

LOOP THE TAPE



by

JANNA PATE

Bachelor of Arts, 2006
Texas Christian University
Fort Worth, Texas

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
AddRan College of Humanities and Social Sciences
Texas Christian University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master of Arts

May 10, 2008

Copyright by
Janna Michele Pate
2008

To B.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Loop the Tape

My Dad’s Spot.....2

The Colors Don’t Stick.....6

Rinse and Repeat.....21

American History.....33

Ringlets Sound Cute.....44

She.....50

The Strings Are Thin.....59

If You Want to Become a Cub Scout.....68

The Skeleton Left.....74

Fireworks.....78

The Curl.....86

Afterword.....89

Notes.....94



My Dad's Spot

Though we don't hear footsteps in her question, we leap from the bed and beige sheets. This would be easier if she was fat. Or lazy. Lazy could work. Or she could wear some smart salmon heels and a pink power suit—I mean, she could *keep* wearing them—because heels could signal us. Creaking floorboards could be a sign. Is my mom going to see us?

We want to know, to prepare. Of course, there is no preparing.

When my mom comes home from work, she changes. You cannot even hear when she comes down the narrow, white hallway in blue jeans with holes. She appears. Look at her circular knee caps. With another box of cheese pizza in her unpainted fingers, she cuddles, “Your favorite, right David?”

After ten years of counting as family (she calls David her “second” son, even though he is three days older than my big brother Kaleb), it’s as if my mom might not know what David prefers. As if now, just because he is my boyfriend and not, first of all, Kaleb’s best friend in the world, this basic fact is in question. As if it’s all subject to change.

I glance at blue-eyed and blonde-headed David, who has snagged his red and white lacquer electric guitar on the way up from the bed and beige sheets. Brilliant. In his lap, the red strap hangs limp, a slack line. He fingers the neck. Suggestive. Just playing. Good boy.

Before us, a photo opportunity: my mom lingers, giving her perfect, white smile, as if to say she can’t tell what it is we’ve been doing. I wipe my mouth on the back of my hand, but the watermelon lip gloss is already gone. David’s blonde hair looks mussed by quick fingers, the way most boys wear it, or try to, even those boys who haven’t leapt from the bed and beige sheets.

“Wash up,” my mom says. “Use soap.” She walks to the living room, where the hardwood floor creaks, and I groan: the signal’s too late. Gray hairs pull silver and shining into her tight ponytail. My mom’s secret: she colors her hair. But she never quite gets to the roots. Her age is showing.

So why can’t mine?

By the time we arrived, my mom had already positioned the four plastic plates, portions allotted, white napkins beside. She folded the napkins into triangles, creasing the fold with the side of a fork. I was supposed to have done that; it was my duty—but the table, at that point, was set.

In the circle, I perched in my usual place, my mom and my brother in theirs. My place was nearest the doorway. My mom unfolded her triangle napkin and thumbed the crease across her jean lap and her circular kneecaps. Kaleb just sat there, across from me, but against the white wall. Black bangs formed bars on his forehead, blocking out his hazel eyes. I looked down and saw two pieces of “David’s favorite” on a green plate. There were three pieces on a navy blue plate before David, slumped at my side, his red and white lacquer electric guitar in between us.

This memory is two weeks old. I don’t know why, because the plate hadn’t been used, before that, for such a long time, it was hardly familiar, but still, I said it: “That’s my dad’s spot.”

Sunset streams through my green window curtains. We pad our soft socks down the narrow, white hallway and into the tiny, white bathroom. The white walls are dotted with dandelions. Yellow bursts. In front of the mirror, I see Buddy, my baby blanket, hanging limp in my left hand. I lean out of the bathroom’s tiny threshold and toss the blanket; beside David’s red

and white lacquer electric guitar, Buddy lands in a heap. In the porcelain sink, the water turns hot. I reach back and swing the door shut.

“Sorry about last time,” I say.

Under the silver faucet, I shove open palms. There is steam off the water.

“I really am sorry.”

The tiny, white bathroom begins to choke on the tears from the faucet. I rub a hole in the slight mirror fog; we are framed—but I don’t handle the green and red bottle of watermelon soap.



The Colors Don't Stick

When my dad moved out of our house with the narrow, white hallway and into our yellow vacation spot, known as a “family” campground, I dyed my hair for the fifth time. When he drove his navy Ford pick up out west, to Marfa, Texas, for a day, I went green. Then, when he stayed in Galveston, at the Holiday Inn, for a week, I went pink. And when he slept with old friends on the outskirts of Austin, I was blue. His parents—blood red.

I have a hair thing, if you couldn't tell. My mom has red hair, but she calls it what Kaleb called it when he was little: “all-burn.” My dad's hair is the “color” that Kaleb calls “salt and pepper.”

When I was little I said, “Does that mean you put his hair on the eggs?”

My dad's hair has flavor.

Kaleb's hair is the best. It is so black, and kind of long too, like Edward Scissorhands' hair, without all the teasing and spray. Kaleb is a natural. His hair will never turn white. Maybe silver at some point. I can see silver. It shines like a tear.

Naturally, my hair is light brown, a color which Kaleb calls “dirty blonde.” What a joke. Kaleb always kids me.

I know I'm a baby, but I wish we looked more alike.

When I was a six, which was ten years ago, I liked to peep windows; I liked to look in. That's what I did in the summers when our whole family went out to the lake—we lived at the campground, for two weeks, together—and Kaleb and David, his best friend in the world, went fishing, on the island, with my dad.

David liked to fish with chunks of red watermelon. That was his bait.

“What are you fishing for, David?” my dad said. “Sea cucumber?”

“That or a clown fish,” said David.

“Sorry excuse for a fish. You won’t find that here. And you won’t catch *real* fish with fruit.”

For David, my mom packed a baggie of red watermelon cut into chunks.

What I can tell you about peeping in windows is, you never see what you want.

All I wanted was to know things and have my own secrets, like who stays in which yellow cabin for how long, and do they use red peppermint toothpaste or wintergreen mint. And I wanted to know other things too, things like what my dad and my mom knew but they didn’t teach me, like if it’s better to comb or brush out your tangles.

I’m sixteen; I still don’t know.

But how could I?

It pulls either way.

I started to peep with Cabin A because that’s what made sense. The cabins were labeled: baby blue letters, and, beside them, a small yellow buttercup. In the Cabin A lot, there was a truck—a white one with dry dirt and pebble dust on it, and a nose full of love bugs. I marched the plank steps and rapped the door but nobody came. For each year of my baby life, I waited a second.

Six.

Whole.

Seconds.

Then I turned a circle on the sunflower welcome mat. There were beds to be made!

I wanted to make all the beds. Little beds, big beds: it didn't matter. I brought along Buddy; he was my helper—and that's how it started.

I raised up my body on my big toes to peep in the window. The floor was cluttered with clothes—white socks and blue jeans and inside-out t-shirts. Lots of colors. I tippy-toed to the next window and peeped again at the mess. That's when I met eyes the man. He wore gray sweatpants, no shirt. A scruffy gray beard colored his face, and wisps of gray sprinkled his skull. The man was not bald, only gray, and his eyes, also gray—gray that flared blue, for a second or two, when he frowned. Through the glass, I smiled without showing my missing front tooth. This man looked old. So, to be sure he could hear me, I shouted: “Hello!”

“What's the idea? What do you mean looking in here on me?”

“I mean to make up your bed.” But this man—whatever I said, it did not matter to him—he would not believe me.

“Ain't it early for that?”

“Sun's up, you're up,” I said. “Seems like a perfectly good time, if you ask me—which you did.”

“Little miss, you're sure a young one to be tellin' me what's a good time. I don't know how you got off looking in, but it ain't proper, surely, else why didn't you bother knocking the door like housekeeping do, and anyhow, what's with the blanket and where is your duster?”

“This is Buddy,” I said. “And this is my campground. I been coming here with my dad since before I was born. And Kaleb too, and he's my brother, and he's even bigger than me. But

I'll be bigger one day, you'll see, and plus," I said, "I did rap the door." He had me on the duster thing, though.

"You can leave now," he said. "I can make my own bed." Well, of course he could; I could too—but it was just such a chore.

I would rather make everyone's bed than my own.

Black socks, brown blanket, brown floor. I rapped the door and continued to peep. A blue toothbrush, at the edge of the sink, balanced beside a squeezed tube of cap-missing toothpaste. A single black mug sat squat, on a square wooden table, by the black coffee pot. Black coffee stood still in the pot, forgotten.

The people had long since left: they were gone; they were not coming back. There was no one to play with and nothing to do.

I marched back to my yellow cabin. I did not have to be quiet this time because my mom was not there to be taking a nap. I fitted both hands under the mattress. My knuckles bumped up in little red knobs. I had a strong grip—Kaleb said so—because I could pull him down the pebble path—and then we were skipping.

I planted one white sneakers against the dark bed post and pulled up as hard as I could. Since I was six, I guessed I could pull pretty hard. The bed didn't guess so.

The chairs at the table were yellow and spun. I plopped in the one on the end and shoved at the table, tucking my feet to spin faster. The room circled me: bed, table, door, bed. I reached for the edge of the table, held fast, almost tipping the chair, and the spinning—it stopped.

Sometimes I forget that it stopped. Sometimes I think I'm still six.

My dad stashed the silver key under the mattress. I spied him because I had been on the porch, posing on top of the plain wooden picnic table—one hand on my hip, one hand over my eyes, on the lookout—the way Kaleb had done, pretending to be the boat captain. I rapped my knuckles again. The sound it made echoed, hollow and thin. The cabin was empty, the cabin was mine. I wanted that key.

I was *so sure* that I wanted that key.

I pushed the yellow chair from the table to the window, all the way scraping the flowers on the floor, printed there on the vinyl, because the black wheels would not roll. There were scuffmarks. I rubbed them out with the beige, rubber sole of my white sneaker.

The window looked over the fishing pier, where my dad slouched back in his rocker, black stocking feet on the rail. He had drug the rocker from the porch to the pier; there were ruts in the grass. My dad did not care. He held a fishing rod in one hand and a cigarette in the other; his legs held the Bud. My dad let the cigarette touch his lips, then he breathed smoke. For a second, the cloud choked my view—but it cleared. He rocked and leaned forward. In the water, the bobber floated toward shore by that same amount.

He yawned; then I yawned.

We had been at the lake for three days. The boat had not budged from the slip.

My dad took his black stocking feet down, off the rail, set his Bud on the dock, and reached over the rail with the rod. He looped the rod back on the bottom bar; the reel rested. His

body stayed. Forward rocked, he eyed the rod, and on the flat water, flicked ashes. The ashes did not make a ripple.

My dad took another breath of cigarette, then dropped it onto the dock. The end flared red. It bounced and it rolled, but before it could plop in the water, my dad—he stopped it.

He eyed the rod more but the fish were not biting. My dad smudged the butt with his black stocking toe. He eyed the rod more and again, and when he was sure it would hold, he rocked back, reached for his Bud, took a long drink into his mouth, swallowed hard. My dad closed his eyes.

Back then everything happened so slow.

I hopped from the counter and stumbled and paced. After three laps around the yellow bed island, I headed for the yellow door. “Unlock,” I thought, and turned up bar in the middle of the brass knob, then flung the door open and let it slam closed. My dad did not holler, did not even hear.

I peeped around the corner to see if he had budged, maybe an inch, but he hadn’t. I righted myself: tugged my shorts straight, tightened my ponytail, and tucked a stray hair behind my left ear.

The way I walked was the other way: I walked away from the pier, toward the playground. Kaleb was at the playground; he was doing his fishing, sort of. Kaleb cast the yellow practice bobber into the white sandbox.

Kaleb usually did his fishing, alongside my dad and David and red watermelon bait, on the island. But sometimes David and Kaleb stayed on the bulkhead, while my dad took the boat to the island alone: those were the times that I got to watch the boys fishing.

When David was fishing, the small silver perch neared David and they neared the rod. The small silver perch were shy and nibbling, then backing away, and not caught.

The wind blew the black bangs in Kaleb's hazel eyes; he tossed his head to one side and the bangs layered. In the back, the shorter hairs curled into half-pipes. I guessed what they would do if I tried to straighten them out: they would bounce up again.

David stood perfectly still and the small silver perch neared again. I looked up, down, and back up the gray beach, left—right—left: the way you're supposed to look when you cross the street—but of course, you never do. Beside David's baggie of red watermelon, there was a second baggie of watermelon for Kaleb. Also, there were five little boxes of grape juice, tossed in a pile on the gray sand. The drinks were all Kaleb's, but he sometimes shared.

David reeled in the line; there was nothing on his hook—so he walked back toward the baggie of red watermelon. Kaleb rested his fishing rod on the gray sand and reached for a nearby grape juice box, tugged the straw, and the sides sucked in, but the straw stayed clear, so he tossed it aside and sat, bottom down on the gray sand, legs stretched straight like sticks before him. The toes were chubby, legs thin. Kaleb reached for the baggie. The rod shook in his hand, but he hooked the chunk. Kaleb's watermelon looked a little bit yellow.

When Kaleb stood, stretching his back, his belly peeped out from the bottom of his black t-shirt. Kaleb's belly had a dark tan, but his skin, if you tickled it, felt soft.

My dad like to hold up “the claw.” The claw was just my dad’s hand—but it was still scary. “I’m going to get you,” he said.

My dad did not get me so much as Kaleb.

He tickled Kaleb until Kaleb cried, and he would not stop until Kaleb stopped.

To the amber shallows, David carried his rod, weighted by the chunk, and cast it out. David did not shift his feet, or huff, or sigh; he watched the line. Kaleb followed behind him and watched David watch. For a long time, Kaleb did not even blink, then he did, and his eyelashes were straight and so black and also long. David and Kaleb continued to gaze.

They were so patient. They still are.

I’m nothing like I was back then. Not that I can see.

I kicked off the bulkhead and marched down the ramp. Gray sand filled my white sneakers. I pinched with my toes on the back of one heel and then the other to get the white sneakers peeled off, and then the white socks as well. I stuffed the white socks in the sneakers. The gray sand felt like hot little stings. I danced my feet.

David did not look at me.

“What are you doing?” I said.

“Waiting.” But still he did not turn around, so I mashed through the gray sand to the amber shallows and splashed the flat water.

“You’ll scare them,” he said. I did not stop.

“You can’t catch silver perch with red watermelon.”

“I can’t.” David turned his blonde head.

“Nope.” He looked at me. David’s eyes were so brilliant and blue. He looked back at the line.

“Well,” he said then, “maybe I’m not wanting to catch them.”

“Then what are you wanting?”

David shrugged. “I want them to trust me,” he said.

“That’s impossible.”

David said nothing. It took a while.

A small silver perch neared the line and nibbled the red watermelon, staying by David’s line for a time, and then swimming away.

I sloshed over to Kaleb, black bangs in his eyes.

They really were such great bangs. I wish I had touched them, reached out there—but I didn’t think to back then, and now, I can’t.

“No one can touch me,” says Kaleb.

In the amber shallows, Kaleb just stood there, line out of the water, not even trying.

“What are you doing?” I said.

“You ask too many questions.”

“Do I?” Kaleb grinned. There was a little space between his front teeth—not at the top, but just at the bottom, and there was a scar on that lip. The scar was the shape of a curl; it was a frown that hung down, off of his crooked smile.

I didn’t know why, at that point, but I’ll tell you now, because now, I do: Before I was born and when Kaleb was two, my dad caught Kaleb’s lip with his sharp, silver fishing line hook.

Of course, Kaleb will tell you a much different story. “I was in the way. I was practically asking for it,” he says now. “I did it to myself.”

In grade school, Kaleb was always getting into trouble. His teacher moved his clip everyday, just about. This is how it worked: He started on green and then moved to yellow, then red, and last black. If the traffic light went out, he got what I thought he said: “suspended.”

That was the lesson. It lasted days.

Kaleb got to stay home, but he’d say, “I have to do work.”

“What work?”

“I have to read books.”

“What books?” I’d say. “*Boxcar Mysteries*, *Nancy Drew*? Is it *Curious George*? I can tell you what happens: They sort it out, every bit, so don’t even worry your head because they learn their lessons. And now,” I’d say, “let’s play house. You can be the little boy, and I’ll be the mom.”

If Kaleb didn’t want to play, I’d say, “Fine. You can be the dad—but I’m still the mom, and Buddy can be the little boy.” Buddy was a good little boy.

When I arrived at the playground, which was really just a square patch, marked off by four steel trashcans, in the center of the family campground, Kaleb drug the toe of his black boot in a fat line across the white sandbox, where he cast the yellow practice bobber. “Oh, come on,” I said. “Let’s do something fun. We are taking a break. Let’s play house. You can be the dad, and I’ll be whatever you want.”

“Just be yourself,” said Kaleb.

“We need David for that.”

“Can you lift the mattress?” I said. “Can you get the key?”

“I can get it,” said Kaleb. But really, we did it together.

We walked down the pebbles. They crunched with the weight of our shoes—my white sneakers, Kaleb’s black boots—and everything else in the campground was silent. There was only the crunching.

“Do you think this key goes to—” But then I stopped because we were in front of the cabin I wanted to peep, the one with the red convertible parked out front. Snazzy.

We marched the plank steps, but when we got to the top, the windows were yellow with the curtains, so I could not peep. Kaleb leaned against the wood rail, and I took the silver key to the door.

“Maybe it’s the key to this cabin,” I said.

“No it isn’t.”

“How do you know?”

“Because,” he said. “This is somebody else’s cabin.”

“So what does it go to?”

“The boat slip,” said Kaleb. “I bet it’s the boat slip.”

“What do you get if you’re right?”

“I get to go back to my fishing.”

“You mean the practice bobber.”

“Yes.”

We walked the crunching pebbles back to our yellow cabin, but my dad was not in there. He wasn't inside.

“See,” said Kaleb. “He’s still on the pier by the boat slip. Now we’re going to get in trouble.”

“What do you care?”

I opened the yellow back door and stepped out onto the porch—but my dad wasn't down by the fishing pier either.

“See,” I said.

“I don't care,” said Kaleb. “I don't care one bit. You don't know anything. I've broken the rules already, all of them. This is boring.”

My mom knew all the good car games—I Spy and Slug Bug—and she the packed board games—Hi-Ho Cherry-O, Chutes and Ladders, Trouble—for when we arrived. My mom did not play with us; she just brought the games.

Kaleb and I marched down the crunching pebble path to the boat slip, but the silver key didn't fit in the rusted out lock.

“You're not doing it right,” said Kaleb. He jiggled the silver key, but it still wouldn't turn.

“Let's go back to that snazzy cabin, the one with the red car,” I said.

“There's nothing there.”

“Maybe we have the key.”

“Make it a bet.”

“Whatever you want.”

“No,” he said. “You don’t get it. You have to name your terms.”

“I told you, I want whatever you want.”

I slipped the silver key in the lock and the brass knob twisted easy in my fingers. I was so silent the man did not hear—but the lady did, and she peeped at me over his tan shoulder. Her hair was furious red, but her eyes were pale green and so soft. She sat up a little in the beige sheets and kissed the man’s tan shoulder and traced his naked side with the little white moons of her fingernails. Her pale green eyes, the whole time, were on me. I thought. I shifted my weight, but her pale green eyes did not shift. I turned.

It was Kaleb. All his weight was on the wood rail.

“Do you know her? Who is she?”

But the man heard me then. To the white wall, he said (at the same time the lady said “his teacher”), “I should ask you the same.”

“You can rest easy,” my dad had said. “I’ll take the kids.”

“For once,” my mom said.

“Can David come with us?” I said. “Kaleb wants David to come. He really does.”

Kaleb slugged me in the shoulder.

“No,” my dad said. “Two kids is more than enough.”

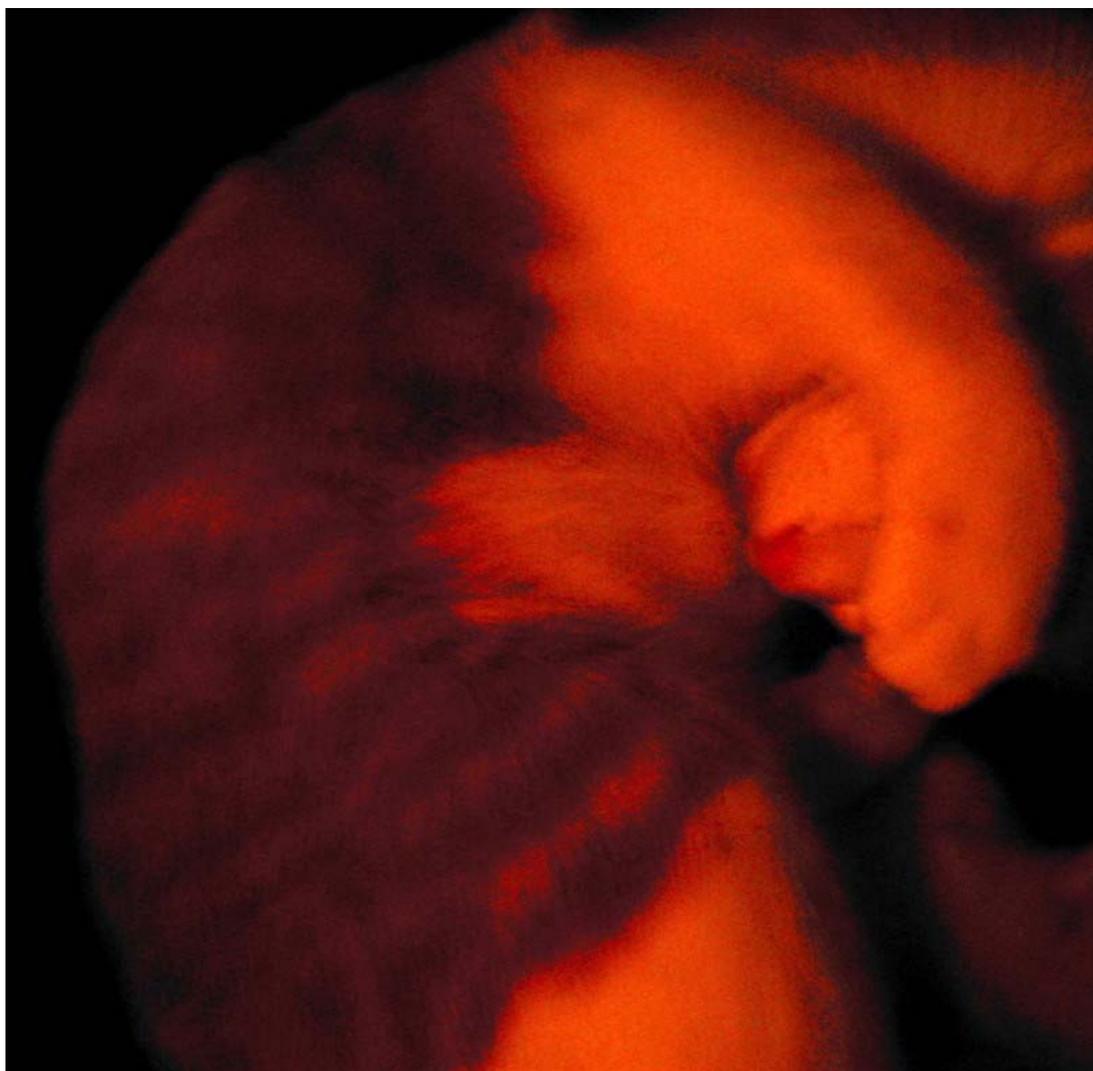
I turned the rest of the circle. The man took the yellow sheet from the teacher with pale green eyes and furious red hair, and he turned around in his dress. His hair was seasoned. That's how I knew him.

“Where is David?” I said. “Where is he?”

We didn't get what we wanted.

Now my dad lives at the lake. It's only been a week and already my “dirty blonde” roots are showing. This, to me, is tragic. Kaleb says I am being dramatic. “There's always more dyeing to do.”

I admit that his most recent move might not have called for the permanent dye—but when you are blonde, it doesn't matter what you do; the colors don't stick.



Rinse and Repeat

Here's the trouble: I haven't done laundry since the day before Valentine's Day—and, it is time for spring break. Time for college kids to get naked and pose on the crystal-white beach for the camera. Time to take a look.

The dirty clothes no longer fit inside my closet, where the little white laundry basket waits. The closet is tiny. My dirty clothes pour out the door like sick puke from an unhinging jaw. Colorful puke. Textured too. Puke you could wear.

My fingers search the green fish, groping inside its ceramic belly for change. I scrap out what I can. There are mainly old pennies, turned black with tarnish. I just need quarters; that's all I need: four quarters for each washer load of laundry, and an additional two quarters per load if I want to dry them, which I do.

I examine the coins in the palm of my hand, toss the ones that aren't quarters on the beige sheets, and count out whatever is left. With the fish change, I have just enough quarters to wash one load of laundry. I can get it half dry.

Here's the trouble: one load won't get my socks—not to mention everything else.

There are black pants, plaid and pinstriped, brown corduroy pants, blue jeans and even one pair of red pants; the pants are all over, the piles of these piles, spewed on brown carpet, and on the bed too—the now empty half.

David had always had quarters. His mom collected them in a candle jar (or, it used to be a candle jar) on the kitchen counter, and every time he came home for dinner, he could have the change. David could have it all.

I shake the green fish: a crumpled chewing gum wrapper falls out, a piece of paper, a wad—but nothing else. Figures.

I need change; I need David's change—but that is one thing I know I won't get.

I haven't talked to David since I last did laundry, the day before Valentine's Day. The reason: "the wash."

It was on his To Do List. It was right below "3 girlfriends."

I should have known it would be there.

I chunk the gum wrapper at the trashcan but miss. It falls lightly on the brown carpet.

All I can do is remember.

David kept his quarters in a red ceramic frog that he got at the same place as I got my green fish: Galveston. Instead of the lake—where we went with my family in summer, back when my family was a family, but now it's just my dad who lives out there—last year David and I went to Galveston for spring break.

When your boyfriend's in college, they tell you to go to the beach for spring break. What they do not say is that it should be a beach where the water and sand are other than brown. They should add that.

Anyway, I would have dumped the red frog long before, had I needed change. Probably would have. But I didn't really need change before my dad left, because we had a house then, with its very own washer and dryer, and plus, I thought the extra stuff David kept in the red frog was useless stuff, like drill bits and sockets and six different-sized rolls of duct tape.

What dumped out of the frog was a wrinkled up paper, so I smoothed the paper, thumbing the wrinkles.

Before I saw it was a To Do List, I didn't know what it was. I didn't know, in the first place, David had a To Do List.

I didn't have one.

Let's be clear: what we're talking about here was the first time for me.

So yes, so sue me. I did it anyway; I washed his clothes and mine, together; that is what I did. And what I didn't do: I didn't say what I saw, what I *found*, while David was in the bathroom. I stared at the white textured ceiling. To wake up, David washed his tan face. He smelled like fresh watermelon and bubbles of clean. He really smelled clean.

Really.

I'm at the point now where I almost call David for quarters, because it's not entirely true that I haven't talked to him since the day before Valentine's Day. I mean, I like to think of it that way. In my head, that's how I see it. That's what I'm saying.

For crying out loud, it was the day before Valentine's Day!

David got a message from me. That next morning, on Valentine's Day—that's when I sent it. In the message, I had said I had his black dress sock, which I did.

That wasn't all.

David gave me the key to his dorm.

Daily, I stamped up the thirteen flights of stairs and into the dark hole with the wooden door and a small sink in one corner across from a built-in bookshelf full of gadgets and odd containers containing what I thought was nothing.

I had my red hairbrush inside my green army satchel. I was staying with David.

What I'm doing now is something else. I'm telling myself how it is: I'm saying it's thirty-six days I have made it, thirty-six days since I last talked to David—but the truth is, I haven't quite made it that far. I get ahead of myself.

I'll get it straightened out. One day.

For now, I need the encouragement. I need—what's it called? What do I need?

Maybe it's something I need To Do. 3 girlfriends, is it?

My comeback: "Want me to do yours?"

I meant the laundry. Well, didn't I? I did the laundry. I cleaned his place out and washed all of his clothes, even the ones on the hangers. Because—who knew where'd they'd been?

White Tiger Cleaners is on the corner of Guadeloupe and Second, beside The Garage, where David's band plays Wednesday nights. The Garage: I cannot do enough to stress how dirty this bar makes me feel. But White Tiger Cleaners, I like: yellow linoleum floors, rusted baskets on black rubber wheels, and black plastic buckets of who knows what all; they look like buckets that, in the fish cleaning station, collect fish guts. What I'm talking about is the cleaning station at the campground, in Brookeland, at the lake, where my "family" vacationed.

There are four card tables at White Tiger Cleaners. You can sit and read while you wait for your clothes. Each card table has its own bucket.

But no one waits inside White Tiger Cleaners for their clothes to finish.

Except me. I do.

I like the way it smells inside White Tiger Cleaners. My eyes tell me it's going to smell like the New York subway system or maybe an old folks' home—but it doesn't; it's different; it's not what you'd think.

White Tiger Cleaners smells like belongings, like having a home; it smells like my brother, Kaleb, and me, playing Sardines with our dad. I mean, okay, it smells like a dryer.

In Sardines, I was It. I was hiding in the washing machine—but then Kaleb found me, and we hid in the dryer, together, where we both fit, and it was a good place to hide. Our dad lived with us back then, and with our mom too, sometimes.

Now, our dad lives at the lake—all by himself these days, what a cheater (there, I said it!)—and we live in a single apartment on Town Lake. The apartment is a dump, but as my mom reminds me, it's much closer to her office in downtown Austin than our old house, the one with the narrow, white hallway. I miss the old house, the one that was *home*. At this Town Lake place, my door doesn't even have a lock; it doesn't even shut. Well, it shuts at the bottom—but it doesn't at the top. At the top, it bows out: the latch will not catch.

At night, when I close my eyes tight, my cat likes to let himself in; he curls on the bed, close to David, and licks David's cheek with his rough tongue. "Get off me," says David. "I'm not your asshole."

This is not David's dorm, not his space.

But he might as well stay here. My mom would let him. We could do the old trick where David pretends to sleep over in Kaleb's room, but at four a.m. he sneaks into my bed for an hour or so before my mom wakes up for work.

Please let me dream. This could have happened.

In bed, beside me, David stretches—his belly warm and warming mine; his smile wide and widening mine. “What do you want?” I say. He says it’s my waist; then it’s sleep.

I wake and I stare at the textured white ceiling.

David stays with me.

David's roommate, his official roommate I mean, is a blind guy named Rob, whom David tried to recruit to play drums in his band, along with Kaleb, who plays the bass. Rasta is Rob's Seeing Eye dog.

I like to take Rasta for walks on Town Lake. David brings a yellow tennis ball for her to fetch, slinging it sidearm across the fat grass—but Rasta would rather sit, scooting up by the students on the matching park benches, who eventually clap shut their silver and black cell phones and reach down and stroke her under her hairy dog chin.

I like to put on my sunglasses and pretend that Rasta is my dog.

“She's beautiful,” they say.

“Is she?”

Rasta is a Rottweiler with iron coat marking that make her look like a tiger. “This is the crap you get from the city,” says Rob.

Seeing Eye dogs are not supposed to be Rottweilers, and Rottweilers are not supposed to be pussy cats. This is undesirable.

Rasta accompanies Rob at the gym. She barks with every bench press, and when Rob is finished, Rasta brings him a white towel. She can find anything—a clean undershirt, a condom, a black dress sock, whatever you want. In the dark, daytime and nighttime, and even with things spread all over the dorm room, which is how Rob keeps his things, Rasta can find Rob's belongings.

“Rasta,” Rob says, “You're my bitch.”

That she is. Or is she?

“You take her for a while,” he says. Like Rasta is a burden.

David doesn't like to hold her leash when we go to Town Lake because, with David, Rasta sits on the curb and refuses to cross the street, even if there aren't any cars coming.

There are always cars coming.

“She can smell your fear,” I tell him.

Rob is a real mellow guy. He smokes a whole lot of pot. “And he gets a lot of action,” says David.

“Pot makes me see things differently,” Rob says.

Now that's a good trick.

“You know how it is,” says Rob. “All it takes is a helping hand.”

A soft hand: this is what Rob's girlfriends have in common. They use lotion, moisturizers; they have a scent—and we notice.

“They're not attractive,” says David.

“So what?” I say.

Rob doesn't ask questions. That is the main thing. Ask Kaleb.

When he first moved in, Rob flopped his mattresses like a fish on the floor.

“It's for the girls,” says Rob. “They need the distance—so we can fall madly in bed.”

Rob has to change his orange sheets a lot.

Has David changed his?

I haven't seen him.

Still.

I wanted to leave David's laundry, spinning around in the washer, at White Tiger Cleaners, the day before Valentine's Day. I wanted to walk back to David's dorm room. I wanted one extra time.

I was hoping that, while I was gone, someone would steal his black button-up, the one with the pearl-snaps, the shirt that he wears when he plays The Garage, his stage shirt.

I hate what that shirt makes me feel.

Even still.

I just sat there, and I watched. After the clothes came out of the washer, I didn't even pretend to read my American History textbook anymore. It's like reading the tiny type on the back of your green and red watermelon shampoo bottle. I mean, what's the point? You know what you know it says, and either you rinse and repeat or you don't. You do what you want.

I created a game with David to help me get through American History. All he had to do was read. I guessed the signs that he saw. It was a reward system. A period was whatever he wanted. A question mark was whatever I wanted. A comma was a kiss. A semicolon meant a little extra.

I washed and dried David's clothes three times. Around and around and around. That's how I used up the quarters. Then I walked them back to his dorm and stood there: a foot on Rob's bare mattress, and Rasta sleeping, curled like the iron tiger she is, and Rob in the shower. That's how I folded the clothes.

How did I leave the key? How did I do that?

I really don't know what to do now.

The apartment has its own laundromat, but it costs four quarters for the dryer instead of two and it takes twice as long. White Tiger Cleaners has those industrial type dryers. They can hold two washer loads, and in twenty minutes, your clothes are so dry that if you touch the zipper on your red pants, it will burn you a little.

The thing is, I don't know if time is the issue, or if it's money, or what. What does it mean when your boyfriend says, "I want to be single, at least for a while?"

When I washed David's clothes, there was navy and gray and sometimes a red in the wash. The industrial dryers have large plastic centers, so I could watch the clothes spin circles around the steel cylinder. The fabrics would topple on top of each other; they tangled, and I couldn't tell one from the other: his clothes and mine.

But the bright colors blur, and they fade; whatever you wear, whatever you wash, swirls together; it's here, in Dryer Fifteen, smearing like blackberry jam; like a shifting kaleidoscope picture, I see two tarnished eye-hooks on back of my favorite black bra, and I see, in my head—they are touching his towel.

Did I wash his towel? Wasn't it green? Or red? Maybe it was blue. Maybe it was a black button-up.

This is the thing I don't understand.

The sock had gotten tangled up in my sheets. It was a black dress sock, the kind that he wore with the black button-up, and it was between the beige top sheet and the navy comforter. I found it, with my bare feet, after I made up my bed.

There it was.

Now I am afraid to go down to White Tiger Cleaners. What if one of the other girlfriend's clothes are in dryer sixteen? What if she is washing her clothes, together, with David's? What if I can't even tell?

I don't know if I'd know. Even if I saw it.

The wash is a window of textures and satin-hid things: the bras and the blue jeans, a black button-up, and also that dress sock.

I don't know what to look for.

When I played Sardines with Kaleb, our dad couldn't find us. We were so silent my mom had to give us away. She always knew.

"Look in the laundry room," she said. "It's the second door on the right."

Our dad never washed his own clothes. That was the problem—and the solution.

Meaning: In the next round of Sardines, he was supposed to be It. He could not cheat anymore.

Our dad escaped to the lake. That's where he decided to hide. Were we supposed to go find him? Were we supposed to be looking? Is the game over? Has it begun?

"I don't want to know," Kaleb says.

I do. I want to know where things are. I want to know.

Only, don't tell me.

My dresser is plastic, clear tubs that you stack. I have two tubs in my stack. The top tub has shirts and some shorts. There are bras and underwear, belts and socks, in the bottom tub, and at the front of that tub, against the plastic, I put David's black dress sock.

The rest of the tub is just about empty. I think I can see it.

I need to wash. Do I need to wash? I do not want to wash.

Yet.

But.

Maybe.

If I say it again.



American History

Here. Here I am. In a red sweater, and in a Love's truck stop. The time: it is Valentine's Day; it is the coldest day of the year.

The red sweater is what I got for Christmas. It wasn't a great gift, but my mom picked it, and, of course, my dad paid (such was "the agreement" in their separation), so I wear the red sweater, even though I am single on Valentine's Day.

What is it with Valentine's Day?

Just an hour ago, I was speeding down the gray Texas freeway in my green car. The reason: space. But the longer I drove, the less I believed that space, like I said, was the problem. There was plenty of space; there was too much space. I had been wrong about that.

I listened, on repeat, to heartbreak: "*Just 'cuz you're pretty good lookin',*" Jack White sang, "*for a girl.*"

When it started to snow, I had never seen snow. The first snow I saw was at eighty per—and the way it pinged off the windshield in little white beads was better than gray rain on lined pavement. I did not know that this snow, really, was hail.

There was a difference? It was all snow.

I continued to speed, passing the time and the more cautious drivers. But when changing back to the beloved left lane, I felt my tires skid, and when I tried, lamely, to straighten the wheel, the rest of my green car just kept going left.

The next thing I knew, there was brown grass where blue sky should have been: outside my dark tinted window. Oddly, the song about heartbreak kept going, no stopping, not even a

skip. I quit my breathing, then cut off the engine entirely, and hung by my gray seatbelt, the only thing doing its job.

Then a man. He appeared in the passenger window. He was trying to ask me—what was he trying to ask me? The glass and his accent were thick. The man beat his flat palm on the dark tinted window. The tint was peeling in bubbles because it was David’s home job. The man helped me pry the door open; I climbed out the top of my green car—and then the man left. He rescued and left.

I felt that it would have been an appropriate time to cry, and for that reason only, I couldn’t. I could just stand there, instead, and stare at my green car. The wheel wells were mud and ice caked, underbelly indecent, exposed. There were skid marks down the embankment that ended in sewage. I had missed the sewage ditch somehow—my green car was suspended—so I stood in the snow, or the hail, whichever it was: I could only be numb.

The tow truck that arrived seemed especially small, but then, I *seemed* especially calm. I told the driver please, not to call an ambulance because, as a matter of fact, I was fine.

I sat in the tow truck while the driver worked on my green car. This driver was young, for a driver: he wore a gray sweatshirt with grease stains and black leather boots. The boots had steel toes like my big brother Kaleb’s.

The driver glanced back at me in the truck’s cabin. His brilliant blue eyes had barely outgrown saying to girls, “Bee my Valentine,” or even, “Hoppy Valentine’s Day.”

He hooked intersecting cables to hooks in intersecting directions—and this, evidently, is how one flops a green car like a fish, from its side to its belly again.

The driver tried to do the whole maneuver in one, single motion.

Stuck.

We are not different, just very distant. That is what I thought.

The driver called for another driver. I called for my dad, in Brookeland, like childhood, at play. And when he didn't answer, I called for my mom, in Austin, like always, at work.

"I don't think the car's totaled," I told her. "But it might be. It might be expensive."

I didn't realize. Those were the answers to questions that *I* was asking. It wasn't the car that concerned her.

The first of the rubbernecks was a yellow Nissan Frontier. It swerved onto the shoulder and the shoulder was narrow and slick. Two young men hopped out and ran down to my green car. They searched for my body.

"She isn't in there!" No body's home! That's what the driver decided to shout from a small crack at the top of his window.

After spotting me in the tow truck, the boys plodded back to their yellow Nissan, clearly disappointed. Then dismayed. They had learned: yellow Frontiers can get stuck in the hail!

They deliberated. This took some time: *you do it; no, you.* Back and forth.

The driver let them stumble—but how did he sound, this driver, when he had to admit that the tow truck was stuck and he'd stuck it?

Of course, how did I sound? The Accord, upside down.

It could tell its own joke. No reason to ask.

My parents purchased the Accord almost a year and a half ago, on my sixteenth birthday, August 15, 2003. To do it, they skipped four consecutive anniversary trips prior: their twenty-second, twenty-third, twenty-four, and twenty-fifth. Or, maybe that wasn't why they skipped them.

Here's the deal: "If you wreck your car, the next one will be on you."

Isn't it on me already? Maybe they said something else? Like what? Be a good girl? Ah, yes. And if you can't be good, then what? Have fun? Or maybe be careful? Be tough? Some sort of advice.

The second car angled onto the shoulder, and the woman inside, with one arm out the window, took pictures. Thank god I wasn't in them: the camera looked cheap, and she drove away. What she drove was a white Chevy Cavalier (it wasn't that great). I could just see it: KID IN FAKE FUR COLLAR CRASHES FOR FUN! featured in the Entertainment section, right *below* the celebrity gossip.

Well, I'm glad we could all set aside this special time to humiliate ourselves in public. Because hey, if you can't laugh at yourself—well then what? Find someone else to do it for you? Do it for somebody else?

I say both.

The new tow truck was industrial sized, and the driver who drove it was even bigger—and also quite old. It took him some time, but we tapped our feet and he towed the lot: the yellow Frontier, the little tow truck, and the green Accord.

While the last of the hooks were being hooked, a cop finally came. He asked for my insurance and driver's license (big shock!) and walked back to his cop car to perform his cop customs. But upon his return, there was no ticket in hand. That was the weird part. Then he crossed his arms and I hung my head. We had our brief.

“Little miss” was the name he called me. Familiar? Yes. But was that warning official, or could I ignore it?

I could have at least hit the sewage. Maybe thrown out an elbow and smashed it. I wanted to do it again. Really, it didn't have to be just my green car that was wrecked. Where was my second chance?

As it stood, the young driver hauled red sweater me and my green car all the way back to Love's truck stop. The mechanics let me sit in the office, which was really a corner of the garage they blocked off with a half wall and windows.

I feel like a fish in a fish bowl, a fish, that is, who wears a red sweater.

Love's truck stop smells worse than a fish. I'm trying to act naturally, but then, what is natural about fish bowl behavior? I never thought I would say this: I need my school books; I need a lecture; I need American History.

What I do not need is Kaleb. I do not want him. Kaleb will not ask me questions.

There is time to kill. Wherever I am, it is not close to Kaleb and his wicked warehouse, which wobbles on Austin city limits.

Because Kaleb didn't go to college this year, my mom said he had to get out of our apartment on Town Lake. He rents this warehouse, which he's nicknamed "The Kennel," from a guy named Anonymous Dog. Kaleb does not seem to care. He just drinks all day. And pays \$315 per month, which he earns playing the bass with David, who plays lead guitar. They are missing a drummer, but they have a band. The band has no name, but they get gigs at The Garage, and they practice at the warehouse. Kaleb spends his day building up the practice space, pooling rusted scrap metal and lumber—and blood, the vent fan belt slitting his thumb.

My mom calls the corner pay phone. The bums answer, black handle in hand. On that block, the street beats. It is bad.

Kaleb has put in a shower head and installed a few moldy A/C units. "It is minimal. But it is electric," he says.

The sick, rabid rats run down the steel staircase. It spirals. I've been there once. The scene makes me dizzy.

David drove me to The Kennel in his red Firebird. We arrived together. As friends.

"Let's play," Kaleb said. He was wearing his black bass guitar. David had his red and white lacquer electric guitar slung over his back.

"Chill," said David.

"Fine," said Kaleb. "Let's have a Bud."

"You had one already," I said. "I smell it on you."

"Chill."

David, Kaleb, Kelsey: We filed in The Kennel that way.

“You can sit on the bed or the bed,” said Kaleb. The rest of the room was speakers and amps.

“Great space for the band,” David said. He stood in the middle of The Kennel with his red and white lacquer electric guitar on his back. David turned around slowly.

“You can take that off,” I said. I started up in the steel staircase.

Kaleb went to the black mini fridge, still wearing his black bass guitar, and pulled out two Buds.

“I’ve been thinking,” he said, pausing to slug back the beer, “about adding a mixer, and maybe some mikes. We need a singer. Also a drummer, of course. Distortion pedals, and a delay too.”

“Keep it simple,” said David. “I want to be like the White Stripes.” He took a small sip of his Bud.

“But the White Stripes don’t have a bassist,” I said, starting back down the steel staircase.

“But they’re the greatest,” said David.

“No they’re not. Green Day is the greatest.”

“They’re both the greatest,” said Kaleb.

“They can’t both be the greatest.”

“Yes they can—they are,” said Kaleb. “It’s called a contradiction.”

“You can’t compare the White Stripes and Green Day,” said David. “It’s like fish and frogs.”

“Why can’t you compare fish and frogs?”

“You just can’t,” said Kaleb.

“Are you kidding me?”

“They’re different animals,” said David.

“Don’t answer for him,” I said. “That doesn’t even make sense.”

Kaleb chunked his empty Bud in the steel trashcan, the kind they used, at the lake, to mark off the playground.

“Let’s play.”

“Chill.” David took another small sip of his Bud, then slumped on the black bedside in his black button-up. I perched beside him and put my hand on the back of his shoulder.

“Chill.”

“Fine.” I scooted away and crossed my arms.

“I want to get red and white drums,” David said. “A small set.”

“You don’t have a drummer,” I said.

“But we will, you can count on it.”

“Whatever. Are you going to practice or what?”

“Chill.”

“Stop saying that.”

“Just chill and I will.”

“Just *practice* and I will.”

“Let’s play,” said Kaleb.

“Chill.”

“Stop it.”

David stood and returned to the middle of The Kennel, the red and white lacquer guitar on his back. “I need some space,” he said.

“Me too, I need some space too.” I started up the steel staircase again.

“I’m leaving.”

“I’m leaving right with you.” I started back down.

“Let’s hit The Garage,” Kaleb said. “I’m out of beer.”

“You don’t need more,” I said.

“Chill.”

“Shut up, David. And Kaleb, you can’t drive.”

“Fine.” Kaleb said. “David can drive. It’s called a compromise.”

“Yeah,” said David. “Chill.”

“No,” I said. “No. I can’t chill. I *won’t*. And I won’t go out to The Garage either.”

Two guitars thrummed toward the door. A red Firebird flashed through the filthy and round Kennel window.

David spun out.

Forever. If the Accord will be wrecked, that is how long the recovery will last.

Either way, though, I still have to wait. This is going to cost me.

Because David spun out, I spun out too. I was spinning toward the lake, to see my dad, but so far, *and this feeling’s still gonna be around*, it’s been three hours of listening, in my head, to Jack White.

When I talked to my mom on the phone, she said she’d send my dad on was on his way—to get me, I mean. And maybe the other way too. They are still talking about that.

But I'm guessing, *until I know everything I need to know now*, that my dad isn't coming.
I'm guessing I'll have to ask Kaleb.

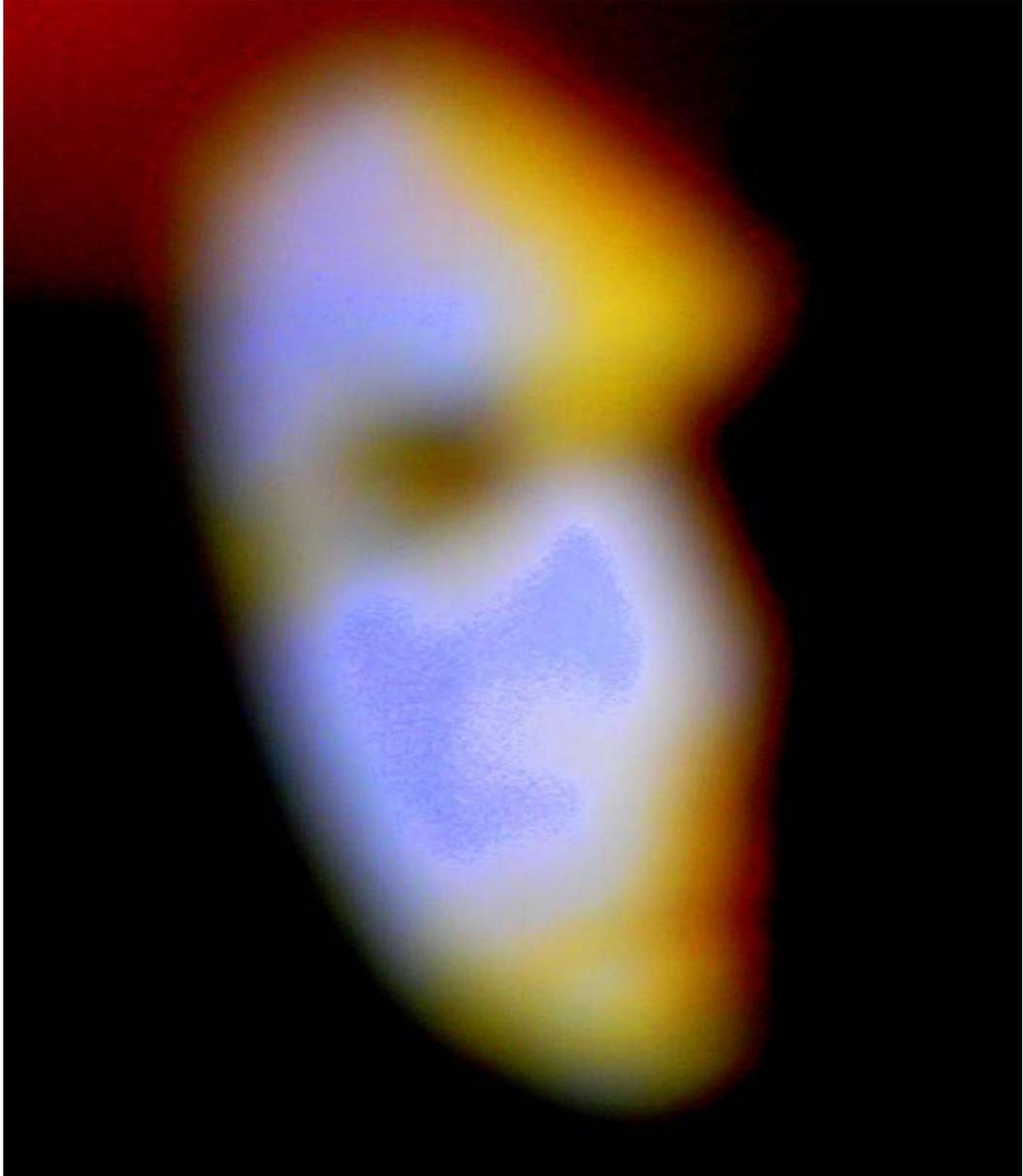
The seat creaks when I cross my legs. I want to leave; I want to get on with things. I can't, is the thing, and so, in the meantime, while wearing a red sweater, while in a Love's truck stop, I will do what one does: I will watch my watch, and my watch will move the hands, however slowly.

Time: that is the problem. Not space. Tell David. If you know how.

I'm not getting any younger over here!

Contradiction, compromise, and now, confession. I do not pretend to know how a monkey wrench or even a clock is supposed to work. I can see that the seconds are working like minutes, and without speeding up, this goes on.

If I can say so, I have to say this: it is *older* that I am not getting.



Ringlets Sound Cute

She will not call them “family portraits” because I am not in them. At this point, my dad is no longer a consideration, and neither, I guess, is David. There are three shots: one of Kaleb, one of my mom, and one of the two of them together. I am allowed to take the one of Kaleb. My mom does not like how she looks in pictures.

The first round of chemo grew her hair back in ringlets. That is the nice word for them; ringlets sound cute. As a little girl, my mom had ringlets. Now her hair seizes up in spirals against her scalp. When you stretch the spirals, they are as long as your hand, but when you release them, the spirals shrink to an inch.

“It’s unmanageable,” she says. “Completely unruly. I hate this look.”

The chemo has made my mom blind. She needs trifocals, but hasn’t resigned herself to them. Instead, she hides her second pair of glasses, the ones she uses for reading, in the ringlets.

“You can still see them.”

“I know, and I don’t want you to remember me this way.”

I am trying to think about the future, about how this is going to be my second driver’s license, and how, after this, I won’t get a new one for six entire years. That is a really long time. By then, I will be out of college.

My first semester is ahead of me. I start in two weeks.

“Do you have an agenda?” my mom asks. Meaning: “Is there anything you’d like to do?” I can think of a few things; it is my eighteenth birthday, after all—but she means “while you are here.”

I tell my mom that I would like to get my hair cut. “Before I go to the DMV,” I add.

In my first driver’s license, my hair is unusually long, blonde, and straight. My face is sunburned in the shape of blush. I look like, in sixteen years, I have never once blinked. I look like Barbie.

I thought about renewing the license from school. There is an online option and a phone number for the Texas Department of Public Safety, Driver’s License Division. But then I would be stuck with the Barbie picture.

There is another option: I could get a Louisiana driver’s license. Louisiana is where I am going to college.

“But Texas is your *home*,” says my mom.

On this last word, she leans hard like she leans on the wall. You could offer to help, but she would not let you touch her. The house itself holds her up.

When my mom baked the homemade “Happy Eighteenth Birthday” sugar cookie cake with butter cream icing, and a homemade cheese pizza, she had to sit on a black and white barstool.

There is so much cheese on the pizza that they—the pizza and the cookie—look almost the same. So I almost say “good work, Mom,” but then I remember I am not supposed to say that word: “work.” My mom’s last day is next Friday. What she’ll do then is quit, even though the office types said it is “early retirement.”

How does that soften the blow?

These days, my mom can’t even remember that cheese pizza isn’t my favorite; it’s David’s. Or, it *was*.

We sit in our white wooden chairs at the table. Beside each plastic plate, there is a napkin folded in the shape of a triangle and creased by the side of a fork. I press my thumb on sharp tines.

My mom cuts her pizza in squares: more and more, smaller and smaller. Kaleb and I grab our portions with bare hands. We cram our mouths full. Kaleb licks the grease from his thumb. He will not be outdone.

I have to remember to forget to chew.

From the chin up, you can't tell that my mom is down to ninety-five pounds. The steroids keep her face "moonied-out."

I never realized the moon was a wad of chewed gum.

"Are you ready for dessert?" she says.

I swallow; it looks like a nod.

My mom handles the hot pads on the counter by the stove. She tells Kaleb to get the candles and the lighter from the drawer. "The second one on the left," she directs. I move the napkin holder out of the way.

There are two candles—a big wax one and a big wax eight—and an Aim-N-Flame, to get the job done. In one mighty breath, I blow out both candles, when she stops singing. She acts surprised.

"What did you wish for?"

"If I told you, I'd have to kill you."

Kaleb and I clean the kitchen—I rinse, he dries—while my mom takes a nap. When the rinse cycle timer is set, we search the internet for pictures of a haircut.

“Which one would David like?” I say.

Kaleb doesn’t care and there are no bets made about how long it will take before my mom wakes up because we both know: we have a while to keep searching.

I ask Kaleb how school’s going. He changes the subject. The same for girls. His new band. And work. We’re almost on weather when my mom wakes up.

“Do you want to go to the mall, to one of those fancy places?” she asks.

“Let’s go to dad’s old place. Let’s go to Patty,” I say. “Kaleb—want to come along for the ride?” Kaleb shakes his head side to side, slinging black bangs across his hazel eyes.

My mom sits in the vacant chair. I tell Patty the best haircut I know: short in back, long in front. Kaleb’s hair. As it turns out, the look suits me well. At least, that’s what Patty says.

I guess she would.

Patty dries my hair and tucks the loose ends—they want to go straight—with a round brush. She has to loop them again and again.

When we’re standing before the white register and the white counter with the appointment book and my name in black ink on the list, my mom insists on paying the bill.

“It’s your birthday,” she says.

“Oh, Happy Birthday,” says Patty. My mom slides the credit card out of her billfold and hands it to Patty, who asks to see my mom’s photo ID.

Before she can wiggle it out of the plastic window, I peep.

In the picture, my mom is wearing a cobalt dress shirt with a scalloped neckline. Her hair is fluffy and golden: she looks like Farrah Fawcett.

I am getting the picture.

Patty glances from my mom to the photo and back up again. Then she looks at me. My mom looks at me. I feel something inside me go out.

“You don’t have to do this,” I say. Patty hands back the picture.

“I know,” my mom says. “But I want to, while I still can.”

She means, “while I still have a job.” I mean, wouldn’t you like to think so?

When Patty swipes my mom’s plastic, the register beeps. The card has been declined.

“Don’t worry,” says Patty. “This happens all the time. The reader is fussy.” She smiles.

“I’ll just try it again. I am sure we will get it this time.”

“There were two candles,” I think. “And that means two wishes.”

So I wish she wouldn’t.

And I wish she would.



She

Kaleb didn't bother to give it a name. "Put that baby back!" he said.

Would I be a girl, or another dumb boy?

My mom did not know; she did not ask. I was the baby. So Buddy, my blanket, was outfitted: green, red, and blue. My mom threaded the eyelet lace with yellow satin ribbon and stitch by stitch sewed him for me.

From slumber parties to college dorms, hotels to motels, I have seen pictures, and the number of ways Buddy covered my pillow. But if I looked now, I'm afraid I couldn't uncover Buddy. That's partly because of the mess—the crumpled blue jeans, belts and purses and inside out socks; the paperback books and the colorful folders and pens; the candies, the chocolates, and wrappers from peppermint gum—in my room, on the bed, where all the trash piles.

From down the hall, I could hear it: the way Kaleb cried in his sleep. "Creatures surface," he said. "Faces morph."

"Like how?"

"She haunts me," he said. "I'm morphing into my dad."

The nightlight, glowing green in the bathroom between us, did not help. I carried Buddy into his bedroom. Buddy wiped the tears that hung from Kaleb's smooth chin. He whispered to me: "Don't tell, please don't tell. I asked for it, really. I asked for the details. I asked her—"

"Who? Who? Who did you ask?"

"I asked her to tell me, that summer, what happened. I practically did it myself. "

I passed my hand over all the little red Superman shields on Kaleb's back, rubbing small circles, clockwise, until he stopped shaking and fell back asleep. This went on.

In the morning, Kaleb would wake me (by snatching the covers!), and I would go back to my room. The bed was a mess. I sorted through it and put on my school clothes: pleated skirt, polo shirt, black and white. Kaleb would stay in his bed.

My mom always thought I was the first one awake. She called me her “morning star.” She thought Kaleb snored. Or at least, she pretended to, for someone, and maybe for him.

“I don’t think she’s that bad,” I said. Like before, I could ignore furious red hair for the soft, pale green eyes. “She doesn’t even wear the sweaters with the red apples and ABCs on them.”

Our school was a small one. There was only one teacher for each grade level, so whoever taught Kaleb, two years later, taught me.

“She taught me how to loop the tape.”

I held up a sheet of blue construction paper; it had green fish taped to it, but you couldn’t see the tape.

“See,” I said. “I constructed the lake.”

“No you didn’t,” said Kaleb. “You are missing the island.”

Kaleb went to the refrigerator and slid the pizza box out from under a plump watermelon. Then he got the big red-handled scissors out of the drawer with the Aim-N-Flame and the two pronged fork. He cut a small circle out of the lid.

“Get the tape,” he said.

I got the tape and I showed him how you loop it, by wrapping the slick side around your first finger. The tape made a little, clear bubble. I handed the tape loop to Kaleb. He stuck the ring on the white side of the cardboard, so the brown side, the dirt, would face us. The circle

stuck to the blue construction paper. I think he was going for the middle, but it came out a little bit left. “Good enough,” he said.

I don’t know why Kaleb’s teacher didn’t teach him to loop the tape, but he did get an A+ in penmanship. That is his secret.

“That is not fair,” I said. Kaleb could not read his own writing. And also, we went to a Montessori school. No one got As.

The three Rs: reading, writing, and arithmetic. I don’t know why these are called the three Rs—only one starts with ‘r’—but I do know why arithmetic is last: in order to figure it out, you have to see how it adds up.

I still don’t get it.

Buddy learned the three Ts: threadbare, translucent, and thin. It was the washing machine that taught Buddy.

When we played Sardines, I tried to hide there—in the washing machine—it was the best spot, so that’s where I hid, every time. Kaleb was the first one to find me. We were supposed to hide together after that. I banged down the lid, but the washing machine wouldn’t close; Kaleb’s head was in the way. We climbed out and switched to the dryer; it didn’t have that big thing in the middle.

“The agitator,” said Kaleb. “The apparatus that stirs or shakes.”

Our dad couldn’t find us. My mom had to give us away. “Look in the laundry room,” she said. “It’s the second door on the right.”

Our dad never washed his own clothes. Meaning: in the next round of Sardines, he was supposed to be It.

Is this the game? Have we started to play? How old are these questions? This story?

The surgery was performed laparoscopic style. My dad was the doctor, an anesthesiologist actually, but it was my mom who made the incision. She cut Buddy open and extracted what had, at one end, collected: It was a massive cotton clot.

“Thrombosis,” said Kaleb. “Throughout the circulatory system, the obstruction of the flow of the blood.”

Kaleb wanted to be a doctor, or a dictionary. It was one or the other. Kaleb wouldn't say, but I could tell: he wanted to know everything.

The outcome: it all came out. My mom pulled it out, and she placed it in a green glass jar with a metal latch.

“A hermetic seal,” Kaleb said. “This jar used to hold tongue depressors.”

“It used to hold green beans,” my mom said, “before that.” It was her jar. Her grandmother gave it to her when she married my dad; my dad took it when he opened his clinic. The jar kept the cotton clot in; everything else, out.

The problem: the stitches. My mom didn't know how to sew.

“I'll do it,” my dad said.

But he sewed the stitches so tight they ripped out, tearing the hole even bigger.

The night our dad left, I could hear it—and it wasn't the slam of the door. That I could sleep through.

“A cry,” said Kaleb. “Not necessarily for help.”

“Why not?”

“I have to sleep by myself now. No one can touch me. I am the man of the house.”

Kaleb was ten, the number that’s also a sport: ten is. By definition.

This is what I dream about: I dream I will grow up one day. And how it will happen: I will learn to make my own bed. I will start by clearing the piles of my mess and smoothing the wrinkles in my beige sheets. Then I will fold up the quilts at the end of the mattress. I will even get to the point where, for fun, I will plump the various pillows. They will be decorative pillows, so I will arrange them in a decorative manner. They will not need to be covered, is what I figure. And the older I get, the more pillows. The pillows can cover the empty half of the bed.

The reason: Buddy can’t cover anything these days. There isn’t enough of him left.

“We need to fix this,” I said.

“When Dad comes back,” Kaleb said. “Just wait until Dad comes back.”

Like the doctor, we made our rounds. Three-thousand six-hundred and fifty-four nights. When we thought it was a joke, my mom had her stroke!

And we thought the cancer would kill her.

Outstanding: my mom’s favorite word.

“Projecting; prominent; standing out; striking,” said Kaleb. “Marked by superiority or distinction; excellent; distinguished.”

In the dictionary, I looked it up—but that is not what it said.

Conspicuous. Remaining unsettled.

Kaleb was in college, at last, and my mom was in chemotherapy. I was in bed and would stay in bed. The neighbor would take her to the hospital. It took all day.

This was after they had pronounced her “cancer free.”

But what did that mean? What were the symptoms of being cancer free?

She didn’t have symptoms.

When my mom came home, when she finished her treatment, I would be waiting in her bed. I eased between the beige sheets, smoothed out the wrinkles, and stared at the white textured ceiling.

I tried not to blink. But sometimes I got up—and that is how, in her closet, I found the divorce papers.

I had been looking for anything that hadn’t been washed, anything that might have her smell, her real smell, on it.

What was her real smell? I don’t know if I found it.

My mom is the one who hid in the recovery room. Her nurse is the one who found her. I am the one who climbed in the white bed with my mom—and also her machine.

“The ventilator,” Kaleb corrected.

“She might wake up.”

“Vegetable,” Kaleb said. “Any plant whose fruit, seeds, roots, or flower parts are used as food.”

My mom’s stroke was in the brain stem. I should have brought flowers.

The root cause: colon cancer. It spread to her liver, her lungs, and her heart.

There was no where left for it but in her head.

“I love you so much I could just eat you up,” my mom once said.

Do I have to say it now too?

“Cremation,” says Kaleb. “To consume.”

My mom cannot fit in a green jar. I won’t let her become quite so small.

In her white bed, clutching the bedrails, watching the sack, disposable, blue—it filled her up and it let her down—for three days, I tried not to blink. I wanted to be there. I did not want to miss this one too.

Kaleb demanded a miracle work. “You fell asleep. That’s when it happened.”

“Was it Divine?” I rubbed the sleep from my eyes.

“It was a pat on the hand. I was touched,” he said.

“You’re kidding, right?”

When my fingers found her hand cold, I choked.

“Why?”

“SCD.”

“What?”

“Sudden Cardiac Death.”

“I don’t understand. Where are the doctors?”

Kaleb just shook his head. The black bars of bangs fell forward and into his hazel eyes.

“Where is our dad? Where is he?”

And why, at that moment, did I want an answer?

Which brings up another question: For one day, when you’re losing things, can’t a mom be enough?



The Strings Are Thin

If the strings were the problem, I could fix the problem—but the strings are another excuse. I don't know what this is. Inside my back pocket, a small wad of paper, small slashes of pen and four letters: "ABBA." That's what is written; that's all I have.

This will not be enough.

What I'm going to need is a little instruction. Where are the lines of the staff? Where are the notes? Is this what they mean by a "chart?" What is this jargon? I am so out of the loop—but as far as I know, this isn't music.

I am a liar; I said I could sing—but I can't sing this scrap of paper. It's too foreign to be familiar. I need a melody; I need some words. "ABBA." Those are letters.

Crisscross applesauce. This looks worse than my college algebra homework. That's how bad this looks.

Is this a joke? I don't know what to do. What do you do with something like this?

What they tell me is, "You have to feel it." That is the secret to improvisation. That is how you sing the blues.

Well. I cannot improvise. I cannot feel.

I can see. What I see are black bangs. Completely, they cover his eyes. His midnight hair sways back and forth with the beat. When Kaleb plays, he sweats. The shorter hairs curl up in half-pipes. But, from the back of this dive bar, where they keep a juke box and pong, no body in

here, not one single soul, can smell the faint ring of the salt at his neckline. Nobody knows how he is.

Kaleb looks good.

“Is that Jack White?” a girl with no bra loudly shouts out to no one.

“That’s my big brother.”

Kaleb’s band name, when he was with David, was Zero, but now it’s just Stick. I will not call him Zero. I will not call him Stick. I refuse.

The stage lights blind Kaleb, staring out, dumb. The red leather strap of the guitar on his shoulder is the only thing holding my brother; he’s up, on his feet. Bottles of Bud line the stage. There is a yellow banana peel sticker—he stuck it there—by the pickups; it’s under thin strings. Kaleb says they’ll snap soon. New strings are needed. I tell him “chill.”

The strings are thin, and the sticker is tacky—but that’s not that problem. The problem is missing.

“Jack White’s not a drunk.” But the girl with no bra is not listening now.

Where is the melody? Where is the front man? The star? Where is David?

David, who wears an unbuttoned black button-up with white pearl-snap buttons. David, whose white-blond short hair shines aglow in the stage lights. David, who stands at the front, a hand and three thick, silver ring bands on the back of the mike. David, who is really the one; he’s supposed to be up there.

Do you want to know why? Ask Kaleb.

Kaleb, who learned to play bass just to back David up. Kaleb, who swears that David did not kick him out of the band, LOOP THE TAPE. Kaleb, who “chose” to move back to Town Lake. Kaleb, who wears this guitar like a crutch, this red and white lacquer electric guitar.

Yes, he got David’s guitar.

Kaleb is lousy with Bud. At four in the morning, he stops snoring, starts shaking, and stumbles to the refrigerator, where he slugs back, and washes his hands with a red and green bottle of soap.

I slump down in my bed and stare up at the white textured ceiling. With his rough tongue, the cat licks my face.

I close my eyes; I pretend to sleep.

What I do is worse than what Kaleb does.

It wasn’t supposed to be like this.

I’m trying to think how it was supposed to be. However it started. With the three of us. I couldn’t say how it was. I can’t really think of examples right now. I can’t really think.

The amps are what keep me from thinking. I could probably think if I moved. But this is where I am. I’m here.

There is a naked woman in black and white paint on the otherwise bare wall behind me.

The amps stack in towers; they tower above me; they fill me with something like sound. My body seems not to be hollow; my heart seems to pulse.

Music: Illusion of motion.

I cannot move.

I've done all of the moving I can.

I haven't moved.

But I did try to move.

To college: Tulane. That was the plan. Or okay, not originally. Originally, the plan was to stay. At college: UT. College with David. No. Actually, I had it right on the first time around.

The plan was to move. A long time ago. It did not involve David.

Wait.

Was there a time before David?

Probably not. So the plan was to stay.

With David. I buried the plan.

Do you get it? Me neither.

How could David be gone?

I came back. Am I back? Am I here? I came here, to Austin, because of the storm.

“Because,” said the school, “it isn't safe here.” That's what the Tulane RA, who wore black horn-rimmed glasses, told me: “No school. Go *home*.”

It is that last one that got me.

The first thing I moved was my wardrobe, by which I mean my clothes and the small stack of plastic tubs where I keep them.

Here is a lesson: start out with small things—like a black dress sock, for example—that way, you can make the first moves by yourself.

So they say. But for me, even a black dress sock is a big thing. I don't want to move by myself. I don't want to move.

In August, Kaleb helped me move the bed; it wouldn't fit in my green Honda Accord. If the bed had been twin-sized, I might could have done it myself. But it was queen-sized—Posturepedic too, and it had a mattress topper, and also beige sheets, and my baby blanket, Buddy. I took all of that with me.

Thank god we did not have to go up the stairs, is what I thought.

“Just put it on the floor,” I said. “Forget the frame. Let's just put it down. Right here, where we are.”

Where we were was right in the middle of the dorm room. The bed took up the whole space—almost. There was a bit of blue carpet that showed around in periphery. The bed became an island.

I found a beige fitted sheet in one of the small cardboard boxes I marked “covers.”

“Take a corner,” I said.

“There's no point. I'm calling in pizza.”

“We'll need a napkin,” I said. “A placemat. Plus, it's taboo to get crumbs on the *sheets*, not the mattress. You have to break the rules right.”

The pizza Kaleb ordered was cheese pizza. The thing is, neither of us like cheese pizza that much, even though pizza is our favorite food (Kaleb likes sausage; I like mixed veggies), but

David likes cheese pizza best; it is his favorite. Or, it *was*. It had been. Whatever. We can agree on cheese pizza.

When the RA, wearing black horned-rimmed glasses, rapped on the door, I offered a slice.

“Here,” I said.

“Get out.”

“No really,” I said. “You can have some.”

“No really yourself,” she said. “You need to leave.”

“You’re kidding,” I said.

But she wasn’t. Unfortunately wasn’t.

And the storm was—it was coming.

When I close my eyes I can see I can’t see. The room is no longer what’s spinning.

Still. Still. Still.

It is me.

“Leave your stuff. You can come back in just a few days,” said the horned-rimmed RA, “when this blows over.”

Well, guess what you could guess but I couldn’t: the storm did not blow over, it blew *in*, and it ruined everything—and I don’t mean just my mattress, which it definitely did ruin.

On November 22, just before Thanksgiving, I got to go back. Or rather, I got to go forth. Whichever. The water was out of the room by that point. You could see just how high it had got

on the particleboard door. The mold was as high as my chest, and the black reached my lungs. I tried to get away from it. But how do you get away from air?

I coughed and I coughed. Like a sixty-seven year old man who smoked his whole life, two packs a day, maybe more. Like a nerd kid wearing Chuck Taylors and smoking pot the first time. That is how much I choked. That is how stupid I felt.

“It’s okay,” the glasses told me. “They’ll clean it all up. I mean, yeah, you’ll have to get a new bed. I can clearly see that. But you can try it again. You can come back next fall.”

I put my white sneaker on the mattress; it leaked water—and that’s when I started to cry.

I haven’t stopped. I mean, of course I do stop sometimes, but then I start back. It’s really unpredictable, the way this happens. Out on Town Lake, in White Tiger Cleaners, out at The Garage. Someone else has to tell me it’s started again.

Look: I just saw someone. Someone brought a Bud to a blonde guy in a black button-up with pearl-snap buttons. I see him, I swear. He’s standing beside The Garage’s garage door. It’s a big exit. You should look there. You do not want to look at me now. You do not want to miss this.

I missed our old home, and I missed it real bad, so my dad helped me out: he bought up the place with the narrow, white hallway.

“Do you want me to live there, with you?” he said. And I said “yes,” but Kaleb said “no,” so my dad stayed at the lake.

“Take care of Kaleb,” he said.

I am trying.

Here's what I do: I sit on the bed, which was my mom's but now it's mine, and I watch as, by ear, Kaleb picks out old songs which I then sing to him. *My future's wide open*. On David's red and white lacquer electric guitar.

"Don't you want to be better?" I say. Kaleb is self-taught, or maybe it was David who taught him, if you want to be truthful. But, either way, Kaleb is bad. And this is no lie. Without David, there isn't much choice. There is just need: I need Kaleb, Kaleb needs Stick, Stick needs a drink.

"Let's play."

Through the mike, this slurring voice does not sound like Kaleb. It sounds like somebody else I don't know.

ABBA.

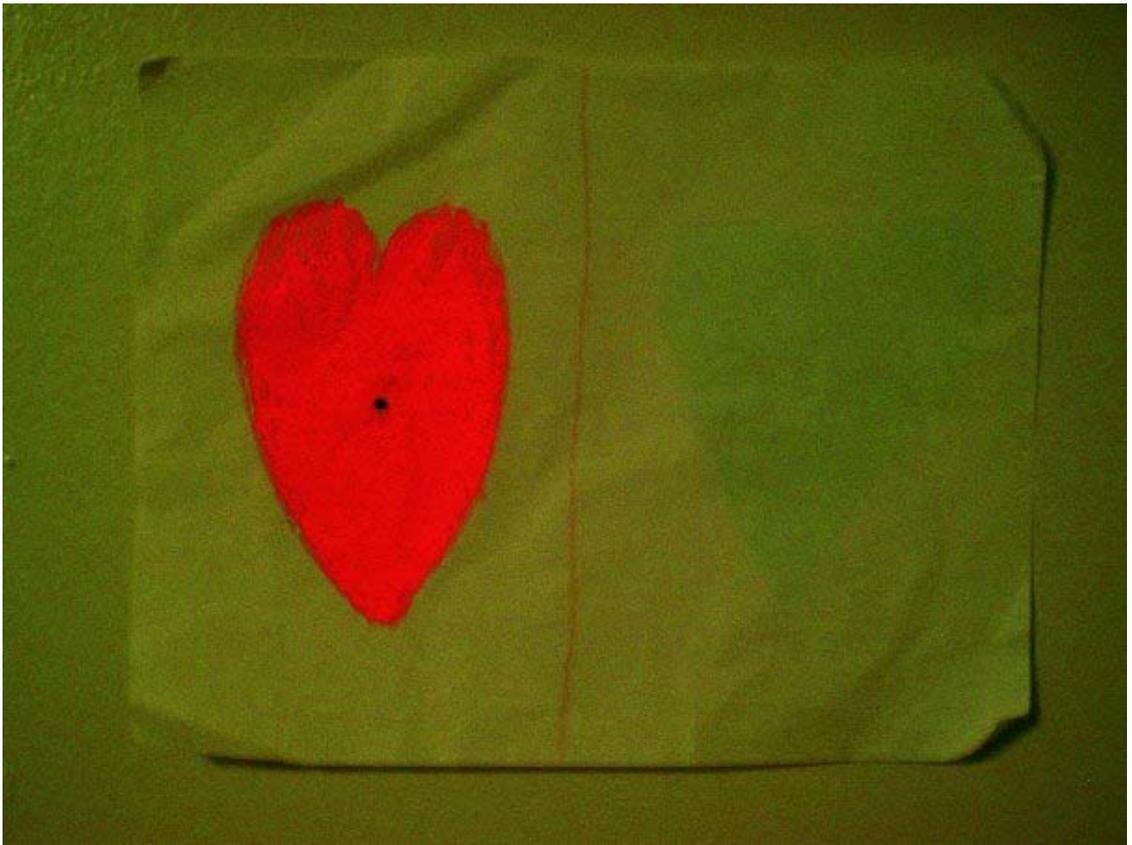
You know these changes by heart and would not have to think. You could sing this tired song in your sleep. And if you felt the melody, that's what you'd do. You'd know just what to sing; you would get the return.

Well. There is no melody here. So tell me, what is the difference between A and B? Between Kaleb and Stick? Between present and absent?

No answer?

I shake my head side to side, slinging blonde bangs in my eyes.

A thin string snaps. It lashes back, as if casting a line for his callous-hard fingertip, and hooks through a small slice of flesh, ripping it, tearing a hole. Around the guitar neck, it coils: a reel slick with blood loss, red tears.



If You Want to Become a Cub Scout

This is a question you have to answer: “What does it mean to do your best?”

David had to answer that question ten years ago. I don’t know why it feels like today.

I am going to teach Kaleb a lesson. My dad says, “A real man knows how to shoot.” I say, *Don’t trust him.*

Kaleb will not want to hear this.

He will jump when the pigeon explodes—and it always explodes. All the same, he will pull the thick cord, and I will recover the pieces with David; he lines them up—the shattered clay shapes—along a fallen pine log. Kaleb pulls again, jumps again.

This will go on.

I grip the pellet gun, and David rests his chin on the top of my head.

“Your scalp smells like green grass and pine and watermelon soap, your scalp smells like Kelsey,” he says, holding my back to his chest as he steadies my hands.

The pellet gun is the kind that you pump. The pump is a wooden handle with grooves, like the lines on a page, which help you to grip it. My dad’s initials—*PH* (for Patrick Horton)—are burned in the wood.

I pump the gun until it hurts me, and David has to finish the job.

Kaleb would not trust just anyone with the gun—he would not trust me—but David is a Cub Scout; he has his Bobcat Badge. It is official.

“You can’t do anything without the Bobcat Badge,” David says. The Bobcat Badge is what makes you a Cub Scout.

To get your Bobcat Badge, you have to discuss these questions with your family: What does honesty mean? Why is it important for people to trust you when you give your word? When might it be difficult to keep your word?

My dad never made it out of Webelos, which is the easiest level. He said it was because his dad was a sailor. He got shipped to the war, but the war did not ship him back. When the Scout Master asked my dad the Bobcat Badge questions, he said, “Could *you* ask my father?”

When David’s left ear presses my right, I can hear it—but there isn’t an ocean between us. It’s just sometimes we hit, and sometimes we miss.

“Take your best shot.” That’s what David says.

My dad can’t miss.

“A real man knows how to shoot,” says Kaleb. He pulls the cord again and again.

When my dad shoots skeet, he fires rapid fire. When he’s out of ammo, he tosses the shotgun to Kaleb. “Put this up,” he says.

My dad lets the screen door slam closed as he slips inside the frame house.

The gun is no good.

We are staying at the frame house this summer. We didn’t stay anywhere last summer. After what happened with the teacher at the cabin. My mom likes the frame house much better.

Kaleb hangs the shotgun above his black bicycle on the clout cut nails in the beams of the bright red barn wall. David and I finish finding what's left of all the clay pigeons, and against the pine log, we arrange them and shoot them to dust.

Kaleb takes to the pasture. He comes back with a rotten pecan, a pine cone, and a sweet gum ball and says, "It's my turn."

"Just a little bit longer," I say. "We'll switch when we hit that triangle piece." I point to the one I mean and it's pretty big.

"Fine."

David adjusts his arms, getting still closer, so we can aim. I turn my head and kiss him on the cheek, as high as I can reach, and lift one white sneaker, like in the movies.

David has never kissed me before. We miss six shots in a row.

"You're missing on purpose," says Kaleb.

"No I'm not," David says. He pumps the gun good.

"Yes you are. It's my turn now and it's my gun. So give it to me."

"It's out of shots anyway," David says. Kaleb takes the gun, feels the weight.

"No, it isn't," he says.

It's below the left shoulder. Next to the spine. That's where Kaleb shoots David. I feel him shudder.

David is gone.

I would like to start over.

I didn't want to miss David. I wanted David to miss. He is a Cub Scout. Or was.

I would like to start over again.

Question: What does it mean to do your best?

It means have to tell you something: “A real man knows how to shoot.”

I wanted Kaleb to see David miss. And I wanted it to be okay. Or at least better than it was. Or is. Whichever. It’s both.

I lied. And I did it to *you*.

David lied to Kaleb, but not about the gun being out of shots. Kaleb is the one who lied about that.

When David gave the gun back, he did not say “it’s empty.” He let Kaleb take his best shot. For six entire minutes, Kaleb fired rapid fire and David stood chest to back with me and we watched.

Kaleb’s stick arms were shaking. He could not make one single shot.

“I could teach you how to shoot better,” said David.

“You can’t teach me,” said Kaleb. “I saw you miss.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

“I am.”

“Yeah, you’re right—I was missing on purpose.”

I set out to teach Kaleb a lesson, but my lesson went wrong, and now I don’t know what’s the truth.

I wanted to hide this, the part where I lied.

Because it’s always the lesson you think you know—that is the one that will get you.

Kaleb tossed the pellet gun on the ground.

“It’s out of shots anyway,” he said.

David picked up the gun, felt the weight.

“No it isn’t,” he said.

David did pump the gun. He did not need to. The pressure was already as high as it could go. Kaleb pumped it himself.

“It is so,” insisted Kaleb. “It’s out.” And that is when David shot Kaleb. With his own pellet gun. Below the left shoulder. Next to the spine.

“A real man knows how to shoot.”

“You’re a baby, David,” said Kaleb.

We all were.



The Skeleton Left

It's amazing that this thing still works: my green car, the Accord, carries me and the tent and the cooler to Brookeland, the lake. Of course, to make all this happen, it takes ten CDs and the right-hand lane, but I don't much care. The White Stripes scream electric loud through the speakers. Can *you* hear the diesel trucks honking? So what if I'm slow! Pass me by. There you go.

I can handle this.

I am going to visit my dad, where he lives, all alone, at the lake. When I was little, my whole family lived there. In the summers, I mean. That is where we came alive, and we came together. It was my dad and my mom, Kaleb and David, and me. Hamburgers, baked potatoes, and board games. But you couldn't play Scrabble with my dad. He invented new rules and played proper names, which don't really exist in this game. His favorite was "Texan." Xs earned you a lot of points.

I do not want to talk about Xs.

I'm here. They could all disappear. I am here.

Alone. I think I should have known.

I am not ready to see my father. Or anyone, really.

I need to prepare.

When I stop off at the beachfront, it's crowded with kids. They run the shore, sandy swim trunks swaggering and wet, watermelon stains on their lips. The parents sit back, sipping Bud.

A boy with a fishing line need not remind me of my as yet unburied memories here. I stub my bare toe and trip on a green pine stick in the stinging, gray sand.

I'm getting ahead of myself. It's been a while.

The calendar says it is summer again, so I strip off my shirt and I wade in the water. The amber shallows seem stagnant. I guess I can float, for awhile, among grey, driftwood forearms.

Kneeled on the beachfront, with knuckles red-ridged, I clutched the pine stick, green on the end where I'd twisted it off from the branch. David sloshed in the shallows, not paying attention to me. His fishing line sagged with the weight of the red watermelon.

My green pine stick parted the gray sand as I scraped out a lopsided heart.

The clay rose in iron and white swirls. I had once shaped two pots from clay. I put one in the cabin and one on the porch. The pots could fit in the palm of my hand. My dad used them for his cigarette ashes. The one on the porch had more ashes.

Kaleb picked up some pebbles along the shore and skipped them across David's line.

Six.

Entire.

Skips.

"Pretty good." David's eyes matched the sky and his hair matched the sun through white clouds.

“Think you can beat it.” Kaleb held out a pebble: jagged, sharp, toothy. David looked at the pebble, crinkled his nose, and waved it away. The scar on Kaleb’s bottom lip quivered. Kaleb let the pebble plunk in the water. I stretched on the beach. The sun warmed my belly but there wasn’t shape to the clouds. I fisted the green pine stick and pointed.

“Fat can of bait worms,” I said.

“A brain,” David said.

“Your brain,” Kaleb said.

I threw the green pine stick at Kaleb. It carried the scent of fresh pine away. With the slight breeze, I could smell it: the small silver perch—cold in the pale green grasses beyond the clay shore—stiffened.

The skeleton left.

My left hand touches the top of my right shoulder, and right touches left. Touch is okay. And taking off my green cover up wasn’t the scary part either. I don’t care if people are watching. The problem with people is—what if they aren’t?

I feel the gooseflesh on the back of my neck. I feel something I can’t admit. It feels funny—what my stomach does—all of a sudden.

David is gone as a ghost.



Fireworks

This is the road trip that David and I were supposed to take: Austin to Marfa, a West Texas tour. Of all the road trips my dad took, this one, he said, was his favorite. There are boxes of concrete in Marfa. They are the size of a building, but there's nothing inside; they are only the frames. I wanted to pitch David's two-person tent in the center and press our bare hip bones into the concrete.

That was our plan. It changed. Boy, did it.

Now I am hanging with Kaleb.

Why did I think this would help? Who did I think it would help?

Kaleb makes a swift clockwise rotation: the knob and the handle, the radio dial. Turn, turn. Kaleb sits at the wheel of our dad's old diesel truck, a navy blue Ford.

David, in his red Firebird, filled that position before. Kaleb was too drunk to drive. And so was the other guy, the one who hit David.

The diesel's dashboard is sun burnt, the saddle brown bench seat ripped through to the yellow foam cushion. The windshield bears the faint scars of his wiperless blades. The cracked rearview mirror is missing. Ahead, the horizon is turns black.

This is a traveling night.

David's light was green. Even though Kaleb won't say, I am just sure it was.

Through the truck's open window, Kaleb lets his shaky breath loose.

"Welcome the poisonous earth."

An occasional cigarette touches his lips.

"Aren't you afraid you'll get cancer?"

That's the scariest thing I can think of, but I can't say that he shouldn't smoke because, when the drunk guy hit David, Kaleb flew out the window, the open window, the window he opened to smoke. Kaleb landed into a soft sewage ditch. He was saved. By *poo*.

The cost: Kaleb's childhood.

I would like to remember it for him. Whatever he needs to keep living, whatever he needs to go on. I will whisper the stories. I will make up the parts of himself he is missing.

I seem to remember we climbed in the Fisher Price car. The car was red; it had a yellow, domed roof. The only problem was, we could not get the door shut. So we had to hug tight.

The map, in the glovebox, is squeezed between wrenches and pistons and grease-covered other things I cannot call by their names.

Kaleb bangs on the glovebox; it falls. Open mouth. He roots for the map. Gadgets clatter, metallic and cold. The map frees.

"Well, that's most of it," he says.

The rest of the story: It was the seatbelt that did it to David. The seatbelt did its job: it hung him.

The boy I remember wore Little League cleats. “So it will go easier,” he said.

Kaleb would not have said that. And he would never wear Little League cleats. With Kaleb, it’s black boots or nothing. He likes to make things as hard as they can be. So maybe it’s not Kaleb I remember right now.

In the July afternoon, the scorching sand stacked at the base of the ramp. He pushed the Fisher Price car to the top. With the cleats on, double tied, he could sprint. He was quick.

Kaleb is quick, but he’s also slow; he takes the back roads wherever we go.

We’ve gone crazy too far.

“Do you know where we are?”

The ramp ran from the bulkhead to the beachfront. He steered us into the gray, stinging sand. And suddenly, we stopped.

David’s death was not instant. Kaleb remembers the sound of his cries. That is all he remembers.

The boy from the night of the fourth of July—he carried the sparklers down to the edge of the lake. He lit them; they popped; I flinched. He patted my shoulder and rubbed it in circles, like he was winding a clock.

That was before the “big show” started.

It wasn’t so scary back then.

Hot wind slings through Kaleb's midnight hair and the window. The lights on the dashboard flash green. Kaleb flings the old map to dust. It catches wind and it spreads, fanning out.

A tumbleweed snags through barbed wire and splintered wood fenceposts.

Before the old map can fall to the ground, we are gone.

The mottled ducks waddled back through the thin, narrow grasses.

When he held out the sparkler, I held out my hand.

I thought I had it.

“Tell me what happened. The last thing you remember. Whatever it is. Tell me what happened to David.”

I never saw David in tears. Never once did I hear David scream. The black casket was closed.

The setting sun cast coral colors over the amber water. The cabin was facing the generous lake.

“Please, Kaleb. Please.”

The grill lines cooked into the hamburgers. The sharpened steel prong speared the aluminum foil with potatoes inside.

The potatoes were not growing eyes; they were just growing soft.

The problem with the facts is they are the mortician's. The problem with the memories is I don't know whose they are.

Will you let me start over?

The morning cast spare sunbeams through the pine trees along the thin ridge. The boat drifted.

Like a dangling sternpost, Kaleb's Bud hangs out the window; it guides him.

"Part of West Texas is still in the glovebox," says Kaleb. "I want to go there."

"What are you saying? What do you mean?"

Kaleb shakes his head and his bangs form black bars over his eyes.

"Why won't you talk to me? Why won't you just talk to me?"

"There is no reason," he says. "For coming, for going, forget."

I waved to the grasses. The ducks disappeared against the green shoreline. I stretched out my hand, in the boat with my dad, letting the wake spray my arm.

The roads that we travel are not on the map.

The bright summer sun shone through white clouds in the strewn beams of light my mom called God. I closed my eyes and allowed all the hovering colors to brighten and bleed.

Kaleb clears the horizon of all conscious thought. The world is a blank, the cruise control set. He turns right on the radio dial. Raw noise blasts from the speakers in tandem. There is only vibration and scream. Inside my sternum, it resonates there with the freedom and violence of fireworks.

Right now, I choose to believe David's light was green, though it could have been red, and the headlights were white—then veering, then swerving toward David.

As the Ford swerves down this back road, Kaleb's Bud sloshes across the yellow foam cushion, and we leave our skid marks to texture the passage.

“Hey—are you hoping to wreck us?”

“Hope,” Kaleb says, “if there is hope at all—is to lose yourself.”

You were both there and gone if you stood on the deck, late at night, under shimmering moon, staring across the silver crests of lake water and you felt like floating.

You oohed and you aahed when the fireworks began. You raced your own heart.

There was nothing to say.

They waited, Kaleb in the sewage and David in his seatbelt, for more colored lights. These lights would not spark into colors or flame. They would not save anyone.

An electric green needle leans onward, toward the night sky.

I remember the fireworks. Where was the finale? I missed it.



The Curl

This is his movie. On film, for the record, for show. Show the boy: My big brother. He bleeds a finger on red watermelon cut into chunks. They form a heap on the beige tabletop.

Into the monitor, into the screen, blinking, I stare. The boy tapes his anger with a black camera and paper, white gauze planned for pain.

He didn't plan this.

I wish I had seen it before. If I wasn't too late, if the film was in making, not made, I'd snatch the knife and shout "STOP!"

On the screen, I hear static hush and see backward in flashes. Kaleb heaves with the zoom and the focus lens, searching in three a.m. half-light. High volume and low resolution. Recorded, on record, on screen. Each breath brings the tabletop closer.

Everything's colored by blood. He meant to spill. No "sorry" about self-destruction. There is Bud in his veins. But this is, by far, too much.

We sit on the island. Around the bed's corner poster, the beige sheets bunch in the curl of a child's lonely body, white cotton remnants of childhood contained in a green glass jar in between us. Kaleb strikes a harsh cord, with one thin string long missing, on David's red and white lacquer electric guitar.

"Talk to me, talk to me. Are you okay?"

Kaleb grabs the black camera. My eyes avert at the flash and slight click of his capture.

"No fair," I say. "I wasn't ready."

Kaleb shakes the black bangs in his eyes. I touch Kaleb's back. Against the clock, I circle.

"One more."

Kaleb does not even blink. He will not close his eyes.

“Fine.”

We face the camera and look at ourselves on the screen. Kaleb’s bangs form black bars over his hazel eyes. My hair looks—what?—natural?

Colorful clothes dress the background. We look like we’re inside the dryer. Not hiding. We look like we’re home.

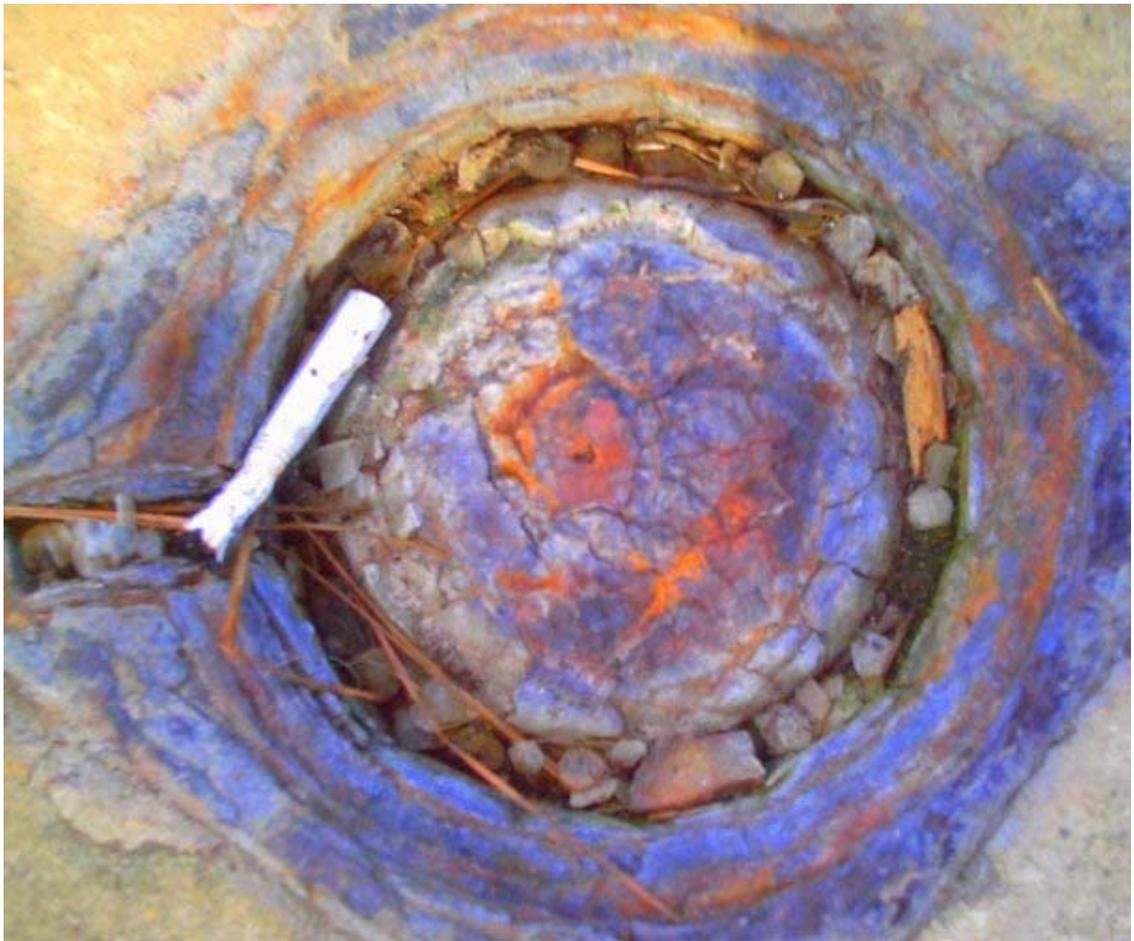
“For posterity,” he smirks.

A smile on one side.

I look at the image afterwards. It’s blurry because Kaleb shakes, but I think what I see on his cheek is not the first strand of silver hair but something else that can shine. I turn his rough chin my direction. Then, with my free hand, I smooth the black bars. His bangs layer; they soften.

“That lower lip scar looks a little smaller,” I say.

It looks like, you guessed it, a comma.



Loop the Tape: Afterword

I started this project in June, intending to write in four revolving perspectives. A fact: I like to read novels—*The Sound and the Fury*, *The Poisonwood Bible* (to name only two)—told in revolving perspective. Now add a small piece of wisdom: Write what you read. Therefore, I thought that I could and I would write in revolving perspective; it would be in my interest to do so. Well, never assume.

And so, on New Year's Day, I began anew. I closed up the theory books I had been reading: *Elements of Alternate Style: Essays on Writing and Revision*, *Voices on Voice: Perspectives, Definitions, Inquiry, Voice as Process*, *Landmark Essays on Voice and Writing*, *The Modern Stylists*, *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction*, *New Perspectives on Narrative Perspective*. I closed up the literature I had been reading: *Winesburg, Ohio*, *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*, *Love Medicine*, *As I Lay Dying*, *The Sound and the Fury*, *Airships*, *Plainsong*, *The Poisonwood Bible*, *Machine Dreams*, *The Wonder Book of the Air*, *The Heaven of Mercury*. And I also closed up the open and unfinished files on my computer screen. I shoved my notes to the side, my narrators to the side; I got it all out of my way. Then I drove to the lake, where I thought that I might set my stories.

The campground was empty. I was the only one in the whole campground and probably for ten, fifteen miles; I was completely alone. The sky and the water reflected clear blue; the air smelled new green. I made my way across the small pebble footpath that leads to the fishing pier, sat down cross-legged in the center, and looked out at the lake through the pier's steel bars and the sun's strewn beams of light. The water was still. I took Amy Hempel's *Collected Stories* out of my green army satchel, opened the book to the first page, to a story I had read at least three dozen times, a story I had more or less memorized but had somehow forgotten as well, and

began reading. Before the first space break, appears the phrase “and I listened.” And I did. Ever so slightly, the wind sounded down through the pine trees; it was something I felt more than heard. The story said something like that; it said that very thing, in fact, but it was talking about the beat of a pulse. I felt myself beginning to move, back and forth, swaying. But before I looked up, to see if the origin of movement came from the pier or from me, I finished the story; I waited to breathe.

When I started writing again, it was from a single perspective, the sister’s perspective, Kelsey. I couldn’t say why. I just wrote. Four days and four stories in, I could see what a fool I would be to write anyone else. Not only did this shift from revolving narration to a single, first-person narrator simplify my project, but also, it allowed me to focus in on the core of the story I had to tell.

From the beginning, my interest in this story had been in Kaleb. I had chosen to write in revolving narration because it would have allowed me to look at him from three different perspectives: that of his sister, his best friend, and also his girlfriend. In addition, it would have allowed me to give him a voice of his own. I wanted him to get as much attention as possible. The trouble was, Kaleb’s perspective was so nihilistic that I could never get his stories to add up to much (go figure). In addition, I wasn’t really that interested in Kaleb’s girlfriend in any respect other than in her relationship with Kaleb. As a character, I did not sympathize with her, but because she was a narrator, I felt forced to talk about her family life, and to drag out the narrative in that direction. The pieces told from the best friend’s perspective were somewhat better, but flat, and they, too, tried to force my attention off Kaleb and his immediate family.

Family and family relations were (and are) so important to my story thematically that I couldn’t reasonably ignore the family situations of all my narrators except Kaleb—that is, if they

were going to narrate, their families had to be central. But I didn't have the time, the ability, or the interest to write a novel that took on the personal histories of three entire families. I did not want to think about that many problems. After all, one family is sure to have more than enough.

When trying to speak for four people, three from different families, I found myself reaching deep into unknown territory. On the literal level, I was deep in East Texas, at a lake called Sam Rayburn, where my family has been vacationing since before I was born. We go there every summer, and I am taken with the smell of fresh pine and the feel of fine sand mixed with clay in between my toes. It's just enough to make me sentimental. I'm hardly an insider in neighboring small town of Jasper, though, and so, whether by choice or by circumstance, I know very little about the culture and politics there. If I wanted to make Jasper my fictional home, however, I would have to; I would need to do serious research. Clearly, this approach opposes the conventional wisdom to "write what you know." Nevertheless, the need to research, in itself, wasn't something I saw as such a bad thing. As a graduate student, research is a large part of what I do, and plus, it would allow me to divert my attention from the impending failure of my creative project. So research it was.

I took three trips down to Jasper to check things out for myself, taking notes in a moleskin notebook on top of the steering column while trying to figure out which of the back roads ended in something other than mud. I also ordered and read history books and journal articles about the town and the dragging of James Byrd, Jr. in particular. Unfortunately, after all that work, what I discovered was that I had absolutely no interest in creating characters that were part of or even aware of the culture and politics in Jasper. For my family, and a number of other families who have befriended my family over the years, Lake Sam Rayburn (fifteen miles north of Jasper) is a vacation spot, a place of escape. It's one of the reasons we can survive the other

fifty-one weeks a year elsewhere. To us, it's not a place where hate crimes occur; it's not a place where anything occurs, really, and that's the beauty of it.

Of course, the power of a place of escape to draw us together is, at best, temporary, and at worst, an illusion. You can't stay gone forever, even if gone feels together. Reality settles. And in reality, East Texas is less than idyllic; it's somewhat backwards, in fact. I would not want to live there. Not even on paper. As a result, my characters became homeless. And so it is with them. In a loose sense, their home is in Austin now, the state's capital and also the most culturally progressive city in Texas (not to mention the live music hot spot). But they never quite fit. People are perpetually splitting off, from the land and their lives; they are, at each moment, leaving. I left revolving perspective in much the same way.

My collection participates in the genre of short story writing that came out of the Twentieth-Century literary movement known as Impressionism. During that period, Hemingway's iceberg theory of omission came to dominate the short story genre, and would later influence a new generation of short story writers including Raymond Carver, Gordon Lish, Barry Hannah, and Amy Hempel. These writers rely heavily on the use of "white space" to create the rhetorical concept of *aporia* in their texts. The idea is to produce a story that not only invites but requires the reader to "fill in the gaps" and thereby experience the text first-hand. As such, the writer must exhibit tight control over the language; otherwise, connective patterns will not emerge. The goal of the *aporetic* writer is to get the reader to feel more than he or she understands and to become comfortable with his or her uncertainty. In reaching this goal, the writer must learn to effectively gamble on what to include and, more importantly, what to leave out of the text. The effective use of white space has been my foremost preoccupation in writing this collection of short stories; it is a lesson that I am still learning. In addition, because this is a

collection of short stories rather than a novel told in revolving perspective, I am learning to navigate the contours of a more flexible narrative structure, one that does not proceed by strict chronology but by the natural movement of the mind. The resulting narrative appears as a series of stacked moments that should ultimately coalesce into a collage-like picture of the whole.

Notes

The lyrics in “American History” and “The Strings Are Thin” come from the White Stripes’ song “You’re Pretty Good Looking (For a Girl),” by Jack White, *De Stijl*, New York: Third Man Records, 2002.

Page 33: “*Just ‘cuz you’re pretty good lookin’ [. . .] for a girl.*”

Page 41: “*and this feeling’s still gonna be around.*”

Page 42: “*until I know everything I need to know now.*”

Page 66: “*My future’s wide open.*”

Dick Porter’s *The White Stripes: 21st Century Blues*, London: Plexus, 2004, was also a reference.

VITA

Janna Michele Pate was born September 15, 1984, in Webster, Texas. She is the daughter of James (“Larry”) and Mitzi Pate. A 2003 graduate of Clear Creek High School, League City, she received a Bachelor of Arts degree in English and philosophy from Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, May 2006.

In August, 2006 she enrolled in graduate study. While working on her master’s in English, she served as the Associate Director for TCU’s new writing initiative, the Writing Associates Program, during the 2006-07 academic year and as the Associate Editor for TCU’s literary journal, *descant*, in 2007-08. She is a member of the College English Association and the Association of Writing Programs.

ABSTRACT

LOOP THE TAPE

By Janna Michele Pate, M.A., 2008
Department of English
Texas Christian University

Thesis Advisor: Cynthia Shearer, Writing Consultant

This thesis is a collection of short fiction, presented as “a life in stories,” and modeled after the prose style Amy Hempel. There are eleven stories, all told by one narrator, Kesley Horton. Of the eleven stories, six are set in Austin, Texas, where Kesley’s mother and big brother, Kaleb, live, three are set in Brookeland, Texas, where Kelsey’s father lives, and two are set in transit. The stories take place over a period of roughly 4 years: Kelsey’s last years in high school and her first years in college. During this time, Kesley deals with her parents’ divorce, her boyfriend’s infidelity, her boyfriend’s death, her mother’s death, and her brother’s alcoholism. My brother, Wesley Pate (age eight), created the cover art. I have also included an afterword, which details my creative process.