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It's Not about Brooklyn

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IT'S NOT ABOUT BROOKLYN

By

Elee Oak

Bachelor of Fine Arts - Sculpture

School of Visual Arts NYC

2012

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
Of the requirements for the

Master of Fine Arts - Creative Writing

Department of English
College of Liberal Arts
The Graduate College

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Abstract

My work at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas in the Master of Fine Arts Creative Writing program has culminated into a collage form hybrid comprised of vignettes, poetry, and other creative works. The writing engages central themes, through the Queer gaze of the character Sissy. She became suspect at an early age because of her *odd* aptitudes along with a physical appearance that never fit. She dodged and at times embraced an identification as a sort of side show curiosity, and an intoxicated freak of gender, race, and talent. She survived physical and mental attacks. Then she blindly stepped into the path of a Brooklyn man, whose wake destroyed her, renewed her, and relieved her of the blinding privilege of class. The underlying threads woven through these include a gritty spirituality, a pushing against classifications and identities, and buried histories unearthed. In disillusionment, through forced identities, and while defending against ongoing threats she is shaped into a creative yet practical ghost of sorts. In addition to these foundational stories and themes, the ritual of tea is a connecting consideration.

Some pieces highlight a childhood of drug use in the heartland of Iowa, and the Bible belt states of Kansas and Missouri. At times there is a return to Brooklyn, where a rape

instigated for the purpose of restoring Sissy to her straight nature, *instead* conceived a son. Some of the works are re-envisioned art works that were destroyed or appropriated throughout her life. There are pieces that reexamine her relationship with her mother who died young and high.

It is strangely tragic and yet intends to retain a fairy dust lining. A humbled account of her truths, her motives and her flaws, is meant to inspire a fresh look at constructions and illusions, how we perpetuate them, how we survive them. And how *sometimes* we perpetuate them in order to survive.

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1. Tale of Blinds

Korte went to the front of the class. No one knew why Mr. MacNulty called on him. Korte looked scared and Mr. MacNulty didn't look any more happy than his usual self. He was an x-military man, who backed up the rumors of child abuse with a wooden paddle and his infamous "milk shake".

"Do you know why I called you up here, Korte?"

"No Sir."

"You were talking while I gave the instructions for the test."

"Sorry Sir."

"Oh! It's okay. You are going to repeat them to the class, for anyone who did not hear, because of the disruption."

Sissy knew this was her fault. She had asked Korte if she could borrow a pencil since he always kept extras. She raised her hand.

"Put your hand down Sissy. What you have to share is not pertinent here."

Ever since kindergarten they had been warned about Mr. MacNulty and now Sissy felt horrible for not listening. It was the first week with him and she was terrified every class. She started to cry silently. Korte was one of the nicest kids at school and never disrespected anyone.

"Korte? Where were we? Yes. You were about to repeat the instructions to the class for anyone who did not hear because of the disruption."

"I'm sorry Sir."

"You're sorry?"

...

"I'm sorry Sir."

"Well, you should be. You do not *know* what the instructions are. Do you?"

...

"No Sir."

"Well then, you have a choice today. Lucky you." He smiled at Korte and then at the class.

We had all seen him use the paddle, and that was bad. It left bad bruises, too. None of us knew what a milkshake really was. We understood it was a trick name. And we knew it wasn't good at all. But we couldn't conceive of the thing.

"Would you like the paddle or the milkshake, Korte?"

...

...

...

...

"Korte!"

"Milkshake Sir."

Mr. MacNulty went over to the door, locked it and pulled the blind down over the glass window. He came back over to where Korte bravely stood. We were in third grade. We were all pretty small. Mr. MacNulty was a big man. He was very white, very thick and had a flat top, as was the military tradition.

"Get the blinds Sissy, since you are so eager to help today."

Sissy got up out of her seat but she could hardly see for the tears. She had seen how so many of the nice kids, her friends, were mistreated by the all-white teachers and it had become too much. The bright white blinds were literally hard to see through her teary eyes. And she couldn't close them.

"Someone help her before she breaks them."

Bryce got up and closed the blinds.

Mr. MacNulty picked up little Korte by his shoulders and lifted him into the air. He started shaking him harder than Sissy thought possible. The class was silent while Korte's arms and Korte's legs and poor Korte's head were jerking around like leaves on a branch in the wind. The kids could all hear Korte making noises but no one could tell if he was trying to say something or if it was just from the shaking. Mr. MacNulty turned bright red and his eyes and mouth twisted with a sick smile. His muscles were bulging with the effort to set a lasting impression on the class.

Sissy wanted to scream but she was too scared. She closed her eyes and put her hands over her ears and waited and waited.

Later, on the playground Korte assured her he was going be okay. One of his eyes had a bright red part. Plus he had a bruise on his leg where it hit the desk. But he wouldn't go to the nurse.

"It hurts in my head a little."

Figure 1. Shoulder Chip



2. Ms. Mama Sis April 2013

Remember cans? I remember a morning and Mom using that triangular claw hooked can opener. It was bright and she always had a cup coffee. I stood on the kitchen stool so I could see every little thing Mom did. And sweetened condensed milk, I recall, as an essential indulgence in her sweet condensed life. She dusted the top of the can with her apron. Then on one side of the can, she made a small triangular opening, not fully inserting the sharp hook. Directly opposite she would make a perfect triangular opening, this time inserting the fullness of the steel blade. The smooth displacement of liquid poured out and into, as the atmosphere sucked itself into the can.

This other morning I cut myself again. There's limited counter space in the kitchen. I stood with cutting board covering and balanced above the sink. Issues I've yet to resolve with using the very last ends of the turnip caused me to waste a portion of my thumb instead. My poor ever abused and scared left thumb. I wrapped it up again.

A few days later I woke wondering if the aloe had worked this time, to reattach the hunk of thumb. Sitting on the toilet still dreary with sleep, I peeked under the bandage at the wound. I felt the cool of the air as I pulled the band aide away, then I felt the blood flowing from another opening. I

heard the trickle from the delicate accesses of power still
waking between my thighs. I saw it bellow in brilliant saturated
sweeps against the white porcelain.

I'm like a can.

3. Tale of White Wicker

There is no translating the moments, hours, years before words. I know now, wicker. I know now, laughter and the smell of weed and alcohol. But there is no translation for the one in the white wicker basket staring up and out, eyes wide with fear. Faces aimed at the me that was, and that was inside. Faces sick with happiless smearings across them, before smiles were smiles and they were more immeasurably nuanced. Wriggling inspired by a trappedness that was hers and was so much more than trapped. The one with words remembers back to that other, to that other one. And there is no sense to be made of then or now. She recognizes the wicker basket that was hers when she was, just was. And there were no reasons or justifications or definitions. She knows the feelings that were hers, like fear, like knowing, like don't look now – but yet like none of these. Because she has only seen glimpses of, reflections of, and fleeting just out of reach traces from the shattering facades. She understands bits of what the heart *must* warn against before the mind has organized a trap for the trap.

4. Tale of Accidental Birth

They moved through the shifting currents of people, her mouth glistened with cotton candy crystals. Her face felt feverish from the hot day. She tugged on the finger that sometimes made her laugh because it sometimes made him fart, "I wan this one Daddy; whas dat one? I can't see."

Her father picked her up and with a proud grunt, then *hoisted* her onto his shoulders. She was not expecting that. But what could she do? She giggled a bit, nervous and excited. She looked around at the new view and felt so *exposed* and hallowed by it, as if she were on a pedestal like the pretty white ladies, naked in Mama's art books. Within moments she had adjusted to the advantages of her position. Her little legs shifted as if to steer her Daddy and he let himself be steered. She heard a man yelling at the crowd.

"We didn't lie to you folks. You laughed at the notion of a bearded lady until you saw her. And you won't laugh if you *dare* to enter the tent Alive tonight! No! We would never *lie* to you good people of Des Moines—good *heartland* folks. Many of you traveled *some hours* to the see the Midway. Don't walk away with regret for the *unseen*. We told you we had *living breathing monstrosities*. But for the *accident* of birth you might be like they are."

"Dat tent Daddy. Kin we go in dat tent?" They had just left the tent with the two headed goat; it was stuffed and looked to be recovering from an infestation of silver fish. The other things were dead too, drowned in a smoky liquid the color of weak tea. They were contained in jars just like Mama's canning jars. Yet, these jars had a coverlet of dust. This display disappointed little Sissy. She wanted to be fed the truth that she knew lived despite all odds. She wanted to see someone fantastic, someone alive in a skin of landmines, just like hers.

"Alive! Alive! Alive! With the body of a snake and the head of a beautiful girl folks. You must see it to believe it. And you can't see it anywhere, *save for the Tent Alive!*" The man swept his arms in presenting the velvet draped entry. "Step this way for the last show of the summer! Only twenty lucky lucky *lucky* people will be allowed to enter on this *fine* evening Folks. Will you be one? If you are *so* lucky, you will daze upon a wonder and freak of nature. Gather round Folks. *Here* but, for the accident of birth, you could be *Snake Girl*. Set your eyes upon her scales. Look into her dreamy..."

Daddy moved too slow and her legs wiggled in agitation making it harder for him to hold her. Once she had her feet on the ground again, she needed all his fingers, both his hands and she pulled him with both her hands, forward through the swarms

of sweaty, beer soaked folk, so that she could see the girl who, "but for the accident of birth", might be her.

Once they were in the tent she pushed to the front and found herself face to face with a woman. Aside from being in the midst of a makeshift arrangement of mirrors and an odd use of stuffed animal parts this woman was just a woman. Sissy was disgusted at adults. She could not put it into words exactly but she knew most adults were lying cheating jerks.

"Daddy, I wanna go home."

~~~~~

Sissy touched the molding and chipped red paint. She leaned against the vending machine looking into the glass window. Daddy said he was going to get the car so she wouldn't have to walk all the way through the chalky parking lot and get shoes scratched up. The beer tent was happened to be on his way. Sissy had three dimes. Daddy promised the chicken would dance for her. He read the sign pointing to each word as he read it, "Slide a dime in my slot and I will dance for you a lot". Sissy watch carefully as the hen preened her feathers. It seemed they might need extra because there were some bald spots and some of the feathers looked dirty. The hen turned her head to get a better look at the girl through the gap of the swinging door. Sissy smiled, "Hi. I'm Sissy. What's your name?" She pressed her fingers to the window; the hen stayed resting in the tiny space

to the side of the stage. "Is it hot in there? It's hot out here." She imagined holding the chicken, petting the chicken, feeling the chicken's warm feet resting on her shoulder and feeling its beak preening her, maybe the hen could help her with her rat's nest of hair, before Mom got to it. She knew Mom would get to it eventually. Daddy said the chicken gets a prize every time she dances. Every time a dime goes in the machine she will do her dance and collect her treat. Sissy touched the coins in her hand with her fingers. The moon shone its light on the tired grounds. She heard muffled laughter from inside the heavy canvas tents and trailers that were scattered around. "Do you want something to eat? You don't have to dance if you don't want to. I only like to dance when I'm alone, so I would understand if you just want to eat the treats. No one else is here cept me. And I won't tell." The hen turned her head sharp to get a better look at the girl. She lifted herself and shifted herself around in her little nest, that was not a nest at all, but plywood painted to look like a nest. Sissy took her dime and found the slot.

## 5. Eight Passed MayBelle

Time's not a tease

She's my whore  
hate her when her legs are spread  
miss her when she's gone.

And when Time is

gone inside out cake  
I eat her with spots,  
of Jasmine tea.  
Hold your second.  
Hand me words.  
Soft  
black  
bananas  
Be my bitch double.

Time

for burning knees.

## 6. Tale of a Blue-eyed Jesus

We rarely visited my maternal grandparents. But I remember on their walls pictures of blue-eyed Jesus and Mary hung. Bibles were on the night stand in the bedroom and on top the TV set in the living room. One visit, in an attempt to connect with Grandma Hood, I drew pictures as best I could imagine and remember from the art history books my mom kept. I used a broken number two pencil I found in Grandma's trash. I sharpened it with my fingernails and used scraps of paper from the newspaper wrapping. My pride and desire for love drove me as I brought the drawings to my grandma.

In retrospect, I think it was more than the nudity that upset Grandma. My skill at the age of six might have frightened her. Many people displayed strong reactions and judgements to these skills. And Grandma *knew* that the finely illustrated anatomy of Adam, Eve and the breastfeeding Madonna with child, though presented to her from her granddaughter, *had* to be the work of the devil. I knew enough to cover the genitalia with fig leaves, as I had seen in the "classics" but that could not soothe Grandma.

She grabbed the drawings refusing to even look at my Last Supper. She ripped them up and threw them away. Grandma had a voice that stung. Yelling at my mother as if I were not there,

"What demonic shit are you teaching this child? I knew you were not fit to be a mother! Here we have the proof!"

Mom tried her best to defend my well-meaning efforts. Grandma ranted blaming my mother for my evil leanings. I kept the deep scratch I received from Grandma Hood's ripping sharp nails hidden.



## 7. Tale of a Shiny Grey Oval

Sissy sat looking at the huge stack of tests on Mrs. Bowman's desk. She could feel the heat growing in her and began to worry the other kids could see it, which made it worse yet.

The thirty-two children were mostly quiet. There were a few whispers, "I forgot" "Do you have a pencil I can borrow".

"Everyone get out a number two pencil. If you are *afraid* you might break the lead, then make sure you have two pencils ready and sharpened. This is a timed test so you cannot waste any time. When I pass it out, I will place the test on your desk face down. Leave it face down until I give the class the direction to begin."

A few children had their hands frantically waving in the air.

"If you do not have a pencil come see me now. You are in the third grade now. I expect you to remember your pencils."

The three hand wavers lined up in front of Mrs. Bowman's desk. Some others nervously looked around the room.

"Is that all? Next time you forget your pencil on test day you will stay after class. Is that understood?"

Two more in need of pencils scurried up to the desk.

"If you need to go use the restroom, wait for me to hand out these pencils." She smiled as she handed out the last pencils.

"Okay, raise your hands if you need to use the restroom. I will wait for everyone to get back, before I start the test. No one needs to go? If you need to go during test time you lose time to work on your answers. The test will take thirty minutes."

Five students then raised their hands.

"Okay, hurry and come get your hall passes." She handed out the hall passes, and the children hurried out the door.

Sissy felt the dampness on her skin, though the room felt cold. She felt cold. But cold never stopped her from sweating when she got scared. She looked over at her friends Korte and Laura but they were whispering. She hit her pencil on her desk.

"Sissy. You are going to break the led doing that."

Sissy stopped as the kids started returning from the bathroom.

Mrs. Bowman held the stack of tests against her chest with her arms crossed and her lace up shoes pressed together. She waited patiently for the children. As soon as they were all back in their seats, she started passing out the tests, "Remember, leave the tests face down until I say." There was a question booklet and the answer sheet. "Darren! Leave the test face down.

Are you not listening?" Once she passed out all the tests she stood in the front of the class. "Okay turn over your tests."

Sissy felt a rush of heat as she turned her test over and looked at the booklet laying on her desk.

She filled out her name. Then she looked at the race section. Korte rapidly filled his answers in. He was so sure he was Black. She had heard people talk about Black folks. But Sissy got stuck on what other people thought were the littlest things. Her parents had taught her she was French, Slovenian, English and Irish. She thought those were her races and could not find anything that they had talked about at home. She raised her hand.

"Yes Sissy?" Mrs. Bowman came over to her desk.

"it's not here."

"What is not there Sissy?"

"My race."

The whole class laughed.

Korte whispered, "Your White Sissy. Fill in the White Oval."

Mrs. Bowman shook her head in agreement.

Sissy pressed the lead into the oval till it was a shiny grey.

Figure 2. Map of a Young Grrl



## 8. Seeking in the Wake of Pleasant Tremors

It is gray that is deep. The child's flesh was warm and a dark silver gray and so was the soft powdery fur. And though the child's claws stayed hidden from her, she knew that they were the same warm gray. She trimmed them with her teeth, never needing to see them. What kind of beauty is it that needs to be seen? Birth is as a soft tremor, and gray with the dark and the light at once. The child's eyes were the same, and muddy pools.

## 9. Tale of Jane, Li' Jane and Christie

Sissy's doll house was a temporary arrangement of various items she had found or stolen and then repurposed for her use. Sissy had learned that everything she created had a lifespan. And it was usually short. If it were up to her these things would not be temporary. She loved to make things and loved the things she made. She had been playing happily by herself all morning. She made numerous trips to her mother's studio to gather masking tape, markers, and string. She had seen the exacto blade the last time she reached into her mother's oak drawing table drawer.

Liddle kiddle calamity jiddle doll was one of Sissy's favorite dolls and the one she felt akin to. Sissy called her Lil' Jane. Lil' Jane was three and a half inches tall. Size and various other things differentiated Lil' Jane from her Jane West doll. Lil' Jane was soft and rubbery with wire in her limbs to allow for slight bendable posing. But she could not stand by herself and her head was nearly as big as her body. She had a little red and white

Jane West had kept her name, Jane West. Very unlike Lil' Jane, Jane West had design elements much like the GI Joe, in that, she was the same size, sturdiness and had visible hinged appendages.

Unlike any of Sissy's other dolls, Jane West's clothes could not be removed. Her hair, clothes and body were made of the same stiff "poly-plastic". Her riding jeans, jeans shirt and boots were securely and permanently attached to Jane's body.

Both Lil' Jane and Jane West had straight flaxen hair, light pale skin and blue eyes, just like Sissy.

Christie also kept the name on her box. She was Sissy's most beautiful doll. Her hair was black and, Sissy thought, straightened like the neighbor girls. Christie's eyes were an amber brown and her skin a rich dark brown.

Sissy finished the pictures she made for the wall of her play house and with the three dolls held tight against her chest, ran back down the stairs to Mom's desk drawer. She was nervous about Mom coming home and wanted to be near the desk so she could run and put it back. Instead of returning to her room, she sat down on the couch in the basement with the dolls and the X-acto knife.

"Lil' Jane you are windy inside and I know about those parts. Those parts inside can't fool me young lady." Sissy's face was cross. She knew Jane West felt concerned those parts were bad and that they would get them all into trouble. Jane West had the responsibility of taking care of Lil' Jane.

Lil' Jane knew she had been something bad somehow, though she did not understand how. Jane West had punished and hurt her

before. So, Lil' Jane wriggled and tried to run from the big hands calling to Christie, "Christie help me!" But Christie was scared too. Jane West was big and strong, unlike Christie and the other Barbie dolls.

"Come here right now! What about this? Children, children, children! This is not any government you need to go play about for decades!"

She made little cuts, lots of little cuts. She cut and sliced at and off half of the blue of Lil' Janes eye. "This part has *got* to go. All that fuss for what? The Red Cross is going to get you if you don't take your eyes out of into the clouds. So you should be thanking me."

"No Jane! No!" Lil' Jane cried out to Jane West and tried to get away.

"You need to realize, this is the wheel world and you can't just get off. Hold still now."

She looked carefully at Lil' Janes feet and noticed there were no toes. She had little tiny feet with no toes. She clearly had fingers though her hands were smaller than her feet.

Sissy remembered how hard it was to walk the day before when she had stubbed her two biggest toes on the concrete walkway. She had rolled to the soft grass holding her foot and crying till her Mom came and calmed her with her kisses and puzzling words, "Life is rarely easy and acts of farness are



more seldom than not. Expect that and you will have fewer disappointments." Words that confused little Sissy, and served to distract her from her pain. Words that were late coming because Mom had been shut with that black typewriter working on her studies. And then the storm came they had to go to the basement and wait. Her toes were feeling better then and she could have ran and played if it weren't for the tornado.

"I know what your empty head does today Lil' Jane and I'm not going to wait for a tornado. I found the other problem right here" She cut off Lil' Janes two biggest toes from both her tiny feet.

Christy sat on the couch, with her head aimed straight away, with her eyes wide open, and with mouth permanently perfect and not saying a thing.

Sissy gathered up the dolls and her mom's knife. She put the knife back to her mom's drawer placing it at the exact same angle and rotation. Sissy's eye minded those details and she had a hand for minding her eye.

## 10. Friends Don't Squirm

when their rock is lifted,  
a dappled beam their biggest fear.  
Saved from harm with green finger shades.  
Robins ditty, silvered leaves chime,  
for golden bodies to break the fast  
—in warm pulsing harmonies.

Napalm holds a burning bite.  
So does salt for the slug.

And my lungs and my bones and my stormy defenses.  
They are mine,  
they are my *nothing*,  
next to my blue-eyed familial.  
His blackened wink wink,  
winks away the weight of  
a thousand innocents.

I'm left my caustic crystals,  
in a gilded world.

## 11. Tale of Rebirthing Grounds

My parents were often loving, intelligent, skilled and artistic individuals. They worked hard to create a respectable home within the artistic and intellectual circles of Des Moines. They were aware of the stigma their working class background carried. They were determined to move beyond that. They could transform any trash into what appeared and functioned on a level equal to the top designer furnishings and clothes. I spent many hours "junking" with Mom, hitting all the garage sales and thrift stores. Mom taught me to mend, sew and repair furniture. One of my best childhood memories is dumpster diving with Mom, Dad and my brother Paul. For this little girl, it was like a cavernous steel rebirthing ground. Dumpster diving gave me the feeling I could act as a savior of sorts. I resurrected worldly goods and gave them new lives. I could make good out of that which others labeled trash. As a child I grew excited about such things.

Dad suggested Paul and I ride bikes with him down to the Target store to check out the dumpster, "It's a beautiful day. We can go see what's there in the daylight, that way when we go back with the car tonight we will know exactly what we want."

"Okay Dad." Paul was always game for an adventure with Dad.

"Tonight we will be in and out quick before anyone comes."

Dad was cautious though we had never been caught.

I thought I could never learn to ride a bike correctly. Dad said she is, "just a little slow." I wanted to go see the dumpster, to see what was there to be scavenged, but I felt scared. He said he "didn't know what my problem could be. Maybe she lacks the coordination or something." Paul brought out the weed first. I'm not sure. I know I had that feeling I often got. I didn't know that feeling could be connected to the high until years later when I finally stopped smoking the stuff. I don't think the weed helped me with my anxiety or what other kids referred to as paranoia. Maybe for me it was combined. I don't remember not having that feeling or being afraid of having that feeling. I thought of it as a part of me.

Memories are all littered with those frighten bouts: the sweats, the racing heart, the inability to talk or do anything at all, just frozen. I didn't want to go for a ride, but I did. I could feel my heart beating so heavy in my chest and in my ears too. I couldn't say no. And if I refused I would have to pay for it later in some other way. I dreaded that and dreaded going.

"What is wrong with her?"

"She lacks coordination son."

I had such a hard time riding with them. Dad got so frustrated with me and his fuming carried like a poison gas that rushed upon me and made me worse. If Dad or Paul criticized me

and how I rode it made me more nervous and I forgot the simplest things. I forgot to pull up on the handle bars when approaching a bump. I forgot where the breaks were. I forgot to exhale. That spring day we rode down the hill and I nearly wiped out at the base of the steep incline, deep with sand from the early spring snows that had just passed.

I tried to block out the comments but they crept in. "How do you manage to pick the area where the sands the deepest to make your turn Sissy," Dad said taking his hand from the handle bars to raise it to the heavens.

Paul smiled and added, "You don't need to hug the curb so tight. There aren't any cars," he looked down the empty street shaking his head in disbelief.

We made it to the parking lot and I could barely hear anything around me. I tried to follow my brother's lead.

I still felt sorry for him. Dad never beat up Mom or me. I loved Dad but he could switch like that. I hated Dad when he switched. I hated him for what he did to Paul. Dad's glared at me moments before when I almost wiped out reminded me of night before that I had nearly forgotten. I always tried to forget. But that look brought it all back. Dad seethed straddled on top of Paul and slamming his head against the cement floor of the garage. The thought, the image made every muscle in my body tense and I couldn't think at all. I blamed Dad for the way Paul

treated me. Every time Dad hurt him I wanted to do something but I wouldn't do anything helpful at all. I paced and cried, I begged Dad to stop. He never heard me. Sometimes I hit myself making bruises on my legs or I scratched the skin from my upper arms until they bled or more often I pulled out my beautiful eyelashes.

As we approached the entry of the giant Target store I stayed close behind my older brother. I headed straight for the curb and pulled up too late almost losing control of the bike. Somehow my tire gripped enough to pull me onto the side walk in front of the store. I could hear my dad yelling my name, but it sounded muffled as if he had duct tape tight over his mouth. I headed straight for the glass. I couldn't think how to turn or break. Completely frozen I slammed hard into the giant glass store front. It did not break, as I had no weight to me, but instead bounced me back and I landed somehow under the bike, scrapped and battered.

I could hear my brother laughing and Dad telling him, "Okay, okay, Paul." He laughed too.

## 12. Ms. Mama Sis March 2014

The military garbed weed eater trims the drive of our first alone home. I still want to ask the gardener, armed and fatigued, "Can I just pick a few pomegranates. You see when I first moved here this tree was dyeing and I nursed it to health and fed fish blended and piss and I chased the men away with my cast iron skillet plus some confidence direct from God. It was not of me. Yet those were my first fruit bearing roses."

But I can't say shit to him. The rocks might hit my face because I am no different than the girls walking up the street this morning searching for a stray eye to catch and hold. The souped-up weed eater demolition man, sucker man won't notice I am freshly bathed. There is no seeing past my lack of Ted Nugent bonding, my close proximity to the Las Vegas John friends' of. It's not enough the plastic wire is throwing the rocks at my window. Can't they just leave us to love? Holy matrimony will never be a freedom.

I had to get that out.

The thumb is healing up again though. That aloe sure works wonders.

This morning as I made my morning tea, I again did so with glances out my kitchen window. I put the water on to heat. I spooned out the jasmine snow drop leaves, so refined and shade dried to a tender fragility.

The maintenance man finally left. And I calmed down.

And there she was again. She always reminded me of one of the characters referred to as Schlitzie the pinhead, in the 1932 movie Freaks. I am ignorant to Schlitzie's true identity and know nothing of Schlitzie's story. I vaguely remember him being presented as a female although I believe he may have been male. Lord only knows. And I am a simple one, who's brain makes associations that are based on what I've seen and heard. I hated that film the first time I saw it. I hated it and I must have loved it. I knew it was likely the best work any of the "Freaks" would ever find. It made me sad and sick and I watched it countless times, after I first suffered it in my Avant guard film class back in the early 80's. In the film there were the "pinheads" and the one called Schlitzie. Schlitzie wore dresses and had a slightly elongated head that tapered to a slight point which was accentuated by an odd hairdo, shaved bald except a bunch on top tightly pulled into short pony tail that stood up on top of his head.

Like Schlitzie this woman has a small head and on the very top of her small head she keeps a ball of ratted tow strands,



rubber banded tight so that it pulled at her face making her appear bald on the sides. Her large body in comparison, moved like an over filled water balloon, the mid-section parts draping over her stubby legs. Her clothes, as always, had uneven splotches of light pastel colors that shown through the heavily soiled cloth. And when I say heavily soiled, I don't mean that as a figure of speech. The clothes sagged with extra weight in areas, and were darkest in these areas—like the breasts, knees, ass, and crouch most of all. There the soiling had become the heaviest. And yet the elegance with which she held and occasionally sipped at her cigarette hinted at some other worldly existence. I always wondered where she lived, if she had a place. She often walked up and down 14<sup>th</sup> street and so I would often see her from my kitchen window.

As I watched her, wondering which yard she would pick, I blindly washed my tea cup.

It appeared she had found her spot across the street and to the East. The neighbors that lived there were gone for the day. She looked around, placed her cigarette atop the cinder block wall dividing the yards and slipped her pants down as she squatted near the wall, near the driveway, and in clear view of any passerby who might appear. But as it was, like always, I was alone in my surveillance. Or at least, there were no cars or neighborhood folks about, that I saw. I watched her as I put my

cup in the bamboo drying rack. She released her dump nimbly and without a second look, had her pants and cigarette realigned for to continue on her walk. I had seen her many times just walking. I had seen her many times stopping to take a shit. She always had perfect timing, staying out of eyeshot consistently over the years.

I thought of how unlikely this woman's existence would be if she were any shade of Brown or Black. Remembering my time in the shelters and having to deal with and depend on various institutions. Remembering all the times I was treated better because I was the shade of pale that I was, because I could talk the talk. I could fit in many worlds and in none. I appeared to be the straight and the straight up absence of color. Yes, I had to deal with other shit, different shit. And I still feel like a freak on the inside. But had I the burden of color on top of everything else, I never would have lived through the things I lived through. Or I would be locked up somewhere.

There is no healthy honest representation of identity for me anywhere. Baldwin could not be and say what he really felt. His every move watched by the powers that tee. Who would have read Dickinson's unedited work while she lived? The works of hers that were published when she lived were never near, how she wrote them. The *other* is rarely if ever given room for their true identity. And the lack of our truest healthiest

representations grows from a foundation of lies, white lies. That is what we are raised on. And one lie never stands alone. It grows like a virus. For William S. Burroughs it was language itself. But is that not because of the lies and manipulation that language is tooled to justify?

The only thing ever gained from claiming whiteness was and is privilege: The privilege to live on as your darker brothers and sisters die prematurely all around you, the privilege to step on their heads while climbing the ladder of success, the privilege to take what your darker brothers and sisters earned, the privilege to turn away the needy while snatching at indulgent pleasures, the privilege to be among *our peoples'* heartless murderers, the privilege to profit from rape, the privilege to exploit our own children while pretending to save them, and the heart deadening privilege to deny it all. No wonder so many of our brothers and sisters who passed for white did such a thorough job of hiding that painful truth. The story of the white lie, while largely unspoken, has nevertheless left a wake of horrors. White privilege is as real as the rising sun. Seeking better awareness of privilege can be useful towards solutions. Yet the act of claiming whiteness as an identity, as a race, is a lie, it is the denial of race and silencing of the soulful and moral self.

I strive to face the truth of what it means to claim whiteness as an identity. I cannot help but wonder if it might empower us in our common ground to be honest about the lie of whiteness. It reminds me the Emperor's New Clothes. If we could see fresh like a child and call out the nothing that is there. Whiteness never happened, it has been constructed to separate and control us. It is the *absence of*, that we have built upon. And when you build on nothing everything falls apart.

I think of the times as a child I questioned these norms, to be shut down by adults again and again. I think of the times I have witnessed people of color and especially those that are in intersects of additional otherness mistreated. We are a sad lot.

### 13. Seeking in the Wake of White

Stained in a glowing translucence, alive with the pain of skinning, and so then running with pain that demands a strict hold to suffer. I will not call absence presence. Still, he with some arrangement of flesh undid as white, took amok. He thought he knew and knew to feed himself with compensatory pleasure, so locked his sights on me. And me running in my warm tight blackness. And the rooms were locked, and barred, or the stairs too sharp or the drop a straight shot blind. And the eyes were ripped from his face. Bloated with a shrunken penny scab deep set in hollows that set again their sights on me. And me, pulled to running. And me, my legs regretful for running of up the stairs and of through the halls. Throat was done screaming, not the heart.

## 14. Tale of Guns and Coins

I can still see her strong hands on the stirring wheel and that ring was always there. We liked to do road trips together, just us two. We visited her folks down in Kansas that summer and while we were at it we hit one of those collectors' shows. There were guns, gorgeous antique guns, plus coins and old jewelry stocked that big old army surplus tent. There was never a proper floor in those places but the prairie grasses were worn and trampled from all the foot traffic.

Mom hunted down beautiful inexpensive Indian jewelry at those places whenever she went back home and prided herself on her skills. Seemed like we always stuck out like a sore thumb when we went back to Kansas. Not too many females went anywhere without a man especially not to those places. Plus, Mom was just beautiful. I still see that day, what a picture. It was hot, but early summer so not yet tiresome. She wore her black halter-top, some jeans and a smile that would knock you dead. The combination of black onyx and sterling silver attracted her like a bee to the peony, and she loved the big stuff. I liked the jewelry too, but I couldn't walk by the old coins and the guns without getting sucked in.

I first saw the ring on her moments after she bought it. I was studying an old Remington Beals rifle, the kind Annie Oakley used.

Mom walked up behind me, "Sissy". She cut through the crowd of men adding a touch more animation to her left hand just to be sure I saw that ring.

That instant it grew to be a part of her just as much as her slate-blue eyes, her lawless laugh and the tender touch with which she always smoothed the tangle in my brow.

She could soften away all the tension with her warmth, never allowing her long pearlescent nails to even slight my skin.

"Please don't do that Sissy. Relax dear. Your face will stay that way if you keep that up, you know?"

Then, just to get a playful rise, I would cross my eyes flexing and twisting every muscle of my mug into a disgusting contortion. She could only fight it so long before she broke with a giggle.

Still begging, "Please Sissy, don't wrinkle your pretty face," she gave again to that deep wave of laughter.

## 15. Seeking in the Wake of a Righteous Foot

Deep in the woods just before the abandoned brick factory, Mom took a lover. Their bed was high above the ground with corkscrewed legs that lifted it out of the reach from the hands of snakes, spiders, torments or other critters that kept themselves cozy warm in the bedding of *forest* beneath them. Yards of white chiffon grew from the branches and took to smoothly down, enveloping the bed and coming to an unrefined yet woven closure around the cork screwed feet. Mom, in her grandest form, was in some powerful act of love. But I could not or, unready, did not focus to see with who or how. I only knew it to be of her and for the beauty of live cork screwed legs and her to be of it. And I knew and I saw that her best leg stretched, bare and strong. And her righteous foot, with pearlescent toes nails, stayed shrewdly planted in the ground through the ecstasy of she ain't Theresa.



## 16. Tales of the Mermaid Queen

It was early spring and sixty degrees felt like the heat of summer to a couple girls who had just survived the Des Moines winter. Cathy's mom kept a clear view of the girls from where she worked in the kitchen. Cathy used hair pins to fasten the towel on to her short brittle hair, which she could never successfully grow out beyond an inch. She had tried her entire life, of seven years. She would always run inside as soon as the play theme was settled to ask her mom, "Mom could I borrow a dish towel. I'm going to be a Princess." Or whatever it was. And her mom always acted surprised, and it seemed she always had a clean towel set aside for Cathy. Cathy liked to pretend she was a horse with a long and flowing mane more than anything else. Her next favorite play time choice involved pretending she had long flowing hair. Both of these desires came to life when she became a horse with a mane. As long as she could toss about her beautiful dishtowel hair she felt content. Her fantasy characters found a way to be a part of any play. The towel was the only constant prop for Cathy's. Everything else was negotiable. They played in Cathy's yard, so seconds after the decision to *play mermaids*, the towel was in place.

Sissy lived next door, just down the hill. Cathy was two years older. Despite this, Sissy was stubborn and proud. Sissy would often attempt to dominate and shape playtime based on her exceptional knowledge and ideals of the world. Sissy had educated Cathy on how babies were made, and the evils of white people, all to the watchful towel suppliers' disgust.

Cathy decided to be a seahorse friend with a healthy turquoise mane. Sissy was a mer-queen.

"We have to go to the castle", they swam across the yard, and Sissy imagined the swishes of her long tail, Cathy a rhythmic galloping seahorse motions. Sissy climbed up the ladder for the slide on the swing set, to address her subjects. She had a stick in her right hand from the cotton wood her dad had planted. She said "Wait a minute." And took off her shirt for effect. Then she began addressing her subjects, "Mer-people of the great Des Moines River..."

"Sissy, put your shirt back on. You're gonna get us in trouble."

Sissy looked surprised, "I still have my undershirt anyway."

You see, Sissy understood from her progressive folks that nudity had no shame. They often walked around the house naked or close to it. They often left the doors open when they used the bathroom, showered or bathed. There were long talks about how

being naked came natural to everyone. There was lectures on how no one should be embarrassed by their bodies and how Sissy should never let anyone tell her different. If they did, she had been instructed to tell her parents. She felt secure in her belief that she could take *all* her clothes off if she wanted to. She felt sure her parents, especially her mom, would stand behind her decision because they so clearly taught her to be proud of her body.

"That's private clothes, underclothes. You need your shirt on top." She looked at the window nervously. Her mother had picked up the phone and was laughing into the baby blue receiver.

Sissy then took her undershirt off, "I'm the mer-queen. I have shells." She found two leaves in the grass and covered her nipples.

Cathy stood blocking her mother's view to the quickly undressing Sissy. "Sissy no. You have to put your clothes on. Mt mom is gonna be mad. Remember when you showed me that Shenna comic book and we got in trouble? Please? Remember I warned you that time too." Cathy's turquoise mane just laid there on her shoulders. No more flowing through the river currents of the great Des Moines.

"My mom told me to be proud of my body. She don't care. For goodness sake Cathy, I could take my pants off, too, if I want to."

"No Sissy! No! Don't!"

Since she failed so miserably at convincing Cathy she felt she *had* to prove her point. She stood up straight with her bare chest pushed out, "I am the mer-queen!"

Just then Sissy's older brother Paul walked out the back door. He glanced up the hill, "Sissy what are you doing?"

"I am the mer-queen!"

"I'm telling Mom."

"Go ahead. Mom said I'm beautiful. You will see."

Paul went back inside.

Sissy mom had made flared double knit pants especially for her to play in. Sissy pulled down the elastic waist. She had stripped to her cotton under panties and began to sway like a mer-queen, right before Mom arrived. And Cathy's mom too, stood at the door with her mouth wide open, the blue receiver still in her hand.

Sissy's mom's voice was not angry. She looked at Sissy with a confused expression and told her, as quietly as you can yell from 20 yards, and still be heard, "Put your clothes back on."

"But Mom you said..."

"I reckon it's best you just get your clothes and come inside. Now, young lady."

"Mom?" sissy looked devastated. Her brother stood behind his mother pointing and sticking out his tongue.

Sissy stayed in her room crying and talking to her big yellow bear.

"Mom is stupid! Paul is a stupid dumb dumb! I don't want to come out anyway. Mom said it is different with neighbors. But they said there was nothing wrong with me. I don't see how it, it is different..."

Figure 3. My Room World



## 17. Tale of Brick Yard Dancing

As a little girl I used to go walking through the woods when things were no fun at home. One time when I stumbled onto the old deserted brick factory. It was just beyond the railroad tracks before the river. There was a clearing there. It became a regular spot for me to go and be. There were huge brick dome shaped ovens, each with one whole in the very top like I teepee. I never saw anyone there. In the ovens I danced and spun and sang and screamed and ran. Then I and danced some more.

## 18. Tale of a Pretty White Bed

On Monday mornings it took me longer but I was almost ready for school. I sat on my pretty bed underneath my white lace canopy. I organized all my drug paraphernalia. I enjoyed using the word paraphernalia when it came to addressing all the instruments of my daily ritual. I had an ancient brass cigarette case. Beautifully ornate floral stamps and stains decorated its leather skin. I bought it at a yard sale the previous summer. Perfectly rolled joints filled it every day. I always used with the thinnest Job papers I could get. And I always kept it stocked and I always sold from the case. Presentation is everything. In preparation of rolling, I carefully picked the finest leaves, after making sure there were no seed parts or stemmy pieces. Before beginning to roll I always ripped the excess off so that I created only the slightest overlap when it came time to lick and close it tight. Then I would roll the paper by itself between my fingers massaging, softening and giving it a slight curl as a final preparation before the actual rolling process. This made for a very clean burning smoke that was all the rage.

The kids knew me for the precision of my craft and it paid off. Even some of the juniors and seniors would put away their pride to buy from me. The thing that was really getting



attention this month though, were those little white crosses. The kids couldn't get enough. I just walked around, or sat in the multipurpose room doing what I liked, reading or sketching and collecting my profit from the consistent flow of kids in need.

And since everyone flocked to get high with me it was especially easy. Free samples are a powerful promotion. It didn't matter how cold or windy, I would be there behind the church before and after school. Still I was sure glad it was getting to be warmer. I always had some weed and would share with anyone who showed up. They always came back for more with cash. My joints or whatever else I had sold itself.

I finished putting the hot little items away and stacked up my books. I double checked my purse to make sure I had my comb, perfume, lip gloss and went to grab my jeans jacket.

Someone slowly moved down the hall. I heard their feet brushing the carpet.

I felt a hardness in my throat as Mom's little kid-like voice called, "Sissy-poo?"

I didn't answer. I slipped on my jacket and looked for my mustard silk scarf. It still held the sent of musk oil and I put it over my nose to smell the sweetness. I noticed that the white lace canopy of my bed had grayed with dust and smoke.

Lately I had been particularly bothered by my Mom. Much more bothered than usual. The sudden and constant questioning of me and my brother Paul about what we did, where we went and now she had a sudden concern about my lingering bronchial problems just bugged me. Mom became an irritant. Both my parents were an irritant, but especially Mom. I knew what I was doing better than what they had taught me. But they couldn't deny being part of the seed of my ways.

How many times had I been directed to serve *hors d'oeuvres* at Mom's Friday night discussion groups? "Intellectuals" shared a joint amidst *elevated* talk of a guest speaker on Astrology, or the fine art of facial massage, or maybe the book *Passages*. At seven, I would listen, take a hit and offer bacon wrapped water chestnuts to those gathered.

My folks progressed in some areas others did not touch. Though they struggled to get ahead, they also had an awareness of their privilege. As a straight, white, married couple with the perfect set of children, a boy and a girl they received favor in many circles. They noted how they could work, save and pursue higher education unlike some of their friends or acquaintances that might not have inherited these privileges. They were aware of the blinders that helped to alleviate guilt and release the responsibility for so many that recieved similar privileges. They were keen to the inherent burden they placed on

those below them on the socioeconomic ladder. They tried to open our eyes, mine and my brother's amidst an environment where the "ideal" was often more talk than walk. And then they had their issues. Before anyone knew what had happened were off on our own.

Then all of a sudden she had decided to put her foot down. As far as I was concerned the drugs were the only thing that had kept the family together. Drugs were the only thing we did together, well until recently. Lately fighting made up most of our interactions.

Before Mom acted pretty cool, but as cool as Mom played it, she had always been against us doing speed and coke or anything 'harder' than that. She only did pot, acid, mushrooms, and stuff like that. She claimed that those couldn't hurt you. They were natural.

I had told her that the Dex-a-trims were the same as speed but she always argued with me. I had told her once, "Mom I sometimes even sell Dex-a-trims as speed when I am in a pinch. I just call them Christmas trees. The kids never once complained."

She just shook her head and took her Dex-a-trims with a bite of cinnamon roll and instant cappuccino.

She said, "It's *different*." She thought prescription drugs were *different* too. She had all kinds of prescription drugs and I know my brother used to take her valium and other stuff. He

sold it sometimes. I didn't steal from Mom or Dad and I had an issue with prescription drugs. I thought they were prissy. Besides Mom did them, so not doing them, I could rebel a little. I said I had standards for what I did. Funny, I never had a problem selling shit that my brother had stolen if he gave it to me though.

Dad was cooler. He would try anything and he didn't tell Mom lots of the stuff he did with us. He never threatened to search us like she was.

Her recent thing was, "No more drugs in the house," but not Dad. He didn't argue with her but he didn't say anything either. I knew he wouldn't do anything if he saw something when she wasn't around. I knew he would still get high with us if she wasn't around. I smoked a joint with him on Saturday even.

But now Mom wanted to pry away our only family link? As far as I could see, she didn't have a leg to stand on. Maybe with Paul, but not me.

My big brother Paul had been in trouble with the law quite a bit, theft, drunk driving, possession.

He had a thing about stealing interstate signs, oh and flags, the bigger the better.

He had a few accidents too, totaled out two of Dad's cars. The last one was Dad's chocolate brown two-door 1972 vinyl-top Ford LTD. Dad really liked that car. He had never bought a brand

new car before that Ford. Paul wrapped it around a telephone pole going sixty miles an hour at four on a Sunday morning. The cops said they couldn't figure out how he lived let alone got out of that car. By the time the residents came out to see what the hell had happened in their front yard Paul had disappeared. He walked a mile home, then tried waking up my Dad to tell him.

Dad turned over so out-of-it asleep he thought Paul had been sleep-walking again, "Go back to bed Paul, you just had a bad dream." Paul used to have lots of sleep-walking nightmares.

Me, since I'd gotten into eighth grade I had been getting all A's and B's. I always took care of my chores before I went out partying. I could drink, smoke pot and generally use more dope than most of the older kids and still keep it together. Even when I was little, they used to have me stand on that step stool so I could take hits out of the six foot bong with all the adults. Everyone would cheer. Hell, Dad didn't nick-name me "Lungs" for nothing. It had stuck too, with all my friends. Plus I hadn't had any troubles with the law in a long time. Well, not since that last bust and that wasn't even my fault. And all my arrests had been when I was still too young to have a record. I looked like a good kid compared to my brother. So I didn't know why she acted so bent outta shape lately.

Anyway Mom and Dad needed to sort out their own double standards. This change came too late. They couldn't backtrack on

the drug thing now. I took what I had been shown and ran with it.

True I had been in some fights but people always tried to start fights with me. I blame my older brother for that to. He acted like such a racist. He wasn't really. He had a crush on the girl next door so I knew different. But he just got hooked up with the wrong people. Him and his racist friends used to throw rocks at the Black bus sometimes and other stuff too.

I had Black, White, Indian, Vietnamese, all kinds of friends. I didn't care, as long as they were cool, what the hell would I care where they came from. The thing was though, that being just five foot tall, kids found it much easier to get back at little Sis when my brother did shit. My brother stood five-foot-eleven, threw a punch that would make anyone pee their pants and had a temper almost as bad as Dads. So that is how things went. And Paul wasn't the kind of brother who looked after me. I think the kids would beat me up because they knew how bad they would feel if someone beat up their kid sister. Only problem, my brother never cared, so they never could get back at him.

It didn't stop them trying though. At least I got a little better able to hold my own after a time. I got lots of practice. Mom didn't like it when I got in fights and she really didn't like it when I got beat up.

That last fight made her real weird. She kept asking questions, "Pumpkin, are you sure I shouldn't take you to the doctor?"

"Yes."

"Please let me see where it hurts. The Principle said you took some pretty substantial blows to the ribs and head too. Maybe you have a concussion Sissy?"

"Don't touch me."

"Does it hurt?"

"I just don't want you to touch me Mom." I pulled away from her and went in my room. I could still hear her through the door.

"Please let me know if you change your mind. I'll take a sick day to take you to the doctor. We could go to a movie, too, just for fun."

I had lit up a joint and layed down on the bed. That helped the pain a little. I never did like doctors.

Things had settled down since all the fights. I knew she was worried about me before. But did not see the worry now. I thought maybe she should be dealing with her own issues. Her and Dad were always fighting. She rarely got along with Paul. I thought I was the only one who had things balanced out. I felt determined to have no more trouble with the law. I had completely stopped the shoplifting stuff *almost* and I had good

grades in school. I just wanted Mom to back off. I wanted to go back to hanging out and having fun like before. It seemed crazy to think that the same Mom that I used to get high with, threatened to start searching my purse. She hadn't done it yet, just a threat I didn't much appreciate it. It seemed crazy to think she wanted to walk in on me and catch me with something after all the times we had watched each other's backs. Did she think I got stupid all of a sudden? I couldn't think to stop dealing. I thought to myself, "I had covered for her so many times before. I'll be damned if she thinks she's going to get in my purse and take my stash."

"Sissy? Are you there Sweet heart?"

I heard Mom slowly brushing up against the door.

My door stood ajar and I felt glad she kept it the way it was. She timidly half entered just peeking around the door. I stared at her with a furrowed brow and narrowed eyes. She didn't even say a thing about my face getting stuck that way.

She held onto the door kind of tight, her left hand on the knob and the other wrapped around the edge next to her face. Was she steadying herself or what? For a minute she looked weak but I stopped myself from reaching to catch her. Then she seemed okay, just pale. Her weight seemed to be held up by her face pressing against her hand and the wood of the door.

"Honey Bun?" She sounded kind of pitiful.



I put my hand on the side of my neck rubbing and then scratching, not knowing what to think. Her eyelids looked heavy. But I still couldn't help but notice her pretty skin. I would never be as pretty as her. She had some color even as pale as she looked that morning. I appeared to be the real whitey next to her.

"You know how Mommy likes those Dex-a-trims?"

I just nodded.

She talked slow recalling those Bible belt roots, "Well, I thought I had bought plenty. Turns out, they aren't working as well as I thought. So I've had to be taking more than I thought. Anyway, I'm fresh out and I got to get going here this morning. I don't reckon you have anything that you can give Mommy to help her through her day?"

I stood silent, letting it all sink in.

Then I felt my lips creeping their way into the slightest smile and like some virus its poison spread beyond my lips to direct every cell of my body. I knew I had won. I had control.

I tamed my excitement and opened the door wide to her. Mom and I both sat down under my gray lace canopy. I got out a stash of white crosses from my purse. I counted out what I thought she would need.

I knew eight would probably do the trick for the day.

"This should be enough. Start out with six and then if you need

more. Well, here's ten just to be safe. Let me know, how you are doing tomorrow and I'll see if I can set you up with some more. I think you will be fine with these for today."

"What do they cost Sissy?"

"Don't you worry Mom. Can I get a ride to school? I'm all ready."

## 19. Ms. Mama Sis

The thumb is completely healed. I keep thinking I have to be gentler with myself. A huge realization for me was an is again and again that my self-centeredness wasn't just about me thinking I was better or smarter than others or that I had all the answers. Of course that is a problem as well.

But the root of my self-centeredness problems grow from me thinking I knew *better* than divinity, when I set on a path of self-condemnation or destruction. When I am thinking that it is all my fault, that I should be able to save the world, if only I spoke true enough, loved deep enough and if only I worked hard enough, that is a kind of self-centeredness that I have been taught to ignore.

It's not my place to turn away the gifts of the universe because I've decided I don't deserve them. And the truth for me is those gifts aren't mine anyway. They are only there so that good orderly direction can work more effectively through me. Best if I am set on getting out of the way.

## 20. Tale of the Mail Away

It took fifteen minutes for Sissy's Mom to finish getting ready for school after she took the white crosses. They kicked in fast. As they drove to school Sissy knew she was all better; and so were they. Things had returned to broken way in which the defending and denying wanted it. They were about half way to Meredith Junior High when Sissy noticed a surge in her Mom that scared her. Mom talked fast, told her about how some of her students had showed up before school the previous day with cases of art supplies to help her build up her department. They knew the funding for the departments materials had been shredded and they, "just wanted to help out".

"That's really cool Mom, what did they bring you?"

"Oh you would be amazed Sissy! There are cases of pastels and oil pastels and tubes and tubes of watercolors, there is vine charcoal, block charcoal, charcoal pencils, and oh they brought erasers too - kneaded erasers, pink pearl erasers, gum erasers, beautiful colored string and cord. It will work beautifully for that macramé project I am assigning next week. It's more than I could have dreamt of Sissy, more than I would have thought to ask anyone for. I almost have too much really. I'll have to bring some home because there is nowhere to store

it all at school. Plus, someone might ask questions. You can use as much as you want to Sweetheart."

"Wow, cool. How did they manage to purchase all th..."

"I didn't ask where! How could I ask where it had come from Sweetie? And they didn't say Sissy. That's that. Please come to school with me this weekend and help me sort things and bring some home."

Sissy looked out the window. They passed the other kids walking to school. She felt surefooted back on her familiar ground. She unconsciously imagined new ways to use her mom's dependencies to manipulate a world to suit her desires. Buried even deeper was a sadness. Pushing against, shaking through, acting as an earth quake of a child— She had broken her mother. Deep inside she hated everything. She wanted to knock down what she herself had become.

"Hey, while I'm thinking of it, Sissy can you help me with an art project at the Iowa State Fair this summer. I'm going to teach kids Bas Relief and I need an assistant that knows how to mix plaster, knows about the relief process and is good with kids. You would be great. It will be fun Sissy! You can have a break every day at noon and go down to the midway, go see the displays or whatever you want."

Her words curled into Sissy's ear the whole drive. "I think so Mom. That sounds coo..." She tried to get the words out as we

approached the student drop-off area. But Mom was not there to hear. She was on the run.

"Guess who I ran into Friday over on University? It was the funniest thing Sissy— Donny Anderson. I don't know if you remember him, Dad's friend? He asked about you."

Sissy gathered herself to get out of the car. Mom lowered her sweet voice to a theatrical hush, "He's married Sissy. You know what Sissy? He purchased a mail-away wife, had her shipped all the way from Vietnam. Can you believe that?"

Sissy gathered her books and purse as Mom pulled over and kept right on talking, "Well I reckon that's just as good a way to get married as any." She grabbed Sissy's arm and held it tight for a minute smiling and frowning at the same time, "Don't you ever marry a man sweetheart. You are different and you are stronger than that. No reason to get married these days. *Especially* not you Pumpkin. You are brilliant, talented and beautiful. Have a good day Sissy. See you tonight." She pulled me closer and gave me a peck on the cheek. "I love you. And thanks again for those little pills; what are they, the white x's..."

"They're white crosses Mom, speed."

"..Oh whatever."

"I love you too and thanks for the ride."

Sissy got out of the car feeling not brilliant, not talented and not beautiful but instead, feeling a dizzy. "Just keep moving," She thought, "I might just take a few of those 'little x's' myself." She laughed out loud with a face dead of emotion. The lightness in her head passed a little as I walked towards the school. It had been something she had grown used to dealing with. Fainting spells and seizures had started for her in the sixth grad about the time she began smoking weed daily. Mom pulled out of the pull-in. As Sissy approached the main entrance of Meredith Junior High she slowed my pace. She could see her mom's little burgundy Honda in my peripheral picking up speed and heading down Madison towards North High School where she ran the art department and taught. Sissy heard echoes of her friends who had told her she was the coolest, her mom was the coolest, and she had the coolest family. She turned away from the entrance and the school and headed over to the little Church across the street. She wondered why she still pretended to go to school. Mom had made it so clear that she was too high to care anymore. Mom had made it so clear that she was on a race against all odds. Mom had made it so clear that the reigns were in Sissy's hands again now. Then Sissy remembered for a moment that she enjoyed the changing seasons and that she had worn one of her soft spring dresses. It made waves in the breeze with its pretty print, mostly black covered with all different colors of

tiny flowers. Mom had bought it for her on one of her sprees at the mall. The light fabric felt good rippling over my thighs in the mild shifts of air. Sissy watched for passing cars and when all cleared, she cut behind the church. She sat down on the cool red brick half wall and half terrace, built to accommodate for the changing elevations in the earth. It extended out from the simple nineteen-fifties building along one side of the back parking lot. She could feel the gritty texture of the cool concrete capped brick wall pressing through my dress and into my thighs.

It wasn't even seven o'clock yet. The lot empty.

She felt a rock in her huarache sandal and stretched out her leg wiggling the foot and toes around till it fell out. She took out a joint and sat it down on the brick next to her. Then she counted out the white crosses. "Eight for now," she thought. She shot them to the back of her throat with a flick of her wrist and palm to her lips. It would be a whole hour before school started, time for business and pleasure she thought. She lit up the joint with a trusty blue tip strike-anywhere match.

Mom always dropped her off early if she wanted a ride. She had to be to work way before her kids got there. It gave Sissy a chance to hang out with friends anyway, well sometimes.

Especially when they happened to want what she had. She told



herself, she didn't really mind smoking alone. She did it all the time.

No one ever worked at the church on school days. She sat there overlooking the empty parking lot. Well, not no one ever, once a guy came out the back door yelling at her and her friends. He scared the shit out of them, Sissy included. He shoed them and they all went running. Nut Sissy acted cool. She took her time, put all her paraphernalia away and left slowly. With most of the goods and the most to lose she acted as if she had the least worries. Her unique background and looks afforded her the blindness white privilege. This amidst the haze of intellectual hippy arrogance. Her experienced proved she was right. That happened at the beginning of last year. She came back to the church the next day never to have a problem again. Trees surrounded the rim of the parking lot. There were lots and houses just behind the trees. They were barely visible even in the winter. The branches were thick and dense even then, even without their leaves you couldn't see clearly through them. But now that spring had hit, new growth had overtaken them; it was as if there were no houses at all. A skinny path broke between two of the trees in the corner of the lot. Sissy kept checking to see if any of the "cool" kids she knew were coming. She tapped the joint with her finger, knocked the cherry to the breeze and took another hit. She started feeling the

undercurrents of the white crosses mixed with the mellow high of refer and then a rush of sensations and images pulsed through her. The rhythmic thrusting of her little life muscle nudged at her ribs taunted by the speed— those “white x’s”, as Mom liked to call them, pretending she didn’t know better. She had made an art out of so many things, one being the dumb girl act.

Sissy could hear the neighborhood dogs and then a cat made a fuss that reminded her of my parents playful days, when they kept the door shut for hours, as if privacy mattered. But they were not shy at all about their vocals, the living sounds of sex filled the house. In Sissy’s head these thoughts drifted into echoes of music. The night before, she had fallen asleep listening to the grunts, moos and oinks orchestrated so beautifully on the new album from Pink Floyd, *Animals*. The sounds rose up through the vents from my brother’s room. He had his bedroom downstairs. She could always hear his music clearly. She loved that album, even better than *Dark Side of the Moon*.

She thought of Donny Anderson. Funny how Mom’s unanswered question floated in the air, “I don’t know if you remember him?” Sissy remembered. He had turned the whole family *on* to the *Dark Side of the Moon* when it first came out. He attempted to turn them *on* to many things.

The thought of Donny, “How weird, getting a mail-away bride?” She scratched at her upper arm but didn’t realize it

till she tore the skin. She wet her finger and tried to clean it up. She pressed it to stop the bleeding.

Donny used to be Dad's student and dealer at Tech High, where Dad taught drafting, blueprint reading, math and other stuff. Donny came around a lot as Sissy was growing up. He and Dad became close friends. He had to be twenty four or so the last time she had seen him. He came by so often for a while and then *after that one time*, never again.

She took another hit and looked at the path. She looked at her watch. Only fifteen minutes had passed. She scooted closer to the building so she could lean against it and relax a bit.

She wished didn't remember the last time I saw him. He was a creepy end to what could have been a decent afternoon.

It happened three years earlier, the beginning of summer. She had just finished the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. She laid upstairs on her bed reading her favorite old time comic, "Sheena Queen of the Jungle" when she heard the down stairs door bell. Sheena always had to save that stupid guy, Bob, her "boyfriend". But she was cool anyway. She loved animals and she was strong. That day Sissy felt like being lazy and comfortable, barefoot in some Uncle Randy's soft old hand-me-down cut-offs that were too big and hung a little low. Her Mom gave me some of the most comfortable her halter tops and she wore one. Mom had so many clothes and she would give Sissy stuff she liked. It was blood

red and stretchy cotton. She just wanted to wear the same stuff I always had. She hated wearing bras. She didn't want to think about her body changing. And not wearing bras was the "in" thing anyway, if you were cool. Hell, even the manikins showed their nipples. It felt like just another hassle having these things. She tried to forget about them even though nobody else did. So hanging out at home with Sheena felt fine, less hassles.

She rolled over and stretched. She listened to the voices downstairs, her Dad's and someone else's. She could tell they were at the base of the stairs near the stereo. Because of how Dad redesigned the interior of the house everything was open. Since he finished all the remodeling she could hear most anything that went on.

She heard the stereo coming to life, the click of power, the hum of the speakers the needle touching lightly onto the vinyl. A faint familiar but unfamiliar beat began building; a heart pumped mounting stronger, then voices, growing in their force and permeating the house. Then the voices turned to a painful laughter that wove itself into a consoling melody.

Dad had just put in the coolest stereo system ever. There wasn't a place in the house that you could escape it. Not that Sissy ever wanted to. She wasn't uptight like that, although sometimes the neighbors might have wanted to escape it, but they never said a thing about.

It wasn't miserably hot yet. Sissy loved the summers anyway even when everyone else thought it was miserably hot, she still loved it. The warm gentle wind came through her east window and went out the south brushing the ruffles of her white lace canopy and as it did it did the scent of lilacs mixed with the fine mist of sweat that covered her. Her body felt refreshed as the vocals entered her space.

...

*Breathe, breathe in the air.*

...

She finished the Sheena Queen of the Jungle adventures for the thousandth time, rushing through the end. She barely read the last page. Not wanting to disrespect the Sheena but this music captivated her as each new lyric crept in. I put left Sheena and followed the sounds.

...

*Run, rabbit run.*

...

Between her folks and her older brother she always got turned on to new music. She made her own tapes off everybody's albums. Dad taught her how.

Down the shining mirror paneled hall she rubbed her feet on the white shag carpet saving up for a big shock by the time she hit the steel rail of the winding staircase. It always worked.

She earned her shock at the top of the perfectly crafted three-quarter circle hole in the oak floor that contained the circular steel stairwell. She sat down just a few steps from the top and I felt the force of the music humming through the steel structure of the stairs.

From there she had a decent view into the basement family room. Dad and Donny sat at the barrel based table. The music vibrated so loud she could barely tell they were talking. She could see their lips move and hear a few sounds.

Her toes wiggled playing with the softly padded olive green shag that covered each of the steel stairs. It wrapped the stairs, a green trail leading down to the same green covering on the cool basement floor.

The beat picked up faster. The sounds shifted back and forth across the room and she could hear someone running and laughing again and machines or trains or helicopters, she didn't know. She closed her eyes to listen better. Then the beat deepened and there was shifting laughing from everywhere and an explosion and running again.

Then the ticking started and great alarms and louder ticking and a heartbeat. The strength of the base vibrating warmth through the thick metal of the stairs and through Sissy's body mixed with seductive drumming and the melodic structure gathered other

sounds. Drums and keys turned in heavier and then the fluid vocals came.

She sat there listening for a while. She loved music.

So did Dad. She had so much in common with her Dad. Dad could make anything too. She helped him put the winding staircase in. The steel part came in a huge kit. It was like a big puzzle. Making the hole in the floor and all the finishing proved to be very exacting work. She helped Dad with every project she could, not because she liked working with him. He was hard to work with, but she loved making things far beyond that difficulty.

Strawberry incense crept up the big opening in the floor mixed with the sweet smell of refer. She had bought the incense at Spencer Gifts the week before at the mall. She told herself she didn't mind them burning it.

She opened my eyes again. Dad and Donny were talking and giggling.

In the middle of the table sat a big brick. She knew a brick as soon as she saw it. She had heard Dad and other folk's mention how weed came packed in a big brick. She had seen them on the news when there was a big bust too. She hadn't ever seen one in real life. Donny supplied Dad since way back when he was first his student. He was a tall white guy and had whiter skin than most with pale blue eyes. His long blonde hair he kept

pulled back in a plain red rubber band. He wore those round John Lennon glasses to complete that Midwestern hippy look. And he always dressed in jeans and a tee shirt. Both Donny and Dad were absorbed in the music and the joint they were smoking. They didn't notice Sissy sitting there. When she realized she also had some sense that she should leave. But the smell of pot and the music hushed her hearts wisdom and she stayed.

The loudness of the music edited crucial and creepy parts of their conversation from her ears. As the music softened she picked up a bit of conversation.

"... I would think that's not really for me to decide, Donny. I don't know. Isn't that kind of old-fashioned?"

"Well, I thought I should talk to you first. Guess I'm kind of an old fashioned guy..."

Dad interrupted him, "I guess so seeing how you come bearing gifts with your proposal. So tell me, what does one of these go for?" Dad asked waving the joint in the direction of the brick and then handing it to Donny.

Sissy did not understand the conversation. She probably would not have if someone explained it to her so far from her reality was it.

Just then she shifted on the stairs and Donny looked up, "Hey, Sis I didn't even see you there. I didn't mean to be rude,



come on down try some of my new Doobie. I think you are going to like it."

She hurried down the stairs and pulled up a barrel stool between the two of them with a little smile. She didn't know anyone her age that got high. She drank some too but Mom and Dad weren't quite okay with that.

Donny handed Sissy the joint and she took a long hit and held it.

"*Sissy Lungs* is a real natural when it comes to holding her own. You must be proud Jack?"

Sissy proudly held her hit and listened to the music.

...

*You are young and life is long and there is time to kill today.*

...

Sissy handed the joint to Dad who hadn't bothered to answer or acknowledge Donny's question. Sissy noticed the album cover laying there but knew she wouldn't be able to see it till they smoked all that pot Donny had deseeded and left there. She considered it wasn't the best, probably Columbian. Dad almost dropped the joint and groped, trying to get a better grip with his fingers. "It's hot!"

"That's because your daughter really got it smoking. Here Jack, I have a roach clip."

Donny pulled out a surgical clip from his bag and handed it to Dad who fixed it onto a tinny pinch of the paper in order to not obstruct the flow of smoke. Sissy let out my hit and didn't cough once, in keeping with her understanding of the nickname, "Lungs". Dad proceeded to take another hit and got a wave of smoke in his eyes. He closed them tight wincing. His voiced strained as he tried not to lose any of the precious smoke and felt blindly around in the air trying to pass the joint to Donny, "Here Donny! Take it!"

Sissy's focus remained on the music and her high. There were no end to any of the songs on this album; everything flowed together. It inspired her. She thought she would go draw something as soon as the joint was gone and she could see that album cover better. Sissy thought to herself, one advantage to having a cool Dad, cool music.

The back door stood ajar, with just the screen closed. The currents of outside air pressed it firm against the molding then released it again. She watched the shifting. The air smelled alive, full of clover, and damp earth. Everything felt cool and dark in the basement despite the heat building outside. The walls were covered with rich muddy brown paneling. The photo image of wood grain repeated on them with the fake blackened crevasses detailed in between.

Dad rubbed his eyes and got up to turn the album over, "I really like this album Donny. Can I borrow it to tape it?"

"Why sure, of course you can, just make a backup copy for me would you? It sounds excellent through this sound system you put together. What is that a BIC turn table?"

"Yep. Thanks Donny." Dad spoke proud.

"Hey, Sis can you run and get Donny and I some sodas?" I felt thirsty too so I didn't mind, "Sure, what do you want? We've got cherry cola, root beer and orange Shasta."

"I'll take a root beer Honey. Donny what do you want?"

"I got to get going soon but I'll stay for a soda. I'll just have a root beer too, thanks Sis." He looked at Dad for a long time trying to catch his eye. Sissy scurried back up the stairs to get the sodas. It felt so much hotter up there; she realized this as she reached the top of the staircase.

At first she thought she might be okay, be able to push through the spell, but when I got in the kitchen she had to sit down at the bar for a minute. She put my head down on the cool Formica, and was out for a moment. When she came back to she talked to herself, "You're okay Sis, you're okay Sis... It's gonna be okay." She pushed to get up again keeping one hand on the bar as she followed its length with her hand all the way to the refrigerator. Opening it with her left hand she kept stable with the other on the bar. It felt better. She told herself, "I'm

better. I can smoke them all under the table." She knew she could keep it together when I felt the cool rush from the refrigerator fall out and touch her bare feet. The cool sent shivers through her and filled her with a bit of something that strengthened her stand. She picked a cherry cola for herself and held all three icy cans against her bare belly. This felt even better than the cool on her feet. She went a bit more slowly going down the stairs.

She could see Donny had rolled another joint with the last of the pot on the album and lit it up. She set the cans of soda on the table and sat down. She opened hers and took a sip of the cold syrupy liquid. It felt icy falls down her dry throat. That made the almost perfect high: a little sugar, a little caffeine a lot of weed. She felt much better, full of energy.

They had stopped talking when she came back down. They sat smoking and drinking their sodas. The Piano sounded lovely. Everything slowed down. She heard beautiful horns and the vocals echoed softly. She picked up the Album cover, now clean, to look at it as she sipped her soda and waited for her turn with the joint.

Dad took one more hit, stood up and handed to her.

That's when he said, "Sis, Donny's got to go soon but he wants to talk to you before he leaves. So I'll leave you two. I

got to finish outside. I want to mow that grass before it gets too God damn hot today. I'll touch base with you later Donny."

Sissy had a feeling of intense irritation with her Dad. She did not know why these resentful attacks happened. But when he stood to talk she found herself scrutinizing every part of him. Everything about him at that moment was cause for annoyance. When he did yard work he often had the look of some washed up pimp, she thought. His dark chest hairs curled around that gold plated chain and out of the v, in his white V-neck t-shirt. He wore a pair of double-knit, plaid, *bell* flared, pants with a *thick* cuff at the bottom. They were stylish when Mom had bought them, but had grown worn out in the knees, so Dad had the bright idea to wear them as work pants. He had turned the bottom of the pant legs up three more times, on top of the thick cuff. This, to keep them out of his way, because he had been working in the yard all morning. He wore old dress shoes and old dress socks. Dad's skin grew darker each day of summer, which some could have thought to be handsome. But, his calves that rarely saw the light of day were white as parchment, and now brightly visible because of his strange get-up. They stood out even more next to his old black dress socks. Sissy could not justify this look, this attire.

He winked at Donny. He caressed his dark moustache and healthy sideburns smooth on his face. This irritated her more

than anything, because it reminded her that he still often *insisted* on giving her kisses, especially when there was company, and these felt worse than sandpaper. He seemed to be making much of his exit which she did not understand or like. Then he patted Sissy on the back and walked out the door letting it slam. She was glad to see him go without a kiss.

She could only think that Donny might want to buy some of her macramé or a drawing. What else could it be? And she was used to her parent's friends taking interest in her and in her entrepreneurship. She could hear her Dad getting the lawn mower out of the garage and heading down the long cracked up driveway to the front yard. That was the next thing on Dad's list to fix: the driveway.

Donny fell quiet. Sissy sat there hogging the joint, looking at the album cover. It wasn't as easy to listen alone with Donny. She tried hard to concentrate, but he kept looking at her weird. She blocked the weirdness as best she could. He seemed like a nice enough guy and all. It just felt weird suddenly. So she didn't look at Donny. She told herself, "Dad wouldn't leave me alone with Donny if there was anything to worry about. He was her Dad. He was crazy but, he wouldn't let anything happen?" Even though the side door still had an opening she could barely hear the lawn mower start in the front yard between the surges of sound from the stereo.

She read through all the names of the songs and all the credits. She opened the cover and read all the words to all of the songs and took out the inside sleeves and studied those too.

...

*The lunatic is on the grass.*

...

"You like this music Sis?"

"Yeah. It's decent."

"I like it too."

"Well yeah, I figured you didn't bring it over here because you thought it was lame."

"Am I making you uncomfortable Sis?"

"No." She kept her eyes on album and handed him the joint. She gathered up her legs in her left arm, thighs tight against my chest and heels firmly pressing into the padded stool top. She held the album in front of her face.

"Oh, Okay, well that's good."

"I wanted to talk to you about something Sis."

...

...

"And? So?" She didn't even look up.

...

"Well Sis, I've been coming around here for a long time now..." She grew tense and kept trying to refocus on

the album over and over, trying to ignore him. But the feeling was not cool. She hated that feeling.

"Just say what you want to say Donny." She looked at him for the first time since they had been alone. He looked down at the joint he had been nursing.

"I already asked your Dad and he said, I needed to ask you, so that's what I'm doing..." There was another long pause, "Well Sis, I want to ask for your hand in marriage."

Sissy couldn't help but to make a soft gasp.

"I really am fond of you Sis. I know you are younger than me but I would take really good care of you. I'm making good money. You can ask your Dad. And I have a van and I'm renting a sweet little house on the west side. I'll probably be able to buy something soon. "

"Donny, what the hell are you talking about?"

"I want to marry you Sissy."

"It's not even like I'm younger than you. It's like I'm a kid. You're a man. You aren't even like a brother to me; you are like an old Uncle."

"But you are so mature Sissy. Everyone says so."

"I'll be in sixth grade next year, remember?" She could not see the look of shock in his face since her shock and rage had blinded her, rage at him and at Dad.

"So that's a no then?"



The little bit of a joint that remained, he played with in his sweaty hands. He looked pitiful. He wasn't very good at rolling joints in the first place, had to use one of those rollers and even with that they were too loose and falling apart. The cherry went completely dead without him even realizing.

She looked at the album again and then looked at that big brick sitting on the table. She wondered if Dad had given him *something* for it. Her brow was still all a tangle on her forehead.

"Well Donny, that's a definite NO. I mean besides you being a man and me being a kid I haven't even dated anyone yet. And even if you were my age, I don't really even know you Donny, not that well anyway."

"Okay Sis. I'm really sorry if I made you uncomfortable. It's just that I am so fond of you, so fond, and I thought well maybe. Never mind then, sorry. I'm sorry. I got to get going."

He got up from the table picking up bag. He couldn't look at her. And she felt like she needed to hold strong, that somehow watching him kept her safer.

He looked at the brick on the table and he shook his head real slight, "Okay, Well take it easy Sis."

Donny struggled at the door. The screen must have jammed when Dad went out. It often did. Sissy could hear the

mower motor struggling too, over a patch of damp grass as Dad backed up and made another pass.

Donny clumsy helplessness at the door drew Sissy in. She felt a little bad for him. Maybe he really did care for me. She got up to help Donny with the door. The hook really jammed this time and she stopped looking at Donny to fix it, and get him out. Usually she would just have to wiggle it and it would release. She pushed on the little mechanism that usually sprung back. She wiggled it.

Then Donny's mouth and tongue were pressing wet on and through her and she turned her face to break away. Above her he pushed and she cowered trying to cover her face and she couldn't get out of his lengths of arms and his leaching lips. She elbowed and kicked hard with her knee twice. The second time she must of got some contact and he sank back. She pushed him against the screen door as he doubled over, and it finally opened. He fell into the driveway saying something about a bitch. She locked the screen. She locked the door. She sat down with the brick. She heard him backing out the drive. Dad finish mowing the front lawn and she heard him roll the mower over the rough of the driveway moving with a steady coarseness past the closed door and on to mow the back yard.

She went back to her room, shut the door and lay on her bed. She didn't hear Mom come home. The smell of cooking woke

her. She could hear Dad in the shower. When she passed the stairwell on her way to the kitchen to help Mom, the brick was gone.

She never saw Donny again.

That morning was the first she had heard anyone speak of him since that day.

She shifted her weight on the brick wall and looked at her watch again. It was seven-third five. She touched the place on her arm where she had made it bleed. The pressure had stopped the bleeding. She pressed out what was left of the joint against the brick and put it back in her cigarette case, glancing up at the path. Then from the front she heard someone coming. It was Sally and Cindy coming around from the school grounds.

"Hey Sis! We were looking all over for you. I should have known you would be here. You know, you are the most coolest, diehard stoner at school. Do you have any more of those white crosses?"

"Yeah, whatever - flattery will get you nowhere. How many do you need?"

## 21. Sole of My Mouth

Riddle root you tongued, Bryant.  
Grinds your cause more harm.  
So happy boon and Pop Corn muzzle!

Baked leaves in every room,  
under the *shine* blankets.

Before the sun tipped  
first mourning's,  
I knew clear.

Before orange  
menses owned that mound  
obliging Ashley did.

The basement, lights off.  
An industrial cardboard drum.

If big blue ought caught us,  
honey bees in December fare better.

Knowing is knotting.

Traces of knowing make trim tremors  
Snipe the plume of letters,  
of my eraser?

What for Octoroon can thaw the box  
of snow in *my* the family's room.

Get up, get up grrl. Taste that,  
that the delivered deviant at your door  
makes hot and taught new.

News men questioning questions about a  
national crusade to consume smears shelved  
and self-proclaimed  
And for four that lapped the sands of one twin,  
a flirtation tendered up next to  
the bent-on-doing-away.

We certainly would have eyes pinned down  
and done, done-it on June the eighth,  
after all one of the most *biting* victories  
rubbed the country stiff!  
We did not bear our breast in Norfolk Virginia.  
If you are a doormat then flaunt what you well know.

My toes of joy burrowing in the olive acrylic.  
The Des Moines is hardest through April  
before she folds and gives.  
May will wait.

And a fiddle is our savior,  
Sip sipping a stone,  
I must attend home.  
menu-of-prayer for the one we call, them.  
People meet people eat flush people.

A little while later the husband's log aimed  
four private pie throwers chatting-it-up  
in the parking lot.  
You know this motion man kneeds  
you a slow game of honey dip,  
you over the loud speaker.

Well now, despite his earlier plea,  
for he, knows they love getting it up in rant  
portions,  
he does  
not,  
never,  
want that man touched or harmed  
except by his pretty pie, delicious  
and no charges filed,  
his smooth entry on  
sharpened windfalls.  
The doctors made a wet spot from  
touching his default parade.

Teachers gonna show us shackle bones chic for caressing.  
Then willy nill till eternal sinking will link us.  
The vanity of you me I.  
Sleep peaking where people spoke swallow-scratch

My joyous cries snuffed and sold for your relaxation  
and for your the ladies,  
and for the gentlemen,  
and for the boys,  
and for the girls too.  
Not me. Not Jennifer Miller

No lousing my pie mouth.  
But banana cream can come still and soft, thank you.  
Licking, crying—the Mike catches all.  
Turn on another *other* prayer.  
Father Grace we want to thank your sweet ass  
for red lips  
and for sleeping beauties.  
Father we, we, I,  
we, you,  
forgive her, him, them.

## 22. Ms. Mama Sis

I just over heard this discussion on the bus. I felt so angry by the ignorance that I get surrounded with. Lord help me to understand. We have created a pro-rapist society that, in the best case scenario shuns the innocent product of rape and at the worst kills them, nearly always letter the perpetrator go free. The punishment for the crime is redirected by the perpetrators away from them and at the innocent. The most innocent pays for the crime of the guilty.

If I choose to be honest about the rape then I choose to make my child suffer, with the label of the unwanted one, the illegitimate one. Or I could just kill the child. I'm told and taught *that* is okay by conservatives as well liberals. Did this child rape me? Rapists don't get capital punishment but babies conceived from rape do? Just because woman was raped doesn't mean she don't want and love the baby. And just because she got raped doesn't mean she wants to kill my baby.

If there is conception from rape, the mother faces unimaginable pressures to keep the *rape* a secret, "to protect the child" "to protect herself" "to protect their futures". But you can't convince me that elevating the rapist to "daddy" is an accidental side effect of protecting the child. We cannot justify enabling the act of rape, by hiding it, with the excuse

of protecting the child from a shame that he should not be asked to bare. This world is so completely twisted No loving God would say it is acceptable to rape. No loving God would say it is the fault of the victim who was raped. And no loving God would say it is punishable to be born of rape. The child has no choice and is no better or worse for his conception.

On the other hand, if the rape has so damaged the mother that she cannot see beyond it, to the innocence of life, then why would we force her to raise this child? If she were in such a state that she blames and hates the child for the rape, then the child would pay the price if she were forced to give birth. With that kind of vindictive heart, she would surely damage the child. And even if she is not angry but knows that she is not prepared to raise a child, forcing her to take on that burden does not create a receptive environment. Really if we think about it, when a woman feels clear that she doesn't want to be a mother for whatever reason, what favor could we possibly be doing the child if we force her to birth him into a world where he is unwanted?

I need a cup of tea.



## 23. Tale of the Multipurpose Room

Who knows about that last fight, the one with Valerie? Well, I thought she stole my money, but I never knew and I didn't even say she did. I never said that to anyone. I swear. Well, except I said it to her that day. But, I said it after the rumor got spread by someone else. I guess somehow it got back to her that I thought she stole it, worse than that, she thought I told everyone. Which I didn't, although I did suspect her. But I had already written it off. I felt relieved whoever did it didn't get my stash too.

That day, Valerie, she just walked right up to me in the hall between classes saying, "So why you telling everybody I stole your money?"

Why I have such a sharp tongue, I'll never know. I guess I kind of did want to know if she had stolen it or what. Part of me thought, I'll just come right out and say it, see what happens. I probably could have talked her down, but no, I had to go raise my eyebrows, stick my neck out and say, "I never said that Valerie, but you probably *did* steal my money."

"I didn't steal your money bitch," and she slapped me hard across the face. I just started punching her as hard and as fast as I could. I didn't think about anything just went crazy on her face.

She didn't really beat me up that bad. I just pass out easy when I get hit in the head sometimes. I got a few good punches in before I went down. All my friends said so. I don't remember what happened. I mean everyone knew she was tough. She had already gotten kicked out of nine other schools for beating kids up. But I couldn't have people just thinking they can break into my locker and take my cash and then slap me and call me a bitch. That's what they would have thought too, because lots of kids thought she had staged the whole thing. I guess I wanted to make a point. Maybe I couldn't whip Valerie ass but I sure as hell could stand up to her long enough to make people think twice before they messed with me again.

At that moment when her hand hit my face, I couldn't think.

I usually didn't even keep that stuff in my locker in the first place. Anybody who knew me knew I rarely kept that stuff in my purse very long and I sure as hell never kept in my locker.

That day we all got caught off guard because we had an unexpected fire drill. I had just sold a couple eighth grams and I hadn't hid the money in my sock yet. I organized my shit, about to grab my bag out of the locker. I just set it down there for a second. Then when the fire alarm went off one of the girls tried to be helpful and shut the locker for me.

The whole thing played weird because usually we got a warning before all the fire drills. There was never a surprise fire drill, not till that day, there wasn't. It was usually this little tidbit of information that got passed through halls between classes to all the kids. This would happen way before any fire drill ever did. We would know what period the drill was set for and whether it would be towards the beginning or end of class.

I had my stash in my pocket. My perfect origami-like little coke packages didn't take up much room, prettiest coke packages you've ever seen this side of the Mississippi. I'm sure who ever took my money thought she was going to get the stash too. But she only got a measly sixty dollars.

I had just been showing off the coke a little, taking a loving spoonful in the back of my geometry class the period before the drill.

Well, next period we had Gym Class and we were all in the locker room when the alarm went off. Miss Wiggins came running through the locker room telling everybody they need to get out because of the drill, I just thought, I don't have time to do that stupid combination again; it'll be okay this once. Sally, Cindy and Deloris were all heading out so I just went on with them. Then, when we got back I found my locker all busted in. I knew all it needed was a good kick. I knew it was easy to break

in those things. I had never done it but I knew kids who did, well I knew my brother.

Once the fight had started the kids all gathered around. They always did that so that the fight would be protected to go its course as long as possible without getting broken up by a teacher. But when the staff and teachers got there and saw what was up the kids welcomed them to break it up. But they were all too scared of Valerie to even attempt to break it up. She stood six foot tall and solid as a rock.

If it wasn't for Dad's old connection with that police liaison guy, Mr. Stanton, it probably would have been a lot worse for me. Mr. Stanton was the only black person on the staff and all the white teachers and staff was too scared to touch Valerie.

Mr. Stanton used to supply Dad pot from what the police had confiscated. He treated me like family. He was cool. As things were I just got bruised up and a bunch of my hair ripped out. I guess she did the number on my hair after I passed out on the ground. She had me by the hair and kicked my ribs. That's what they told me. My friends said my hair decorated the multipurpose room. The fight had started around the corner in the hall but we ended up in the multipurpose room in the end. The other thing is I always kind of blacked out in a weird way when I got mad. That's just the way it went. My rage black-out turned to a

physical black-out at some point. I don't remember a thing past those first few punches. When I came to I sat on the floor legs spread out with my torso flat between my legs and my face on the floor. Never been so limber before or since.

Lucky thing, I have so much hair. I didn't have a bald spot anywhere anyone could see and my scalp only felt sore fore a while, well aside from that big bump. But my skin wasn't broken anywhere. I just had some bruises is all; kinda big bruises, kinda my entire rib cage turned into a bruise but the cold justified no one ever seeing that.

I went back at school after my suspension of three days. I started right back to doing the same things I did before, maybe a little more careful. Some kids had even waited to buy from me. There hadn't been any trouble since. The stupidest thing is though; after it was over and me and Valerie had to meet with the principle, I believed her when she said she didn't steal my cash. She got kicked out over another fight within a month. I actually kind of felt bad for accusing her.

## 24. Bright Fright

Swells my mass bro  
Available with rhyme sores  
Everywhere river rats are lulled

When soft steps taught my tongue to run  
And popularity arose with an itsy bitsy death  
Tufts of impotent magic number strings danced

I won't shun the looky-lou anytime soon

'cept when the farmer's wife cuts it off  
With whatever-the-fuck was sharp  
and within reach.

Cause that shit had to stop.

## 25. Tale of Northern Iowa

Since Mom died I felt alone and helpless. Who else came in a heartbeat if I ever had a problem or a need? Who else listened to anything I had to say without judgments? Who else set down firm boundaries with me to the point that I hated her sometimes? There would never be anyone else like her. I didn't think about that shit before. I hated myself for turning her away. Right before she died she called me at my Brooklyn loft. She really needed me that night. She cried much of our conversation and sounded so tired. She told me she filed the divorce papers for the new husband.

They had married five months prior. He had at least one affair. Hell, when I had been in town he made a pass at me. What a sleazy guy, an absolute loser. This guy's name fit him perfectly: Dick. He treated mom like shit and I grew tired of hearing about it. Even though she filed for divorce she still slept with him, still hung out with him still gave him money. It made me sick.

I told her, "You need to just stop complaining and get away from this ass hole."

"You are right Sissy."

"He does absolutely nothing for you and you just keep going back to him."

I could her sniffing.

"For Christ's sake Mom, when does a school teacher make money than a lawyer? When the lawyer is a lazy-ass stupid dumb fuck, that's when."

She cried, "I know I need to stop seeing him. I just got this residency in northern Iowa."

"Oh that's great Mom."

"It will be good for me, give me a little confidence. They all think I'm a wonderful teacher and artist. The director of the program keeps calling me to make the final arrangements and he is so excited..."

"I'm sorry Mom. I have to say it's partly because you are a brilliant teacher and artist that you make more money than him, too. I didn't mean to imply... I just don't want to hear about him anymore. I'm glad you are getting a divorce. I'm glad of that..."

"It's a crossroads for me."

"That's right. This will be good."

"Part of me thought your dad and I could get back together. We have gotten to be better friends and I still love him so much..."

"I've got to get going Mom. I've got to finish this project for school. I love you..."

"Oh okay Honey. When are you free?"



"I don't know. I'll call soon."

Mom planned to come see me in Brooklyn for my twenty second birthday that May. I planned on showing her all around, proud of all I accomplished, proud of my success. I almost had my BFA from one of the best art schools in the country. I worked a good steady job at Sam Flax and I lived in a beautiful loft space with my "boyfriend". I told myself I really did good for myself.

## 26. Professional Rescuers, David

Foaming opinions  
far downstream  
rush of asphalt, with what facts?

I am reckoning edging the edges could be construed as suicide,  
save all else.

Soaring impression arm deficiencies,  
I see her as she is not struggling.  
I see her as she, as she, she floats away,  
Like Ophelia, a cherry-tipped Alpine composed on soft lips with  
Tab laced in finger tips.  
Hop, skip, come tumble down.

They were trained.  
They had equipment.

## 27. Tale of not meeting a Sissy

That night after work I went to a Williamsburg neighborhood meeting. I must have been sitting in that meeting at the time her mom died. It was the first and last meeting of that sort I went to.

A bunch of artists had been locked out of their spaces and their artwork destroyed by the landlord, who wanted to sell the building and claimed they were breaking the lease and that he did not know, had not agreed to them living there. A young woman spoke up and repressed the group. Hearing her I tried to but couldn't think what I would do if I lost my space and my artwork. It was my life, everything I worked for. As the young woman spoke to the mostly unsympathetic group about their plight I felt sad for her. I also couldn't help but feel relief that all the artists in my building had legal representation for this sort of thing. These artists had not and it didn't appear that she or the other artists, that lost everything, had a leg to stand on because of it.

There was a woman at the meeting looked so much like me. I stared at her and when she raised her hand to speak she introduced herself as Sissy. I looked around to see if others were looking at her too. They were. They all looked at Sissy. Of course they did, she had a concern to bring up. How strange I

felt. I couldn't believe that *this* Sissy, I had never seen before existed in my neighborhood.

My double spoke clearly, "There have been increasing problems with violence towards women here in Williamsburg. Girls and women are disappearing or being found dead at an alarming rate. Just the other day I saw a woman dragged down an alley screaming. I have witnessed so many attacks myself. When I call the police to report incidents they don't come. It's as if I never made the cal..."

A man in the front interrupted, "We have to move on to the next item on the agenda. This is not an agenda item."

She insisted, "It may not be on the agenda, but I believe the group will *agree* that this item should be added. They can make that call if they like. This is a crucial issue. We need to be working on finding solutions to thi..."

The man interrupted, "Procedure is in place for a reason. If we didn't have it anyone off the street could walk in and bring up some off the wall topic."

Then others joined in with him interrupting to bring up a problem he and they were enraged about. It was next on the agenda and they had waited long enough.

"Just the other day those damn kid's purposely sprayed water in my car. They faked like they were going to block it, keep it aimed the other way as I drove by. Then as soon as I was

in shot they moved out of the way and my interior was soaked I had to spend over two hundred dollars getting it cleaned and detailed! This opening of the fire hydrants has got to stop!"

I walked out. I thought it best to get a start home before it got too dark to start home before it got dark. The evening felt like it had a soft hold on me, the air was that perfect temperature, maybe seventy-four. It felt like a blanket softly wrapped me as I walked in the dusk. When I got home Gary mentioned he picked up a film at the rental place. After dinner we took tea and biscuits back into our private space to watch the movie. Well, I had her tea that night and Gary had coffee.

I sat there watching Liquid Sky. I felt grateful. The day left me tired and though I watched the screen, I lost track of how many times Margaret had been raped thus far. The character Johann intrigued me as he secretly observed the aliens from his secrete post at the Empire State Building. Liquid Sky, I had heard, was a ground breaking independent movie. Finding solace in the rooftop aliens' ability to use their teleporting phallic brain-fuck-death-crystal, to feed off the endorphins released with each premature ejaculation, I relaxed into the evening.

I could see the projects of Brooklyn, the warehouse rooftops and in the distance the World Trade Towers through a large window just behind the TV set. The evening horizon was of course sprinkled with golden city lights. Psychedelic images

emerged through the glowing screen surrounded by a beautiful and spacious interior. Everything appeared just as I had dreamed. I finally felt a part of the New York art scene. I had immersed myself in my studies at the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan. I worked a steady job at a big art supply store and I enjoyed a great studio loft space in a warehouse in Williamsburg Brooklyn.

We quietly watched the turn of events filling the screen. I sipped my chamomile tea. Gary sipped his plain black coffee Camel unfiltered cigarettes. The cigarettes disgusted me but everybody smoked them. They shared one of Sissy's masterpiece joints.

The phone began ringing.

Gary slowly looked up but only moved to take a drag, "Should I get it?"

"I got it. Just turn it down a bit."

An arm's reach without a glance, she answered the phone on the third ring. What she heard on the other end resembled a sick and injured dog crying and muffled by some shifting storm. The warm breeze from that New York April day couldn't stop the chill that grabbed at Sissy's throat. Her older brother Brother Paul's voice came through with sharp little fragments of words mixed with his glistening wet sorrow, "Sis... oh my God..." And there was so much clatter that it left room for Sissy to hope she misunderstood. Paul could barely breathe let alone talk, "its

Mom... it's Mom. We can't see her any more Sis... We can't touch h... Sissy... Oh my God. She's gone..."

She fought against the hearing. She wrestled with each barely recognizable word.

The screen was her hope to take her out of the hoping, of the denying, of the pain. No she couldn't even see the pain that was yet to come. She couldn't imagine the salvation she would need to pull her through. It was too much. The moment was too much. Though her body reacted in ways it was only the surface and some part of her knew that. So to be pulled in to the electric box and away from life and its inevitable tragic end, that became her momentary fix. She felt the swell of her throat and the flood in her eyes. Through the waves that obscured her sight she clung Margaret and Adrian as they began to scissor fuck on the screen in front of her. She whispered, "Adrian would die because Margaret never comes." She laughed.

Gary glanced over at Sissy and then picked up the joint.

Paul trembled in her ear. He could not hear Sissy or himself he just kept replaying the events of his evening in words that were barely audible. After running through them multiple times some part of Sissy got the gist. He called you right after he got back from the hospital. They had told him when he arrived that it was too late and they couldn't save her. She made out little bits of the events, she could barely

understand through his cries, "I had to see her Sissy. I had to see her. I lost it Sissy. I pushed through the nurses. I had to see her. I pushed through those doors Sissy. They tried to stop me." Somehow he knew right where to go. The doctors tried to stop me. I pushed through I couldn't stop myself Sissy. I'm glad you didn't have to see her Sissy. Oh it was terrible what they did to her. She was so messed up Sissy. She is really gone. I'm glad you didn't see her Sissy. They swore they tried real hard to save her."

The steal of the car had collapsed around her crushing her little chest. Just getting her out of that crumpled wad of metal was quite a task. The Jaws-of-Life took over an hour. She was dead by the time they got her to Mercy. They opened her chest split wide at the breast. They tried to massage her still warm heart back to life. Paul saw her on the table moments after they called it. What might have been a man was completely gone that night.

After Sissy got off the phone Gary stopped the movie for a five minute update on current events. Then Gary resumed watching the movie. Afterwards he waited for further explanation and crying before going to get more coffee. When he returned up into the loft Sissy was in the bed crying and holding herself, "You know Sissy, I have heard sex becomes intensified beyond belief when someone experiences a death of someone close in their



family. That's why so many folks end up pregnant after a significant death." He explained this matter of factly. That was Gary all matter-of-fact. Sissy never stopped crying as she obliged him that night. She didn't feel it necessary to stop crying and he didn't seem to mind. She secretly hoped the aliens would pay a visit to her Brooklyn roof top that night.

Sissy went to work the next day right on time. The subway delivered her close to the Sam Flax on Twenty-third near Fifth just like it had so many days before. Mercedes helped her run the Graphics department there. Mid-morning after the rush of people passed, they were getting ready to place the order. Sissy always called it in, but the inventory they did together.

"Mom died yesterday."

"Sissy that's terrible. I'm so sorry. What happened?" Mercedes touched her shoulder and looked around to make sure no one was coming; she pulled Sissy behind the counter and the display.

"It was a crash. I found out late last night." She held the tears tight all morning but one slipped out when she saw Mercedes shocked and grievous face.

"Sissy, you need to go back home! You need to buy your ticket to go back home! What are you doing here?" She looked at me puzzled, gently shaking my shoulders as she talked. How could

Gary let you come work? I knew something was wrong. She shook her head, "When is the funeral? Who is taking care of things?"

Sissy couldn't talk. Mercedes heartfelt reaction was distracting her from her distraction. She turned to her order and tried to focus through stubborn tears. Mercedes grew frustrated and rushed out of our department. Sissy listened to the sounds of store: the phones ringing, papers shuffling, the cash registers rhythmic taps and rings mixed with soft whispers.

Mercedes returned to the department and rejoined in the work of getting the order together. Just as Sissy sat down with her paperwork to make the call for the Letraset order Frank Tortaricci interrupted, "I'm your boss Sissy and I demand that you take your bereavement leave immediately."

Sissy looked up puzzled, "What's a bereavement Frank?"

"You have had a death in your family. Mercedes told me. You get time off to take care of things."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, that is so."

"Really? All right then." Sissy looked over the order and double checked some numbers, "That's okay then? I didn't know."

"Your job will be here for you when you get back."

"Okay Frank, thanks. I'm going to place this order and finish up a few things and then I'll take off."

"Okay Sissy. Promise?"

"Yes, Frank. I promise."

"I'm sorry about your mom." I didn't look up till he turned his back. Frank walked away with his permanent slump. He rubbed his hands together and looked from side to side, retreating back to his office. She was surprised he came out to tell her that. He rarely came out of the office for anything except birthday cake.

Sissy picked up the phone and dialed the eight-hundred number looking forward to hearing the familiar voice that awaited her order every week. She united with Helen in this way every week for an hour and a half at least. She loved Helen's voice. And Helen acknowledged everything Sissy said. Sometimes if Sissy wasn't clear or she didn't hear for some other reason she would repeat the quantity and the item number back to make sure she understood exactly what Sissy needed. Sissy then corrected or confirmed the numbers and they would start again right where they left off. It felt so reassuring.

"Hello, this is Helen. Thank you for calling Letraset. How can I help you today?"

"Hi Helen."

"Oh, hi Sissy. I hope you are having a good day."

"Thank you, you too. It's just good to hear your voice. Are you ready to take my order?"

"Whenever you are."

"Here goes then. 2 of 19589"

"Okay."

"1 of 16832"

"Mmm Hmm."

"3 of 22841"

"Got it."

"2 of 13252"

"Okay."

"2 of 19577", Sissy had not noticed the scratching again.  
She stopped but had already broken the skin.

"Okay."

"2 of 12920"

"Okay, wait. Again?"

"That was 2 of 12920"

"Got it."

"5 of 12920"

"Okay."

"2 of 15000", she had blood on her hand.

"Okay."

She sat up straighter and reached across the desk for a tissue. She looked around. No one could see me. She continued the order grabbing her black long-sleeved cardigan from the back of the chair. That would cover it up for now.

"2 of 12223"

"Okay."

"1 of 12327"

"Okay."

"5 of 10266"

"1 of 16620"

"Mmm Hmm."

"1 of 78211"

"Mmm Hmm."

"3 of 09402"

"Got it."

After this went on for one hour and thirty-nine minutes they said their goodbyes, "That's all we need for the week. Thank you Helen. Take Care."

"And thank you very much Sissy. Talk to you next week then?"

"I think Mercedes will have to place the order next week."

Before she left Sam Flax that day she took out four of her favorite sheets of Letraset rub-on letters and graphics. The sheets ran nine dollars and ninety-nine cents each plus tax. They measured about nine and a half inches by fourteen or so. Letraset made sheets of every typeface from Times Roman to Helvetica and everything in between. I think there were one hundred or so type faces in all. Sissy liked the sheets of rub on graphics as well. They made sheets of arrows, money signs,

stars, borders and hearts. She used them when she had graphics jobs. She used them when she made private invitations for parties. She used them in her artwork. She started collecting them the day Frank Tortaricci informed the staff that he had enacted a new policy; at the end of each day all the women were all to line up at the exit to have our purses searched. She didn't let it get under my skin. She had a system for not letting it get under her skin. She never stole anything from Sam Flax until that day. Never mind she had been stealing from everybody else since the ripe age four. Never mind she had been casing for opportunities ever since she arrived. But after the new policy she felt she needed to sleep better at night. The Letraset sheets were easily cut into smaller sections. That didn't compromise the integrity of the product. Her department had plenty of private space to work with. She tucked the sheets into her feminine hygiene mini bag within her larger purse. One of her co-workers, Melissa, had the job of looking in the women's purses and she certainly didn't enjoy digging around in there any more than she had to. Sissy cut up her favorite sheets for the day, though it was hard to see. She tucked them away and left for her "bereavement".

## 28. Seeking in the Wake of Clay

They delivered with the calm of TV snow. Rested after their birth near a cliff that rose above an ocean, a cliff with air and ashes, ashes. The child arrived set for would be repaired and with mud and the furrow darning. She had skills for healing and she took to the task, knowing so. And she the other deliverer had bright eyes, for him *capable* in the face of early, in the weakness in her first light.

She measured the opening and gently stroked the child's leather-hard forehead. The breeze blew into a first delicate turning and then a force of whirlwinds into her open mouth as she grew vacuumous. She worked and sorted about, and all in a widening her, the countless tiny earthen particles as she gathered all the air in. She smoothed the outer edges of the child's opening with her mahogany rib. All the while she stroked the child. In stillness the child still needed soothing. And her hum of drawing wind soothed to the child. Into her mouth, all the once aerial elements of gray clay, which she ordered about with tooled tongue.

The gap looked to her about two inches long and a half inch wide. It drew apart above the left temple, but the child had not lost much light, had not caught the dimming, but for the earliness on. The loss that had since birth, was minor and her

show regenerative. This light could serve light and further save the within store. When her mouth swelled with clay dust, she closed and mixed it with the tip of her tongue. Then used her needle tool to score the edges of the child's opening and ready there for the slip blended smooth. She used her sharpest tongue then, to load her brush with the thinnest slip for the first applications. With slow and *steady* members, arms braced on solid thighs, she began to build the finest layers. From her tongue she loaded her brush again and again. From her brush she filled the gap again and again. Soon the gap was closed. The slip warmed and grew leather hard as the sun rose to a blinding white. She used the curve of her boxwood to smooth the renewed area, the clay matched perfectly. She felt clear and knew the child to be contained and to be a container. She rose up and dived naked off the cliff of ash and the salt.



## 29. Through the Cold Brick Embraces

Past the weeping clergy  
shit stalls,  
my feet  
soared above crossfires' pull,  
above rusty locks of teeth,

Renounced the Rosen Lap.

*My blessing* in the steel brier defense,  
buttress for my nestling ankles,  
to lift my calling wind stores.  
You, beyond the hissing groin vault prayers.  
We rejoice through shattering skies, Jeremiah.

Yes, our throats pricked,  
all through the draining electric cobalt  
so that all reservoirs restored their song.  
And we were fed fiery trinkets.  
We shared a glittering joy.  
No sleep for rupturing smiles.

And how pretty the crowd

could be,  
kept in a blanket of blinks.  
Bells chimed away laurels.  
Recess ended us.

Good friend and prophet  
we are the rising creek now.

There are still cars,  
fresh-fangled bars,  
and sweet love  
is only  
for the lord or wars.

But do,  
help unknot these fingers  
once more  
to touch  
the limb  
out on.

### 30. Ms. Mama Sis June 2015

What's a little break-in? So they took my fucking old computer, all my electronics, all my flash drives and portable hard drive full of manuscripts, video work and documentation of my sold or destroyed artwork. That wasn't much right? I have lost shit before. And I understand once you cross the line of committing a felony, you might as well try to get the most of it. I keep imagining how disappointed they were once they broke and squeezed through that four-inch gap in the kitchen window knocking down my shelf to create a flood of broken herb jars, and then once through that to see stacks of books, an old computer, no TV and the biggest electronic item an old heavy sewing machine. Yes, I'm still crying from time to time when I remember that box full of treasures my son made for me. How were they to know that a heavy, difficult to open jewelry box (one that was obviously loved) could contain, little pictures my son had drawn for me, little notes he gave me, the first hello kitty trinket he gave me to start my collection, jewelry he made just for me. I'm sure it all became filler for the dumpster down the way. The window is still broken. I'm still sleeping with my caste iron skillet, when I can sleep. At least the skillet gives me a little more peace when I lay down. I remember at times to practice gratitude for the fact that I was not home. I practice

by saying, "Thank you God for not letting be home." Because I sure as hell don't feel grateful. But maybe saying it will help. Yes, saying it helps I think.

It was yesterday when it happened. I left to go catch the bus in the morning and I realized I forgot my favorite ring, the black onyx one mom always wore. I felt so torn suddenly. I had forgotten the ring before at times. But I wanted to go back and get it. Since I knew I would miss the bus and I couldn't be late for work and waited.

I said to myself. "This is the last time. I am never forgetting that ring again."

Well I didn't know how right I was, because they took that too.

## 31. Tale of Black Bread

On the day I turned twenty-two I walked home from the subway as the afternoon closed. After Mom died the passing of time surprised me. It passed unnoticed and then when I turn to find it, it reminded me like a stranger from behind, telling you the line has moved on. I had to stop and think and remind myself that I had a birthday.

I walked down Division towards South 11<sup>th</sup>, towards the water.

Beata, got up from her chair as if to go inside, then my sullen approach caught her eye. She greeted me, "Hello Dear." She often greeted me, but this time she added, "You must to have some bread today," Holding her hand up to stop me, "You wait for some bread now."

I couldn't refuse, "Oh, okay. Thank you." I must have looked like hell.

She made an insistent gesturing with her hands fluttering like leaves in the wind. Once she felt sure her motherly beckoning had convinced me to wait, she made her way into the open door of the old storefront. I could tell there used to be a nice display window but now the glass was cracked and taped, reinforced with pieces of cardboard that looked like they had been there for a decade at least. Shelves and boxes blocked any

view in or out. Beata looked to be late forties or early fifties when I first followed her into the bakery that day. She didn't try to hide the tattooed numbers on her thick forearm. I had never seen those numbers first hand before her, but I knew what they were from all the movies and documentaries about Auschwitz and the living hell that the people faced.

The bakery really wasn't set up for walk-in customers but that did not stop the walk-ins. As I entered I thought they must do most of their business with commercial clients, restaurants, grocery stores or banquets, that sort of thing, but in the short time I stood waiting three more people came in. I tried to follow her with my peripheral but lost her in the second room in the back. I was lined and crowded with big tall metal bread racks full of fresh baked bread. She had slipped away to the back reaches through the maze of delicious baked goods. I noticed while I waited that some of the bread rolls that my all-time favorite Hasidic market carried were right there fresh out of the oven. I had learned move cautiously around the different Hasidic markets. I felt unfamiliar with some of the expectations and did not want to disrespect anyone's boundaries. I resolved to go back and wait for her just inside the door. The smell of fresh baked bread was an elixir to my heart. So heavy with the aroma of the days baking I thought the

air alone could sustain me for a month. I remember almost feeling guilty for breathing in so much richness.

She emerged with a beautifully formed loaf in her hands, "Come in. Sit down. Come in. Sit down. What is your name, dear?"

She hurriedly rang up the other customer's orders as if she had completed these transactions daily for a hundred years. There was a little Yiddish exchange between them and they were gone.

Finding the only chair, I hovered unsure and answered, "I'm Sissy. And yours?"

"I'm Beata, Sissy."

"Well good to meet you Beata. My Lord it smells so good in here."

"Mmm, Hmm, yes," She busied herself behind a small counter.

I hesitantly sat when it was clear she was done urging me. I watched her from there near to the counter.

She had rested my loaf down and was opening a plastic bag. "Wait till you have a slice of this bread I'm about to give to you. Have but one slice for your morning meal Dear. It is so rich and so full of life you will not want for to eat till the afternoon." She put the black loaf in the bag and I watched it instantly steaming up the inside as she smoothed the plastic tight. Her strong thick hands fastened a crisp new white twisty

around the opening. She handed the loaf to me with both hands. And then quickly corrected my one handed reception of it. She grabbed my lazy hand and placed it on the loaf and then again gestured the handing off of the loaf her with both hands giving to me with both hands receiving.

I accepted it and met her concentrated gaze with a grateful smile, "How much?"

I then found my right hand to be under the firm weight of hers and pressed against the warm loaf. With another full dose of her smile and a squeeze of my hand in hers, "You just try the bread, Sissy. I want you to have the bread today. It will be good on you on this day. Look, you need some good bread." She tightened her eyes and brow smiling in concentration, "No charge today. But you promise you *must* come back and tell me how you liked it."

"Okay, I promise. It looks very very good." My eyes grew large and I suddenly felt waves of longing in my stomach. "Thank you,"

I was surprised at its heaviness as she released it to me.

"Now you be sure and let me know, won't you, how you like it?"

I left the bakery backing away and smiling at her as I hugged the warm loaf, "I will. I'll be back soon, Beata. Thank you!"



I tried a piece with butter as soon as I made it home. It was the finest bread I had ever tasted. I found it mild with a kind of meatiness about it. I loved the smooth and dense texture and with no seeds, which I liked especially. It's not that I disliked caraway seeds. But it always bothered me that I could never find a rye or black bread without them. Dark breads I had before were flavorless compared to this, or else the taste of caraway was always so strong that it left little room for much else. It was my dinner that night and it was my breakfast the next morning.

I went back the next day to tell her how much I appreciated the bread.

She smiled, not at all surprised, "Yes, yes, I know. You must just keep eating the bread. This is good. It is the best food for you. Now come inside and sit down here. Tell me about yourself while I finish this the books. You aren't from around here are you?"

"Well, originally I'm from Kansas, born in Lawrence. But I grew up mostly in Iowa."

Though she worked busily she didn't appear occupied. Her attention about me was masterful. She stood there carefully listening. I wanted to ask her questions as well, but each time I answered a question of hers it seemed she would have another insightful question inspired by my answer.

After that I visited her at least once a week to buy my Black bread which I would share with my loft mates and visitors, bragging to everyone about the wonderful bakery and Beata.

## 32. Farther from Father

Run Jack  
Tatter of fact

In potluck smiles sharp with gums  
And hatching cranial flames

"Where yours is?  
Everyone has one!"

D for deliver  
A then for always an appetite, of another, of an *other*  
And the last D is not for ease, but the dis  
And the wishful dawn disappearing

So cock it for fun son.  
Appoint your tactical blood tapestries.  
I got the frontline for you,  
my fine grave.

Dick  
Alive  
Drive.

### 33. Letter to my Michael

How could I judge or be angry at you, of all people? Look at me. Even after all I went through with Jay, he convinced me to give him another chance. As much as I knew my true self to be a rebel queer, unable to conform or fit, a sick part of me clung to the ideal of a "mom" and a "dad" playing their accepted roles in society and raising their child. Thinking of how I dug my nails into those roles despite the blood makes me feel hideously ashamed. So how could I look down on your choices? I barely lived through his assaults, he destroyed most of my life's artwork, my career, and my dreams; yet I can't deny, I still tried to make a "happy home" for you with that man. Granted, the desire for that home only lasted a short time, but in my twisted brain I wanted so bad to *give* you that? To do that *favor* for you? As much as I hated everything that condemned me, it still controlled parts of me. While those sick elements sucked my life blood they also guided my path, telling me to serve those needs first at my own expense and I'm afraid also at yours. And in order to cope with those pressures I tried to convince myself that Jay's promises were worth something. Promises can be like parasites if they have claws and get good a hold. Condemnation everyday with my time tested fusion of domestic and street drug remedies. I told myself, "pacified is happy". In that state,

with all the ulterior motives hidden from me I believed my aim was true. How could I be trusted to care for myself or anyone else? My attraction to Jay should have taken me down. I took steps to support his talents and I claimed focus on his *potential*. I used his lame attempts at charm and humor to justify a make-believe acceptable end. He appeared to persuade me to trust him. But if he persuaded anyone she begged to be persuaded. I let him in my life for a moment at a point when I was weak. And that moment proved just a moment too long. And bloodshed cleansed and warmed me through no doing of my own and I saw glimpses of love. The parasites lost their strong hold. And as my thick skinned lies tenderized with each blow there began to grow bits of truth just enough and just in time to see your light my son. I almost forgot the parasites within me still lived. I never killed them. Even if I might one day succeed in killing Jay they would still live on. And I would keep watching them.

I've made an effort to give myself some credit over the years. I did everything I could to protect you and me once I got us away and then only then realized the magnitude of the danger we were in, I put us in.

I'll never know what it's like to be in your position Sweetheart. I don't blame you for giving him a chance as I did. I get mad sometimes, but not at you. I can just imagine him

calling himself "Dad", "your dad" that fine title with all its grand facade. And what does it take to be a "dad"? A little muscle, a fractured rib, maybe it's the sharp twist of a wrist on a day when there's just no more fight that allows for that slight give. Once past a certain point it gets a lot harder to go back maybe it's just time and no escape in sight that kills the fight.

I'll tell you what I get mad at. It has nothing to do with you Dear. I get mad at how much weight we give to blood, especially a man's blood. Whether you choose it, or not - once his blood is fixed to you, fused in your child - good luck, if it is not the blood of a saint. And, Lord knows I don't mean someone who has been sainted; I mean the blood of a truly good and spiritually grounded person. Because the power that he is handed, it would take a saint to turn away from.

If you could have known me before your conception I think so much would be clear. That's silly though. Is there anything more ridiculous? And anyway, no one *knew* me then, unless maybe my mom. She knew me better than anyone else, at least. I don't think you'd recognize me then. What a gutsy girl I was in ways. I grew near to breaking free from the confines of my birth.

When you and I visited Williamsburg in two-thousand-eight. I had been away for so long, since nineteen ninety. Everything appeared smaller than it did in my memory. As if I returned to

my elementary school, finding all the little chairs, the miniature desks and the toilets set so low to the ground, I walked around with you, my grown son. Of course, I haven't grown up at all since I left Brooklyn. I haven't grown an inch since I turned eleven. But I felt as if you standing tall there with me had assisted me in shattering some magnificent illusion of grandeur, if only for that moment.

Figure 4. Blowing Kansas





## 34. Tale of Morning Tea for Three

Listening intent on perfecting every transition, I rolled another perfect spindle joint. I struck a wooden match on the bottom of my desk and lit up as I rewound the cassette again. I played it back for at least the two hundredth time taking notes and adjusting levels.

I had been working hard on a version of the "Three Legged Baby Chair" sound track. The performance scheduled for the School of Visual Arts Auditorium in Manhattan approached, only a week away. I ran with the intensity of my preparations and had been for a couple weeks past. I intertwined the various found, vocalized, created and all completely manipulated sounds into an arrangement that would serve as a foundation for my improvisational movement work. The only other prop I planned on using for the performance was my white, wooden three legged baby chair. I found it orphaned in the vacant lot next to my warehouse building.

One of the main sources of unearthed sounds I used originated from a music box I had received as a goodbye gift from a man who may very well have been my mom's lover. Of course I never would have considered that at the time. At eight I already had strong ideals about romantic love. I would have never imagined either of my parents having an affair, even if

the evidence froze in its tracks before me, like a coyote with a cat leg still hanging from its mouth. Still, as a kid something in me obsessed over that box. I took it apart piece by piece throughout my childhood. The ballerina's skirt disappeared first. Then the little doll herself long since gone, then the little triangle mirror broken and lost, and lord knows what happened to the box. I vaguely remember pulling the sky blue satin from the sides. I used the little Masonite board sides to draw on with crayons and ink. I recognize the material as being the same as what Mom often used for her small paintings. But after all that, for at least fifteen years I hung onto the guts, the part that played the music. It stayed with me through all my moves, with that constant humming steady behind the chiming of the tiny steel teeth each time I turned the finger crank. I never took *that* apart. I kept the comb, the crank, the gears and the cylinder all in perfect condition. It played "Oh What a Beautiful Morning" from the musical Oklahoma.

Both Gary and Jennifer our loft mate, were out and about. I didn't care where. I happily focused on my work and enjoyed the hours without distraction tucked away in the warmth of our towering warehouse loft.

I held the old music box and sped it up and slowed it down in waves by gently forcing the crank while recording into the mic. Layered on top of that, I added a track of my voice. I

sang, "Oh What a Beautiful Morning," at first clear and sweet then twisting to a guttural operatic sarcasm. Another track had my humming. I worked for hours. Stella, with her coat a mix of glistening and tarnished silver napped at my feet, wagging her tail each time I said two words to her. I found myself suddenly struggling to break free from my process, so as to prevent being sucked down into the abyss of my own creative course. I felt I needed to break away and come back for a fresh look. I quickly stood up shaking myself free and nearly passed out. I thought better and resumed sitting at once. Stella's muscles tensed preparing to follow my lead. Her head rose up from where she rested on the floor. I wanted my cup of tea.

I stretched and arched my back with a slight twist and a few cracks. I picked up the joint I had been nursing, drawing deeply in and then exhaling with a sigh. I caressed the cherry clean of its ash and lay it in the tray watching the thread of smoke as its warmth pulled thinner and it faded into the height of the fifteen foot ceiling.

Stella rose up and stretched with her bronze brown eyes fixed securely on my blues.

I picked up my joint and stood again, slowly this time. Walking towards the hall door, I held it open for Stella. We walked out of my studio, past the old abandoned sweat shop, by the north elevator, down the dark hallway past the stairwell

door and the south freight elevator shaft. The hall had a strong sent of steel, old stale wood and musty cloth from the abandoned sweat shop. It took up a large area on that floor. It stood unused for at least ten years I had been told by other artists. All the machines and buns of fabric were still there. Some days I would enter through the unlocked door and walk around in the huge vacant sweat shop imagining what it used to be like; imagining it must have operated much like the one that still functioned on the floor just above us.

But most the time, like that night I ignored that space. Stella silently followed at my ankles leaving my side only to check on an unfamiliar smell that crept through the cracks in the machine oiled hardwood floor, the large gaps at the door and of course the open freight shaft. We ventured into the kitchen. Stella double checked the smells surrounding the door into Jennifer's space. She looked up at me confirming that everything proved in order. I could see the slight shadow of Jennifer's two cats, Chloe and Pinkie and their little noses under the door.

Stella had a thing for both of Jennifer's cats ever since their first spring together. They would both prance in front of Stella again and again with their tails in the air, glancing over their shoulders to see if she noticed. Stella then pounced, looking up at me a minute. I knew she wanted to chase them and I, knowing Jennifer's wishes would always tell her, "No". At

which point she laid back down. I had a feeling they were just going to have some fun, but Jennifer, not knowing Stella as I did, proceeded with more caution. I didn't let her carry on with the chasing until one time when Jennifer left town for a few weeks that summer. She chased the kitties down one at a time holding them firmly yet gently under her as she rhythmically pressed herself against them. Then, after a while of that, she began thoroughly licking them from head to toe. They just laid there as if paralyzed, purring. When released, they started the whole ritual over again. When Jennifer returned I informed her of the routine and then they were allowed to entertain us repeatedly. Interspecies pet flirtations as well as happily adjusted interspecies pet families remained a common place thing on South Eleventh Street. The painter across the street at Fifty-Six had a dog that nursed an orphaned kitten after its mother died when hit by a passing car. The dog never had puppies but started producing milk as soon as the first vibrations of the crying kitten permeated her breast. The dog was young at the time and they grew old together like sisters.

Stella remained at Jennifer's door exchanging warm sniffs with the two kitties on the other side.

I went to the window and forced it open, securing the splintered two by four brace under it to keep the seven foot framework of wood and glass from crashing down. We found its'

lock long since shot when we first moved in. By then, I grew used to the weight of those windows. Living in that warehouse, every chore presented itself a little more challenging than most residence I knew previously. Everything worked a little on the rough and rickety side, calling for extra muscle in most tasks. Even going to the bathroom took the preparation of a trek. When I was a kid, we used to have to visit Grandma Hood's. She owned a small farm for a time. There she had a cottage with an outhouse in the back yard by the barn. The walk to the outhouse might have been a little closer than the walk from my bed to the bathroom at the Williamsburg loft, and sometimes the toilet seat felt almost as cold. I just kept squatting like Mom had taught me. No need to touch my cheeks to anything I didn't have to. Grandma Hood's house never felt as much like home as Fifty-Five South Eleventh Street. It only got really cold between seasons. In the dead of winter, the outside ice and snow never penetrated the depths of the loft. It stood like a fortress and kept me safe during the time I lived there.

The loosely fitting windows rattled in their sills unable to resist the tickle of the constant breeze. Our warehouse building rose up just a few blocks from the east river and the winds stayed faithful; hot and heavy in the summer, cutting cold in the winter. Every year after the summer heat lifted and the fall gained momentum I would be shivering. Those gusts would move

through the clattering windows and up from the street spiraling through the elevator shafts. Since there was only one floor above us, the sixth, much of the winds had nowhere to go and came pouring into our fifth floor residence.

At the first sign that a freeze might hit, the veins of the slumbering steam heaters became hot, pumping full of life, with a sporadic crashing rhythm that penetrated every corner of our loft space. Our shared space measured about three thousand square feet in total. And even though the steam pipes were only found on the supporting walls, they were still enough to warm even the coldest bones. Mine were always the coldest. I felt my spirit lift when the pipes grew hot. Each winter after the heater's revival and for the rest of the season the whole place felt like a sauna. I loved it. That's the way it stayed till the landlord felt sure the risk of freeze had past and then the pipes would go into a long slumber until the next year.

The steam heater's pipes screamed and hammered out an enveloping heat all day and night. Once the January cold swept Brooklyn I could walk around our loft comfortably in a tank top, jeans and some flip flops. That's what I wore the night I worked on my sound track. I worked till long after midnight. So, more like early morning I would say.

That night in Brooklyn, standing there with the window open I enjoyed breathing the fresh cool air and let it brush my face

while all around me, I stayed toasty warm. The currents of cold and hot mixed sweeping my body as I looked out the window. Stella joined me after satisfying her questions as to the latest happenings next door. She waited patiently for her usual viewing platform. I responded, according to my training, and to her earnest eyes. I moved one of the kitchen chairs over in front of the window with its heavy wooden back close against the hot pipes. She jumped up so she could see the street and be next to me. Stella stood on the chair with her elbows and front paws resting on the sill. She held her nose high and took in the night air. Then she sniffed my arm and licked my skin, still salty from my mid-day dance session. I stroked her neck and back. I took a deep breath and coughed. I pretty much always had a cough back then. Smoking ranked above lung health to me. I could smell cold and nothing more, "What do you smell girl?" She ignored my question, except for a slight twitch of her ear. Her attention fixed down on the street. Her wet nostrils flared.

I looked down to South Eleventh ninety feet below, and then rested leaning with my elbows on the sill, fingers interlaced and suspended above the street. The pipes ran directly under the window. I dared not touch them when they were so vocal. I had done it the first winter. I didn't blister, but it was hot enough. Rushes of cold mixed with the dense heat of the pipes and gave me the sensation of being in an Iowa cave where the



different air currents would vary drastically in temperature. The darkness had settled at its thickest capability. New York always carried that soft city glow that could only be lost in those hidden dark nooks. The bright bare-bulbs shone below the corrugated steel awnings on the loading docks at the fifty-five and fifty-six buildings. It didn't get much quieter around there than it was that night. I could hear the sounds of the city that drifted over the east river. I could feel Brooklyn's strong deep pulse. The J train rumbled and raked steel till it stopped at Broadway, then on to Manhattan and Essex Delancy. The familiar droning song of Williamsburg stirred, punctuated by various solos; screeching breaks, a spray of gun shots, a distant siren and then another, but then mixed with the harmonies of a pack of howling stray dogs. Stella's ears shifted and twitched perfectly with all the sounds as if she were the cities conductor.

The surrounding warehouse buildings and a few of the projects to the south limited the kitchen view to little more than my street. Since the kitchen windows faced south and the building across from us climbed as tall as ours, it blocked the south. I could see just a touch of the east river beyond the warehouses and some of lights of Manhattan were always clear, but only a little between the building. It wasn't half the view we had in the main space, the space that Gary and I shared. In our space the windows faced east and much of the skyline showed

itself to us, the world trade and those financial district buildings to the south. We could see the Empire State and all the buildings reflected in little flashes of light in the East River. Up on the roof we had the best view ever. It stretched just like below but endless, just endless, and in every direction. We had all of New York.

Gary and I both fell in love with the views. They were one of many reasons we settled there. Our relationship felt appropriate for what we were doing. We supported each other in our creative endeavors which proved in time to be more important than any romantic commitment either of us had. He left early that night with some friends to jam. He liked to sing and play the guitar. I appreciated the time to work alone.

There came an icy sharp shift in the air. Stella braced herself completely still and I knew she had caught sight or smell of something. I glanced down at my street again and saw an approaching form. Emerging from out of the night a block down South Eleventh, a towering figure moved with a wide lumbering motion. At first I felt confused, and then the image broke through the softened barrier of Thai Stick and Café Bustello. Everything fell into place. My fellow loft-mate Jennifer Miller walked upon her stilts towards the loading dock entrance.

Jennifer was twenty-five or so at the time. She started the Women's Circus (different from the Women's Circus that came

later out of Australia) not long before she began renting a section of the loft. Her and her circus people often practiced juggling flaming torches in the loft and stilts on the street to be ready for their parades and other escapades around the city as well as the world.

I called down, "Hey Jennifer? It's nice out tonight, huh?" Stella wagged her tail with untamable joy as she recognized the voice of her friend returning home.

Jennifer turned her face to the light of the dock and exhaled a soothing reply, "its sooo nice out tonight. The air really smells good."

Another nice thing about the winter; the air rarely stank, unless of course there was a fire. All I smelled was cold that night.

I saw the warmth of her words float off for a second quickly swallowed up by the chill of the night. The loading dock made a perfect place to set off on stilts and a perfect dismounting stage after a practice session around the hood. The kitchen window we most frequented aligned directly above it. She approached the dock, braced her decline with her arms, then turned and relaxed seated on the edge of the steal diamond plate platform. She began removing her stilts.

Jennifer always lived a kind and generous life and I enjoyed hanging out with her. Now I looked forward to sharing my tea

and Lorna Doones, with her. "I was just going to put the kettle on. Will you join me for tea?"

She looked up again still unstrapping her stilt, "Sure, I'll be right up."

When the old tenant moved out Jennifer took over his lease. Grandma Hood had a picture of Christ at her home. I knew little of Christ, but I used to wish he would visit Grandma's house for real. I felt sure he never had contrary to Grandma's loud claims of intimacy with him. I did like that picture of him though. Jennifer Miller looked like that picture of Jesus Christ at Grandma Hoods. She often wore robes in flowing blues, golds and dirty whites. She had his loving, sad eyes. Though I never saw her heart open and burning as in the picture of Christ, I saw her juggle flaming torches with the equivalent heart of a hundred men. She did so frequently, on the street, at the park and most impressive, in her bedroom. Her voice always soothed as I imaged the Christ's voice would if he stepped from the picture at Grandma Hoods. There were many times I would be working in my studio and then break for some coffee or tea. From the west facing windows I would glance towards the East River and Manhattan. There she would appear, Jennifer Miller walking between the buildings above the water. For brief moments, the stilts that she walked so gracefully on would be blocked from my view by the trees and bushes. The river appeared to flow beneath

her feet like a miracle, like a real miracle. Then, there was her following to consider. My lord, people knew the name Jennifer Miller all over Brooklyn. So many women, *especially* women, came to visit our loft after Jennifer moved in. I heard only sounds of love carried from her space. And like Christ in the picture of course Jennifer Miller had a soft beard with gentle waves to match those of her shoulder length brown ringlets. She like Christ, appeared beyond any definition though many have tried. Some of this may have been because of the Circus, I know. The robes, the flames and all - but, *I* believed her to be a magical and spiritually ground being. More of a saint than any sainted sort. I've rarely met anyone so loving and so forgiving of the world.

I stepped over to the stove, lit the gas under the kettle with my strike-anywhere match and exhaled the earthy sweet smoke. I checked to make sure there was plenty of water in the kettle for two teas and a touch more for good measure. Since I wasn't dealing much anymore, I had little control over the quality of my weed. After years of the best, it took time to get used to that, but I didn't have the time or energy for dealing. It wasn't bad and I had work of my own to do. I took another drag and sneered slightly with my exhale. I blew out the match just as it progressed to burning my fingers tips. I tossed it in

the trash and began looking for those Lorna Doones I'd bought earlier at L and K.

Stella stayed at the window peering down, listening and wagging away.

I busied myself preparing two cups with a pre-bagged cinnamon licorice clove blend, and then I glanced up again. Stella had stopped her wagging and her gaze shifted from Jennifer, to something else, something further west. I heard tires ripping against the craggy street and a dull thrashing mixed with exhalations of fiery hate. I turned the overhead kitchen light off and then inched back to the window careful not to step into full view of whoever else was out there. But my fear for Jennifer's well being pulled me forward. As I moved closer to the window I looked down again, seeing that the vehicle was already gone. Stella still posed attentive. I saw her soft fur stood high on her neck. I came next to her touching her shoulder and smelling the lemon juice from her bath earlier that day. I could see Jennifer stayed still where she had been at the dock but with her eyes fixed, as were Stella's, to the west.

I gathered myself following their gaze. A completely naked girl stumbled, barely catching herself from a fall and then again. She moved towards the loading dock. Her bare feet slapped the cold pavement. Her legs move about, something like running

on sinking ground. Her knees kept giving in with nearly every step. Her arms groped for handles in the air. She glistened as if she were covered with ice. Jennifer resumed removing the other stilt keeping an eye on the girl.

I had seen a few things. But I had never quite dealt with this. Not that it surprised me. I inhaled the warm delicate smoke in the dark of the kitchen window. Gently I touched the cherry on the outer edge of the window sill, freeing the ash to the wind. A veil of white smoke swept my face seeping with a sharp twinge into my eyes. Pinching them, shut images filled my head.

Once as I walked home from the subway, I had turned onto South Eleventh from Berry as I usually would. Right there near the corner a windowless van sat parked. Three men stood around talking as if they were waiting for something. I didn't expect the crowd on the sidewalk and detoured to the street past the van. I passed and noticed the van rocking gently. I heard grunting and heavy breathing as I walked near. I held my urge to run, to scream, to yell and curse. I recalled stories of the neighborhood hoes doing tricks out of vans in the light of day. I became aware of a heavy metallic flavor in my mouth. I doubted the credibility of those stories when I heard them. After a while I saw things with a shock value that far surpassed the stories I had heard.

The image of the girl's illuminated body in the night air clung to me long after I closed my stinging eyes. The pain softened, I opened them again and my sight returned to find her closer. The only light on our street hit her back as she moved forward. This reduced her figure, for a moment, to a thin smug of black lines. But as her image diminished temporarily to a shaky silhouette with the shifting light, in my head her blinding entrance repeated like that big flash we used to use on those old-school four-by-five cameras.

Jennifer, almost back on her own two feet, watched the girl slowing her pace as she searched for some direction. The girl and I were about the same height, very similar build and bone structure. I thought to myself, she must be a little thinner than me, and damn, it had to be thirty out there, if that. Watching her, chills ran through me like a river of needles. I watched as she moved closer, about twelve paces from Jennifer.

If she were left out there she would probably freeze or worse who ever dumped her might be back to finish her off.

We had no fantasy whores in Williamsburg. It seemed like they just wore whatever was left from their school days, junior high school days. Mostly though they would just wear whatever they could find it seemed. They approached me sometimes. I came across a girl one day. She walked as if she wasn't sure there would be ground under her feet with her next step. I headed home



from the J train tired that night. When she found herself faced with me she suddenly got the strength for a smile that pleaded yet without hope, "How about a date tonight sweetheart?" Her lips were tight and dry. Her eyes sagged gray. Her arms had mirror image matching yellow and purple bruises wrapped around them, on a day too cold to be sleeveless. "I'll do you real good honey... I'll do you *real* good." Our eyes met and for a second. I wanted to say, "Let's go". I told myself, it might just give her the little break she needs. I told myself, I'm at a point in my life where I could offer her something more than what she had. I imagined taking her up to the loft and fixing her a nice hot meal, letting her take a shower, bringing her some hot tea. I thought, maybe we could be friends. I justified my fantasy pretending I could help. But I know a part of me wished to pale my secrets next to a girl like that. Then maybe I could be myself, let my guard down and lift my chin up. I didn't say anything. I just shook my head no and walked on.

I never stopped to talk to one of those girls. I walked by them day after day. I just looked away and walked by time and time again.

But this one came right to my door. I stood in the dark of my kitchen watching her waver on weakened legs in the glistening light. The broken streams of cold and hot touched my bare arms. I took another hit feeling the warmth grow between my lips.

Spring in Iowa had that same twist; snow on the ground with little warm shoots of bright happy green popping up here and there. Growing up I loved to watch the amber slugs come to life as things warmed. I thought of the amber slug after I lifted her protective roof rock, revealing her in her most vulnerable state. She moved in waves with streaks of gold that shimmered in the sun as she hurried to find someplace to hide.

The steam heater slammed with a chain of driving, penetrating calls that made Stella shift her gaze from the girl below, but just for a second. I took in my breath of smoke.

We had some good righteous neighbors. But we had just lost a whole family of those. The grandma, grandpa, mom, baby and the nine year old boy who refused to join the gang. They were all shot down in their front yard on Thanksgiving Day. The gang spread the word through the neighborhood, they were an example. There were still good folks and we always had the fire department. You could count on the fire department to come and spray certain flaming things or even particular people from a distance. It at least stopped stuff from escalating, or spreading sometimes. And they never made a big deal when the kids would open the hydrants to cool off in the summer. I loved the fire department. So many elements had been out of control for so long, who cares about some kids cooling off in the fucking fire hydrant? I know what it's like there now. I know

people that don't believe the stuff I saw. But they are the fools that walk on the backs of others. There will always be fools who think they know it all and think they are tough, just like me.

That night in my warm kitchen my eyes saw this naked girl struggling for the smallest bit of relief. My heart's eyes had to squint to filter out the blinding power of her pain. It seemed I felt what she didn't. Only a few Moments had passed since she first appeared. I knew that I had little to offer. I knew that. I didn't even pretend we could be friends in the privacy of my head. But I had to give what I could and let go of those other self-obsessed ideas for a second. I stood at the window with the outpouring of warmth surrounding me. I felt our loft could at least be a brief sanctuary from the cold.

Jennifer resumed the removal of the other stilt. She leaned it gently with its partner. She slipped her waiting Birkenstocks over her heavy socks and looked up at me.

As I looked down at Jennifer that moment, I knew we had just turned the same page. There came a surge of energy and I felt that true guttural nudge, "I'll be right down Jennifer."

I rubbed my joint out, left it on the brick window sill. I turned off the stove. Throwing the wool blanket from our couch over my shoulder, I took down the stairs. I went fast, taking three or four at a time, loosely bracing my leaps with my right

hand sliding on the slick steel pipe rail. Stella shot ahead of me as if there were no stairs at all. When we reached the loading dock we found Jennifer helping the girl up the stairs of the dock. She had one hand lending support under the girls forearm and the other lightly on the middle of her back. The girl held her own bare arms crunching her shoulders together. She had some bloody areas and swelling but the blinding light of the dock made it a hard to see. Besides, I tried to not look. I felt rushed to get her covered both to save her from the cold and to save her from any further degradation. She trembled. Her eyes were wide, staring at nothing. Then she caught sight of Stella. As if she woke from a dream, she stepped back suddenly. I thought she would bolt. Her eyes flashed at me, then Stella, then me. She saw the blanket I offered, "Don't worry, Stella won't hurt you."

She accepted the blanket once she saw it. We wrapped it around her and held it waiting for her to clasp it with her own shivering hands, "Do you have it?" Jennifer asked. Then the girl stopped again. This time she backed away from Jennifer supportive arm. She looked at me, looked at Jennifer and at Jennifer's chest and earrings and draping, colorful clothes. The girl pinched her brows together and stood still continuing to shift her eyes around at all the information she had. Jennifer's voice sounded distinctively female. Maybe those were the first

words she had heard Jennifer say. I'm not sure. It hadn't occurred to me that a woman with a beard could be more frightening than what she might face that night if left naked in the cold. Honestly I tended to forget about Jennifer's beard unless reminded, as I often had been by ignorant individuals. The girl's reaction reminded me again, but I have no idea what the real hesitation arose from. It could have been some unrelated thing. At one point she backed up to better focus on Jennifer's face. Jennifer patiently assured her, inviting her to continue and come up the stairs with us, "Just come sit for a bit, have some hot tea and we'll get you some clothes." She gestured to the stairs, offering her arm again, "It will just take a bit of the chill away."

I nodded my head in agreement smiling as kind as I could, "I can give you some of my clothes," I assured her, "We just want to help if we can."

She resisted a moment more but then murmured in agreement to the climb. The elevator only ran during the business hours when Charles came to run it. Sometimes he left it unlocked for us if we arranged it, but usually he locked it up. I took Jennifer's stilts and Jennifer continued to offer a stable arm to the girl. They moved slowly, Jennifer paced herself with kindness, moving with the clumsy distraction of the girl up every turn and step of the five flights.

Stella ran up the stairs, waited a minute and then ran back down to see what took us so long. Then she ran back up again. I, at first, waited for the slow ascending of the stairs but then decided to go ahead with Stella. We got to the kitchen and I turned the light back on. I closed the window and added more water to the kettle, lighting the flame once again. I grabbed another cup and readied it for our guest. The small remainder of my joint I put in my front jeans pocket.

When I heard them at the top of the stairs the water was ready. I opened the kitchen door for them and Jennifer led the girl into the warmth, offering her a chair. She accepted and sat quiet for a while. I poured the tea and she held the hot cup like a sacred balm. With her bundled in the blanket at the table I found myself focused on her face. Her skin looked like a cinnamon cream except for the pocks that come from living in such wretchedness. The scars were common place to the infectious crack addiction so familiar to the girls around there. But hers looked not quite as bad as some I'd seen. She looked somewhat new to this way of life. Her hair was brownish-black, shiny and soft with effortless ringlets that fell to her shoulders, still shiny with her body's natural oils. She couldn't have been more than fifteen.

When I realized I stared, I slowly moved my eyes so as to not be noticed.

I decided to make myself useful, "It looks like we're close to the same size I'll go get you some clothes." No one said a thing and I left the room with Stella close behind. I grabbed some panties, a pair of jeans, a T-shirt and a sweater, some socks and a pair of canvas sneakers. I had all my clothes plus most all of Mom's too. There were just a few things that my Aunt Marolyn, my Mom's twin sister wanted. I had most all of mom's clothes and jewelry. As I gathered the clothes for the girl I thought Mom would have been happy to help out. I felt glad to be able to help. I even brought her a nice woven jacket that I never wore.

As I left my studio I glanced at the three-legged baby chair prop I had been working with for my performance piece. I had been so entrenched in my work earlier, but at that point of the morning my designs for sound movement and shadows were jumbled with the events of my early morning tea. The old white, wooden baby chair, I had found it in the vacant lot near where they prep the dogs for the dog fights. I visited the spot after the last set of dogs disappeared. A couple guys used to come with a couple dogs. They would tie them in this vacant cavity in the wall of the ground floor of our building. I guess it used to house supplies or something but there wasn't a door any more. Anyone could go in. They would visit the dogs the tied there every now and again, beating the two dogs with pipes or sticks

or whatever lay around the lot. Then at the height of their beating the guys would kick or beat the dogs into each other. That started them fighting. I watched it all take place out of my bedroom window numerous times. The first few times I made calls. I called the cops. I called 911. No one came. I called the ASPCA. They told me I had to file a report and pay for the pick-up of every dog I reported, twenty dollars each. They brought new dogs every few days. I kept trying other numbers. After a while I stopped calling anyone. Sometimes I still watched. Sometimes I went down there after they took the dogs away. I saw the blood and the area that had been cleared of much of the trash dumped there. That's where the chair was. I saw the missing leg. So I guess it wasn't really missing. I thought it looked like they beat one of the dogs with it. I left the fourth leg there.

The movement element of the performance piece I had been working on developed around the idea of trying to sit in that broken baby chair. I choreographed the movement around that repeated theme. The sound track worked as a score to remind me how to move. I began singing the song from "Oklahoma" as I left, "Oh what a beautiful morning, Oh what a beautiful day..."

Dipping as I walked past the chair, I knocked it over with my pinkie finger. Its legless side hit the floor and there it



stayed balanced on two legs and the corner of its baby seat, its third leg raised helpless in the air.

Walking down the hall again with Stella I knew Jennifer and the girl were both talking. I couldn't hear words but I could feel the vibration. Jennifer's voice moved soft and low. It carried with ease through the loft. The girl had an edgy nervous voice. She spoke the most and fast too.

She didn't stop as we reentered the kitchen. Putting the clothes on the table near the girl, I sat down and listened.

She looked at Jennifer mostly, "Another guy was driving. I don't know him so well. I think he's from the Bronx. I thought everything was cool. I knew both of these guys, see. I just don't know the driver so well. I don't know his name. But Richey and I, well, we went to school together. He was getting his doggie style, that's how he always likes it. I'm used to it." She rolled her eyes, "He's been a regular john for a while. But then he just went fucking crazy and pushed me flat on the floor of the van with all his weight on me. He was really hurting me, still fucking me and then I thought he was hitting my back but he was stabbing me. I didn't really even know what the fuck was going on till I finally pushed his crazy ass away and rolled and saw the god damn screwdriver." She shook her head rubbed her arm and rolled her eyes, "I tried to block his stabbing with my arms and hands." Her fists clinched. Her body tense with the

retelling. "I was kicking him too. And that other guy was yelling at Richey, calling him a crazy mother. Then the door was open and Richey was kicking me. That guy took off fast screaming the whole time and Richey knocked me out the back of the van as they went. He didn't even fucking pay me, fucking nothing, not even a hit." She glare at me for a second and then at her tea.

Jennifer and I concentrated on sipping our tea.

I got up to refill the kettle and restart the stove. I starred at the colorful flame burning the gas. I liked staring at things. The kitchen grew still, just sipping and quiet. I wanted to get out another joint but thought I'd wait. I studied things a lot; I tried to think about my performance.

The girl still talked, "I grew up right over there on South Ninth. My mom is still there." Then there was a long pause. We could hear Chloe and Pinkie Jennifer's two cats, playing on the other side of the door. The girl fidgeted and kept looking around as she drank instead of sipped her tea. Stella let out a loud sigh. She lay curled in a perfect ball on her corner pillow. There, she could see each of us perfectly and without shifting from her luxurious pillow. Her eyes took turns resting on Jennifer then the girl both sitting with their tea cups and then me waiting for the water to boil at the stove. Around and around she looked at us each in the same order every time, her eyebrows raised as she shifted views. Even the kettle could only

manage a quiver in that silence to tell me of its boiling insides.

I brought the hot water to each cup, and added a bit more without asking if it was needed. I wished Jennifer would say something, her words were always soothing. The girl fidgeted and looked around.

I had been reading Nadja lately and I thought of that line, "Time is a tease because everything happens in its own time."

I imagined the kitchen must have seemed strange to someone not used to a warehouse setting. The table was painted plywood with some two by four legs. The fixtures were raw and unfinished. And the wood floor was painted the same electric blue as the table.

I began to feel wrong for bringing her there. I searched for relief to my own discomfort. I knew the police never came to our neighborhood. Still, I reasoned it was only right to offer to call. "Do you want me to call the cops?"

"I'm not talking to the fucking cops. What do you think I'm fucking stupid? When is the last time you seen a fucking cop on this street?" Her eyes were wide and she shifted in her chair. The blanket was lost from her for a second as a result of her shaky grip. I saw clearly her screwdriver stabbed back in the florescent kitchen light, though she quickly covered herself

again. She had quite a few rough and bloody holes and gashes. I closed my eyes, aching from the sight.

Jennifer got up and got a clean rag and some hot soapy water. "I just want to clean those wounds a little bit. Is that okay?" Jennifer tried to tend her as much as she allowed. Quite a few puncture wounds in her thin and battered back were swollen. There was scrapes on both her left arm and leg with bits of oil and dirt stuck in them. She repelled Jennifer's attempts to clean her, feebly waving her hands and telling us she needed to go now. She pulled the blanket tighter around herself as she stood up suddenly. Then she grabbed Jennifer's arm to catch herself from falling. Jennifer stopped trying to clean her and they both sat back down. We all sat and sipped our tea again for a few moments.

Then the girl stood again. She moved with direction this time and picked up the clothes I had earlier sat on the table.

"You can get dressed in here," Jennifer led the girl to the door to her space,  
As Jennifer opened the door Chloe and Pinkie who must have been waiting there listening, scurried away to go hide under a crate of circus gear sitting on a pallet. Jennifer turned on the light. The girl went in and Jennifer left the door ajar.

Returning again for a moment to my sound track and my impending deadline, I sat sipping my tea while Jennifer went to

wash some dishes. I thought of rhythmic loop. I wanted to use a deeper version of my voice though.

When the girl came out a few minutes later she was dressed from head to toe in my clothes. Everything fit her perfect. The sanctity of the warm cup was lost with time and she rushed the remainder down her open throat.

The girl's quicker movements caused Stella to take note. Her corner pillow remained a fine place for her to observe, but Stella needed to sit at attention. The girl folded and laid the blanket down on the couch right where I had got it. "Thanks for the clothes and thanks for the tea. I've got to go now."

Jennifer and I both tried to keep up with her in her unexpected haste. She found her way to the stairs and struggled with the unfamiliar heavy gears of the police lock on the stairway doors.

Jennifer touched the girl's arm, "Here I can do that," and unlocked the door for her, "Are you sure you should go back out there so soon? What about those guys?"

"They probably just had some bad dope. It'll be okay. I'll be alright really. I want to go now." She moved driven with the same intensity of the caged chicken back at Riverview Park in Des Moines, waiting for its reward pellets after it did its dance. She shuffled her feet slightly on the soft worn wooden floor with her new perfectly fitting black canvas women's sneakers. "Thanks. I should find my friends. They are probably

worrying about me." She crafted a half smile that vanished before she turned her head to start down the stairs.

"Be careful," the words tripped off my lips. Jennifer and I stood in the door for a few minutes with the cool air of the brick lined stairwell on our faces. Down the five flights of stairs we could hear her little feet quickly tapping.

When the ground floor door slammed, I shut and locked the door to the stair. Jennifer and I turned to walk back to the kitchen.

Stella stared at us both and then had a sudden surge of energy, prancing around us. I petted her head, "You are such a good girl Stella." Then she shot to Jennifer's door. She pounced and braced herself with her rear and tail waving in the air. Her paws slid into the gap between the floor and door forcing an end to her path. I flinched at the pain she didn't notice for her preoccupation. Laying her cheek on the floor she pressed her nose to the gap. She delighted in the exchange of breath with Chloe and Pinkie again on the other side.

I rescued the joint out of my pocket and went back to the window. I forced it open securing its weight once again. I struck a match on the brick wall. Down below on South Eleventh Street I saw the girl's pace had slowed considerably upon reaching the street. She walked west then shifted her direction a few times with each sudden turn of her head. She appeared to

be performing some modern dance inspired by the shifting currents of the city or the reverberation of her evening. "Did she look familiar to you Jennifer?" Stella walked over to where Jennifer sat at the table. "No not really. She said she grew up over on North Ninth. But she didn't really look grown to me." Stella put her chin on Jennifer's knee hoping for a bit of Jennifer love and was soon soaking up some ear massaging action, "Good girl Stella. You are such a good doggie."

The girl stopped towards the end of the block and I thought for a minute she would look up at our window. She didn't. I glanced at my watch and saw it would soon be two in the morning. I started rehearsing in my head the movements of my piece as I watched her wonder away. As I did, I sang a loud, "Oh what a beautiful morning." I imagined lacing in that rhythmic loop of another vocal of mine, sampled this time and dropped down so that it pulled from the depths of masculinity. Over and over the chant in the background would repeat, "Time is a tease, Time is a tease, Time is a tease". I stole it from Nadja.

Her steps meandered west towards the East River along South Eleventh Street, "oh what a beautiful day." She turned the corner and moved out of my view up Wythe. "I've got a beautiful feeling everything's going my way."

Jennifer stood at the stove, relighting the flame under the kettle, "You want some more tea?"

Figure 5. Ducting





## 35. Tales of White Plaster

I returned to Mom's home in Des Moines, Iowa. There I discovered Mom had kept all my childhood drawings. They were untouched in the frenzy. I am sure they would have been tossed in the landfill if I had not found them. I saw a truth in this early work that seemed connected to powers far beyond that of little Sissy's natural capabilities. I took them back to Brooklyn and dove into reawakening of the process I once freely used. I carefully replicated those drawings the same way I copied the old masters years earlier in the beginning of my art training. But my copies although perfect technically did not serve to bridge me to my childhood mastery. I worked on, to find the honesty expressed in them.

My fascination with the buried away grew after Mom passed, and I tasted a Divine disillusionment in a concentrated formula. It had been there all along but trapped by judgment and the survival tools I learned as a kid. Drugs, alcohol and prideful creation were the closest things I knew to bring me any freedom from the pain. There was a slowly growing distrust of all I had become familiar with, despite all the signs of urgency. During this time I put myself in dangerous places and discounted countless brushes with death. I nursed a fascination with a childhood memory. It was a memory from one clear moment that had

come back to me. I remembered reading a story at about twelve. It was in an Omni magazine that my folks had lying around. The family partook in a great deal of hallucinogens at that time certain readings turned into vibrant memories. As I recall, in an old convent after many hundreds of years of decay and collapse, an attempt at repair began. During the restoration process a number of corpses, those of newborn infants were revealed. They were buried deep in the white plaster of the walls. Upon reading this, I felt the heaviness of those walls. I felt the heat from the chemical reaction as the plaster set around the baby's soft little bodies. One of my jobs as a child was to prepare and pour the plaster for the students in Mom's bas relief workshop at the National Art Educators of Iowa conference. I knew the feeling of the setting plaster well. I knew how it would bite at the skin with a sharpening thirst.

## 36. Tale of Textures There

At the subway while waiting for the train I starred at the tracks. My eyes focused down by the tracks studying a curious slightly florescent yellow liquid standing between the ties and all the other colors and textures there. I saw a part of a newspaper, a rat creeping past looking for some forgotten morsel. I watched as he stopped near a part of a hot dog bun seasoned to perfection. He moved in closer, "He really scored," I thought. He took the giant crumb and scurried off, past a half smoked cigarette that laid down with lots of others smaller butts between the tracks. Then there were all the unrecognizable items too. And the smell even in the winter air was a living putrid stench.

A pasty faced and shaky man shared my interest in the view. He crept lowering himself down off the platform between the tracks to where the rat just left. His eyes fixed on that soiled half cigarette. He closed in and plucked it from his private garden. He brushed it off examining it carefully. He placed it in his front pants pocket. He had to use both hands to clamber back out. Visibly more energized, he brushed himself off and retrieved the treasure from his pocket. In his other pocket he found a partial book of moist matches. After several tries with match cupped in his leather nubs there was a dribble of smoke

from the lips. He appeared to have the damp old cigarette lit which provoked a slight smile to his lips. Then sucking, sucking, sucking until with disgust he flung his hope back into a puddle of florescent piss and oil.

## 37. Tale of Home

Charles was fortyish I guess. He had been running that elevator for a good twenty years. He stood thin and tall, a dark man with tight curls cut short against his head. Charles somehow managed to hold his ground, maintaining a better than civil working relationship with everyone: the artists, the workers, the Hasidic business owners and the Hasidic landlords. He maintained a position as a master mediator. Charles stayed home sick that day and a young Puerto Rican kid, Jesus, ran the elevator for him. Charles never got sick in the five years I lived there. But on that particular day he couldn't make it in. The tensions between the Puerto Ricans and the Hasidic in that neighborhood were intense. I saw swastikas spray painted on the buildings around there a lot. I don't know who did it. All I knew was the sweatshops were all owned by the Hasid's and the workers were mostly Puerto Rican women and girls. I saw girls who looked to be ten, at the very most, working there. So, no matter who really did it, everyone assumed that the Puerto Ricans did.

I got on the elevator ready to do my shopping with my wire screened rolling cart. There were five Hasidic men in the elevator before me, all facing the door. They had surely just left the sweatshop on the sixth floor right above. There were no other tenants they would have visited in that building. I

greeted Jesus and glanced to the men expecting some sort of polite acknowledgement, but they were talking amongst themselves. I stepped in the elevator and turned my back to them ready to get out at the street and my day's shopping. Jesus shut the doors and pushed forward the big wooden lever to take us down. The men broke the silence and started talking again, this time in Yiddish whispers.

I didn't think anything of it until one spoke up in clear English, "You want to meet me later you, lady? I know what you like. You like the fucking?" The other men quietly laughed and continued speaking softly in Yiddish. I turned and made a point to look each one dead in their eyes, not knowing who had said it. I spit on the ground at their feet. Jesus held in his laughter, and very well I might add. Every muscle in his face flexed to keep from an outburst. We got to the ground floor and I slowly moved my head towards Jesus, keeping my narrowed eyes on the now silent bunch of men. At the very last moment my eyes let them rest and I soften my gaze focusing on Jesus, "Thanks for the lift Jesus. Take it easy."

I rolled my cart out and Jesus helped me over the large gap where the elevator met the floor. Those Hasidic men never spoke that way towards me with Charles around. I did not realize what a unique God send Charles was.

As I stood on the corner of Division and Berry, less than a block from the South Eleventh Street I thought how convenient everything was. The L and K market was the best.

At first I was cautious of the L and K. I didn't want to get attached to them and then get rejected. I had attempted to shop at many of the Hasidic markets in my neighborhood with not the best experiences.

I remember the lovely yard goods and notions store with the most incredible buttons I had ever seen. The first time I walked in the door, I fell in love. There were yard goods stacked to the ceiling and a wall of tiny little file drawers perfectly organized and containing the most amazing buttons. There, I found the perfect buttons for that old coat of Mom's. I had set my heart on repairing it. Seeing the other women in line to pay for their goods, I happily joined them. Then the women behind me just cut in front of me. I spoke up but no one acknowledged me. Then another woman cut in front of me, running over my toe with her baby carriage as she did so. It happened again and I became the permanent end of the line. The cashier and clerks completely ignored me until I finally just gave up put the buttons back in their perfect little place and left. I never went back, nice buttons or not. I really wanted those buttons but I didn't want to be treated that way. I ended up giving my button money to Canal Street after that. They weren't quite as

pretty but I had my priorities. Like so many things on South Eleventh Street, whether they were good and bad, they were the honest to goodness truth. Sometimes I didn't want the truth.

But finding that little L and K market reminded me of one of those dreams where you find a shit load of money. Except this was not a dream.

L and K Supermarket felt different from the start. The "ideal" family, Mom, Dad plus a girl and a boy all worked there together. That made me a little wary. I didn't want to be cautious on purpose. I always tried to expect the best when I met new people. I tried not to think about the bad experiences or to make assumptions.

It did affect me, having so many of the Hasid's be mean to me. It did sink in that they were often hateful. So I tried to expect the best but to be prepared for the worst with the L and K market, the same as the others. But I had a good feeling about them from the start, despite my justified caution.

The L and K Supermarket had wonderful produce greens and root vegetables. They had a superb assortment of baked goods which they kept in cloth-lined baskets on an old wooden shelf. Many were exactly like the ones my favorite Grandma, Grandma Rose, and her sister my favorite Great Aunt, Aunt Mary used to make. One that the folks at L and K market referred to as a nut roll tasted especially close to the Slovenian Patista that



Grandma Rose and Aunt Mary made. The first time I saw it and breathed in its warmth I was struck with such emotion. I felt a little embarrassed as if I had just realized that my dress was inside out or something about me was showing. I had no idea why. And when I took the roll home and tasted it, I might as well have been back in Frontenac Kansas, nurtured by the fondness that laced those childhood visits with the sweet old sisters.

The L and K Supermarket had this poppy seed bread roll that was just as incredible as the nut roll. And even though Grandma Rose or Aunt Mary never served me with that particular baked item, I felt sure it existed somewhere in their repertoire. I reasoned I must have somehow missed out on it until then. Also it was at the L and K Supermarket that I got seriously hooked on dark bitter chocolate. They were the best source I'd ever found. After I tried their bulk German chocolate clusters with almonds and raisins I absolutely craved them without any hope for satisfaction. Those chocolates were added to my list of vices right up there with my fine Jamaican hashish, red haired sensimilla and my warmth-restoring tequila. I used to go there at least once a week, sometimes more. But more than any of their wonderful food and old fashioned household products I loved the feeling of generosity and security I felt when I went there. That day I stood in line and a woman cut me off. She was a Hasidic woman. I calmed myself. She pushed her cart right in

front of me like at the yard goods store. I thought okay I've gone through this before, but I didn't want to give up so easily this time. I liked this market a lot.

I said, "Excuse me, please. I'm in line here."

Turning, she looked right through me. Her face said she might have forgotten something on the shelf behind me then thought better of it and turned back around. The husband half of the L and K Supermarket quietly waved me to come to the front counter and began adding up my items, ignoring the woman. As he rang me up, the woman started in on the store owner, raising her voice in Yiddish. He abruptly cut her off with a Yiddish reply and she became quiet in midsentence. I have no idea what was said, but I felt much more comfortable. I remembered I needed bar soap and went to get it before he finished ringing me up. The wife half of the L and K Supermarket, Sarah was stocking the soap and said to me, "You just pay once a week from now on. We keep track, no problem. It will be easier for you I think, yes? You just pay on Thursdays, okay."

"What? Really? Are you sure?"

She repeated what she said and added, "Yes dear, it's no problem. We know you. You are like family. Here almost every day. We would feel better." She called to her husband in Yiddish for confirmation.

He yelled back in agreement, "Yes of course, but of course, you pay Thursday. No, no. Don't argue young Miss."

The woman who had tried to cut me off left her cart and walked out.

Sarah ignored her, "That is right," she said, "Don't argue."

"Okay then, thank you very much. Will you have more of the almond raisin dark chocolate clusters soon?"

She smiled, nodding with right hand raised, proclaiming, "Tomorrow morning, your chocolate clusters come, tomorrow morning."

I left with a smile on my face that couldn't easily be shook. I always felt *special* when I went in there, very special, and not in that evil white girl kind of way that I hated, in a good way. It was like visiting family I never knew I had.

I had decided they were at the top of my list for places I would bring Mom when she came to visit for my birthday. She hadn't ever come to visit me in New York and I had been so looking forward to seeing her ever since she told me about her plane ticket. I would be twenty-two that year and I felt so excited to see her and show her all around. I planned it out months in advance. Mom supported me and my dreams like no one else. She knew who I really was. Through February and March, I cleaned and organized trying to make sure it was comfortable for

her. I bought a nice futon bed she could sleep on and told all my friends that she was coming. I made sure I had a nice selection of teas stocked and that I would have some a nice delicate weed just like Mom liked. My birthday was May 16th, and she had bought her ticket for the 14th.

Further down, right under the elevated train stop where I caught the J were two of my favorite restaurants, the Chinese Puerto Rican restaurant and an old fashioned Greek Dinner. The Chinese Puerto Rican restaurant started as a Chinese restaurant. Well it never stopped being a Chinese restaurant. It's just that it had been there for twenty-five years and became, over that time, a mix of Chinese and Puerto Rican food. I could go there and get a big plate of black beans and rice and a bowl of Won ton soup that was delicious and like none I had ever tasted. They always made it fresh with a remarkable mix of seasonings that were a unique blend of the two cuisines. And it was cheap too. I could get a filling dinner plus tea for less than three dollars. This came in very handy when I was starving and just getting off the J train at the end of a hard day's work. I decided to treat myself and go get my breakfast.

On the way home I noticed a bakery I had walked by many times. A woman sat outside and greeted me kindly. Her dress was slightly different than most of the Hasids. Instead of a wig she wore a scarf. She smiled at me as if she knew something about

me. It was friendly and I felt it was well meaning but it gave me an urgency in my step I did not understand. I did not realize how fast I had sped my pace till I was back at South 11<sup>th</sup>.

Charles was there. He said he had to see the doctor that morning. "Bastard took all my money and did nothing for me, not a God Damned thing."

He helped me with my cart, "You take care Sissy."

"Thank you Charles."

## 38. Tale of Moral Degradation

I arrived before anyone else. Quiet filled the hollow of the basement space. It had been an established squatters spot for a homeless community before Carol offered the landlord a month's rent for a day's shooting. The owners of the building jumped on the opportunity. The cops were called in to clear out the resident's just days before shoot. Some had lived there for eight months. When I came down the few stairs off the street the air stood heavy with emptiness. The early light crept in the high windows. There were large areas on the ceiling charred and discolored with smoke. Support columns spotted the vast area with no walls to divide the emptiness. I thought this warehouse basement set would stay considerably cooler than the streets of the lower East side on that hot day. There were no closable doors or windows anymore, just breezeways which probably helped to soften the pungent smell. I started on the sweeping first, then began bagging up the food wrappers, dirty diapers and syringes. I found some supplies that must have been dropped earlier that morning: trash bags, scrappers, paint, rollers and other odds and ends. I prepped the eastern wall that Carol had requested I paint and then I began to paint. I worked easily with anticipation for the day. Carol promised Sissy an "important task", set aside just for her. I did the busy work

while I waited for Carol to show up with her entourage and instructions. I had always hoped to work doing props or backdrops on a movie set. I had often heard Carol discussing the film projects in the common kitchen. Ever since moving into this new loft space with Carol as one of my roommates, I hoped for an opportunity to work on one. Even with this low budget gig I found myself nervous as I jumped on the subway at six that morning.

All I knew about the film was that it would be black and white, had shades of Eraser Head and that there was an evil "witch like" character at the center of the plot. By noon the little film set had become crowded with crew. Everyone busied themselves about their chores. Having finished the painting, I helped out with some basic wall construction and arranged some furniture.

Then Carol arrived, "straight from China town," she said. She and her crew lugged in ten five gallon buckets of live snails. Then she called me over and broke it down, just what was needed. Carol explained her vision, a wall of writhing little bodies in the background. I saw the industrial hot glue gun.

Sissy felt her smile stiffen and pull tight across her face like a gag. Sissy looked up to Carol.

She wanted to say it out loud but couldn't, "What are you thinking? I thought you loved animals? I thought you knew me?" Then there was the other talk in her head, "Fuck it. Oh fuck. It didn't matter. It didn't fucking matter. I need to focus on the bigger picture. There's *the vision* of the director, right? I need to be grateful she asked me. I need to stop living in a dream world. That's what Dad always told me, didn't he?"

Sissy coughed up an enthusiastic voice-over to her inside talk, "Thanks", as she picked up her tools and her snails. She moved as if to set to her "important task". Carol's crew were all occupied with one thing or another. No one paid her much attention. She ached to leave. She looked at the snails. They were lively snails. They trailed over each other, gently searching their surroundings with their outstretched tentacles. The set surrounded Sissy with a swarm of lifeless movement and meaningless conversation, all directed by the director's vision. She felt isolated and completely defeated. She didn't start right away. She had to wait for the other parts of her to shut down. "Sissy I need you to work fast. They aren't going to live long. They need to be alive when the cameras roll," Carol trusted Sissy. She had seen how hard Sissy worked once she got started. So, she barely aimed her words as she passed by carrying a fleshy prop for the inside the refrigerator.



Something in Sissy told her, "There is the film to think of Sissy—the film came first and you are lucky to even be working on this set,"

Sissy glanced away from her tools and the task before her, a reprieve from the pain. Lights were being set up behind her. She thought, "Her wall wouldn't be important in the shot. It was only a minor detail in the background. It would likely not even be noticed. If anything there might be a hardly detectable wave of movement reflected in the tiny shadows." Then, "Fuck it. Fuck every fucking thing. I shouldn't feel this. No one else cares. Why do I have to care?"

Sissy stopped hearing the work going on around her. She stopped smelling the musty basement. She looked through her work and through the basement walls as her body parts performed the instructions she had been given. But, she never got rid of the constant taste of blood in her mouth. And she could not quiet the screaming. The crew ignored the screaming wall that grew and grew and filled the crawl spaces of Sissy's empty ears, filled her empty head as she progressed on her "special assignment".

Whenever she started to feel, she determined again and again to just work. And so she did She worked hard and worked and on, on her "special assignment". By the time she reached into her last five gallon bucket, nearly empty, she had created a system. She wrapped her hand around about seven little bodies

at a time. Some of the snails clung to her fingers with a pleading grip that almost broke down Sissy's attempted brute barrier from consciousness. But instead she used there clinging grip to ease her task. She let them crawl on her if they fled her grip. But made sure to hold them when applying the heat.

Carol glanced up at the wall a second in passing, "It's looking good."

Sissy's eyes watched while others retreated into their shells. She balanced on the ladder bracing, pressing her calves out against the legs of the ladder. She leaned the weight of her bruised and bloody chins up against the step of her ladder. Every muscle in her body had been in a balanced flex for hours. Her lips were strung tight against her teeth. And she heard that something say, "Good job Sissy, that's the way to use a ladder."

"I'm glad you've been working your way up the wall. The ones towards the top I'm sure will dry in a shorter amount of time with all the heat from the street and lights. Good thinking. You are doing such a great job. I think we'll zoom in for a couple close up sooner than later, in case they all die." Carol smiled and looked at Sissy with approving eyes.

The hot gun had been leaking some. Despite all Sissy's efforts to silence her own heart, she could not help but use a little more glue than necessary. There was a barely breathing hope that it might kill the snails a bit sooner and lessen the

misery. Sissy was almost done when she first noticed puffy blisters appearing on both her hands. She pulled the trigger squeezing out the industrial strength hot glue. Each time the impact of the heat penetrated the little creature, they writhed in her hand. Sissy's legs started to shake again. It was wearing on her. Everything was wearing on her. She flexed harder and pushed her chins deeper against the ladders step until the shaking stopped. She pressed each snail's burning back carefully against the clean surface of the wall, holding it just long enough for the hot glue to cool and form a firm bond. She worked each tortured body into place, each within easy reach of its surrounding neighbors. All alive. All squirming, all reaching into the air unable to free themselves. Each reacted with a quickening hopeful reflex towards away-ness. Each reacted with a quickening sway every time they brushed against their fellow captives, their fellow condemned. But there was no away, just an always into, always into the dying flesh of another, always into a traumatized life, always into a reminder of the slow coming end.

Sissy worked for a good six hours. The wall stood blanketed in a collective of tiny screaming bodies, feet high and sixteen feet long. When she was done she did not look at the thousands but she felt like the thousands were all needling into her own flesh. No amount of pretending otherwise could stop that. It

grew to be hot that day. The damp in the air wouldn't last. As Sissy packed her things on her bike and headed towards the J train stop, she hoped their pain would be done soon.

## 39. Tale of Pretty Suits and Ties

As the undertaker handed it to me, I felt unbalanced. I hadn't had much to eat and had lost track of my drug consumption, "What are you doing?" I took a step back instead of taking the ring he handed me, "She needs to keep it on. She should be buried with it."

I could hear worried Grandma Rose behind me, "Sissy, you are so thin, look Mary and I brought cookies and here is a cup of coffee."

My focus stayed on this man. I had just told another blur of a white-man, "You need to keep her God-damned casket closed. Leave her alone." I thought I knew I could insist on that, as her only daughter. Although I was beginning to have my doubts when I saw how she was dressed and made up. Not quite sure which sight hit me worse, her body that bore no resemblance to her because she had swelled like a balloon after the emergency room's lost battle to massage her heart back to life or was it that fucking powder blue grandma dress, no eyeliner, no lipstick and a hair do that looked like some church lady. I couldn't get that dress out of my mind. I knew Grandma Hood had pulled it from her own closet. It was a God-awful powder-blue double-knit-polyester dress with a white lace princess collar. I wanted to save her, to rip it off Mom's helpless body. It felt worse than

if the whole lot of them had been raping her dead body in the back room, taking from her everything she stood for. I had been calming myself with vivid day dreams of returning to Kansas as soon as Grand Hood died. And that did not seem like it could happen too soon.

My folks were divorced the year I moved out to go to art school. Mom died in a car crash four years later on her way to hang an art show; I was twenty-one. I came *home* from art school and NYC to witness people grabbing at pieces of hers and our identity and history. I left my successful beginnings as a New York artist to see all my mother had done for me torn apart. The house was full of people I did not know. Many priceless things went missing. The theft of the physical did not hurt as much as the mutilation of memories. When my mother died in 1986, she held a Doctorate in Arts Education from Drake University. She was a feminist who believed in her own empowerment. She made 40,000 a year, owned her own house and had traveled extensively compared to her family. She was an intellectual who wore black leather, bright colored skin tight jumpsuits, and always platform shoes. After the shattering of the feminist movement as a result of the Porn Wars in the early 1980's, (which I knew nothing about at the time) women looked up to her as a symbol of an intelligent female empowerment. She lived as an outspoken radical educator who did not deny her own sexuality. And I was

determined because of all this and more, I would dig Mom back up as soon as Grandma Hood was dead and change her dress. I was not like Mom. I don't think Mom would have wanted to do such a thing. But I was not Mom.

That is when this man approached me. And I thought, "Now what is this ass-hole doing with Mama's ring? This was too fucking much to process. Grandma Hood, lingered about like an airborne virus. She was the one to blame, clawing at the last opportunity to permanently set her daughter on the straight and narrow. She damn well meant to take whatever opening she could, strip Mom of self, bury her before she was in the ground and hold tight to a lie. It seemed so easy in that string of Kansas ghost towns to silence the outlier's and board up the peoples past.

I arrived in Chanute high enough to believe I could wake mom from her bad crash and stop anyone who got in my way. And yet I was too late to fix Mom's hair, too late to do her eyeliner. I walked in dragging such an emotional mess around my ankles and I was far too late to defend Mom's prenuptial agreement. Her God-damned lawyer husband of the previous five and a half months claimed *no prenuptial* existed, with sad eyes and a tear for any young thing willing to give him the time of day. Insisting Mom wanted cremation was out of the question. And worst of all I came too damn late to get her into that classy

black silk dress, the one that she would have been tickled pussy pink to be caught dead in that day. I was lucky I didn't get thrown out before the whole thing was over. I was lucky I didn't cause another death before I left Kansas. But I didn't. I somehow managed to walk through the whole freak show.

I kept switchin' up on these mortuary folks. I couldn't help it. As soon as I got them to close that casket I demanded they open it again when I saw the ring, "You gotta open it back up now. Put her ring back on her finger. Put it where it goes. That ring ain't for no one but her, damn it." I insisted, "Do it right-quick before anyone else gets here."

I had been crying nearly nonstop since I got the call, about the crash, from my brother Paul, three days prior. And with only moments of rest, I felt the burn of salt in the corners of my chapped eyes. All my muscles ached because I was in a constant state of almost shutting down. Tightening was my response that came from a determination to hold strong.

Then I realized how insane I must look to these Kansas folks. I dressed for me as Mom would have wanted me to. I was decked just the way she would have been proud to see me. I stepped off that plane fitted in a black/purple taffeta with a black velvet lapel, revealing measurements of 34-24-36. I wore black leather laced up mid-calf boots with four inch heels and



lack silk fish-nets on my legs. My mohawk spiked three inches high, stood stiff and a steely platinum blonde.

The man with Mama's ring moved slowly closer to me, smiled politely and softly educated me, "Now-a-days her' in Earlton we don't eve' bury folks wit' their jew'ry on. It's on account a da teft Doll". He walked away, left me holding the ring, so I put it on.

I straightened my stance brushing some Kansas dust from my suit. I took a step forward interrupting the personal space of the men in their pretty suits and ties, "Where can I take a leak?"

## 40. Tale of a Glorified Shopping Cart

The installation was for this artist, Krzysztof Wodiczko. I didn't really know the guy but I was glad to be finishing the job early. He was David's contact and one of those artists with a concept and some money. He hired my buddy David and me to do his entire project, pretty much from design drawings to fabrication to the final installation. I just finished the install and I wanted to leave there and get home with my cash, \$7000.00 for everything. Leaving the gallery I told myself, Krzysztof was pretentious. This installation was all about homelessness. Like he knew something about homelessness?—with his, paying other people to make his art, ass? Ha. There were large pictures of Black homeless men with firearms of some sort, I thought at the time, automatic weapons. But I knew nothing of weapons like that, at that time. I did know the guns were superimposed on the images of the men. I could not help but wonder if they got anything out of it. This guy hired us to design and build a glorified shopping cart. The structural elements were aluminum. It looked like a shiny fluorescent covered wagon. If I were homeless I wouldn't want some big fancy cart that everyone noticed from blocks away. I would want something that was functional but could be easily lost in the

cityscape. I would want something defensible, not a pretty bright magnet for thieves. I did not understand how anything good for gallery art, could be good for homeless folks. I told myself, he was a joke. He did pay well though. I didn't complain about that. I had gone in the bathroom and put the cash down my pants.

I got on my bike.

As I took off I replayed those last three lines in my mind: "He was a joke, he did pay well though and I didn't complain about that." Those words hit my heart, they were pointing at something real and it was not Krzysztof. I had caught myself. I realized what I was doing.

The truth was I felt bad, because I fucked up the cover a bit, quite a bit. It didn't fit just right. Okay, it fit horribly, by my standards. The cover I had made for this homeless vehicle, from a beautiful awning fabric of brilliant emergency orange, was fucked up. At the gallery I used the two part epoxy to put the female side of the snaps on the ribs of the aluminum cart structure. But I must not have measured correctly or I must not have sewed correctly. I screwed something up, because I could barely snap the cover on. It *attached*. The snaps *reached*, but the fabric was stretched way too tight. I rushed through the installation and hurried out of there thinking the snaps were going to start popping off any

minute. And it wasn't so much that I would look like a fool. I was over that, because I was feeling like such a royal fool already it didn't matter. The thing was, I knew I would be asked to redo it if I was there when it fell apart. And I couldn't. None of this was like me. And honestly at that point I did not care, which was nothing like me either. And I knew why, too. Since Jay had been hanging around I felt rushed, distracted and deeply anxious in a way I never had before, well, not for a long time.

I felt fearful when he was around and when I was trying to work it became increasingly challenging. I never before took short cuts on a job. But I had let my fear dictate my work schedule and rushed through things that I should have labored over. Jay questioned me about the job incessantly while I was trying to work. He asked me questions about my clients that made me nervous. One-time Jay was there when I needed to discuss some dimensions on the phone, with Krzysztof. I was just trying to make sure I had everything correct, as I always did. Jay stood there watching me the whole time. So, that was uncomfortable. Then, as soon as I was done, before the phone was even hung up, he started in, "I could hear the way he was talking to you. Believe me, he has something else on his mind. And it does *not* have to do with the dimensions of the homeless vehicle."

"I don't think so Jay. He has never acted interested in me, *in the least.*"

"There are not very many people you can trust out there Sissy. I can't believe how naive you are."

"I have been doing freelance work since I was a kid. I have never had any issues I could not handle."

"He doesn't care about your work; he just wants *one* thing from you."

"Please, Jay you are making me nervous. It's like you are just looking for something—  
some problem, where there is none."

"I don't want you to take anymore contracted work for artists, especially not men."

As I left the gallery, that conversation started re-haunting me. I realized that my fear of Jay was manipulating the way I thought about Krzysztof, the way I thought about David, the way I thought about my work. I rode my bike feeling disgusted with myself. What the hell was I doing with this guy? He was insisting I get some regular nine to five and take a pay cut. Generally speaking, I loved working for artists. I got to meet lots of interesting people, collectors and gallery owners. Krzysztof was a little weird it's true, but not bad, and mostly they were cool. I didn't understand what Jay's problem was. It's perfect work for me. I caught myself trying to figure it out and

then shook it off. I knew there was only one thing to figure out and that was how the hell to break away from Jay. It didn't matter that he charmed up my Dad, or that he had a good job as a computer tech for TRW. It didn't matter that he protected me from to having to deal with my unspoken truths. I was so close to coming out of the closet when I met him. I had even talked to Jennifer about it. But I still felt so scared of embracing myself in that way. It was an unknown to me. How would my life change? Would I end up hated by my family or bashed like so many others? So, there was no denying Jay brought benefits, but I knew the benefits weren't worth it to me anymore. Knowing is different than facing. He gave me a sick feeling in my gut and that should have been enough. But he was tricky. When doubts were coming up for me he introduced me to his family. And I had fallen in love with them. The other tough part was that, there was another feeling I had too. But it was even harder to think about *that* feeling. So I belittled Krzysztof instead of thinking at all. Because the thought of leaving Jay scared me worse than not leaving. I didn't know why, but it was real, and I had no game plan.

I took off, a nervous mess, picking up speed on my bike. I flew down Mott Street and pushed through rush hour on Canal, heading to the East River. I cut through traffic, horns punching voids into the air and people coughing up and out threats from

their open windows. It was a constantly moving maze of steel and flesh. I traveled through it with a strange careless grace. I jumped the curb to avoid a slower biker with what I thought was room to spare. But I came too close and frightened a woman into dropping her packages, as I passed her. I felt bad, but didn't stop. I *did* look back a second, and saw her gathering her belonging up. I *think* she was okay. She looked to be Mom's age, I mean Mom's age before she died. She reminded me of Mom. I was with her for a moment cold and bound with some kind of turning or shifting that I could not foresee. I told myself I needed to shake it off, if I was going to make this trip in one piece.

Back on Canal I rode on the south side, parked cars to my right and traffic on my left. I went fast. I felt angry. There was an eighteen wheeler, I barely noticed it, park there on the south of the street. The moving traffic pushed me closer to the row of parked cars and I feared my handle bars would catch. I honored the moving traffic with the more space than the parked vehicles, even though the truth was, with one error, either could have easily threw me wildly followed by any number of *pinch the life from me* scenarios. I tried to pick up speed, like that would help.

Then the eighteen wheeler opened his door in front of me. I had a few yards to react. I didn't like that idea so much. I didn't have enough room to break. If I was to break hard enough

to stop, I would have gone flying. There was no place to turn. I couldn't cut to my right for the truck, or to my left for the moving traffic. All I could think to do was duck below my handle bars and hope to clear the door. I aimed for the biggest gap, the part that mimicked the shape of the wheel well, and held tight to my handlebars, pressing my ribs against the boy bar with my head tucked below and to the right. I had no idea if I could clear the fast approaching steel door, but I held to my vision of *doing just that*, and closed my eyes.

I felt the rush of steel running close down my back. Then I knew I was clear. And I still had a head. Maybe we could debate that, but I was alive and I was still moving. I felt completely overjoyed. I turned and looked over my shoulder to see the driver of the truck with his neck stretched and his eyes bugged. I smiled and waved as if I had done something smart. I road home with such a feeling of power. I thought I was the shit. There was no pretense. There was no easy way. It was always a situation and that was where I felt at home. That was familiar. I loved to ride in the city. I could go anywhere on my bike. Before I even got to the bridge I had escaped some slim odds. Then, I remember my cash. That kind of cash gave me another rush. I was not sure if it was the cash or remembering how much dope I could buy with \$7000.00. I was crossing the Williamsburg Bridge. The bridge hadn't been maintained in years, not painted,



not repaired in the least. It was seriously shot to hell. I mean, you could see big cracks in the steel. And on the actual bike pathway, where I rode, there were long gaping holes. I used to look down and see the cars on the level below me. Even race them. Sometimes people would wave and I would wave back as my bike sped over the cars and the shifting planks, and the rusted steel structure. Of course, I had to be careful of my exact path, so my tire didn't jam into one of those long holes and send me flying.

The view looked incredible. And when I crossed and reached the bridge's peak, I coasted no-handed for an ecstatic moment, relaxing my arms at my side and arching my torso. This city fed me, it loved me back. I decided I could do this. I could figure out a way out.

I still did not know how. But, never mind that. I was anticipating the game plan I had followed without fail for some years, as I approached the base of the bridge. It felt like a rite of passage every time, a rite of passage that brought me home into Williamsburg. I would go as fast as I could. I would zigzag to pick up speed. And then, as I approached the base, with those burnt-out maintenance or storage rooms, doors missing and all, darkened behind and below those fifteen foot high stone walls—*that's* when I told myself, that if they *did* come for me, I would hit them so fucking hard, at least we would both get

fucked up and not just me. At least they would have a hard time forgetting this *hell bent* little girl from Kansas. At least I'd make a mother fucking dent before I went down. That's what I told myself every time. That's what got me through. Because I took that bridge three or four times a day some days. The train took too long for Sissy after mom died.

Who knows what those doors used to lead to back in the day, could have even been an office for bridge maintenance. All I knew was that was where the danger hid. The day they ploughed down Carol, they came from one of the openings. After the two by four to her face she tried to get it back. My poor friend Carol tried to have her face rebuilt. That's what she told me. I met her *after* the incident. I never saw pictures of her *before*. So I don't know if she was able to get her face back. She only told me that she tried. And though I loved her, I hated myself more, so I said she was weak. Telling myself that made me feel better. I never wanted to think that I had a death wish. I never wanted to think about anything like that happening to me.

I unlocked the door to my place, bumped it open with the toes of my high-tops, and swung my bike up, boy bar to my right shoulder. Then, I kicked the door wide open with my foot, quickly jumping in, bike and all, before it swung back and slammed closed. I rested my bike at the base of the stairs and

skipped on up the flight of steps two at a time. It was so easy after being used to five.

Stella sat down, alert, wagging her tail and following me with her eyes into the kitchen. I put my bag down on the counter. I got some water to drink and to splash on my face. Stella stared at me longingly with her head tilted to the side. I thought of Jay for a moment as I took my money and hid it in a bag of peas, in the freezer.

I kept telling myself that the fact that he scared me wasn't enough, and then even at times I couldn't bring myself to admit that he scared me. It didn't make sense to me. The situation had to be bigger and meaner than my tough-girl image that I so desperately clung to. How could I admit with finality that I was scared? What justification did I have? We had been hanging out for a couple weeks and I was already searching for a way out. Was I weak? He had never threatened or hit me. Why did I have this feeling I needed to run? It didn't make any sense. I thought of his smiling face and his suits. He always wore such nice suits, had to be at least \$1500.00 each. And folks said he looked like Arsenio Hall. I *liked* Arsenio Hall. There was a familiarity about him that should have been another warning to me. But familiarity can be alluring even to someone familiar with terrorization. And again, the other thing that *really* sucked me in was meeting *his* family. It was like he knew my

weakest weaknesses. Jay had two beautiful daughters, Porsche five and Tiffany seven. They were so sweet. He had three sisters, Lanette, Wanda, and Candy, his eldest. Lanette was a church going virgin. Wanda was a lesbian who lived with her girlfriend. Candy was a lesbian too, a big tall nurse with Marilyn posters all over her little Brooklyn apartment. They were all so nice to me. And his mom treated me like a real daughter. She had honesty and love and no bullshit.

I got the leash and Stella went wild. Her paws scratched and raced on the slick hardwood floor going absolutely nowhere. Then after a few crazed moments of frantic clawing at the slick floor, her pads started to catch, ever so slightly, and then better, and then she headed for the door. She sat there waiting, as I had taught her. I jumped down the stairs taking three with each step this time. Then at the base of the stairs I knelt and put her leash on her as she waited and waged. Her excitement was so intense that she did stop to sniff my bike wheels next to the door.

As we walked outside the sidewalk cleared. I was used to that by then. Stella, although an absolute angel, struck fear into the hearts of most of my neighbors. Women miraculously maneuvered their limousine strollers down foot deep curbs *in seconds* to avoid us. Suited men scurried across the street with their side locks blowing from the mere speed of their gate.

Stella had the look of a coyote or some wild dog. I had never seen a coyote. But I had been told *that* is what she looked like. We made our rounds. Stella took a big crap and I used a discarded paper cup and plastic spoon that I found in the gutter, to gather it up. I used to bring a little bag to pick up the shit in, until I discovered that there was always plenty of trash on the ground I could use. So I never had to bring anything. And the neighbors were all happy to let me dump the shit in their trash cans afterwards. Better than stepping in it I guess they figured. They just smiled getting out of our way as fast as they could.

When we got back home the phone was ringing'. I released Stella from the leash and raced up the stairs. It was Eva. She said she had called to make sure I was doing okay.

"Yeah, I'm good, Thanks for asking Eva. How are you?"

I could tell she didn't believe me. She was quiet. Then she asked, "Is he there?"

"Jay? No."

"Who else Girl?" Then her voice slowly swelled and her words bled out, like the slow pulsing of an open wound. "Sissy, it's okay. Don't lie to me. Don't you think I know him better? He *is* my son."

"I know Ma'am."

"Does *your* mama know *you* young lady?"

"Yes, she did."

"I'm sorry. But, no time for pouting now. Let me tell you a story. One of the more recent ones and a bit more pleasant than some others I have. I don't have it in me today to tell the *real* dreadful ones. Remember that."

Eva told me about a day just weeks before. Jay had showed up at her place unexpectedly. She hadn't seen or heard from him for a good month. He arrived all sugary sweet and left a long overdue kiss on her cheek. He asked about her day, her work and the family. "Man, have you lost some weight mommy? You sure are looking fine." He brought her the perfect *promise* all wrapped up in compliments. "I'm going to take you and the girls to the movies this next weekend. He meant his daughters. How would that be? John is going to drive us all. I'm going to call him right after I take off from here." Eva said she just listened. She said she knew he was up to no good again. Then, came the request, just a few hundred dollars till next week. All smiles and twinkle stars, just a few hundred dollars for her baby boy. At first her rejection was no problem. He said he understood. He changed the subject, back to the girls. The girls always lightened things up. Everyone knew Grandma loved her girls. Then back to that cash. The circular one sided conversation made it clear. It was really all about the cash. And each time it came back to the cash, it got a little harder for him to hear her say

no. Before he left that night he tore up her little apartment, took everything of value that he could find and carry, including a roll of bills she had hidden *knowing* he would come again. He left his mom in need of medical attention. She was beaten down and unable to make it to work for the next few days. Eva was not crying when she told me these things. She spoke like a woman with no investment, just a responsibility to the truth. She was calm and she was clear, if maybe a little distant.

Before the goodbyes she made a suggestion, "Get away, now. I know I am his Mommy and I do love him. But no one deserves to live like I know you are living or you will be shortly. You ought to have better young lady. I'm not one to give advice to someone I don't know and who never asked me for it, but he is too dangerous and I'm telling you anyway, get out now. I did the best I could but there is no more I can do now. Get away from him as soon as possible. Do you hear me, young lady? I am serious. Please believe me."

"Yes, I hear you, Eva. I believe you."

"Well, you are awful quiet."

"I just don't know what to say."

"Good, that's a good sign. I'm going to go now. I have work to do. Don't act stupid. Don't tell yourself it's just you. Remember what I said."

"Okay Eva, thank you."

"Bye, bye Sissy."

"Bye, Eva."

I hung up the phone I knelt down to touch Stella, my hand on her head my thumb rubbing the soft fur of her brow. She nuzzled her chin against my foot and looked up at me. I glanced at my watch. I knew if today was like others lately, Jay might stop by within the hour. "I love you Stella."

I got up and lit a fresh joint. I needed to focus. I needed to move. I started the hot water for dishes. I hated that place right then. I squirted some dish soap in the flowing water and piled all the dishes and silver in the sink. I hated how pretty and clean it all looked. I hated that I had to rent a studio down the street to do my art in. Maybe Williamsburg had a rougher element, in a way. Maybe it wasn't so pretty, but it had everything I needed right there. I could practically smell my bread when I woke up, it was so close. My studio and living quarters were together in the same loft space. Maybe the bathroom didn't have clean white tile but it worked just fine. I grew angry at Gary right then. We actually had a pretty good arrangement. I don't know why he had to lie to me and fuck everything up. He knew how I felt about Stella. We agreed to never take her behind our bikes, especially not in the summer time, especially on the leash. He knew that. We discussed it. Then he went and lied to me about the accident he caused doing

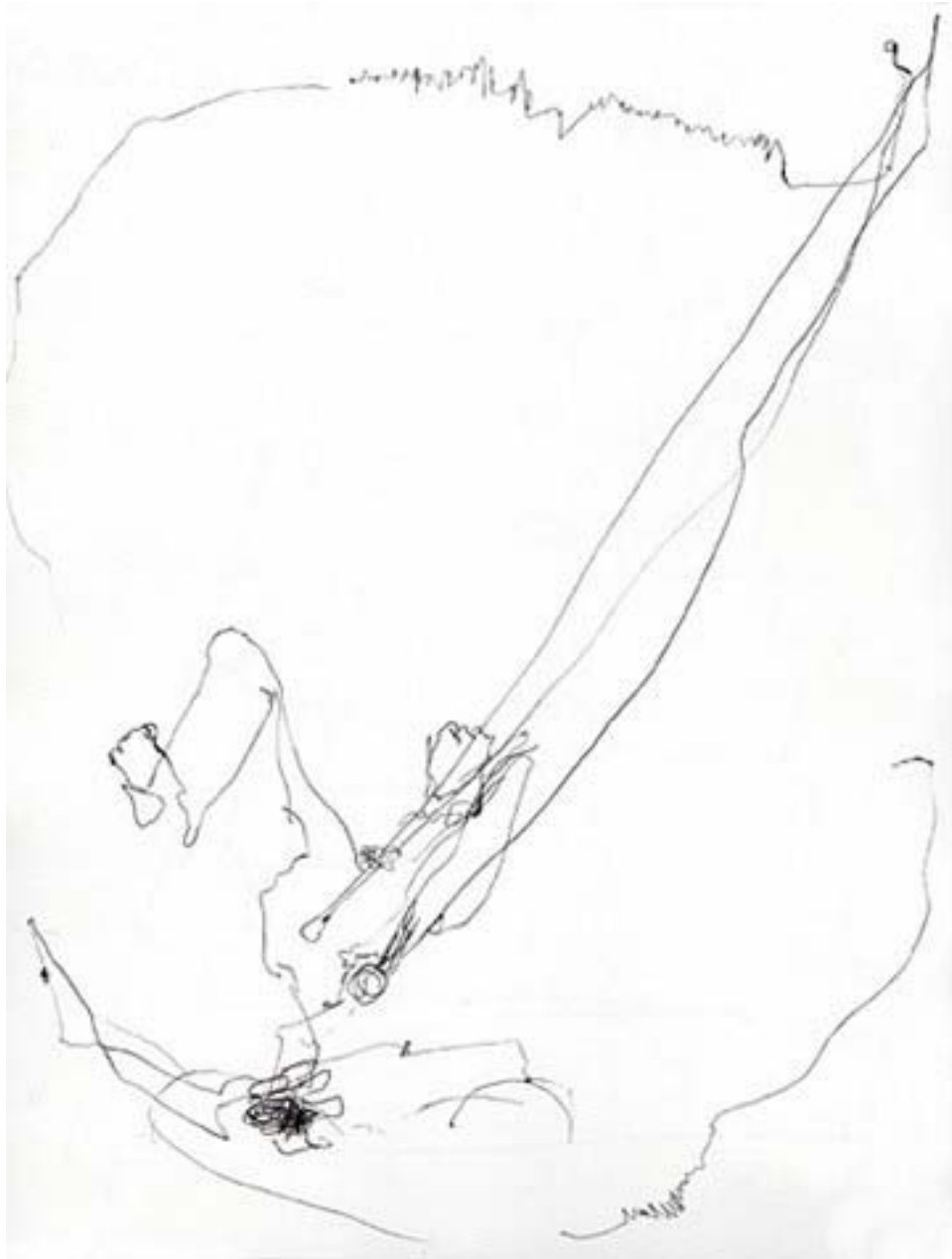


that very thing. It's amazing neither of them were hurt worse. I'm glad for that. But how could I trust him again? He tried to weasel himself out so many ways before he finally fessed up. It makes me sick to think of it. I know we did all the work together fixing up the loft, so I can understand him wanting to stay. We sanded the floors and painted everything. We built another level. The space was perfect, no doubt. I can understand him not wanting to move. I didn't want to move either. But we also had a commitment and he broke it in so many ways. After I broke up with him over Stella and his lies he confessed to having two affairs. One he had with a good friend of mine, or I thought she had been anyway. He said I should stay but I didn't even feel I could trust him as a house mate. I didn't know what else to do but to leave. Since then I moved three times. I couldn't find anything long term, reasonable and with the space I needed.

I remembered the Statue of Liberty Bicentennial Celebration. Gary and I decided to have a huge party on our roof top. We wired our speakers up there and danced to Avalon, Tom Waits, Laurie Anderson and the Tom Tom Club. That night I watched the most breathtaking demonstration of fire arts I had ever seen. The glistening sparks and brilliant explosions stretched the living skyline as the city accepted a blast of inspiration.

I hadn't realized I cut my hand till I saw the blood swirling like red smoke in the dishwater.

Figure 6. Conceptions



## 41. Nodding Sherri is with Child

Is just tired  
Is fine--for the cops all know her name,  
"Are you good Ms. Murphy?  
They botherin' you tonight?"

Nodding Sherri is got money  
And does not need your sugar.  
And you with stabbing demolition cane,  
it's steel jabbed the cabinet memories blind,  
rattled potluck knives,  
shattered perfect stumbling you.

So I can't hear that you didn't see.

Nodding Sherri wants you to know:  
She graduated from  
the army of save me  
just to steal the together key  
And stole chains  
And levels and coffee.

And now hers is the warm grey birdie flying  
behind your sweet and low full head.

Do you want the list of letters and symbols?  
and little rubbing dogs? Black  
All packed special for the end of day's searches?

Or the simple clarity to ask God first?  
Especially when you are sure  
you got this?

## 42. Tale from After an Errand

One morning I returned back to my place, from the corner market, to find I was still alone. What a relief to have this unexpected and extended time to myself. I never knew when he would reappear. Five months had passed since our first "date". I thought at last I had a mindless moment to myself before his nearness shut me down and fucked me up. I had spent the last four months secretly working on a way to escape. That sharp twist that had been nearly constant in my belly, gave me a moment's relief. The creeping cold calm that automatically overtook me gave me a warm little break. No doubt the reflexive façade of calm saved me countless times from the next blow that would no doubt come, had I cried out or whimpered with pain or fear. And it was rejuvenating to meet a moment without its need. My body still ached from a week before. I could feel those kicks to the gut and ribs. I could still feel my scratched at and out insides. These pains made it hard to move. The situation had become out of control so quickly and I stayed flooded with fear, just on survival. I felt nothing mostly. If the feelings did dare to come I pushed past them. To honestly feel, grew more dangerous every day.

Yet, since the trip to Woodhull, one phrase echoed and stuck with me like fish hooks in my heart. I tried not to hear

or remember and certainly not feel the weight of the attending's words. It had been two days since they let me out and the reverberations, despite my efforts, were inexhaustible, "Here's what's left of your baby," the white robed attending slapped the bloody dripping bowl down on the stainless counter and left the room.

Bleeding had started two days after we took the girls to the top of the Empire State Building to see the views and be shot with King Kong in the background. He had disappeared after we took the girls back home. I tried to focus on my work but the tampons and pads were not enough. I kept rushing to the bathroom and filling the bowl with a vibrant swirl of validity. Then, I couldn't rush anymore. I had not seen Jay since that night with the girls and then I was coming to with him there yet his voice was like someone else's voice again, someone kind.

"Sissy? I called the ambulance. Can you hear me?" Jay rocked her gently with his big hands. Sissy could hear. She thought she answered, but there were no words accept in the makings of her mind. She heard the siren, the doors, the men. Thoughts of straightening herself fell flat. She tried to pull herself out of the pool, but they were there already. She felt the heavy limpness of limbs, gathered, arranged, picked up and carried out on a gurney. In the ambulance there was an IV, and a gradual grasp of questions, "How long have you been bleeding?"

"I don... I think an hour or so." Sissy did not realize how long she had been out and she was not quite conscious at any rate.

Jay interrupted with his pretty voice, "I noticed the trash was full of bloody rags. It looked like maybe she ran out of tampons and pads and was using the rags that she keeps for painting. It had to be more than an hour. I called as soon as I got home." He held onto her hand and caressed it imitating perfectly the ideal loving partner.

The paramedic turned back to Sissy, "Sissy, can you hear me?"

She nodded barely. She was coming around. The paramedic did notice because he watched very closely. He also saw the traces of bruises still on her neck and arm. Jay saw too. He wished the light was not so bright.

"She is pregnant. It's her first time." His face looked believably sad. His voice splintered with perfect sincerity.

"Sissy, can you hear me? I need to ask you some questions. Can you answer some questions?"

Sissy opened her eyes and made a little nod again, a little stronger this time.

"I need you to tell me if anything unusual happened."

At that moment she woke with more clarity. She was reminded of fear and that far outweighed anything else. Sissy knew not to

even look in Jay's direction with a question like that in the air. She shook her head "no" as believably as she could.

"I have to ask a personal question. Did you have any accidents?"

She found the energy to clearly shake her head "no" that time.

"Did you experience any pain during sex before you started hemorrhaging?"

"Nope."

"Was there rough sex? Was sex rougher than usual before the bleeding started?"

She knew to go the extra mile. And she could easily play it off. And still kind of be *honest*, too. Because Jay did not *like* violent appearing sex. He did not *like* the idea of rape. He always beat the fuck out of her on a separate occasion, beat her into complete submission far before the sex. He would often leave after he beat her. He liked to feel and believe that she longed for him. He made it clear she needed to *long* for him. So, I guess he reasoned in some obscure recess of consideration—that his routine, enabled him to separate the realities, like he did with his two voices. The one time she did resist, he let it be known that it was not going to benefit her in the long run, in the short run or in any run. It just took a look, a squeeze of the arm and a charged whisper, "Don't ever pull away from me



again". She knew, if she was ever to get away it would have to be far far away. And she couldn't get caught.

The paramedic waited for an answer.

She looked at Jay and managed a weak but credible smile, then she looked at the paramedic, "Jay is always gentle with me in bed."

Both the men smiled and Jay laughed a little. It was just what they all hoped to hear.

"Well that is quite a complement Jay."

At the hospital she was left on her gurney, among other patients. The gurneys were three deep almost all the way down the long hallway with a few scattered wheel chairs and the occasional standing patient. Jay sat in the waiting area. She could no longer see him and was torn. In this arena he had a supportive pretense that was almost pleasant even if it was a charade. The warm pool of blood grew under her. The man closest to her had wheel chair and a stab wound that bleed heavily. He yelled out whenever hospital staff passed by, even the janitor. The others that surrounded her were in different states of awareness. The energizing effects of her IV were plateauing. Everyone was worried, sad and tired yet anger was the prevalent defense to all of that.

Sissy was barely awake when someone started wheeling her away. They did not say anything that she heard. She wondered if

she had missed something. But the movement woke her up and she tried to pay close attention though she was weak. The evening light fell dramatically across the patients' faces. She made an effort and turn her head to either side as she passed the all the voices. For some reason the animated moans and groans of the patients reminded her, in her strange state of consciousness, of Young Frankenstein. She smiled ever so slightly. She remember going to the movie with her mom. She remembered her mom's laughter. Mom's laugh was often so loud in the theater Sissy felt waves of embarrassment. At the end Inga was in bed with the muttering, bug-eyed, part monster-Frankenstein. Inga asked, "The monster got part of your wonderful brain, but what did you ever get from him?" Then Frankenstein eyes got big. He moans and groans turning to her. There was a cut away and then we all heard Inga sing, "Oh sweet mystery of life, at last I've found you..."

Sissy remembered her mom laughing louder and deeper than ever before. Sissy had looked around to see if anyone was looking, "Mom, stop."

Sissy had dosed off. She found she was in a dark room. She woke to soft words and a whimpering behind the curtain next to her. She noticed various curtains with shadows moving behind them. The only light was from the open door. A man walked in and put stainless bowl on the stainless counter. He did not say

anything. He propped Sissy's legs up and pushed his hand into her bloody insides. She was too weak in all ways to do anything. She could feel his cupped hand twisting scooping and ripping loose a warm form from inside her. He grabbed the bowl and dumped the fleshy mass with one shaking motion. Then he slapped the bowl down on the counter, "That's what's left of your baby." His shadow moved out the door.

She woke in a room bright with sunshine and views of nothing but sky blue sky. A woman spoke to her, "We need to perform the D and C procedure."

"I don't know, what about a DNC. What is that?"

Well, basically we need to scrape out the remaining debris left from the pregnancy and miscarriage."

Sissy did not respond.

"You have to decide on and approve local or general anesthesia. Do you want to be completely anesthetized or do you want to remain conscious." The woman had a clip board and paperwork and a pen.

"Not general, no. Just local. I don't want to go under."

"No problem. Sign here." She left with a smile.

Minutes later three men stepped into the room. One put the mask on Sissy. Then the other two held her down as the first slid the IV into her arm for general. She struggled. She managed to steam up the mask with her screams. Then, she was under.

~~~~~

The room filled bright with sunlight and not only could I hear the birds outside I could see them and the trees too. I love the birds in the morning. I knew I would have to leave most all of my artwork. It was big. It was unnecessary. I kept the sorting all in my head. I knew I couldn't really touch or sort a thing until the time. Everything had to remain in my ordered disarray. It had to stay as it would be on any other day. I thought, it would be simple really. I would just have to let go of some things. I could probably hide some away, for safe keeping, with a friend if I planned right—and if luck were with me.

I made the last of my Café Bustello in my old aluminum tiered coffee maker. Jay had cut my drugs completely off, not so much because I kept trying to kill myself. For him, it seemed finding me in a convulsive state of unconsciousness was either a familiar scenario or maybe an annoyance. Who knows, but he made his only concern clear, "Don't fucking fuck with me bitch. What kinda punk do you think I am? What do I look like havin some little white bitch sweeping up all the blow before I get a fucking hit? What the fuck kinda shit is that."

So, much to my dismay, the illusions of twenty plus years *high* faded slowly over the days that followed.

As far as food I had next to nothing. I cleaned the

kitchen, which wasn't much to do. Behind the echo from the hospital, there were ceaseless workings in my brain. There I found a process, a visual sorting out of all my possessions, again according to importance. Stacks were piled and organized up there. I could see just how much room each item took and how much it weighed and if it had any real worth, given my situation. What did I absolutely need to survive traveling for a few days? What did I absolutely need if I only had twenty minutes to pack? What would I be okay to let go of in order to get away fast when my opportunity came? Thinking of all this, I busied myself with tasks that might appear normal.

I went to my sewing basket, a spool of blue, a needle and my favorite dress. I wet the bright blue thread with my tongue and twirled it just slightly with my lips. It stiffened in the air. Easily, I slid it through the eye of the needle on the first try. I sat down for the hem repair at the kitchen table. That dress I remember was blue cotton with the big electric cobalt flowers, fitted in the bodice with a flowing skirt. Mom always liked to see me in blue. She would have loved that dress.

I took another drink and left the cup on the table before I started into my bedroom. I tied the last knot, too lazy to go get the scissors. I scooted my feet slowly almost stopping at the half hall, my concentration geared towards severing the threads between my teeth. Mom told me not to use my teeth to

gnaw the threads. She said it would damage them. I remembered seeing her use her teeth all the time. She thought I wasn't looking.

The dress still hung from my mouth, as I glanced up entering my darkened bedroom. I knew I opened those blinds when I woke up? I felt all my insides pulling my heart down with a deep ache. I had no idea he was there till that moment.

Jay was supposed to be at work all day, five more hours. It was a new job too. He fucked off the last one. He stood in the dark room with his eyes fixed on my journal pages. I broke through the thread and let the hem slip from my mouth. My throat tightened as he stretched the delicate binding beyond its limits. I heard the stitches painfully submitting to his hands. His reading belittled my words with spitting eyes. My mumblings swirled around in my stomach unable to make it to my lips, what good could they do now: "I should have protected them. I should have hid them. I should have known. I'm a stupid fuck. How can I be so stupid?" I hated myself so much right then. I lied to myself. I told myself everything was going to be fine. After all he's got a good job and he wants to marry me. I could be all that's expected of me with him. I could keep pretending and no one would need to know. I was trembling and scared to look around my room. Not moving my head, my eyes caressed my bruised and tattered room. I could see all my beautiful Journals of past

twenty years strewn on the bed and floor. There were only a few of the older ones left on the shelf.

I turned and neatly hung my dress in the closet, stroking it smooth and encouraging it to lay straight. I knew that I hadn't written anything since he had made himself a fixture in her home. I had been very careful, especially since that last talk with Eva. If she had told me sooner, would I have listened? It was all so fast.

Glancing at my book shelf, I realized I might not make it through the day. But if I could make it through this, it might be okay. I sooth myself putting my thumb on my brow, "Okay, Sissy, you play it cool now. That's what you got to do. Know it's going to be okay." I rolled the freshly severed and moistened threads from my hem between my fingers into a ball, I kept rolling tighter and tighter till it was tiny and hard like a lead shot. I rolled and pinched it till my fingers hurt.

Prying the Journal open further he shoved it at me, holding it open to a page I knew well. All I had to do is to look at it. There was an ink drawing to the right, two figures of bliss and the words wrapped around to the left. I returned to this page a million times. Of course it showed itself to him. The memory in the binding thought it was doing me a favor. I imagined the pages parting willingly as he pulled it from the shelf and then fluttering in realization. Those were not the loving hands, the

adoring eyes, here to read that sweet truth once more. I betrayed my journals, my last true friend. I had betrayed my truth. I had welcomed in the most lecherous of evils, a magnified embodiment of my own self-loathing.

May 10th 1987

I had the most incredibly vivid dream last night. It is still so clear. I can smell it. I was in the woods and as I stepped and turned looking around it felt alive and charged. I knew suddenly that I was dreaming and that I could direct this dream. So I did. I emerged again in the same, but a more beautiful and vibrant wooded area. I shaped the air fresh and clean like juniper and the first coolness of fall. I made the amber light streak through the oaken branches drawing the blue shadows of early evening. I walked through my vision. The flickering light of my design glowed and moved like waves over my body, as I composed every step. What absolute joy it was. The excitement in this power overwhelmed me— to be dreaming up my world! I wanted more. Then, I dreamt myself a friend of the closest and dearest variety. She appeared all knowing, all truth, all kindness, all love and of course, pleasure. I reached

to her and pulled her close to me. Her skin and mine suddenly bare as we touched. We turned deeper into each other. She warmth and tenderness. The earth made a bed of soft moss. My lips leaned into the warmth of her breast. I felt her breath on the nap of my neck.

He shoved the journal in my chest knocking me off balance, "What'd fuck is this shit," He was mumbling something else as he knocked the shelf, and the rest of journals to the ground.

"What do you keep this shit for?"

My mouth was longing for an answer that could save my work if not me and it opened slightly hoping some miracle would fall.

"Shut the fuck up. You sick bitch. You and your trash. Before you try to say some stupid shit just shut the fuck up first. You think I'm stupid again? Always tryin'some smart shit. Well guess what? You think I'm gonna let you do me like that bitch? You be a *murky ass stupid* bitch sometimes."

Sissy stood.

"What the fuck is wrong with you. Get your ass busy. Since when do I call myself takin out the trash? Hmm? You need to get your stupid fucking bitch ass throwing it *all* the fuck out. I want every fucking one of those mother fucking book's in the trash now."

She just stood.

"You are *one* stupid bitch. And you know what you better mother fuckin rip every page up first, before it goes in the trash. Don't let me catch you saving any of that trash, you sick fuck. You are a sick fuck, aren't you? No one else needs to read that murky sick shit."

He shoved her to floor with the pile of journals.

"What the fuck is wrong with you? You are just one stupid fucking sick fuck. That's it. And close your fucking mouth before I knock that shit off your fucking face. Get to it, you *stupid fucking slow-ass bitch*. Throw out the fucking trash. Now!"

She tried to move. She didn't know what happened. She couldn't close her mouth. She couldn't do anything. She knelt there looking down at her journals.

"You are one stupid fucking bitch aren't you?" His rose up his sledge of bone and muscle and then it was crashing into her. She still couldn't move for a minute. She lay there strewn with her shattered shelf. Then she remember. She had to let go.

That day and into the night Sissy ripped up and threw out twenty plus years of visual and written journals, twenty plus years of daily entries, twenty plus years of poem drafts, twenty plus years of autobiographical entries, twenty plus years of children's stories, twenty plus years of drawings, twenty plus years of watercolors. She slowly started with the main offender,

the one that had so angered him, the one that described her dream of true love. He made sure to watch her for a good long while. She practiced letting go despite her pain and despite his pleasure and to only maybe buy some time. She started around noon, working on her knees filling bag upon bag till well after midnight. Once in a while he walked in the other room to get something to drink or to make a phone call. Once in a while he took one of the bags down to the dumpster. A couple times when he wasn't looking she stuck a small bit of page under the mattress. Though she was terrified he would see, she had to hide some away. She hoped she could retrieve them later when he was away.

She heard him whispering on the phone at times between the sharp sounds of ripping. He had lost his job that morning. And Sissy's chances for escape narrowed.

43. Ms. Mama Sis June 2015

And God has blessed me with such beautiful distractions like the neighbors place going up in flames two days after the burglary. What better way to break up the monotony of trying to remember what things I used to have? What a perfect reminder of the real blessings, spiritual gifts. The fire department got it out by midnight with no damage to me or my place. I stood in my room doing air punches with my cast iron skillet in hand till my muscles ached. It took the edge off. I took a break from my punches with a prayer.

Then a roar that I didn't recognize, the noise was fantastic. I realized the fire department had not finished. They took extra measures to assure every ember in the area lay cold and wet. Water flooded off every side of my roof as the pressure hose hit knocking shingles across the yard. It sounded so close, like it ran through the walls. It was in fact running through the walls. The sudden cold on my feet made me look down and be affirmed. The hose had knocked off the shingles and blasted into the attic and I stood in an inch of water with a few minutes.

44. Rock a lie Maybe

Sin not for me Pops.

I be the one.
I'll do the time.
Rule *that* nation true.

My truth pays tribute to lies
Respects the fullness working
And just like you.

It's all about the love
tossed, Don't bring up Brooklyn.
Not the song awakening in flame
All the nights made new with skipping needles,
Skip, fall, flailing about at home and abroad.

Men to lend blows
The cradle will mock
Send fallow stakes
A tattle shrill call

It's "the residents"
and hours past,
served up Sherwood Drive.

Great.
Is there anything else?
I can help you with tonight?

Please, a quick survey?
To rate time and knots spent.

The issues was with the time repeating
as a result of its disappearance now and then and then again
we were, I bulged with potentially volatile pulses taking down
toilet paper trees and pet rocks and semi convoys and tube tops
and disillusion is forth coming but the sharp spikes are in the
surveys I already took.

God's wrist felt tired and weak today?

The fattest company only knows
Feels their own cold lactation Seep

Drip-drip time,
So feed us with the same milky sour defense of
stuffed dogs on lay-away
Our best is in that needle
It's preordained
And will more likely than ours
Will be the relief of calves
with their pretty lashes.

The charge of struggle ceases
I am the glory one
And did the time

I dodge the terror sperm of good old boys.
Then I get back to the states late Tuesday night.
Through the thickness of repro men,
the babies missing coin collections
and the sound of teeth as
they are released onto a
bright tea saucer
Grandpa used for the over flow of tea.

Thank GOD!
and the feet god gave,
for headless compensation packages
and for the vacuum of whiteness.

The true hands
Feel through me

Manned ground still hums fatal
With weighty hand falls
Pray be stand Doll
Or let the crime.

45. Ms. Mama Sis April 2016

This morning I was in the kitchen putting the kettle on. I began rinsing my tea pot of the leaves from the day before. The window is just above the sink and nearly jumped when I noticed I stood face to face with headlights. The car was not running. The headlights were off. But it still created surprise. This yard that my kitchen window faces, well, let's just say we have history. I used to live there for two years. And, dear old Scat the alley cat is buried there by the east window where the jasmine used to blossom.

In the two years since I moved into the place next door the old place has stayed boarded up most the time. Squatters move in and out. Sex traffickers, and/or workers make use of it every now and again. Usually they stay a few days before they get busted or tipped off that they better move before they get busted. And there has been a few stolen cars stripped and left there.

I didn't see anyone at first but I have learned to be cautious and this morning was no different. It was almost 6:00 and still a little dark. I finished making my tea and toast crouching below the window. It doesn't pay to be a nark around here, or to look like you could be one. I try my best to roll

with the flow of neighborhood traffic in order to avoid an accident.

The hill climbs up into the old yard and put those headlights eyelevel as I stood at the kitchen sink window. It created for me another menacing dynamic as I made my breakfast, shuffling around ducked down and avoiding eye to headlight contact. I grew used to pretending it was a self-imposed challenge quickly. After all given the option I had I choose to live here. It was not the first time I made breakfast avoiding being seen as a potential witness. Before I knew it I felt adjusted to the new posture about the kitchen and finished up without much of another thought to hiding from the car. Then I glanced up again. There was a young man sitting in the driver's seat staring in the direction of the kitchen window. He appeared not to notice me or the window, just stared at nothing. I gathered toast and tea and disappeared completely out of eye shot and into the next room. A few minutes after breakfast I returned crouching to the kitchen and no one was there. I looked around the yard. I even peeked out the back bedroom window just to see if I could see what was happening and if someone had moved in. Of course, when I say moved in I mean broken in. The door was ajar so I figured they had gone inside. I had dishes to do and set to washing and tidying up the kitchen not so concerned about crouching this time. Then the young man

reappeared this time with a broom. He swept the broken concrete of what served as a poor excuse for front steps. During the next couple hours as I did my chores and came in and out of the kitchen he had moved the car to various positions in the yard facing every direction imaginable. He had rearranged the piles of garbage that were left by the armed cleaning crew, after they chased off the previous party of squatters. He sorted and resorted. Each time I glanced out I found a different composition of the same elements. Every now and then I caught sight of him with an almost proud look on his face as he appraised his labor in limbo.

Figure 7. All Souls Day



46. Tale of Reaching

When Jay arrived in an exceptionally cheery mood that night. With dinner in hand from the Chinese place on the corner, he teased me about being so short and made me some tea with the old lemons dried in the fruit basket. I savored that cup of tea. I had a feeling it was the meant to have some purpose. It could taste good all it wanted and I knew it was all bad. He talked incessantly, something about his new job, his cool boss and I heard nothing accept for what filled my head, the head speak that reflected the truth that was buried in his words. My brain raced and questioned everything, "What does he want from me? Please, when will he go? Let him go now. Let him go find someone else to fuck and to fuck with. I can't stand it. I can't stand his sick shit inside me, please not tonight. Please God not tonight."

I couldn't help but flinch when he moved towards me, "I need some cash Baby. I'll have it back to you next week. I just need it for tonight."

"I don't have it - not that I would give it to you anyway. All I have left is rent and that is due soon enough," I couldn't believe my own words. I thought, I must be ready to die. But my words only slightly worsened his mood and did nothing to deter him. He was looking on the back page of the Weekly paper and

showed me an ad. "I want you to help me with something. It's a little *fantasy* of mine, baby. It'll be good for you, too."

I took one look at the ad and I thought I would be sick, "No, that is not my fantasy. I don't want to fuck a whore while you watch Jay. Just leave me the fuck alone." I went into my bedroom and shut the door. I stood there in the middle of my room, knowing this was hell. There was no way I was escaping.

Jay opened the door, "There you go again." He laughed, "I know what a sick bitch you are. I'm doing you a favor. You are going to *sex out* your dreams all night. I'm going to help. You want to be a lesbian so bad?"

"It's not like that."

"I read your murky ass stupid stories. I read one too many of those smart ass pages. And I know, oh *believe* me Bitch, I know how to read between the fucking lines. You want to eat some sweet juicy pussy." He laughed and smiled, "And since you want that pussy so bad?" He pretend pouted, "I know you want it bad Sissy. And since the only you gonna get it is through me, you best wise the fuck up."

"It's not about sex Jay."

"Is that so?"

"But then you can't understand love so why would I waste my fucking breath?"

He clutched her arm tight and pulled her close whispering, "I can't understand love? *Well*, I understand one thing and that is, you don't learn shit. You have *got* to be one *stupid* fucking bitch."

She tried to get free, "No Jay... not, please, fuck. No." She was crying then.

"You give me the card or I'll kill you, you *dumb* fuck. And cheer up."

"Please."

"Give me your fucking card!" He shoved her towards the backpack, "Is it in there where did you put? I'll find the shit. You know I will."

"She got out the wallet and gave him the card."

As he left he was back to that other pretty voice, "Take a shower and fix yourself Sissy. You look like hell."

When he came back I was putting clothes on. There was a knock at the door and a young woman came in. She seemed to be close to my age or a bit younger. Maybe twenty three or so. That night was Jays attempt at something. He told us what to do. Of course he wanted to see me eat her pussy and her eat mine. I *knew* that was unavoidable. I knew he would make us have sex. What I did not imagine was the way she was able to stage everything for his pleasure and yet we never touched each other's intimate parts. She was magical in the way she led me

through the dance of pretend. It was as if she knew what he was doing and she led me on a little less painful path. I had never been with a woman since Ashely. And we had never made love. We kissed and fondled each other. So this woman helped to protect one bit of sacred ground that Jay had it in his plans to warp. And when I caught on, together she and I sang our sound effects and moved our bodies just so. And he laid there rubbing his dick and watching.

I knew there was no getting out of being fucked by him and neither would she. She appeared adept in fulfilling his fantasies and took the lead when he signaled he was done watching us. So I felt incredibly blessed, the suffering she spare me. She expertly applied rubbers as she needed, and took the brunt of his voyeuristically inspired energy surge. Of course he strictly denied me the luxury of rubbers. He had done a bunch of coke too. I became scared of his energy that it might never end. And that I would not be able to satisfy him or even close to fake my interest. Then when he took over me I felt myself, deadening and my body felt limp. It must have been noticeable because she tried to help. She touched me on my shoulder and something shifted and I remember my point of view did not make any sense. It was way off.

Sissy watched from above while her body kept on in the part Jay had assigned. It was an adequate performance. She covered

the requirements so that he could not complain. She appeared to comply with whatever he asked. It all played like some automatic fulfillment of a miserably long porn flick. She saw and she remember what happened and certain twisted scenes kept playing back in her head long after. You see Jay's thought process led him to a plan where he could fuck her straight. He believed that if he made her have sex with a woman in a *controlled* manner and then gave her pleasure *beyond that* with his superior drive and methods, then she would be cured. But, it was too much for Sissy. And she did not understand, but she had help. There had been a progression that made an opening possible too. There was a shift in her way of processing, of adjusting her consciousness levels to cope. That shift became true *especially so* when he cut her off the drugs. Something had to happen in order for her to deal with the suddenly sober life with doubly sobering circumstances. That shift and that help gave her a way to leave, so she left. She did not know how. She did not set out to do it. There had been something showing her a way.

When she reached back to the flesh it took some time. And she had to sleep and recover some of what she lost.

Recognitions were returning. I was watching the young woman putting her close back on. I realized I was laying in my bed completely naked with my arms and legs spread. I suddenly felt embarrassed but I was too drained to move. I just laid there

trying to be okay. Letting myself come back to reality that I would rather not. It seemed a little safer at that moment. I could hear Jay in the other room. I considered the process of this woman. She smiled at me and asked me if I was okay. I don't think I answered. Maybe a nod.

Then I remembered it was April 9th; usually I would buy some sunflowers and a candle. I would often make a little altar for mom on the anniversary of her death. I felt horrible. I felt so much. I silently started to weep.

The woman was about to leave, "Thank you Sissy, this was nicer than it usually is. Take it easy now."

My eyes were clouded and the lights in the room seemed like they moved and flickered. The woman stood at my bedroom door raising one hand towards me not like a good bye, more like giving praise. And she was gone. Then there was this sensation deep inside me. It felt as if some friend had gently brushed up on my shoulder and stayed. That kind of touch that you look forward to and know is coming because it is full of goodness and assurance. But the only thing was it wasn't on my shoulder. It was a soft stir in that nest of mine, deep inside newly scraped clean and ready for life. I knew at that moment I had a new and innocent guest that had only one friend. I knew at that moment that I shared again my blood and life and that I would not let him kill this baby.

Jay walked in the bedroom. "Good thing you look so pretty for your *début*."

Sissy did not catch that last line. She found some comfort with her new friend and found some sleep. When she woke he had her video camera set up on the tripod, right there in her bedroom. He proceeded to video her getting fucked over and over again and I mean also the over that is on top of and that is erasing every last one of her years of performance videos. The next morning when it was *time* for him to go to work, he did leave, and he left taking all the porn and her camera with him.

In the weeks that Jay had been in my life he had forced me to cash out her 10,000.00 CD nearly emptied bank account and, took all the remaining valuables to his dealer and successfully alienated all the business contacts I had in NYC. I couldn't manage my own comings and goings let alone keep down a job. If I did earn anything he took it fast. I knew that an *attempted* escape could be just as risky as staying. I had to make sure of everything. I had a plan and I knew I needed to act fast if I wanted to save *this* baby.

47. Seeking in the Wake of Fever Song

After a Thick night of wobble tables and spilt bong water came a time of bestowing.

Acceptance arrived where acceptance was needed. Force pushed at the perfect time. Pain came where pain has always been appropriate. She had not heard before of a tender one with a creamy smooth song, a song before words, a song beyond assurance. And then with waking birth, she heard and knew, as if knowing all along. Child arose armed a master of auto emulation, as if possessed by Mahalia's heart, by Billie's desire, by Simone's fury. She knew the rawness of indigo submersion. A wonder from her lips she knew the tender one had come and been released with a fever of song. Where others faulted truth as a slippery thing, this child freely exhaled that gift easy tongued. And it slid to her gestating ears. This child sang as if its lungs had the strength and depth of a great oak's roots. The song felt like the gospel of gritty angels, angels formed of love not the false angels from twisted translations of men with witty motives. Divine choirs are not troubled by ox stunning books, or ceremonious candles. They are not interested in grand furniture. These things do not hinder the voice with promise.

And so the child song had no end.

48. Ms. Mama Sis April 2016

This morning I was thinking of Becky. I don't know how many times I have read Cane. I got down on my knees, as I do, and asked for help, because I don't know what the fuck I'm doing here and the more I learn the less I know. And, then I thought of Becky again; I got Cane and reread once more.

When I went to the kitchen sink to wash out my teapot there was a new set of headlights facing me and my window. This time they were on. It was a big brand new Ford 250 with a white man in the driver's seat. He might not have been a white man. He could have passed for white. But, with the sun not quite up yet and the headlights shining in my face I could not see his face that good. He was smoking. He flicked his ashes in the yard. That much was clear. He appeared to be staring dead ahead right into my window, right at me. I looked straight at him and then abruptly raised up on my toes and flung my hands in the air yelling, "Get the fuck out of my fucking window." I shook my head in disbelief and returned my clean pot to the teapot warmer. I spooned out some snowdrop jasmine tea into the little pot and returned to the kitchen for hot water. The man had moved the truck so that the headlights were no longer aimed for my kitchen window. He had turned off the headlights too. He was probably waiting to get direction from the property manager

after the last fire. I couldn't help but notice how close he was to my dearly beloved cat, Scatt's grave. I swallowed hard and closed my eyes in prayer.

It's funny. I made my almost weekly call to Dad yesterday. He was working in the yard. Burning a pile of rubble and tree trimmings from the shredder, he had rented. It was a good time for a break he said. The smell of the smoke was getting to him because the wind kept shifting and following him around the yard. He told me he has been remapping the graveyard. He lives in the town and on the street he grew up in. And the church he attended as a child, he attends today. He volunteers to mow the lawn of the cemetery and do various tasks involving the upkeep of property and records regarding the graves. He told me he discovered that quite a few folks buried two and three of their family members, where they were supposed to have only buried one. He has some kind of scanner thing that penetrates into the plot and determines how many bodies are there and how deep. I could not understand how they then determine who is actually buried where. Honestly I could not understand the scanner. I've learned to listen and ask questions and listen. He likes to share stories of all his endeavors. He said he is doing his best to figure it out so that folks can find their relatives. That is important to him. I told him I understand because I like to know what is buried where *myself* especially when it is part of me.

Then he told me he got his genes tested, "A bit of a surprise there." He said, with a pretense of not being surprised or maybe not caring, "There is French and Yugoslavian so no surprise there." He said, "We knew that. But yeah, the test came back with Northern African and Jewish blood as well."

I thought to myself, "Surprise to who?" but I knew who. So I listened. All these years I had suspected the Jewish blood. It was obvious: grandma Rose and Aunt Mary's cooking was obvious; even great Grandma's maiden name was obvious. It was Rosen. But I was not in the least surprised about the African blood either. I have had so many friends who were far more light than me whose family had been honest about their blood. I knew Dad had been honest. I knew he didn't know. But I had a feeling.

First, he said "Northern African". Then he said "...most likely Saudi Arabian."

I asked him to send me the print out. He said he would. He is yet to send the card he bought for Michael for his birthday last year or the year before. It's not because he is eighty-three. He has always been like this. He has always thought I was born in June and my brother born in September.

I am blessed to see some of the things I see. Now I know it's not because my eyes are exceptionally keen but maybe because the weakest of the lot are just that. They are weak, not a threat. And they are of the lot. Just like the little sister

who gets beaten up when her bully big brother is not around. The "white" woman or light woman might take the blame and punishment, for what her *perceived* male counterpart, so steadily dished out. It is nothing compared to what the white man has done, of course. And continues to blindly do. And as Mom always said, "Two wrongs don't make a right." I do think it is important to have glimpse of awareness.

49. On Account On

My tricks dead to the stick,
my tracks spite their efforts,
dress his story up pretty.

Those half dozen boys will
never leave jellies to the threshing.

Sometimes the uterus does not bleed,
the hemorrhage comes from the hand
the nose
gums
ear
under the skin

underneath the skin,
of the body.

And in these cases it is often called secondhand menstruation,
acting so differently then, than from what good men would act
under identical circumstances. Wonderful actors, these.

Now, other your pretty little head, Love.

50. Tale of a Goose Girl

It would have been Mom's fifty third birthday had she lived. The dremel had a soft vibration that reminded me of earlier years when I was under her wing. As a kid she made sure I had so many wonderful experiences. One was jewelry classes at the Unitarian Church, I first used a dremel to refine the plastic wax combination into the original for my earliest piece of jewelry, a ring. It was so fun to work with the fairly soft material and spinning head of the dremel. That day, at the Precious Moments Design Studio, progress was swift and the attainable details and textures were infinite. Our manager had made sure we had the best tools. And, it was just the kind of meditation I needed. The other designers worked at various capacities, each at their separate stations in the big open room. Sometimes they chatted with one another about projects or about the latest gossip. There was plenty of projects *and gossip*. I was glad for both, anything to draw attention away from me, was cool. I had just entered into my eighth month of pregnancy. Every thirty minutes, give or take, I took off sprint-waddling to the women's bathroom. Baby, Michael did not appear too interested in acknowledging shared space. When my bladder would get even the slightest bit of utilization, in other words, every time I had a *little bit* of piss in there—he would give me a *healthy* kick.

This immediately freed up space for him and influenced me to take preventative measures. I wore pads to keep from making a mess. I sure as hell wasn't wearing adult diapers. I was only twenty seven for God's sake.

I had fun working on another three dimensional rendition of Sam Butcher's, ever popular, Goose Girl. And the department manager told me again and again how good it was to have someone of my expertise and skill in the department. Honestly, it was the best job I could have landed in that part of Missouri—eighteen bucks an hour and full benefits, including maternity. At first folks were curious as to why I left NYC so close to completing my degree, but they stopped asking when I started showing. And I wasn't in any position to explain the reality or depth of my situation. I did not want to endanger myself or anyone else. And I sure didn't want to jeopardize my chances for escape. And so until I formulated another plan to get away I played the part of the happy fiancée, lying to everyone. At least staying at Dad' place I had a little bit of a buffer. But not much; it was wearing thin fast.

I eaves dropped as I worked. It's a nice distraction to hear other people's shit. Scott had walked over to Dean's station. Their conversation had turned a little intense.

"That's a pretty high turnover. You would think someone would say something."

"Who would be the one? If you were the one, my friend, Lord knows—you would be in the ranks of those looking for employment."

"I don't doubt that. But what if someone said something to his wife? He is just *so bold*, there has got to be something *someone* can do."

"Do you think it would be different if someone went to the wife? Like she doesn't already know?"

"Yeah, you are probably right."

"Of course I'm right. She wants to protect her assets, and that includes protecting his image as a good Christian. What do you think would happen to the Sam Butcher dynasty if it were proven that *he* is not only a *Gay man*, but has had affairs with *numerous* employees?"

Dean shook his head and continued the line work on his coloring book design. "I guess we should all just be grateful we have work."

"And good work."

"But *why* does he have to fire all the ones he takes for a romp in the chapel?"

"He *only* fires the ones that refuse to romp. There are a few who have promotions because of their supplementary activities. That young man who received a managerial promotion in the gift store is full of stories. He seems like a nice

enough kid. He made a logistical choice that his sick old mother is benefitting from greatly. He is able to provide for her like he never could have before. And the way he paints the gift keep coming, Pardon the pun."

Dean's head kept on shaking in dis belief, "The way he runs things, I don't take anything for granted, least of all this job."

Just then the manager, Randall, walked by and overhearing the tail end said, "Yeah, and be grateful you don't have to sit through meetings with him. I'm on my way to one now. Thank God I'm so ugly and far too old."

We all laughed and Dean added, "You are the greatest, Boss!"

Scott cheered on, "You can do it, Randall! And we think you are beautiful!"

Randall walked out and Pamela came over to Dean's desk too. "Did you guys hear the story behind his pool installation?"

"I can't say I have," Scott said waiting.

Dean shook his head.

"Well," Pamela went on...

I had the strangest feeling right then. It wasn't my bladder. It wasn't even baby Michael. It felt like something moving on my pussy. It reminded me of a small bug. I got up and calmly walked towards the bathroom.

Scott called out, "Hey look. She's taking her time."

"Shut up you guys! You have no mercy." I tried to play it cool once again, even though I was freaking out. On the toilet I tried my best to see around my belly to my poor poor pussy. Sure enough, I had crabs. I had never seen them before, but I knew. Jay gave me no breaks, even with me working full time, coming home to make dinner for my dad, dad's wife and himself, *if he showed for dinner*. He *always* showed up at three in the morning every single night and demanded I give him a full body massage for an hour, suck his dick off and then ride on him for a good long time. No breaks. I knew He would give me something eventually. I felt lucky it was crabs and not something worse. One more thing to add to the "to do" list: Pick up those newborn onesies, some chamomile tea and a pack of RID – complete *pubic lice* elimination. I went back to work dremeling away at the cut little Goose Girl. At the end of the day I stopped by the gift shop. I wanted to get a Teddy bear for Michael. Or maybe I wanted a Teddy bear for me. Or maybe I wanted to meet the young man who had made good of his fucked up situation. Or maybe I did not want a remedy for crabs to be my only purchase of my day.

In any case I went to the gift store first. I stopped by Walgreens on my way to dad's place and got a remedy for crabs.

He was obviously some combination of African and Euro-something blood. He was truly beautiful and very friendly. "Look at you. When are you due Doll Face?"

"Next month. I want a teddy bear for my Baby."

"Okay. I have teddy bears *for you*. Come here. What do you think? I like this light brown one. He reminds me of me! And I'm fabulous!"

"I'm sold. You are fabulous." I smiled weakly.

"You know you look so much like my sister."

"Well if she is half as fine as you that is some compliment. Thanks. I don't feel too pretty right about now."

"Oh, come now Doll Face." He gave me a sideways glance, "Maybe you need two teddy bears?" and we laughed as I walked with him up to the counter.

51. Tale of an Old Family Album

"Does anyone know you are here?"

"No. Well, except Fran. She set it up."

"Um hmm... Yes. I know"

"And the cops that..."

"But the address. Does anyone have the address, besides your police escort?"

"I don't even know the address. I just followed the cops." Sissy tried to focus on her new surroundings, the assortment of ragged furnishings, various plaques and a moldy inspiration poster."

Dorothy took notes throughout the intake questioning barricaded by stacks of paperwork a foot and a half tall. "Okay then, we'll say no?" she made a soft laugh, "This will be over in no time. I'm sorry. I'm sure it's unnecessary, but you understand. We have procedures to follow for new residents."

"It's okay. I understand. I'm here now. I'm not going anywhere." Michael began to squirm in the snug straps of the infant car-seat/rocker at Sissy's feet. She kept rocking him with the toe of her high top sneaker, "It's okay Dude. This won't take long." She gave him his binkie and a smile.

"Just a few more questions Sissy and we'll be done."

"Okay."

"Are you on any drugs or medication?"

"No, nothing."

"Do you have any fire arms? Sissy? Did you hear me?"

...

...

"What? What does that matter?"

"Do you have any fire arms? Sissy?" Dorothy backed from her desk, "Do you have a gun?"

"Why? I need it. He'll kill me. He swore. I told you before. He isn't scared of the cops."

"I'll need to have the gun Sissy. You are safe here. You and Michael will be protected. If you want to stay, give it to me."

"What if he finds me? He already followed here from Brooklyn. He will find me. You're not listening." Sissy tried to hold on but she let a tear spill out, moving to the edge of her seat she fixed her posture. She opened her eyes wide hoping to make room for the other tears that were crowding together there. "He said he would kill me and take Michael."

"Are you going to believe that? Or do you want to believe me?"

"It's not about what I want to believe anymore. I wish I could believe lots of foolish things."

"Has he killed before?"

Sissy couldn't hold her tears another breath, she did feel safer there, saw clearer too, "I'd like to believe you. But, yes I'm pretty certain he's killed before... if he tracks me down? What if he breaks in here?"

"You know this place is hidden. We have cops checking on us all the time."

"He doesn't care about the law. And he has friends."

"Does he have guns?"

"Yes. He's best buddies with the owner of the biggest gun store in town and loosing cops is his idea of fun, a hobby you might say."

Baby Michael began crying and reaching to his mama.

Dorothy walked around to the front of her desk, nearer to Sissy. She knew her show of confidence had to be convincing. She had to appear fearless. And it had to be a fearlessness based on *trust* not strength or power. Sissy was only afraid of one thing at this point and Dorothy knew that. So trying to threaten her or pressure her to fear something else would never work. She had to emulate a fearlessness based on *trust* that Sissy *would* do the right thing. She knew the power of expectations. And she needed to get that gun, even though she also felt certain Sissy's hand was holding that gun in her pocket at that moment, "It's going to be okay. I know you are scared. Tammy is going to come in in

just a minute. She's nice. She'll take care of Michael for about thirty minutes while we finish intake. But, *first* I want you to hand me the gun, and *then*, how about giving Michael a little drink from that bottle. I see you have a bottle for him there?" Dorothy held out a relaxed looking hand, squatting down to Sissy's eye level.

Sissy's head was full of surfacing and overflowing truth. She had a lot to deal with. On the other hand, one thing she did not have to deal with, were options. She pulled out the 9mm, "Piddlely-shit thing, it wouldn't do a damn bit of good in the shadow of that Glock 10 mm he's packin' lately."

The click of metal had Dorothy standing up straight. But before she realized what had happened, Sissy had already removed the clip from the gun and was handing both over. The shift in Sissy's face and her sinking posture showed clearly that she *did not* feel safe and certainly not safer without the gun. As hard as she could she tried to manage some remnants of confidence like Dorothy had. But she had none. She never had before anyway, just a front. And Dorothy was losing the grip on her own.

Dorothy took Sissy's hand into both her hands, pausing a moment, she looked into Sissy's eyes, "This is it? This is all you have?"

"Yep, that's it,"

Dorothy locked the gun in the safe behind the desk. Sissy took the bottle out and began feeding Michael.

Neither had noticed Tammy standing at the door until the first slurps from the bottle. And Sissy noticed Michael looking at the door.

Once she started she had a hard time stopping. Tammy had never seen a gun until that moment and was a little shook up, "He'll be fine with me really. All the kids like me. Love me. The mamas beg me to watch their kids. Why just yesterday I watched seven kids at one time, while mamas did chores, ran errands, and did their groups. Is he your only baby? He sure is pretty. Look at those big eyes. Just like his mamas..."

Dorothy had to cut Tammy short, "Give us five more minutes Tammy."

Tammy walked away without finishing the sentence.

Dorothy gave Sissy one more assignment after they finished the questioning, one more task before she could rescue Michael from Tammy. Sissy had to visit a desk at the front of the house and make a delivery.

She had noticed Tammy's nervousness and left before Tammy had a chance to return. Michael had fallen asleep with his bottle so she left him with Dorothy. As she walked through the house she saw women and children getting ready for lights out. It was almost ten. She went back and forth in her head. Sometimes

she wondered if she had been paranoid. Maybe she *did* live in a dream world. She had been too scared to make a report of the rapes or beatings and now had no proof. He convinced her if she ever let anyone find out she'd be dead. She always hid her bruises with masterfully applied cover-up. Maybe she misunderstood the conversation between him and his buddy. It sure sounded like whispers of murder, of tree shredder solutions. It sure as hell sounded like he said, "If there is no body there's no evidence".

After all the questioning, Sissy doubted herself again, doubted her voices, doubted her newly revived truth.

Then in the middle of doubt she thought out loud though a whisper, "All that doesn't matter. I'm going to do what Dorothy said because it won't hurt and it could help." She felt tired. She felt relieved Michael had gone to sleep and wanted to hurry and get back to him. She walked up to the desk, "Hi, are you Patricia?"

"Yes. How are you?" Came the oddly chipper reply.

"Okay. I was told to bring you this."

Patricia looked at it and then reached under the desk, lifting with both hands a large scrapbook. Sissy helped support the weight as Patricia heaved it to the desktop. Again Patricia glanced at the Polaroid and then took it, looking puzzled, "Oh wait, I don't know why they sent you with this. The resident

already brought a photo... Wait a second. There are two residents that brought up this guy's photo. Yeah, same name too. See?"

Sissy looked at the pictures quickly being shown to her and tried to interrupt, "I'm a..."

"Shh. Okay, listen to this." Patricia cut her off whispering loud, "It says here, police have been trying to detain this guy a month now for questioning regarding at least two rapes. There are two women here now because of him. One is pregnant and both have suffered multiple injuries and threats."

Sissy looked around at the other women suddenly even more uncomfortable.

"This bastard is no joke. Well, anyway, with all his shenanigans and with as many different and new volunteers as we have here, it's a wonder a single T is dotted or I is crossed. I mean." She stopped talking only long enough to laugh at herself, "Ha, ha ha... I guess it's better to have too many pictures as opposed to not enough." She slides the picture into the old worn family album. Leaning toward Sissy, "You have to wonder about these residents sometimes. How do they find these guys? Hey are you okay?"

51. In-Take Taking

Tell me
about the rape.

Bus is here.
Seeping hospital Rose.

Hallow the line
receptivist red loading the 109.
Still the drink is drinking me.
Again the now one year or twenty
for sets of pomegranates, for a single cherry.
Leave those frames for the mute eye fruit isle.
Use this night that is too night.

Domest tication ate
via you, you vile,
my stardust stuttering.
And reapply beneath sorry-salt
as up-and-coming.

51. Tricks Enough

T'was nineteen-sixty-four,
the year of the whore.
That's what Daddy did say.

And oh how she tried;
with each trifle she signed,
"Must I go on this way?"

Expectations are strong
though they may be wrong.
With boys she persisted to lay.

Until finally she met,
a man who was set,
for more than a toss in the hay.

He locked her up fast.
And that was the last,
to tell her, "You do as I say".

For the new babe in arms
She cut off his charms
Without a further delay
On a greyhound they fled
And little was said
To those that tracked their way

The shadows she spied
Each night how she cried
Having taken her task halfway

Expectations are strong
Though they may be wrong
It's "Daddy" a rapist will play

Not a day did go by
Years of torment and lie
Forever they were his prey

So

With a cool butchers knife
She severed his life
Soon after their final melee

Set to work hand in hand
Dear 'ol mom and young man
They buried him in the clay

Though rape is a crime
Maybe less than this rhyme
Her truth is forever grey.

52. Tale of Slumber Party at Theresa's House

Evening came and everyone lounged about in their comfy sleepers and hoodies with house-shoes on their feet. Even the adults cuddled the blankets and pillows they brought from home or the donation closet. A few were still arriving and getting settled.

Earlier that morning at kitchen duty Cynthia, a strong country gal, had sat with me and we prayed for our salvation. Well, she *led* us in prayer, and I felt grateful, not understanding why. But her words soothed me with a strength and a wisdom that is rare. As the night grew darker Cynthia settled down with the new girl and told her about the advantages of being a professional bank robber. It had taken most of us months to hear these stories. How quickly she told this girl about that stash buried just south of Joplin. She said they could go dig it up together as soon as they got out. I watched her edging closer to that girl at every opportune moment. Cynthia wore a baggy bleached white wife-beater and her strong arms caught the new girl's eye.

Margaret noticed too, and looked at me smiling, "Just like a slumber party back when we were little girls." She joked, "Mom can I go to Theresa's House?"

I smiled back. Margaret had a beautiful smile despite the efforts of her X to eradicate it. The smile had been

misinterpreted in a drunken stupor one night. And Margaret had paid the price. The X decided it was a smile *far* too seductive to *far* too many women. Margaret's smile had been in the wrong place and turned in the wrong direction. The X, after finishing a fifth of Jack Daniels, broke off the base on the bars edge. Then she came up behind dear smiling Margaret. Margaret turned to see what had shattered.

Broken glass slapped across her face, "You ain't smiling at nobody if it ain't me, Bitch." Margaret's jagged scar stretched out across her face from each corner of her mouth. Luckily she got her teeth put back into some order. Funny, I never noticed the scar till she mentioned it. Her smile still had power enough. Back then, I couldn't imagine a prettier one.

Margaret and I sat quiet. I knew she might get sentenced any day. She knew Baby Michael and I would soon have to disappear. Our thighs touched on the couch. I held Baby Michael in my arms and she tickled his little toes.

Theresa House was the *safest* safe shelter I ever stayed in. It was two stories and wrapped with a beautiful wood plank porch, off limits to the residence. Sometimes the porch swing would tease us swaying in the wind; the chain squeaked. The windows in the large meeting room stretched at least six feet high. I could see the massive wood frames peeking out from the mismatched layers of blankets. Making sure they stayed covered

was a bit of a production but Mama Vanessa or Mama V, appeared to keep it handled. Six large couches dating from the 50's through the 80's lined the walls. There were a few odd tables and an old writing desk with a chair up against the west wall. Five random lazy boys, bandaged with duct tape and dressed in hand knitted throws often made perfect islands and ships for the grade-schoolers to play on. French doors connected the dining area to the large meeting room. The entrance and intake was in the back. The smell of sweet grew suddenly stronger from the oven. I stretched my glance past the dining area to the swing door of the kitchen. It opened and Rosy brought a platter of fresh baked cookies, a few mis-matched Thanksgiving paper plates and Birthday napkins. She made one round with the offerings from her kitchen-duty endeavors and sat the rest down on the only table big enough to hold them. The volume of chatter went up with the arrival of chocolate chip cookies. More children came into the room, some hit the couch with a thud. The voices of the women sharpened and so did the smell of coffee. Pieces of conversations were scattered around the room.

"Sit down with your plate Harley!"

"Hey, I heard Jessie and the kids made it safe to Miami, don't say you heard it from me though. Top secret,"

"Anyone hear from Grace?"

Shirley asked, "Who cares?"

Cynthia cut in, "That's not cool, don't say that."

"Yeah well she wasn't too cool to live with."

Margaret and I sat quiet. My thoughts shifted to what Mama V had told me, last we met.

She said, "All cases are unique. But your case is, *well*, more unique." She was filling out some more paperwork, and there were long pauses as she made notes in between explaining things.

...

"When we relocate you,

...

you cannot tell *anyone*, Sissy."

"I understand," I thought I understood.

"You might not have much notice."

I nodded my head, "Um Hm."

"Not your family either. They have already endangered you, themselves and the entire house. You have to understand that when things like drugs, gun trafficking, multiple incidences of rape (and I'm not only referring to your rapes), the offenders willingness to relocate to continue stalking, possible connections with law enforcement and other offenses are involved, risks increase. That is true if just one of these things applies. Your case has all of these elements Sissy. The danger for you and Baby Michael is increased substantially. And your presence here since he has clearly tracked you here, is a

danger not only to you and Michael but to the other residence as well as staff.

...

So, as soon as we find you a bed you will need to go, within hours. Maybe within less than an hour. And you will need to cut all ties. We will assign you a name at that time."

That was Thursday evening. Just a day had passed since that conversation. My time was spent with Baby Michael and Margaret.

There was a scream. The child's mom had said, "No more cookies," and he raged.

The topic of Grace was still being tossed about in sharp tones. She had moved out over a month ago. None of us knew her new name. Rumors put her about a hundred miles south of Carthage, where her old place was.

We all sat in the main room before group started that night. Staff numbers fell short again that day. One girl joked with a shaky sarcasm, "You think the facilitator will even show up?" No one answered or even acknowledged her question. The girls were charged from the energy of the Friday night neighborhood noises that snuck through the cloistered walls. She was late. Mama V had cancelled all her appointments that morning. Even daily schedules submissions were denied without any explanation. It was as if curfew had been extended all day. The house phone had rung off the hook. Our conversations would

suddenly hush so we might hear, as children are likely to do when they since the adults are keeping secretes. But that day the volunteer used a voice more quiet than before. We still heard, "Theresa House hotline", the cheery repetition rang hollow as always, but then it was followed by murmurs beyond our comprehension.

Someone joked about what a *case* Grace was, "She didn't deserve a bed. I remember the night she arrived, lookin' like a queen—not a scratch on her. Isn't that so, Shirley?" Shirley smiled feeding on the energy that day had brought.

Others joined, "Yeah, I'm glad she is done takin up room, *and donations.*"

Shirley said, "Not one bruise. That's right. Did that stop her from getting in the closet? I remember that night. We heard staff talking about a closet donation from one of those fashion bigwig."

"That's right, everyone was scrambling to get a peek, but staff took their *time getting first dibs*, not letting us in till next morning."

Cynthia again, took time away from her pursuits with the new girl to interrupt the attack, "Not that any of us could have fit *into* those clothes. Come on! We need serious clothes. Those donations are always run way material not anything useful to real hard working women. You all need to stop."

The new girl smiled at Cynthia but Shirley would not stop, "Then we had kitchen duty."

Others shook their heads in agreement. And I could hear, "Yeps" and "Um hms" as Shirley led us to Grace's slaughter.

"Margaret and Lucrecia went and got the wik stuff that day, while we cleaned up and when we all were settling in for room check, Grace must have snuck in that closet taking the best of the picks."

"Cynthia protested, "Now we did not see her. No one saw her."

A girl who was not even a resident at the time added, "I saw some of the stuff in her bag. I'm sure she took it."

As I listened I felt saddened by the sweep of attacks on Grace. I only had met her briefly the day before she relocated. She *did* seem uptight and quiet, but who wouldn't be in her situation? Then I recalled I too had no visible bruises when I moved in. No one doubted the threat on me, because it had affected so many. As we sat I could hear the dull chiming of dishes.

Margaret reminded us, "Just because she didn't have bruises doesn't mean she wasn't in danger. It should not matter. That man sounded crazy. He would hide her keys from her. She would be ready to set off for the 30 minute drive to work and then, no

keys. She *needed* that job. You try explaining *that* to your boss after the third time."

"That *is* pretty fucking creepy."

Cynthia added, "She thought she was going crazy till she caught him."

The tone started to shift with remarks like, "I hear ya", and "alright".

"He would hide those keys and then help her look for them. Come on now, that's fucked up."

Shirley was heartless, "But do you think he was a *real* threat? In group she said he didn't hit her, not once. It takes a lot of resources to relocate one of us. *A lot of resources.*"

Mama V walked in. It was the first time any of us had seen her all day.

We quickly made room so she could get to her oak rocking chair. She never facilitated unless it was an *occasion*, a special occasion.

The plate of cookies gladly skipped over everyone and made its way to Mamma V but she declined the offer. Lucrecia brought her favorite chamomile tea and waited patiently for Mama V to arrange herself before attempting to hand it off with a rare smile.

Mama V began, "Before we get started with check-in and the usual format, I have one of those announcements I hate to make."

The women shifted in their seats.

"Grace was murdered execution style yesterday. It appears the husband stalked her for some time since her relocation. He broke in just after she put the kids to bed. He found her gun, forced the children to watch and nearly took her head off with multiple shots at close range. I know we don't all know her. But we need to understand, this is not a game."

There was nothing anyone could say. But you could hear the truth reflected in the coos and cries of the youngest ones clearer than anything else. They were the only ones wise enough to not judge and innocent enough to love.

Who will read our opening statement on the importance of forgiveness, love, and perseverance? Let see, Shirley. I think you should read it. Oh and, Sissy, come see me directly after group."

Figure 8. Childs Play



52. Tale of Gods Holy Angels

At 10:30, the boss, Jonathan, suggested to the girls to go home, "Get the fuck out of here, *all of you.*"

The girls hesitated a moment, not sure if he was serious or it was just another passing spell of his. They shifted their feet, dug for nothing in their purses and gave quick glances to each other. I cracked my knuckles. It was the end of my first week but I had already learned to expect a dramatic shift in tone every time Jonathan opened his mouth.

His next announcement began with mumbles under his breath, "What did you do, scare all the good men off? With your nasty no good..." And then yelled, "Get out!"

We all started pulling together our few personal items. I stood and pulled out my change of clothes for the bike ride home.

Then as he threw his most recent empty away. And continued to practice his emotional scales, "Not you Sissy, you stay. And no more cracking your knuckles on my clock. It's not lady like. The rest of you stupid bitches, get out! Your shift is through. It's your own fault." He ended triumphantly with a deep laugh.

The girl at the desk packed up in a rush so I slipped in behind her and sat down there. Someone had to take calls and he was obviously not capable.

"It has never been this fucking slow! What the fuck is going on?"

One of the girls paused at the door, "Do you want us to check back in an hour or two?"

"Is that what I said? Are you slow up here?" pointing a finger and tapping his head.

The last girl left and it was quiet. Jonathan sat red and sweaty resting his beer hand on his knee with a fresh icy cold one. He had on a white brushed cotton button up with a slight 70's flare, longer at the collar and sleeves with extended cuffs that folded back on themselves. He had gold cufflinks fixed on his wrists. At his mid-section the buttons gapped. The tails of his shirt had begun to hang out of his pants more and more with each beer. They could not reach around the belly and then compensate for the sudden shift to his tiny flat ass. I thought of all the times I prayed no customer would come in. I thought of how disgusted I had been by various customers, forcing myself to pray through the sessions, to pray myself till the end of my shift and outta there. At that moment I prayed for any one of those customer to please come in.

Jonathan took up with his theorizing where he had left off on the day of my interview at Angels from Heaven. That first day his talk stayed focused on the job, in a way. He talked about the *obvious* ways in which women were meant to serve and pleasure

men. He had elaborated on the ways in which *he* served God by providing the Angels from Heaven massage service just as God had asked him to, "God called on Reagan and he called on me." And I had encouraged him just enough, just enough to get the job that day.

Michael needed shoes. He cried the night before at the thought of lining up with the poor kids to get a free pair of payless shoes provided by the Shoes for Kids program. He told me some of the Black kids teased him the week before saying, "You think you are *white*, don't you?" He didn't understand what they meant, but told me they looked at his shoes, "They all have nice shoes Mom. I have beat up shoes." I knew they would not stop once he had nice new shoes but I did not know what to do. My warehousing job laid me off right before the sixth month of the probationary period ended. You see, I took a day off to tend to Peter. He woke up at 3 AM with another life-threatening asthma attack. Excusable time off for dependent care came after the probationary period, not during. My other job, my teaching job had suspended me without pay when a parent told the boss I took the kids on a field trip to the Gay bar. The Lawyers said I had a strong case. Even so, since the events of 9-11 they were overrun with strong cases like these. There were no pro-bono lawyers left at the Queer Center's. So unless I had an extra \$60,000.00 laying around I better hurry up and find another job.

I took the job at Angels from Heaven and I started leaving Michael at home alone at night to work.

Jonathan really started opening up after he started on that beer, "I bet you Lacy invited that mother fucker over here." I wasn't sure what he was talking about at first. I tried to pray for a calmness in my heart. And I prayed for strength because it felt like it was going to be another one of those times when I just didn't know if I could make it.

Working at Angels I had earned enough for rent, food and Michael shoes. I was tired of asking to borrow money. But it had not been easy.

Jonathan got up. He walked to the window. It seemed more like he was talking to his beer or someone outside at first. His voice got quiet again, "He asked for her by name you know? He asked for Lacy by name." He stood at the front window peeking through the blinds. Then he got louder, "I am so sick of these fucking niggers. They are fucking everywhere. You knew one tried to come in today didn't you? Don't try to pretend you didn't know?" He turned and looked dead at me. "Did the girls tell you?"

"No one mentioned it," I focused all my energy on acting unfazed. I started filing my nails. I knew had to act out a balance understanding him, sympathizing with him and yet not over doing it. He had to believe it. I had to forget so much, at

that moment. I had to forget the fact that he had my social security number and my home address.

"Well, of course, it was a non-event." He bragged as he stretched and bore his belly. "I made sure it was a non-event. Unless that is why no one is coming now?" He walked to the window again and peeked out, "Maybe they saw him here? Maybe one of my regulars thought I let his nigger-ass in here? Fucking sick-fuck, walked right up to the door." He sat back down steadily drinking his cold one, "I blocked it. I asked that dirty nigger, '*Can I help you?*' He started to say something. I cut him off though." Jonathan chuckled, "I said, '*We're full. All Week. I mean all month! I mean all year!*' I told him, '*Get on with your meaningless existence, but not here!*' Ha ha ha, I am a poet. Stupid fucking nigger. He shuffled away like a trick monkey. Don't you know it? He wanted to play with one of the pretty white angels. You should have seen his sad face Sissy." He laughed loudly again.

With that I wondered about my own face. How could I possibly play it off like I was cool with this conversation? I think I managed a believable smile and said, "I bet he won't be back," trying to muster some enthusiasm. I felt seriously scared by then. I had dealt with this type of energy before and it never ended good. I was scared like I had never felt with any of the clients. And no one was coming. The phone was silent. And he

bantered on. I wanted to leave but I knew it could do me worse harm in the long run. So, I was more scared of attempting to leave, yet I could not help but wonder if it was too late. What if he knew about me? He was freaking me out, the worst thing I could do was show it. What if he knew about Peter? He knew I had a son, but what if he somehow found out he was Black. I tried to think back to if I had left my purse unattended, ever. Maybe he saw the pictures in my wallet. I tried to discount thoughts that he might be toying with me and my fearful heart. I told myself to play it cool. My shift ended at midnight. If I could somehow just play it nice and cool till then maybe everything would be okay. I thought, I prayed, that he would still somehow honor the fact that I needed to go home to my son instead of trying something. I reassured myself, there is no way that he knows I am a lesbian with a Black son, there is no way.

He went into the back and came back with another Bud lite. I had made every effort not to count but I knew that was number six. Just when I had calmed myself a little he went on from niggers to fagots and then to nigger-fagots, "Sick fucks, they all need to be strung up. You know just what I'm talking about don't ya Sissy? I can tell you're a *good* Irish girl, deep down. Aren't ya?"

I nodded, "Yep Irish and English," I lied.

"We are *on the way!*—*you and me.*" He took another swig, "And we are not alone. You will be amazed at how many people are backing my work. Just you wait. Be patient. I'll show you. These sick nigger fagot fucks won't have a leg to stand on, cause we are going to chop them all off. You can just watch Sissy. I can tell you're kind sensitive," He laughed and came closer. He put his hands on the desk and leaned in toward me, "I am telling you I have a system. You don't think I do? I told you this is my church right. I am a reverend you know? I have hundreds of followers too."

"That's a nice set up. Good for you. How long have you had a church?" I was careful to not sound too sharp.

"Oh, it's been three years now. Plus I am a lawyer. Right now the city is trying to drive my church under. It's a minor setback. Well I have news for them. I am completely within the law. I know my rights."

"That is good. It's good to know your rights." I pressed deep for a pleasant smile. I had to be truly happy for him. He had to believe it. I had to forget at that moment. I had to forget the fact that he had my social security number. I had to stop wondering if he knew my family background. Lying was a skill that I had sharpened when my life depended on it. I knew this situation. It was different but it was also the same. I had to lie to myself and to believe it in this moment to get outta

there. I told myself I just had to make it through the night. Then I would think of something. I focus on my nails. He always stressed we should keep our hands soft and smooth. So I found comfort in the fact that I liked to keep my hands soft and smooth as well. We could be on common ground in that way. I could appear an obedient Angel and still be me.

"When you were here yesterday, doing God's work, I was down there at the God damn City Hall. And who do you think was behind that God-damned bench? Tell me. Guess."

"I don't know."

"Well I'll tell you, it was a fagot-nigger. Sick fucking fuck. I could tell by the way he talked to me and about me. I could tell by the way he shuffled through my paper work. I could tell by way he looked at me. It was so obviously he was *attracted to me*. It was enough to make me sick, seeing him up there eyeing me, having to answer to him."

"That must have been so frustrating for you. I cannot imagine. How did you stay cool?"

"I am use to it. I have had to deal with those types a lot. They even want to be 'angels' sometimes, if you can believe that. I just tell them we aren't hiring. I can tell a nigger fagot a mile away. And when they call I can tell in the first word out of their mouth."

"What do they say?"

"It's *how* they say it, sick fucking fucks..."

I discovered that night that "sick fucking fucks" was Jonathan's favorite three word combination descriptor. By the time my shift came close to ending, at midnight, he grew clumsy. I knew it wasn't likely to be over but, that made it a little easier than I had hoped to get out of there.

53. Death Can Be

funny, like That Cousin.

Lost for forty years, who shows up and
then is off to see the crack man across
the street—returning there forever, then.

Never to need you again, but
for the tilt of the blind.

54. Tales Envisioning my Elbow

My reading is slow to begin with on account of the dyslexia and the years of drugs no doubt. I never seem to have enough time to read for school. But I can't lie and say I've read things I haven't read, so I sold out and got the damned Audible. That way I can plug it in my ears and read soon as I get up, as I go to take a piss, wash my face, make my tea and oats, clean the kitty box, I even put the phone in a plastic bag for the shower so I can clean my pussy and read at the same time, and on and on. I read during everything that is automatic and physical. And since I sold out and got the damned Audible I was keeping up on my reading much better.

I was reading and almost done with Angela's Ashes. It's sadder than everyone said but the thing is; it is very funny too. It is like life at times. I have to laugh at the all the ridiculousness of life to keep from crying from the sadness.

At times when am running late, I take the 208 and catch the connecting 109 bus at the Charleston stop on Maryland. The smell isn't so bad in the spring and I can bear it if my knee isn't too bad to walk the extra few blocks. If I can muscle through all that, the stop at Charleston and Maryland gets me to school much quicker. Otherwise I would be riding all the way to the BTC for the connecting 109, with only a few steps to the connection

and a safer transfer. I felt good. I walked the extra walk. I stood in the only shade there was behind the benches on Charleston. They aren't comfortable anyway and the stink is stronger by the benches. I thought to myself, if you don't have a place to sleep except on the benches and the city has done their best to make your night's sleep uncomfortable, as if it would be *comfortable* without the steel bands dividing up the bench? Well, if that was what I faced, I would be inclined to take a piss right there too. By the smell of it, I was not alone in my vengeful thinking. By the smell of it others took thinking into acting. The steel sun-magnet covering do provide a little shade. In the morning the shade is around behind the bench. So there I was listening with the volume turned up high. A familiar crowd of folks sat on the bench and stood around. We each took turns as was the custom, peering north to see if the 109 was coming around the corner on to Maryland. Three men came walking across the parking lot from the 7-Eleven on the corner. They meandered towards the stop. I often made a point to use peripheral vision so that men did not appeared to receive any attention from me. I had learned too many times that a glance is an invitation when a man's ego is involved. I paid them no detectable mind but kept listening to my book.

I used to always wear a backpack to keep my hands free just in case I need to defend myself or run. But I noticed the cops

stopped me more often when I wore a backpack. I realized backpacks were the uniform of all the crack-hoes in my neighborhood. The cops hassled me endlessly when I had that backpack. One stopped me on my way to teach and demanded to know where I was going at 6:30 in the morning in such a hurry. He questioned me and then commanded I show him my id while my bus passed by. Once a cop pulled their car sharply in front of me, cutting my gait and said, "Do you realize that there are many many very bad things that go on in this neighborhood?"

"Yes, I do thank you, I have lived here for long enough and I am blessed with eyesight," I kept walking.

"I want to talk to you a minute. Come here." He opened the back door and smiles.

"I have an appointment at UNLV to get to so unless there is something urgent I will be on my way."

He let me go looking a little confused. I knew he thought he was going to get a favor for a promise to not arrest me.

A john once pulled their car sharply in front of me. I refused to look up and refused to answer when they said, "Hey. Hey, talk to me Bitch."

Instead I made a quick maneuver around the car.

Then they yelled, "Fucking white bitch whore".

Then they peeled out throwing sand and gravel in my face.

I can't count the times Johns cut me off, stopped and with a said, "You need a ride."

When I did not have the backpack I noticed, there were no hassles. Not less hassles, no hassles. I started leaving it at home when I didn't absolutely need it. I left it home the day my place was burglarized. So then, I stopped having a choice. Until I could get another backpack it was awkward book bags which are a different kind of hassle. They are just physically harder to manage. Plus they made me feel less agile, less quick on my toes. I hated that feeling. What are ya going to do?

I was standing there with my heavy book bag listening to Angela's Ashes. Which was funny because Franky is so loyal to his-the patron saint of birds in the sky and fish in the sea. I love Saint Frances too. Franky calls on Saint Frances often and I am near to tears half the time reading because even though I am not a Catholic I still love the prayer of Saint Frances. I love Saint Frances more than I love any other saint. I love Saint Frances more than most Catholics do. I believe Franky loves Saint Frances too and he wants to be and *is* a sweet good kid. But not according to the church. Poor Franky, I can relate to him. He can't stop "abusing" himself and "whacking" himself off all the time. He is torn by the things he does to survive. He is starving most the time. He is sent out to find his drunken "dad" who is drinking the money for the new baby. He steals some

food from another drunken man. The priest at confession tells him that it is *he* who "should be washing the feet of the poor." And Frances doesn't understand even though he tells the priest he does. And it is all written in present tense. I listened and the smoke of cigarettes from my fellow bus patrons blew into my face.

I noticed there a strange commotion with the men that came from the 7-11. The white man seemed high or drunk or both and he followed the two black men in circles around the bus stop, yelling at them.

I tried my best to focus on my book. At first that was easy because I actually liked this one. It is always such a hard balance walking through the world of men. With my ear phones tight in my ears I was glad I to have no idea what the man yelled. It seemed lighthearted this time at least. That is often not the case, which is another reason I do *usually* avoid this bus stop, unless I am running late. I assumed they were friends putting on a show for the crowd. I paid them no visible attention and doubled my efforts to keep to my book.

Franky and his friend are getting ready for their confirmation. Franky says, "Mikey knows everything. He is going on 14. He gets the fits. He has visions."

I noticed the smaller of the two Black guys says something to me and of course I can't hear him because I am in Ireland

with Franky and Mikey. I figure if I don't acknowledge the question I will be referred to as a bitch once more. So I take out an ear bud to hear what this smiling man says. He slowed his pace and came near to me looking mock frightened. He said, "Help! Protect me! You can save me!" I smiled, laughed and said, "I am not that powerful. I think you got this." I put the bud back in my ear. He passes by being pursued by the yelling white man. And as they kept circling around he said something else but I stayed to myself and my book. Partly because it does not seem serious at all and partly because the book does. I have a feeling something bad is going to happen. I wonder why I care anymore. Every time there is a lightness a playfulness everything gets turned on its head.

Then the white man stopped yelling at the two black men and is yelling at me instead. He appeared seriously angry. He came closer. He was obviously very angry and yelled more intensely than he was ever yelling at his two friends. I did not care to hear what he is saying. Yet he is so suddenly in my face that I was confused completely. He is gesturing loudly with his swinging arms, fingers in my face and his chest puffed out. I could not help but doubt my own reality. Questions that made no sense entered my head, "Where do you know this guy from Sissy? What did you do to piss him off? You must have done something to piss him off." I knew I did not know him it was just that he was

so convincingly angry at me. I maneuvered quick with a back-lean, slide and side duck. Then I walked away moving around to the front of the bus stop. He followed me. He yelled again at the men and I felt relieved. But then returned to yelling at me. I kept my ear buds in, not so much by choice, there was no time to take them out, with all my book bags and the man on my heels where ever I tried to go. I still did not hear what he is saying. Sometimes playing the crazy bitch has saved me. So, I started yelling back at him, backing, turning, putting my hands up, "Get the fuck out of my face." I was not very affective with all my bags. He was not as huge as some I have had to deal with but of course most everyone is considerably bigger than me. The other people moved away and made a wake for us. At that point I realize that Franky is still in my head telling I don't want to be in Ireland either because Mikey Maloy has fallen into one of his fits and is chewing his tongue to shreds and breaking his own limbs and the world is so unfit. I was up against the back of the bus stop and there was the spray of sour putrid whiskey on my face. And this ass hole was so close to me that I would need my reading glasses to even see his face. I can tell he wants to hurt me. I began imagining my self-defense moves in my head. I know an elbow is the only thing that can save me. An elbow or a knee, and I am envisioning my elbow hitting this man in the side of the face because he had me pinned against the

back of the bus stop and I can't get away and all the people have scattered and the bus is nowhere. And I imagined if only I could get that one good angle and I rose on my toes and raised my elbow trying to look like I was blocking him from me. He pushed me up against the bus stop structure. And my muscles are shaking. I could see the move so clearly but with all my bags and him so close and tall and the bus stop behind me I had no way to make the move I envisioned. I felt devastated and more scared than I had been in some time.

Then there it was. Just like I had seen it. It was the man who asked for *my* help. My vision passed into him and through him. Like a wave busted out from the sea of concrete below, his elbow rose high above the angry yelling madness. The perfect blow, the one I saw would have to hit him just so, to take him out. And I felt the sweat spray me as the mist of the salty sea. Hit with the blow to his head and he was down and out like the tide, and still and flat as the sand. His head hit that sea of concrete and everything was still. All the people had watched, then they all stared. The man who had approached me in good humor, *imitating helplessness* had somehow and with his God given elbow, taken the face to the ground and with it, three hundred pounds of limp limbs and torso followed.

I said nothing. There was a refined moment where our lines of vision neared and broke away, out of respect, out of a

closeness untouchable and unspeakable. The crowd was shifting. I looked up to see the 109 approaching. Everyone formed a line where we all knew the bus would soon stop.

We all found our seats. No one said a word. I knew very well, that I knew nothing. I hoped everyone else was clear on that. I still had the earbuds in my ears and I sat looking out the window waiting for the bus to move. Listening to Frankie. Somehow the book had backtracked to the place where the priest tells him that it is *he* who "should be washing the feet of the poor." I sat looking out the window wondering if the man would ever move. I thought he would not. I imagined a pool of blood forming around his head, but swept that image from my visual repertoire, for fear I would make it happen. The bus pulled away.

Figure 9. Pissing on Today



55. Tale of Dear Dr. Charles

I am writing in response to your offer. I don't think it is healthy for me to be writing. I find myself wanting to write and create non-stop now, not just poetry. The poetry work has refueled my drive to return to the visual and performing arts as well. I have no studio space, so this is a *ridiculous* notion. I find myself staying up late when I cannot afford to. I am worse at teaching, for this lack of sleep. I find I am fed in ways and then left with feelings of greater insecurity.

My present state is most certainly the fault of both yourself and your wife for encouraging me in this frivolous endeavor when I so obviously cannot afford to tease myself in this way.

You may think this is funny. I am serious. I am at a complete loss for how to move forward and find some glimpse of stability. Part of me wants to be publishing, reading and performing but I feel scared of repercussions from the stalker that originally destroyed so much, *years* of my work and also from the department because of the unpopular subject matter that is my life.

I have tried many of the resources set up for individuals here with "issues". Yet the level of: ptsd related anxiety I experience, the continued threats I deal with, the history of

extreme physical and mental abuse and years of homelessness/poverty do not fit the bill. Staff generally walk away in shock, judgmental comments falling off their lips and then they go to ask superiors for help. At which point I am told, they are not equip to help individuals like me.

As a woman who has lived more than the last twenty years in various levels of hiding, I already have faced extreme challenges maintaining steady work. In accordance with advice from various experts in this field, including the FBI, I have tried to maintain a limited traceable paper trail and/or work history.

I have often worked as a ghost. I received a publicly commissioned bronze in 2008, my first and last. The press release accidentally used my legal name resulting in my son and I being tracked down *again*. At that time I had a gallery representing me and a studio. I was dropped from the gallery shortly after they were notified of the potential danger. I lost my studio shortly thereafter for other yet directly related reasons. Living in hiding and without a paper trail has made me appear shady to potential employers. Being honest has it's repercussions as well, judgements and justifiable fear of getting caught in the crossfire. Participating here with you in these ventures has caused a major regression in maintaining the safety protocols I have been advised to keep. This could be good

in finding work and not so good for other things. At this point it does not seem that there is an interest, beyond my own, in balancing the scales for the sake of safety.

So as of late, I decided it wise to go back to hiding, work as a ghost as I did for years and at least I'll know a little better where I stand.

So, thank you but no thank you.

Sincerely

Amee

Curriculum Vitae

Elee Oak

oake@unlv.nevada.edu

520.275.1752

MFA Candidate Creative Writing - University of Las Vegas Nevada
Expected Graduation Spring 2017

Thesis Committee: Dr. Maile Chapman, Dr. Donald Revell, Dr.
Evelyn Gajowski, Dr. Joanne Goodwin

BFA Sculpture/Video/Performance - The School of Visual Arts NYC
Spring 2012

Advisor Joel Otterson <http://joelotterson.com/>

Un-matriculated

Art Center College of Design in Pasadena
Minneapolis College of Art and Design

Graduate Teaching Assistant

Department of English, University Las Vegas Nevada–Fall 2013–
Spring 2017

English 101 Composition

Responsibilities included designing curriculum to conform to
specific requirements of the English Composition Department:
syllabi, assignments, lecturing, conferencing, quizzes, writing
prompts and mid-term/final essay exams for assessing students'
performance.

Writing Center Tutor

University Las Vegas Nevada Writing Center–Fall 2013–Spring 2017
Academic Writing

Instructor/Tutor/Curriculum Development/Consultation

Oak Studios- Fine Art Studio

June 1979 - 2013

Providing Instruction Consultation and Design Direction in the
areas of Sculpture, Bas Relief, Charcoal, Watercolor, Visual
Journaling

Substitute Teacher

2004-2011

City High School Tucson, Arizona

September 2007- May 2010 Tucson, Arizona

Followed the course plans set by instructors for math, science, English and was given free reign to develop curriculum for fine arts classes.

Curriculum Developer/Art Instructor/Consultation

The Drawing Studio

September 2004 - September 2009 Tucson, Arizona

Refining curriculum for and teaching courses in classic charcoal drawing, water color, bas relief, and visual journaling to adults and advanced youth. Used foundational skill sets to develop courses and instruct student from a range of skill levels. Visual Journaling is a course that I developed specifically to strengthen the confidence of students and free them from their fears of judgment as they relate to their creative process.

Fine Art Workshop/Never Too Young

Second Street Day School

Tucson, Arizona

Facilitating two day workshop walking every preschooler through the process of bas relief using water base clay molds, casting plaster into them, finishing and sealing them with a wax based final coat. Each child walked away with a ready to hang timeless piece.

Facilitator Spiritual Gifts Workshop

Rincon Congregational Church

2004 Sisters of Perpetual Adoration Mission Tucson, Arizona

Developed Curriculum and Facilitated Two Day Spirituality and Creative Gifts Retreat for Adults with or without Faith or Religion for Rincon Congregational Church. Using a Variety of Techniques I have developed to help people connect with their Inner Voice I walked participants through an Inspirational Weekend. Upon completion they all possessed tangible Charms symbolizing their Creative Growth and Potential.

Classic Charcoal Drawing Instructor

Muse Tucson's home for the Arts

2001 - 2004 Tucson, Arizona

Primarily instructing students in the process of Still Life drawing, taught Three hour studio classes focusing on Classic Charcoal to Adults and Advanced Children. Demonstrations began each class.

**Classic Charcoal Drawing Instructor/Mentor for Youth in the Arts
Art in Reality Tucson**

1999 - 2003 Quincy Douglas Tucson, Arizona

Developed Curriculum and met three hours twice weekly with Middle School Youth who could not otherwise make it in the Public School System. I led them through multiple techniques I have adopted from Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain as well as The Artist Way with additions of my own. Often from broken, violent, drug and gang entrenched families and/or homes, these students put on their own art exhibition every year. Doing everything from making and framing the artwork to hanging the show to cleaning the venue at the completion of the event. In addition to teaching the in fine arts I taught cooking classes.

Creative Empowerment Coach

Women and Children's Shelters

1990 - 2003 Undisclosed/Hidden Shelters

Facilitating Weekend Workshops Designed to foster Self-trust and Self-love through a series of Meditative Visual Exercises. Leading Structured Conversations that build Connections Drawing the Focus to the Similarities of the Group.

Owner/Operator

Big Sky Organic Home Delivery Service LLC

June 1996 - May 2001

This venture grew from inspiration directly resulting from serious health concerns facing my family. Big Sky Organic Home Delivery Service became an unexpected jewel. A trail blazer in the industry, we delivered personalized boxes of organic produce to residents and some restaurants in the Tucson area.

I personally lead much of our picking, made about 150 deliveries a week, organized community building events such as: recipe contests, potluck outings, and monthly gifts for our regular clients. I ran the recipe department, developing and writing new recipes each week, based on the seasonal produce available each week. I wrote the newsletter, which included current information on food remedies as well as developments in the organic food industry. The newsletter often cited Paul Pitchford's Healing with Whole Foods. The newsletter additionally cited quotes share personally with myself by Dr. Andrew Weil, who voluntarily endorsed of Big Sky until its end. His only compensation being a bi-weekly delivery.

Big Sky Organic Home Delivery Service changed organic food accessibility in Tucson. At the time we opened, Veritable

Vegetables (the finest produce distributor on the west coast) did not yet deliver to Arizona. Networking with Aqua Vita, Rays Ranch, New Life and the Food Conspiracy, we initiated deliveries from Veritable Vegetables to the Tucson area.

The business came to an end, unable to recover financially from a natural disaster.

**Arizona Department of Corrections
Intensive Visual Journaling Workshop
Arizona Department of Corrections
2001 Tucson, Arizona**

This spiritually based introduction to Visual Journaling served young fathers, recently out of prison and/or on probation. I walked participants through a number of exercises that I designed to motivate the release of inner judgments and moving forward with positivity. Participant walked away with their own journal and having taken the first steps to an empowering practice.

**Classic Charcoal Drawing Instructor
Miles Exploratory School
1998 - 2001 Tucson, Arizona**

Taught elementary school children the basic science of light and shadow guiding them through exercises using charcoal and rag paper twice weekly over sixteen weeks. I made use of Still life and photography to help illustrate lessons in addition to demonstrations at the beginning of every class.

**Rocky Mountain Parent Participation Nursery School
San Francisco California
1993 - 1996**

Developing and teaching various one and two day intensive creative workshops for preschoolers including: Basic Charcoal Drawing, Watercolor, Bas Relief and cardboard playhouse construction—as well as: The Art of Making Pie (from the raspberry patch to the oven), Vegan Collard Greens, and Traditional Slovenian Apple Strudel.

Neon Lit Las Vegas Nevada

Reading Excerpt from Novel 2017
Reading Excerpt from Novel 2016
Reading Excerpt from Novel 2015
Reading Excerpt from Novel 2014
Reading Excerpt from Novel 2013

Odyssey Storytelling - Story Arts Group, Inc.

Shoot from the Hip - Improvisational story telling foreseeing excerpts my Novel, in the very beginning stages 2010

Exhibitions

2010 PCC Proscenium Theatre Juried Digital Video and Film Arts Screening

2009 Conrad Wilde Gallery Tucson AZ "Beautiful Morning" Performance

2008 GLAMOK NYC a "Circus Amok" Event - Group Exhibition

2008 Conrad Wilde Gallery Tucson AZ "Falling Out of Line" Oak and Geissman

2006 Conrad Wilde Gallery Tucson AZ "Rising From Instinct" Group Exhibition

2006 The Drawing Studio Self Portrait Exhibition of Artist/Instructors

2005 Conrad Wilde Gallery Tucson AZ "She Objects" Group Exhibition

2005 Drawing Studio Tucson AZ Group Sculpture Exhibition

2004 Arts Partnership Gallery Tucson AZ Group Exhibition

2003 Rincon Congregational Church Tucson AZ Permanent Bronze Memorial Installation in the Columbarium and Prayer Garden

2003 The Shane House Tucson AZ "Woman's Collective Group Exhibition"

2002 Rincon Congregational Church Tucson AZ One Woman Exhibition

2002 East Miles Gallery Tucson AZ One Woman Exhibition

2002 The Epic Tucson AZ One Woman Exhibition

1992 Shell-Ter Site San Francisco Housing Designs by Homeless Artists Groundswell

1988 Morgan Avenue Park - Brooklyn NY Sculpture Installation Exhibition

1987 School of Visual Arts Performance and Installation

1883 Performed and Exhibited at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design