

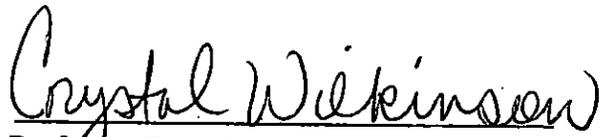
**ACROSS OUR NATIVE WILD:
EXPLORATIONS IN THE SEARCH FOR HOME**

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INTRODUCTION

Every story has already been told, right? Maybe. That is the question that tightens my writer's chest. It is in the way you tell the story that makes it new, right? Maybe.

When it comes down to the end of the day, when I am sitting at my laptop working through an image that may have caught my attention earlier, and perhaps scribbled a jolt of it on the back of a receipt, maybe it no longer matters whether my story has already been told or not. It's the telling itself—the giving and the receiving—that moves us onward. It is for that that we continue to return. I'm not sure if I have ever heard a writer proclaim that they write because they want to. Maybe some of us don't even have to. We just do.

I have come to believe that good writing takes place the moment it is written, because that is when the heart of the subject reaches out. It is transformed into literature, or art, later, when the writer tears through copious revisions, mixes and matches new ideas with old ones. Because of this, most of my better work is short fiction, sometimes even based on creative nonfiction. In the same respect, most of my short fiction is lyrical, in an attempt to combine the art of poetry with the aesthetics and more open narrative options of fiction. A good poem will use every single word, word placement, and line to its advantage—there is only one way that each poem could be, and electing to use a different word would make a different poem. I have applied this general philosophy to short fiction, so that more than the words are connecting with the reader, thus leaving a much stronger impact. The reader may not

come away, then, remembering every line of the piece, every movement in the narrative, but they will leave with a feeling of change, or understanding—something higher. This is what good poetry does, and this is what I try to establish in my short fiction.

Ideas are flying around us everywhere, and sometimes it seems as if you can reach your hand into the air and pluck one out. That is when days are sunny and work is slight. Most days are not like these. That, I believe, is one of the main problems for writers—reading the work of great authors like Junot Diaz, Gloria Naylor, Edwidge Danticat, and Fred Chappell—and trying to make your own words come together and sound as eased as theirs, first try. What we need to tell ourselves, then, is that each of these authors has their own voices, techniques, narrative styles. And so does every other writer. Still, it can be disheartening, and when you cannot find the time to reach perfection, it almost feels wasteful. But most of the time, my ideas never come to me consciously. Instead I have to trust the page, and myself, and allow it to come out through me from—somewhere—my subconscious, maybe. Then, when the core has been written, I can spread out from there.

As ironic as it may be, poetry is what I find myself returning to again and again for inspiration. Although it is repetitive, I cannot escape the fact that poetry leaves me with something I cannot understand, yet makes me reach further into myself. Coupled with our human need to understand, it only makes sense that I attempt to explore this through writing, whether it comes in the form of poetry or prose. E.L. Doctorow stated it simply, “Writing is an exploration. You start from

nothing and learn as you go.” I cannot say that I agree with this statement entirely, because writers never start with nothing; something is always laying around in the back of our minds, an image or a hint of light leaning toward an understanding, but as we write, we begin to open the windows and more light comes in. A poem may not lead us to an exact understanding, one we can state clearly in our minds or with speech, but it gives us the feeling of understanding, like the numbing sensation after stepping out of a too-hot bath. After reading poets like Audre Lorde, Lucille Clifton, and a more open reading of Emily Dickinson, my style was significantly influenced by feminism. Now feminism is something my writing cannot escape from. I have been told to reach into my body and find the writing there—that is what poetry does, and it is for this reason that feminism has impacted me. That is not to say every piece surrounds abuses or overt proclamations of feminism, not at all. Instead, it has helped tune my writing better into myself, and again, the core flows out easier, into art.

Another prominent theme I find repeating itself in my work is that of returning home, or a character’s dilemma with finding where, or what, exactly home is. Of course, this does not always mean the place they were raised, or where they were born or lived most of their lives. It is something bodily. A person can travel to escape, but they will always have their body, changing with the land. And I must say that I do not always attack this theme dramatically, or directly. In my short story “Mare” a boy struggles against losing the mother and farm he once knew as home. In “Spine” the narrator combines her body with her family and experiences to find home. For me it is true that we write what we know, and that in everything we write a

sliver of ourselves is intertwined with imagination. I believe that is why we repeat certain themes, they move from an inward obsession to an outward one, and help to relieve from us a certain part of it.

Lastly, I will speak of my personal style. A few years ago I would have only recognized the narrative arc in a short story, focusing mainly on the plot and content. Then I was introduced to writers like Gloria Naylor, who, in *The Women of Brewster Place*, eases her writing in between time and space (and literally jumps years in the length of one page, without breaks), or short story cycles as profound as Junot Diaz's *Drown*, where he is able to take a country miles away from me (in many respects) and still manage to ground me in place and time, and even in body, with the characters. For these writers, the content compliments the style, rather than the other way around. The focus is on the act of storytelling itself. I imagine that, years ago, when a group sat around a fire to hear stories, they would have been dulled if the storyteller had a monotone way of speaking instead of raising his voice and letting it fall at the perfect moments, or if he remained motionless rather than putting forth his entire body into the narrative.

It is this way of thinking that can keep a person writing when every story has already been told. Move away from the basics, experiment, find how this sounds when it is said with your own voice. Personally, I have attempted many styles, but only two have stuck with me, which on the surface contradict each other. One is lyrical. The other is brisk. I believe that choosing the right phrases and rhythms in brisk writing, you can still connect your reader to the prose with a strong lyrical

intent. It follows closely with the idea of showing the art, or showing the narrative, rather than telling. Lyrical, on the other hand, can easily turn into purple prose, and the reader is likely to put the piece down before even reaching the core. While working with and in between these, and later by combining the two styles, I have found what I would consider my voice.

There is typically not a time that I think of something particular and feel that it needs to be written. In fact, it is not until after it is written that I realize my subject's significance, as I already mentioned. My general narrative strategy follows that basic idea; style is privileged over content. Of course I do not mean to imply that content is not important, but it is true that not every story needs a plot in the traditional sense. The way the piece is introduced and transitions into a new understanding should meet the content easily to follow through with the most force, however subtle.

I have been told that writing is a way to pray, and that is something I will never forget. In all of the technical terms we use to define what we do, in all of the speeches, and in the all of the academic airs we throw on every morning, we will always be touched on a deeper level by writing, which leaves us with something we know and realize without words, even if it is birthed through words. This reason alone can give courage and bring change within ourselves. That is why I write.

SPINE

My father won't say it, but he doesn't have to. Chris, my brother, slants from neck to mid-back where his body kneads the couch in beats. He is twenty-one and moving back and forth as if he is holding a baby. He has done this for years. After school he put on heavy headphones, the kind that swallow your ears whole, and turns on the stereo and rocks. The times he is still rocking when my mother comes home from work she laughs and says she rocked him when he was younger. After she's cooked dinner she makes my father's plate first, then Chris's. I make my own.

Chris sits in the same place, on the couch that now bends in for him like his spine. He has just come home from the chiropractor. He has scoliosis. My father decides to move the bent-in couch into Chris's bedroom.

My mother is frowning. "Johnny, he can't lift that."

My father yells for me to come into the living room. "Pick up that end, Anna," he says. I go to the other side and straighten myself, trying to lift with my thighs and not my back, but the strain is thickest there.

My father grunts and his forehead begins to glisten. We carry the couch halfway before I have to let it down. My brother comes toward me, sprawling out and snapping his fingers awkwardly as they push down toward his knees, his shoulders slanting and wriggling back and forth. "Move, Anna," he says and picks up my end of

the couch. I try to lift at the couch's belly, but only get in the way, making my brother have to hold the heavier end longer while my dad moves the couch up the two stairs passing into the kitchen. From behind I can see it, Chris's back moving one way. It makes me think of my father's shoulders that lean to an angle, one reaching up while the other lowers down.

Some fish do not have spines.

Neither do some people.

I am looking at the spine of the hills, rounding toward the sky of my backyard. I am sixteen. I stand from the grass and unwind the kite string from its holster. Running, I hold its center by the two columns that connect its pieces. When it reaches the air I can see the wind tugging and bending its arms inward. My brother, Alex, is close behind me.

I jump the ditch that separates our property from our neighbor's, and keep running. At the line where trees used to stand I turn around as if they were still there, and meet my brother somewhere in the middle. Our kites tangle in the air and fall together. We sit in the grass to pull them back apart.

It has been five minutes and Alex is already standing to go back inside. I watch the gait of his walk, looking at him like I think my mother would, trying to pull him up by a string in his neck.

When the door closes I follow. My father stands like a column in the center of our house, arm stretched to the ceiling untwisting a light bulb from its socket. I hear my brother in his room, the couch aching with his dives back and forth. My father asks me to hand him a new light bulb.

Ninety-eight percent of animals do not have spines.

Some are filled with unmoving fluids.

My mother thinks Pentecostal people are weird, especially the women. I go to school with a Pentecostal girl, and after my mother told me this I watched her. Her entire presence is made in fluidity.

She lifts her long hair that I know must've taken hours to curl this morning. It rises from the backs of her legs to her stomach and she lets it fall freely, slapping against the back of her neck before it loosens and rests over the chair's back. The legs beneath her skirt are the same, draped easy over the chair's seat. I know she can feel the air filling up her skirt like water and she swings her feet, hooked at the ankles, moving now like a mermaid's fin.

Later my friend takes me to his church. A man with a rounded belly is kicking his feet into and out of the red carpet. The stereo plays a song that beats "Hallelujah" every other note, and the pastor holds the microphone to his lips on the off beats and sings it lower.

A short, thin woman pulls herself to the front. She is hanging her hands in the air and then bending her entire body down and up, shuffling her feet back. She is smiling and wearing thick soled tennis shoes. Her hair laps over her shoulders and back, some hanging down and lowering with her breasts.

Three men make a line and hold hands, kicking their feet and arms up and down. I have heard they are drunk with the holy ghost. I realize I am the only one not dancing, and move to the bathroom until the church doors are opened again.

At home my father stands stiff and shakes his head. He knows where I've been.

Step on a crack, break your mother's back.

Step on a line, break your mother's spine.

The last time I've been in a church I wore pantyhose, striped black and red, and a skirt that pouffed at the bottom from fish netting. If I had breasts then, I would have worn my shirt low-cut.

My brother and I ride in the car with my mother to South Shore. We are going to meet the pastor and his pregnant wife in their home beside the church. I have written questions on a piece of paper. My brother sits in the backseat moving his knees up and down and patting a rhythm with his hands that feels off-beat to me.

When we enter their house I am surprised at their large bookshelf that takes an entire wall's space. It is filled and overfilled. The preacher's wife takes my mother to show her the new baby crib.

My brother and I sit on the couch, the preacher in front of us in a kitchen chair, elbows bent on his knees and hands clasped prayer-like, pointing at the space between my brother and I.

He starts his speech and I can't help but think of how many times I've heard this tone—that amazed, more air than vocals kind of talk. I smile, but when my brother leans away from me I fold my paper back and slide it into my back pocket. I don't know if he is moving his body because of the bent hardness in his spine, or if he is cutting down the center that lines the space between us.

Rock-a-bye baby, in the treetop,

When the wind blows, the cradle will rock.

The car pulls into the driveway and my brother is the first to get out. He molds himself into the bent-in couch and hugs his earphones tighter to his head. My mother sits in the rocking chair at the entrance of the living room, where she has rocked all of her babies, her great body billowing against our small ones, every movement of her lulling us to sleep. The dog jumps into her lap, and she tells me to find the family Bible. "It's somewhere on the bottom bookshelf," she says. I pull it out: a ten pound book with green scaling for its cover, a copied, color painting of Abraham in the

center. Papers come out at its edges, birth certificates, babies' footprints, old letters. Beside it is the fold-open photo album. I carry them both to the living room.

My mother opens the Bible and runs her fingers down its crease. I open the photo album and the first picture is of Chris at two, his fat legs sand-spotted, feet pointing up as he sits on the muddied beach. My mother leans over and tells me that they're in Florida there, "He's trying to catch sand crabs." You can see small ditches in the sand where the crabs dug away from him. He leans toward the middle of his spread feet, fingers pointing awkwardly everywhere, but you can't really see what he's reaching for. "I don't see any sand crabs," I tell her.

She puts the Bible on the coffee stand and takes the album from me. "There," she says, pointing at a dark blotch in the photo. I move the photo out from its holder and the blotch is gone, but you can see it still on the plastic cover from the album. I hold the photo close, "Oh, I see." She picks the Bible up and edges back in the rocking chair, humming a song I never heard the words to. I hold the photo of my young brother up beside her large body moving in the chair, close my eyes and see his two-year-old legs draped across hers, the two of them moving together, back and forth, back and forth.

When the bough breaks, the cradle will fall,

And down will come baby, cradle and all.

INITIATION

There's a story behind the hills. Native to the dead church and the dead leaves and the dead boy in his grave. It says a man comes from the ash heap and falls back a boy. It says that there, acres measure your blisters and green gold measures your soul. It says that when you dig a grave, all you do, is dig a grave.

There were four of us. My father, the boy's father, and a strange man whose voice I never heard. The funeral would be at seven o'clock, because that was the time they always went fishing Saturdays. It was unusual, and only four people came, stood like diamonds rescued from a mine. The boy's father was grateful, I guess. But he never really looked up from the dirt. He was a poor man, and we were digging a poor man's grave.

We had three shovels, so we took turns between watching the sunrise and digging. It was an older cemetery, beside a rotting church with a potbelly stove that wasn't used anymore. It was dead, and smelled like mold; when the wind moved across your face it carried fire and brimstone with it. But the funeral service was held down the street a few miles, in a building with brand new siding, called the New

Haven Church. Inside it smelled like fresh, just unrolled linoleum, though blue carpet covered the floors.

My father woke me up that morning. We lived in a trailer, and there wasn't a door in our home that was not a hanging sheet. Every few months my mother would tear down the solid white ones for just a little while, and exchange them for sheets with yellow flower patterns and swirling lines. No matter how often she took those sheets out back and beat the dust out of them, it clung.

He knocked on the doorframe to my room and it was a long time before I realized my eyes were already open. He probably didn't say anything, I don't remember. But a few minutes later I was sitting on the cement block trailer steps, lacing my boots.

The boy's father was not waiting when we got to the old church. It was still dark, and I asked my father to keep the headlights on, but I knew he wouldn't. *It must've been the battery...* but *no—no, I don't think that was it.* We waited until our eyes adjusted to the black; there wasn't even a moon or a star. Not even a north star.

Soon a man came on foot with the only lantern we would have. In my mind I named him the silent man. His skin bronzed between the night and the glow of the lantern, and a stinking cigar smoked between his knotted fingers. There was no greeting, no awkward nod. I thought he was mute at first, and when I asked him, my father slapped the back of my head. The silent man shook his head no.

So we stood beside the plot for awhile. I edged my toe onto it; I could tell where it would be by the other graves. And my father lifted his hand like he was going to smack me again, but the silent man stepped onto the plot before he could. So

my father's hand hung in the black for a few seconds. I don't think he realized. And all the while the man was just looking down at the plot, circling like a dog, and kneeled there in the dew soaked grass. I think he was getting ready to say something, but he wasn't talking to us.

That was when the Buick pulled up. The boy's father pulled a rusty shovel from the backseat and limped over to us. He looked at the plot first, at the silent man kneeling and looking up at him, and then he shook my father's hand, pulling him into a hug. I think my father said he was sorry, and the boy's father waved his hand at him. He put the first hit into the ground, shoved his boot hard onto the shovel's shoulder, and lifted the soggy dirt. When he threw it to the side, the silent man stood up and grabbed his shovel. My father started in next. I watched the two red skinned men and the bronzed one working against the ground that seemed to have softened. I don't think that my father ever wanted to hand the shovel over to me, but he understood there was no choice. So he just stuck it there in the ground and I took it back up.

I dug a ditch seventy yards long for a pipeline to our trailer once. The dirt was more like gravel, hard rock that crumbled. It did not give to my hits. It wasn't like this.

I tried to watch the fog of my breath. Something about the hole, how it got farther and farther away from us, so slowly. I didn't want to see it anymore. By an hour I was sick of the hole, and the loose dirt piling beside it. It wasn't until we were halfway through that the dead boy's father handed the shovel to my own father.

We were a tribe, and the passing of the shovel a ritual. But for the boy's

father: from then on, his hands would be swollen, and reddened like eyes; from then on, he would lean on the shovel and be careful not to fall without it near. For years later I watched as, with that shovel, he dug another grave. But you can't be soft. There are too many soft people. So when my father stole the shovel out of his hands, the boy's father collapsed. His jeans were grass stained at the funeral.

The silent man, he was a machine. Metal arms drove his shovel deep into the earth and pulled roots and worms and beetles and heaved them away from the plot. He was massive and wore a sweat-yellowed shirt. He didn't come in a coat or even a jacket, just that long sleeved t-shirt, stained before I saw him. We all wore stains then; but the silent man wore his stains like a soldier. They were scars. They were beer money, and the mortgage, and fresh water. I could tell that sometimes he'd taken a shower at the campground down the road from our house. I'd done it once for a month when they turned our water off, because my father refused to take food stamps.

The shovel was taken back, and my father ripped mine from my hands. He was furious. I could tell it wasn't the father, or the silent man. I can't imagine what my father would look like at my own funeral, if the dead boy were me, but I can see him digging. In my mind my father looks the same to me as he did when he took the shovel. He would be mad at me for leaving him before he could afford a machine, before he was rested himself. For making him dig a grave.

The sun was coming and he was red. My father took off the jacket that my mother made him wear and threw it onto the dirt pile. He was striking Earth harder than the silent man now, while the boy's father stopped every few minutes, wiped the sweat from his forehead back to his short hair, and watched. There was one time that

he leaned into my father, like he wanted to wrestle him or embrace him; either way, it was like he wanted him to stop. My father didn't deserve that fury. *His* son was right here.

The plot grew darker even though the sun grew brighter. I'd never dug a grave before. People don't do that so much. It's the job of the silent man.

The boy was young, I guess, because his father looked the same age as mine. They wear Kentucky ball caps, mustaches, grey stubble, and stretched rough skin, except my father is tall and thin, and the boy's is short with a limp. They started to talk for the first time when my father hit rock that sounded like a pipe.

The silent man looked up and nodded. The boy's father said, it's just the rock.

Ain't never heard no rock make that noise, my father said.

Well it does here, he said.

Guess it does, my father said. Right funny, though.

Sure is, the boy's father said. The silent man looked up again and nodded.

My father started to dig harder and I thought he was going to cry. He began to look worse than the boy's father, so I tried to take the shovel back out of his hands again. His back was turned to me, and when he felt my hand tugging at the shovel, stuck solid in the easy dirt, he pivoted like a man crazy.

The hit to my nose landed me on the ground and I tasted copper. The men stopped digging.

Then the silent man cupped his hand over his eyes, shielding the sun, looking up at the orange sky. I was still laying there on the ground and the boy's father pulled me up by the arm. My father never said anything about it. Not ever.

After the funeral we drove twenty miles outside of town, just my father and I. My mother rode in a car with the father's sister, I guess to his house. We rolled the windows down, hung our arms down the truck's metal, feeling the dirt grab onto our hairs as the wind pushed them flat against the doors, numbing the soft parts. My father leaned into the air, his hat pushed up just enough to see the red lining it left on his forehead. He still wore his jeans.

When we got closer to the county line there was a McDonalds; we could see its yellow lights from far off and he slowed the truck as we neared the entrance. He asked if I wanted anything and I shook my head no. He pulled into the parking lot, slow and eased like that all the way to the back corner, parked but never turned the motor off. I remember the door opening, the familiar sound, but not shutting. He leaned one arm into the truck bed and pulled out the shovel and chucked it over the fence into the dumpster, trying to be sure that that shovel would not be passed again.

He came straight back to the car, and we left to go home. The sun was barely coming down by then, light enough to see everything clear but cool enough to breathe easy. My mother was waiting for us outside the father's house; I got out and she moved into the middle. She stretched both her arms forward and then lay one hand on my knee, one on my father's. At home, my father bent low to her on the couch, rubbed his hand on her bony shoulder and kissed her forehead. He wrapped his fingers around the fat of her upper arm and pulled her up. They left the house, but I never heard the truck start. I laid on the couch where my mother had sat and fell asleep thinking of the sound of the silent man's voice.

SHELTER

We are thrown together here like gravel. We are hardened pieces of something else, thrown against and carrying one another. Some of us will leave tonight and come back tomorrow. Some will leave and never come back. Some of us will be here forever.

They call this place Beacon Harbor. Our men are not allowed in. They're not even allowed on the property. This harbor is meant to be a secret from them.

Here we blend like a family with all the same features, sagged cheeks or the same wrinkle on our foreheads. If it's our first night here, sometimes it's bruises. But like baby teeth, those fall away. The building is two stories, the top floor our rooms, the bottom our lounges, kitchen, a classroom for us to relearn how to be a woman from women who seem too sympathetic to be real women. You come into the city, follow traffic to the near end of it, and turn down a road that will lead you to us. But you cannot know more than that.

Most of us didn't know more than that. It takes a while for people to work up the courage to tell us, like they're afraid we won't understand that the way we use our language means everything *but* help, or that we'll carry something here with us that stays.

The women here before me have left that something that no one can name. The women here now will leave it, too. It's something like a trail of bread crumbs—we are all still holding the full roll and know our way home, but nothing leads us forward.

I'd say my piece of that is rotting by now, I've been here so long. My daughter has come with me and she leaves only for school or to see my parents. The divorce should go through sometime in May, I've been told. But these lawyers I have are from the state, trained to deal with poor people like me. Something about the way they talk makes me feel that if I had money I would never have needed to come to them, not to come to anyone at all.

My daughter and I share a room with a woman ten years younger than me. She has no children. She doesn't even have something near a daughter. For this I can only feel bad for her. Allison, my girl, is as raw as a carrot—slender, skin creased so tight in places she looks striped with dirt, but she is clean as a little girl gets. Bright as a girl can get, too. And I don't know how, she sees the world through her daddy's brown eyes; he was the kind of man with clouds mixed into everything he did, so you think he just couldn't see straight. He was a hardened man, but I think he came out already ripened. There was no changing that. But when that color is on my daughter's face, you can see something alive in it, something like you can just reach down inside and tell that she's not him and she's not me. Our roommate, Miranda, doesn't see it. I watch her to see if she's looking at Allison. I watch to see some yearning in her face,

if she's trying to find the living in that brown color. But Miranda never even bothers to look. Maybe she can't stand to.

She told me once that she has tried for a baby with her boyfriend; she says he's the sweetest guy you'll ever meet. It's those times she looks me in the eye. Not in my eyes, at my eyes. The baby she said she miscarried, that was no mistake, anyone can see that.

It has been a month since she came to us. She is shy with everyone else, likes to wear her hair black and hanging down across her eyes. The day she came I French braided her hair, hair so thick it took me thirty minutes. She went to the bathroom to see herself in the mirror—and God, she *was* beautiful—but came back with those same slick strands loosened out. I didn't say anything, didn't want to scare the girl off.

Some women who come love me to French braid their hair, especially the ones with red marks or bruises or scratches on their faces. I think they want to show me, or show somebody, that they're still here and that they're not ugly.

Miranda smiles only with her lips, that are thick and so full you don't think you could get past those to even *see* her teeth. When she talks, though, you know why. Her right, top tooth, the kind that my daughter calls vampire teeth, is broken half off. It's something that makes you want to protect her—that sharp boned part of us that makes us crave meat—is gone in her. And always, she's trying to hide it from us.

A worker brought a camera one day, and before the director realized and took it away, she'd been out snapping shots. She posed some women with their children, some women with other women, and some posed alone. Or she took photos of a chair with an old jacket draped across it, or an un-made bed in the morning, even if our rooms don't have windows. After every shoot she'd sigh, and you knew she felt artistic, that she was imagining galleries filled with our faces, things we've touched, our bruises, our children—our missing teeth.

Miranda would have been the photo in the center, blown extra large, the focus that was to move all of our stories—mothers, women, children—to the world that we had lost our way from. Miranda has that tragic face, a model's thin, high bones and too-thick lips. Then, she has the most important part right there in her smile, the cut that someone gives you that you can't ever fix on your own, the kind that could only scar—the broken tooth. She would draw in charity money, her face would slide across backgrounds of domestic abuse commercials. We Americans want to help pretty people.

I watched as the worker pulled the camera to her eyes and focused it. When Miranda realized that the lens was pointed toward her, she clenched her lips together looking like she was clenching her ass cheeks. She stood and moved awkwardly to the bathroom. She didn't come out for a long time, not until after the camera was put away, so I went in after her.

I knocked. "Miranda?"

"Someone's in here," she said.

“Miranda, we’ve all got something wrong, and you ain’t no better than us. We’re all here because of some sort of chipped tooth in one way or...”

She opened the door and spoke slowly and softly, with tones lower than I would have expected. “What the *hell* is the matter with you?” She didn’t even pause, walked out before I could move.

I won’t say, but maybe I called her a bitch to some of the other women. Maybe I told stories about her and pretended she’d said them to me in our room. Maybe I just picked up her piece of gravel and sank it in the Ohio. So what? She didn’t belong here with us—we were trying to do something here. We’ve got stretch marks from our children, not clean, aborted bellies.

The first day she went with us all to a group meeting we were told to write down why we are here. You know she’s never been to a place like this because she wrote the truth. She didn’t know that she would have to read it aloud. When she refused, the counselor asked if she could read the story for her. Miranda never agreed or nodded or really moved. The counselor read:

I don’t belong at a beacon harbor any more than a harbor belongs in Eastern Kentucky when we’re miles from any ocean. But this is why I am here.

My boyfriend and I—we’re not subtle in the way we love. He tied me down and I waited for him while he went to the other room for a condom. He didn’t come back, and I haven’t heard from him since then. After an hour my wrists were starting to rub against the metal and my body had become stiff. It

was the middle of the day. Later—I don't know how long it was, hours maybe—my mother stood at the doorway. She left the room and came back with a blanket and threw it over me, never looking down. I couldn't say anything. I heard her shuffling in the laundry room, and a few minutes later she set my duffle bag on the other side of the mattress and opened it. She moved quickly from my dresser back and forth to the bed, not paying attention to what she was packing. She zipped it, loaded it in the car, and last came back for me. She dressed me without looking, never saying a word, first my panties, then my pants. Socks, shoes. It reminded me of being a little girl again. Then she took the key from the nightstand and unlocked the cuffs, left arm first to slip it into the shirt sleeve, and then the right.

In the car she told me where she was taking me. She'd only known about this place from her work as a nurse at the health department. I told her to turn around. I told her it was a mistake. I even cried to her. You see the good that did. She left me here like I am some baby in a laundry basket and this is the church steps. He'll find me, I'm sure.

The counselor read her note slowly and without much emotion—just line after line—but we could all tell there was something in it we were all supposed to feel.

Miranda left out the part about her broken tooth.

My daughter slept so quietly in my bed, I felt like I hadn't heard her voice in months. I had never missed it until then. I looked over at Miranda, her hair sprawled around her head like some mermaid princess, and I pictured her throwing her hair out the window that wasn't there. It lopped to the ground and landed dead ends on the concrete where the drain water tunnels down the sidewalk and into grass. As her boyfriend climbed the black rope she turned her head toward me, her body arched perfectly and long legs slighted to the sides. She smiled, and the tooth was gone. Completely. There was nothing but blank space. I would've cut her hair off if I had scissors.

In the morning we ate breakfast together, the three of us, and some other women who were up early. I poured my daughter cereal and myself a cup of coffee and listened while they tried to make small talk with Miranda. One of the older women looked at my face with something like, You live with her? Is she alright?

I shrugged and sat down. Miranda had a frozen waffle plain and a glass of water. She'd slept all night without even moving but looked like I'd punched her eyes blue. The coloring in her face had changed overnight, we all saw it.

I made up for what I said when I approached one of the counselors with concern for my roommate. I pulled her to a corner and spoke softly, as easily as I could make myself, about our community—about how Miranda was ruining everything—about how she made us all want to leave and just go home. No one else had told this to me, but we all breathed the same. I knew that what I felt, they felt.

Miranda was no grass-munching little girl. When I said this the counselor looked at me in a way that made me have to move my eyes from hers.

I looked behind her shoulder to find my daughter. She sat at a table at the opposite corner, stacking and un-stacking building blocks. Miranda walked over to her. She bent on her knees and talked to her, brushing her hand over Allison's hair. Allison looked up at her and smiled. I haven't seen my girl smile like that in the months we've been here. The counselor started to say something to me but I shoved past her toward my daughter. Miranda stood and backed away as I took Allison's hand and moved us back to the kitchen. It was time for lunch.

Miranda came back to us in a group meeting a week later. She read her piece aloud this time. She looked at me as she scooted her chair back, squeaking it against the floor and almost knocking it over. At her head nod I winked. She read:

A year ago I was nineteen and still lived with my mother, who raised me without help. I don't know who my father is and it's not important.

You wouldn't guess my mother was a mother of anyone. She is tall and thin but with wide hips. She works as a nurse and will not leave the house without lipstick and a shot of something.

I did not obey her house rules, and I'd promised her I would. My boyfriend was new then, and I am young, and I want to tell my mother that I'm sorry for staying out late on a night she drank more than she usually does. She never makes excuses like this, though.

He left me at my front door and when I came inside my mother called me into the living room. She was standing by the open window. It was cold and I came closer to close it for her. She must've thought something else when she shoved me down. I turned my body to try to catch my fall but I ended up landing my open mouth on the glass tableside. I cracked the glass and it broke my tooth. It is nothing magical.

When she finished I stood. "Nothing magical, you see?" None of the other women moved. "We've all been thinking it, come on. She doesn't belong with us. We are survivors. She's got nothing to survive!"

A few of the women hyped an "Amen" and moved to pat Miranda's back. One lady, a thin black woman, stood and said, "I'm glad you came to us, Miranda. I'm so glad you are here to remind us that we're still alive and that this place is something—not real."

My voice got louder and I couldn't control it. "Not real? Ladies, this is all the real we've got. It can get more real, it can get bloody and nasty and we can move our children in with it. This place is here because of us!"

The counselor had been watching us, but at my words asked us all to sit down and thanked Miranda for sharing.

A few weeks later I would watch Miranda load her duffle bag into a car and kiss her boyfriend. It was early and no one was awake, the day workers had not yet arrived. Beneath the parking lot streetlight she looked golden. I think she looked at me, to say she knew he'd rescue her. To say I was right and she didn't belong with us. To say we were old and battered, and useless. Our men would never come back, and if we went to them they would not be there anymore. To say we are a lot of sorries. When she looked at me she gleamed her broken tooth like those women whose hair I braided gleamed their broken faces. She'd said something the night before she left to another woman, the one who'd stood and spoke after Miranda read that night. I heard it. You're put together after you're broken. It was something the counselors had repeated to me over and over, told me to make it my mantra, told me to tell it to my daughter when she was older, like they already knew that she would find a man like her father.

That morning when she saw her boyfriend she smiled with all of her teeth, and I could see the missing piece as far away as the shelter.

We come together here, we welcome the other women like they are a new piece of the place, like a new restaurant opening. We pull them into us, put our arms

on their shoulders, kiss their foreheads, and mourn for them when they leave us. But they always leave something here for us. Sometimes it keeps the rest of us here longer; sometimes it is a gift to take with us when we leave.

When Miranda moved out another woman moved into my room. She had already lived in the shelter for a month, sleeping on a cot in an overcrowded room. She was older than me, older than most of us here, and snored so loud at night she kept me awake. I let her brush my daughter's hair in the mornings, and liked the way she put her hand against the back of Allison's head to keep the tangles from tugging. Sometimes at night she walked her nails along Allison's arms until she fell asleep. I have listened as Allison begged to sleep in the bed with the woman. She would climb over top my legs and put her hands on my face, the arch of her palms curved around my cheekbones. I couldn't let Allison sleep in that bed, because I wanted to be in there, too.

I think of Miranda, I wonder how she is doing. If she is with her boyfriend. If she has spoken to her mother. If she misses Allison. If she has ever been sorry.

The woman drank coffee with me in the morning. I don't think she has ever been hit by a man. I think she wanted to be here. Really, I only remember being pushed around. I don't remember bruises, I have a small scar on my back but that was a cut from when I fell against the kitchen cabinet. I only remember saying I was hit. Then admitting it with different words, abused. Domestic abuse. Then domestic abuse shelter. Need to care for your daughter. Protection. I don't remember the thing ever

happening. I forgot how to use the words that first came to me. That they had a man in them.

When I think about men, it's hard to see the one I married. I think of an older man, like someone the new woman could have been married to. Or of Miranda's boyfriend. I like to think Allison will marry a man like that.

PAPER BAGS

She just didn't have the time right. When Granny got home the plastic baggy was spilled onto the kitchen linoleum. Smelled like skunk all through the house, even up to the second floor. I told her, I said "You ain't going to fool her this time. She's going to catch you." And sure enough, Granny got her—there with the paper grocery bags still in both her spidery arms. And Granny sat the bags down on the floor beside the spilt weed, and looked down at my mama on the floor, and let out the longest, sheerest laugh I ever heard that woman belch. I swear, I could've seen right through the laugh, tunneling down into her throat. I would've pulled out my real Granny, pulled her right from this crazy thing that had just entered the house where my mama sat on the floor.

My mama, she's a real surprise. She's done things, been places, but we ain't peas in a pod, like they say down at the grocer. Because I've never been to no place I wouldn't be ashamed of my Granny seeing me there. Granny tells me it was the pregnancy, with me, that started all of it, but I know better than to think that. It was my father. My mama, she's got her mistakes, even if she tries to hide them in her sock drawer, or in the piano back, but when my granny asks her, she ain't got no trouble

laying it out for us all to hear. And she sure ain't got no trouble weeping before my Granny like she were the Lord himself. That way, I ain't never seen no woman bum around as ladylike as my mama can.

So my Granny, her body was shaking, lifting up and down the hem of her cotton skirt, and I felt like I couldn't move. Until I get the urge to lunge down at that green and grab a handful and put it right in front of my Granny's face, so she can see. Was no way she could've seen though, because she wouldn't be laughing if she could. No sir. So I do, held it to her face, not disrespectful, but like I knew I should.

That was when my Granny stopped, like she choked on the green in my hand, because it was green or because it was green in *my* hand, I don't know exactly. She stopped and looked at my eyes, then down at my mother's eyes. She said, "You two, you both got your grampy's eyes." And then smacked the green right out of my hand so some of it fell to the floor, and some flew over into mama's hair. Then she pulled her hand back up and ran her bones right across my cheek like it was years before and I wasn't born and it was her very own daughter she was looking at right then.

Only one other time I've been so angry and scared at the same time. That was just outside, by the river behind church, right before they dipped me in that dirty water for baptism. I didn't believe them, not a one, because I knew, even young as I was, that that dirty water was just more stains to wash out. You can't even eat the fish out of that river. I like to think that's what happened to my mama—got a raw salmon out of the river and it went through her body, sure, but it never really flushed back out. It was in her then, while she sat on the kitchen floor watching my Granny.

Well, my Granny I guess meant to baptize me with the smack of her back hand. (And I can tell you now, it worked better than any dirty river water.) But she never lay a finger on my mama. She skidded her puppy tennis shoes through the green, ignoring that it was there anymore, and grabbed a head of cabbage from one of the paper bags and put it in the fridge. Then she went back for the juice, the lemons, the eggs...

MARE

The mare ran awkwardly against the fence, her long neck leaning over it and her body following straight. Charlie thought he felt her hooves beating against the earth, and set his bags down in the dirt. From a few yards away, he watched his father come from the barn and toward the horse. She ran from him at first, and when he caught her he shoved his fist hard into her nose. The horse reared and then settled into the reins.

Charlie moved inside the house. Sauerkraut left over from the winter's canned food supplies was simmering in a frying pan. He watched his mother lean over the sink in her white apron, lined with sewn-on cherry patterns; the same she wore when he left. She reached to the windowsill to turn up the radio's volume, and looked out the window. She hesitated, moved her hands awkwardly down hair strands fallen from her pony tail, and took her apron off. Calm as she always was, she moved swiftly to the barn. Charlie watched her for a moment, noticing a stagger in her walk that was new to him, then sat down in a chair in the living room.

It had been three years since he had seen the farm; the smells he recalled first. Manure, a must his mother called gravel lung, rotting wood. The house had the feel of a black mold hiding somewhere. The brown chair he was sitting in came from a Goodwill store in the seventies; maybe that was enough to fill the whole house.

His mother's body was bigger than a woman's body. In fact, he realized now that he had never thought of her as a woman at all, or a girl, or even female. She was mother. Her breasts were milk only. Her opened legs were childbirth. He imagined her hips switching to the barn, her fists the only tight clench on her. Six feet, and still not as tall as his father. No makeup, no hair styling. Lye soap she made herself. Then those memories that should be too painful, or for which Charlie was too young to recall, were only simple; his father hit her face one time. She did not hesitate: she put her cigarette out on his arm, and while he was looking down at his burn, hit him across the head with a skillet. He had a pump knot that cost him two hundred dollars for a doctor to tell him it was a pump knot, that cost some dignity worth losing anyway, because she made him go to the hospital and threatened to pick the pan back up when needed. It was a cast-iron skillet. They say those kinds cook a different flavor into every food.

He looked across the room. Everything in its place. He stood up, wiped his hand across the chest of drawers his parents kept bills in. The first three drawers contained envelopes and loose papers with names of the local electric and water companies, some unfiled bank statements. In the last he found a shoebox stuffed with personal letters. The first, addressed to his mother, from his father. He dug deeper. Another, addressed to his father's mother, from his own mother. He pocketed it and threw some other letters aside. He found a doll.

He remembered this. In phone conversations his mother would mention something about the lesson she gave him when he was eight. When he came home

from school angry, more open than usual. He called her from the barn, and cried, and told her about the boy who had picked him, as if from a lineup. The boy had picked him several times, punches to the stomach. It was getting too old. Then the girl, a small girl, the smallest of the class even, who reminded Charlie somehow of his very large mother, sat by Charlie at lunch and, as if a representative of the female section of his class, opened his milk for him and poured it in his lap. He did not move, and, “Mom,” he’d said, “I can’t hit girls.” So his mother set him down with a twin set of cloth and black thread. She read it in a library book he had checked out from school and forgotten about. Together they birthed his revenge. Just once. He had forgotten about it all. He couldn’t remember what she named her doll.

He heard the screen door and shut the drawer; his father came in, followed by his mother. “Supper?” she asked.

“Yes, I’m hungry.”

They sat at the table. Through the window Charlie watched the horse galloping along the circle of the fence, her body leaning into the curves.

“I’m so glad you came home,” his mother said.

“Me too,” he told her.

His father forked his sauerkraut. Salted it and thrust some into his mouth.

“Been a while.”

“Yes, a while.”

“Too long,” she said.

“Mmhmm,” Charlie said.

His father stood and turned the radio to an AM station, playing Bill Monroe's "Blue Moon of Kentucky." When he sat back into his seat, his mother stood, pulled a half-empty pill bottle from a high cabinet, said, "Excuse me," and eased herself into the bathroom.

Charlie and his father did not speak. In between *blue moons* they heard shuffling and a gasp of her voice every now and then. They hit their plates louder with their forks, covered her by scraping sauerkraut, even from the grooved decoration that lined the plates. Their muscles became lazy and tongues smacked and darted directionless in their mouths, across their lips.

His mother returned looking as large as usual, not a red nose or eyes. She placed the bottle back in the cabinet and sat down.

"That's much better," she sighed.

His father stood, rinsed his plate in the sink, and walked back out to the barn. She held her breath for a minute. Charlie stood to rinse his own plate.

"Your father's selling," his mother said.

"It's for the best," he said, not really listening.

"Charlie, your father's selling."

Charlie came to her side and put his arms around her shoulders. She said, "Well, there's no use crying over spilt milk."

"Not at all," he smiled and kissed the back of her head.

They heard a vehicle riding up the driveway. His mother cleared the rest of the dishes. When it got closer, he noticed the large tractor trailer on the back, empty,

for transporting horses. Charlie had not been home for longer than an hour. His parents invited him to *this* dinner, of all dinners in the last three absent years. Even the news of his mother's sickness came to him over the telephone.

He walked over to the barn. No pigs, no chickens, no cows in the pasture. How had he not noticed? The building was empty of tools except a saddle, bit, and some grooming kits. It made no sense that his father had sold the tools before he sold the horse; the horse would bring in maybe six thousand, at least more than a few chickens.

Charlie watched a pair of cowboy boots step onto the gravel. His father put his arm around him, awkward, smiled and said, "This place ain't a place without her," and Charlie couldn't tell if his father was talking about the mare, or his mother.

The man spit tobacco juice on the ground and extended his hand, "Howdy, Mr. Hughes I presume."

Charlie's father took the man's hand firmly. "Well, then you know my name." His father nodded. They stood for a minute, until the man said, "This her? Jesus, she's a real beauty."

Without waiting for an answer he walked over to the fence and ran a calloused hand down the horse's neck. "Them Saddlebreds gentle as a babe." The man's reflection bubbled in the horse's eye, wide, rounded even bigger when she was afraid.

"Easy, now," his father said. "She ain't accustomed to you just yet." The man pulled his arm away and turned toward Charlie and his father. His father asked if he had spoken to the veterinarian who had examined the horse; the man nodded and said,

“Well, let’s see her. Won’t be good trail riding if she ain’t steady. And I like them fast.”

His father looked at Charlie, who said, “Sure,” and disappeared into the barn to find the saddle and bit.

It had been at least three years since he had ridden a horse; he had never ridden this one. She felt different, like she knew more and was hiding it from you. He groomed her for a while before climbing onto her back. She eased from foot to foot, obeyed every tug of the reins, every leg squeeze to her midsection. He walked her, then trotted, and cantered, all eased, the familiar feel of wind and saddle leather and horse sweat coming into his face.

When he nudged her one more time, to gallop, she took control of her entire body, pushing against wind and running away from the barn, toward the woods. It was too fast, he couldn’t turn her around and she was galloping nearer and nearer to the back fence. He hadn’t grabbed a whip, and even though it couldn’t help him now, he wished he had. She reached the fence at full speed and instinctively Charlie bent low to the horse’s back for her to jump; it was the only natural next move. His body bounced as he leaned down and her back turned almost vertical as if to meet his. They were over, out and running in the woods now. She had lost control with him.

It was an hour before the horse and Charlie made it back to the farm. He was off her back now, holding the reins and walking her around the fence and to the barn, her brown coat shining like a new car. He tied her reins around a 2X6 nailed to the back of a water trough.

The man was grinning. When they first came into earshot, he said, "Well, a deal's a deal. Let me get my checkbook," and ran stoop-backed to his truck.

The man ripped the check from the book, handed it to Charlie's father without looking, and walked to the horse. He started to untie her reins from the trough. She watched him again like before, the same large, rounded brown eye popping out from one side. He eased back a little. Gentle. He ran his hands down her neck again, along her back and around her hind quarters. She wasn't softening. "Ah, she'll get used to it," the man said.

For the first time, his father walked to the horse and put his hand on her neck, not petting or rubbing, just letting her know his presence. The man walked back to his truck for more chew. His father whispered something. His face was turning red, a vein pumping from his neck, right fist now clenched. He put the hand back on her neck, harder now. Charlie walked over to him, watched him so he would know. Not hard, just so his father could feel his presence. She grunted and backed up, restless in her reins, shaking her head a little for looseness.

His mother walked out of the house. She watched his father, smoothing her hands over her dress. *Well*, she seemed to say. *What is it?*

"I don't think we've met," the man said. He pushed his hand toward her. "Jim Lawless. I'll be taking that big old girl home with me," he said and winked at her.

She let him take her hand, and barely shook his in return. "Pleased."

His father held the check loosely in his hand, as if one wind would take it away, as if he almost wanted it to. "I thank you," the man said and tipped his leather hat.

Charlie did not look at his father, or the man. He took the reins from the horse and led her into the hitched trailer. He did not look at the horse. She shuffled her hooves and grunted.

Later, after the man had left, Charlie's father came slowly to the house and lay the check on the kitchen table on top of a fruit bowl. He did not speak and went to bed early.

Charlie's mother sat on the couch, fingernails pointing into her palms, listening to the AM station on the kitchen radio. Every few minutes her large chest heaved upward, paused for a minute, and sighed with a moaned release. Charlie pulled his old doll from the chest of drawers and placed it in her hands. She folded its arms in and out of her bony fingers, flipped it upside down like a factory inspection, and then stood. She walked to the kitchen, footed the trashcan lid open, and tossed the doll inside.

They did not keep a Holy Bible in the house, not even for marriage or birth or funeral listings, not even hidden somewhere in a closet in the ornaments bin, to bring out and decorate a table with during Christmas.

On the night his father called with news of his mother's bad health, Charlie was studying for an exam. It was his second year at the state university, and he did not know why he had not come home for the summers.

On the phone his father did not stop speaking for a few minutes, and Charlie could only sound a few grumbles and "mmhmms." But by the time he hung up ten minutes later Charlie could only remember a few words, grouped together. *Refuses medication. Says she'll make her own. Cancer. Not long. Long enough, she says. Not too long, though.* While his father spoke, Charlie thought he had heard his boots shifting through the dirt-covered cement of the barn floor, pacing. He had heard his mother opening the oven, its door creaking, in the house's kitchen that was at least thirty feet away from the barn. But he knew that his father was sitting at the kitchen bar with the telephone to his ear, not moving anything. Charlie wondered where his mother was, if she heard the conversation. If she was nodding her head, or reaching for the phone and his father wouldn't give it to her and this time, just this time, she gave up and folded her hands onto her chest.

That night Charlie wrote his mother a letter. It was formal, only suggestions to take certain medications, reasons why she should at least try them. When he read it over he realized it sounded too objective, more like a doctor's letter from across the states. He thought later he should have told her that his father was reason one. Himself reason two. Her, his mother, her entire life before and after his birth, then the dinners, how she moved through the house, her body so big but so eased that she

avoided every floor creak, then the way she talked, the doll—reason three. It made him realize how long he had been gone. He crumbled it and threw it into the trash bin.

He went back to college and in the year his mother's body worsened. Her voice on the phone sounded scratched, and he imagined stretch marks lining down her neck from where she had to try so hard just to speak. His father called more often, he became more eased, but he never sounded the same when he saw him in person. His father said she was thinning, and Charlie imagined her body. She started looking more like an elongated skeleton, where the bones jut out and there is no fat to protect anyone who holds her from the hurt.

She tried her own medicines, even without the letter. When the phone calls stopped coming Charlie realized that she had become convinced that there wasn't enough mix to heal her. Before she would agree to the hospital doctor's orders she bowed her head, bent on her knees at her own bedside, and apologized over a brand new Bible.

Charlie couldn't move. The mare was gone, the barn useless. The land hadn't been tilled. The apple tree was bare. The coin jar empty. It was summer again.

He lay in the bed, waiting for that moment when you can't feel your legs anymore. First it's in your toes, and it grows up, like shadows, into your calves. Your fingers into your wrists and thighs. It's in the muscles.

He could hear his mother in the kitchen, the oven door opening like ringing a dinnertime bell. Immediately, the smell—casserole. He met his father in the hallway and they sat at the table.

“Smells good,” his father said.

“Thank you,” she said. “It’s just biscuits and some vegetables.”

“Smells real good,” Charlie said.

They scooted closer to the table as his mother gooped the casserole onto their plates. “Let me get that for you,” Charlie said, but she ignored him and set the dish down. She poured them each a glass of water. They had vanilla ice cream for dessert.

“Feels different,” his father spoke of it first. The air.

“Mmhmm,” his mother voiced.

She pulled the food to her mouth piece by piece, careful to not let it fall back to her plate, as if it would fall onto her dress and Charlie would pull out his old bib to tie around her neck. Charlie noticed how bone-thin her hands were. She gulped her water and laid a hand on the table, rubbing her fingers in and out of the laced cloth. Charlie laid his hand on his mother’s. He imagined stones grinding, medical books with pictures.

His mother took her last bite of casserole and eased back in her chair. She stood, pulled the pill bottle from the cabinet again and went to the bathroom. It was quick this time. Quick as the sale.