

REMEMBER THE STORMS

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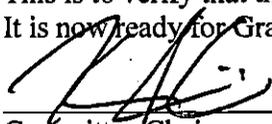
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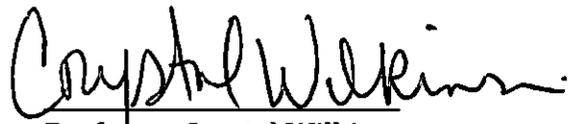


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Accepted by the faculty of the Creative Writing Program, Morehead State University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Bachelor of Fine Arts degree:



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Introduction

Writing non-Fiction means telling the truth. Creative non-fiction is doing it with a little added flair. I equate it with drawing the human figure, specifically a face. You can take what you see and draw it as is, trying to make an exact replica, tensely and tediously rendering every detail as close to the original as possible, or if you're like me, you can use it as a loose reference – a starting point. Certain faces can become engrained in one's memory. For me, the same is true with memories. I recall certain instances with such clarity, it is as if I am reliving the moment. Often I can remember where I was when I go back and look at one of my drawings. What season it was. Who I was with. I just cannot negate the relevance of art-memory and moments from my life that just seem to stand out. I document those moments for the same reason I do a beautiful face: to find the beauty from *my* perspective. In rendering a face for fun instead of within the confines of portraiture, my inspiration or muse gives birth to something original, created by my hands. It is almost as if my art is non-fiction in itself. I do not *create*. I, like many artists past and present, *re-create*. Regardless, without that base inspiration, my human renderings aren't real enough for me.

Over the years, it's become more and more evident that practice is key in both writing and art. You have to practice drawing a face. Following the curve of a cheekbone. The size of individual flecks of darker color in an iris that radiate out from the pupil. Shadows along the neck and under the chin. You have to

draw what you see while keeping in mind what you want to change. To me, this is the reason that writing and art are synonymous. I take what is relevant, leaving behind what I choose; adding a bit of poetry here or there. But I don't draw every day. I like to have an assignment - an incentive. A deadline compels my best work. I draw or sketch because I have to show a new idea for printmaking class, or because there is an exhibit I want to show in. My life is not routine, or does not stay so for very long. If I tried to draw a new face every day, I might lose my drive. I like working under pressure. Sometimes I start drawing or writing and don't stop for hours. I know I'm doing good work if I'm not checking the clock.

I draw because I enjoy the laborious exercise of regeneration. Often, when I stumble across one of the many notes I scrawl in my notebook throughout the day, it serves as a catalyst bringing forth a memory I hadn't revisited in years. Since memories are often sporadic, even after I write them down a story may not come to fruition until I can find its place. These notes I scribble are often just compelling words from whatever I'm reading at the moment. I make lists as I read, consulting the dictionary sporadically and attempting to commit words to memory. I'd always thought that the longer the word or sentence, the more meaning it contained. When I actually started taking the time to read outside of assigned materials for class, I realized that sometimes the most poignant statement is made in just a few words. Obviously, I've not

entirely learned my lesson in regards to saying much by saying little. Perhaps I've got to run a circle around a subject before it makes sense back where I began.

Non-fiction writing requires outside research and honesty in recounting this information. Part of my research for this project included spending long hours on the phone questioning my mom about her family history, about my father, and about us as kids growing up. She shared personal information with me that I hadn't heard before. I knew she was confiding in me. That is why it's so hard to write non-fiction- why every word I stick on the page has to be weighed and measured. In fact, I got so much out of conversations with my mom that I have a folder of ideas on my desktop waiting to be used that are not included here. They have a place, but they cannot be shared too soon, for I am molding opinions and beliefs about people I love to an unknowing audience. It isn't fair to vilify my grandfather for being a bigot, because that's one character flaw, and Lord knows we've all got them. Quite often, it is these flaws that create tension, and tension creates story.

Place also creates story, because with each memory comes a landscape relevant for that moment in time, and I encountered the conflicting landscapes of Louisiana and Kentucky when approaching this project. Both places are home. I have so many vivid memories and such a love of Louisiana that I knew it would create the backbone for my narrative. I wanted to show where my family began,

and why it is important to appreciate where I came from, but also where I reside now. No decision is made without affecting another down the road.

A first person narrative structure fits my writing due to the fact that the events I am revisiting are either those that I cannot forget and/or details regarding family or places that I find unique and relevant. I have a fervent curiosity to understand how the actions of one generation affect those succeeding. For instance, how was my Paw-Paw affected by his mom's abandonment? How are families affected by the death of a loved one? How do different members of a family cope with emotions such as sadness? These are questions that seem to surface in my memory – things I am compelled to find answers to through writing. I am concerned with how the past affects the current, and perhaps even the future. For this reason, I write with uncertainty, as if I am waiting for it all to disappear.

Inspiration comes in fleeting moments. I find myself sneaking away from social gatherings to find a quiet room in which to write. Previously I felt that a few drafts of an academic paper were sufficient- now I finally understand the importance of the drafting process. If I make a mistake drawing the arch of an eyebrow, of course my first reaction is to erase it and do it again. Now I allow myself the same compositionally. Regardless, often I feel a sort of ambivalence towards my "finished" work. Writing, like art, leaves room for perpetual growth

and change. A face I draw tomorrow will have changed in two years time. Why stop when there is room to better oneself?

I've found the best way for me to make things simple is to write too much and then cut, cut, cut. I have had to learn by reading, and reading as voraciously as my time allows for. I realized it wasn't fair to attempt to write non-fiction without *reading*. It is the same as saying I am an artist, but never creating any type of art. During the initial drafting of my thesis, I felt a bit lost, and when I asked for assistance, my thesis advisor, Crystal Wilkinson, suggested I read Neela Vaswani, bell hooks, and Susan Minot. Once I started reading, some switch flipped and I couldn't stop. I found authors like Ed McClanahan, Cormac McCarthy, Chris Offutt, Tobias Wolff; Sherman Alexie. I wish I had invested more of my time sooner reading such authors. I've learned something from each of them.

At the start, I found myself trying to shell out thirty pages of prose: a never-ending paragraph. Crystal suggested that I write in vignettes, which is what I've attempted to do in the pages following. Vignettes fit my interest in recording memories much better, because the memories can be entered and exited quickly, leaving a perfect picture of a moment in their wake.

One of the things I find most interesting is the providence of time; the chance that whatever I am doing at one moment in time could and possibly will affect my future decisions, whether I am making a conscious choice or following

instructions. When Crystal told me to read *You Have Given Me a Country*, I couldn't help but see connections to Vaswani's family and my own. Her writing serves as an example of how our history shapes us; the inevitability of finding out more than you want when you start asking questions. In my research, I ended up with so much information that I had to whittle it down to what is relevant here in my discussion of place, family, history, emotion, and how all these things intertwine. I plan on expanding on all these themes in the future.

At Vaswani's craft talk, I learned that there has to be a certain level of protection present by authors, especially when dealing with immediate family. She said she had to make sure she was writing in the proper tone, with the proper honesty, so as to not lead the audience astray in any way. Vaswani creates prose with a poignancy that renders it poetic. In contrast, in Alexie's *War Dances*, I fell in love with his talent for weaving poetry into his narrative by placing actual poems between sections in the book.

I hope that my tone does not get in the way of honest writing. It has been my greatest difficulty in composing this work. Fear of sharing what may not be mine to tell has also been an issue for me, but I feel that all the background I provide is relevant both in the past and present. When I combined what I learned of Vaswani's honesty with Alexie's poetry, McClanahan's mix of satire and serious, Offutt's knack for describing place, and McCarthy's love of those short and long descriptive sentences, I ended up expanding my writing style

along with discovering a new way of varying composition that I love: the prose poem.

In writing, I had to ask myself this question: is non-fiction a cop-out? Of course not, for even if I am writing about something universal, it will not be how the kid two rows in front of me in class will write. My family is not your family; my experiences are not yours, which makes them unique. I want to experience life myself, and I know that even writing about familiar subjects will always be different if it's coming from me rather than someone else. After all, no one creates the same art. It's impossible. What is born from a creative mind belongs to that individual brain and none else. I can't say anything you haven't heard. Someone else created the words I compose with. I'm only rearranging them. I'm not pretending to have stories to tell that are life-altering or will push you to epiphanies unlike any other literature you'll read. I'm only writing because you can't say what I want to, just as I draw because my interpretation of a face varies from anyone else's. Only I can do that.

Home

I can attest to its subtle beauty: that you have to search for it among the flat, arid landscape. That the further you go into the heart of Louisiana the closer you feel you are getting to another world entirely. The trees show their age by the heaviness of their limbs resting on soft earth, like elbows holding up a reclining woman lying on her back in the sun, her hair a tangled mass of grey and white curls. I want to drink it all in like the many mosquitoes that drill into me, stealing bits of Louisiana back into themselves.

Nothing about home ever seems to change, and yet I discover something new each time I visit. Images I once took for granted are appreciated as I get older. Maw-Maw in Baton Rouge sitting on her back porch with its beautiful flowerbeds. The tiny green lizards that climb on the ceiling of her carport. Finding the see-through shell of shed cicada skin clinging to the underside of a mailbox or the bumper of Paw-Paw's silver and white GMC pick-up truck. I close my eyes and see Granny in New Orleans. Her house on the cracked street surrounded by magnolia trees. Her spaghetti and fried chicken dinners. The smell of the home my mother grew up in that's always the same no matter what season: old wood, family history, six children, salt from homemade play-doh. The dark hall leading to the bathroom with its circular golden knobs on the linen closet and the pink heater with a grille that looks like a chocolate-covered pretzel. A new cake always under a glass dish on the dining room table – strawberry, chocolate, waiting to be eaten, now with some coffee and chicory on the side.

Maw-Maw, a slender Irish woman who shows her temper by slamming cabinets instead of raising her voice. My mother, a reflection of her mom's hazel eyes and dark hair, jaw clenched when she is worried, phone slamming on the receiver when her oldest daughter calls to tell her she has gotten her first tattoo. Joe Volpi Jr., full of Granny's vigor. Amiable and fresh. A temper that manifests in one look, like a summer thunderstorm rolling in on the wind and out again. The earth taking a deep breath. Together, my parents are the thunder and the lightning. Complementary forces. Lost without each other. My dad says things like, "History is always written by the winner," and "You've got to learn everything you can, while you can." We talk cars and we talk Bob Dylan's poetry. My mom says, "One day, when you fall in love, you'll see/feel/know this and see/feel/know that," and I know what she's saying is that with my new love understanding I will learn what depending on someone outside of the family feels like, and I do not know I if will like that feeling. We talk John Mayer and we talk Tom Petty. When we talk on the phone, she wants to catch me up on the family gossip. We end the conversation more than once, neither knowing when to say goodbye, but always ending with "I love you." When I call my dad, it's get-down-to-business, because that's what Dads do. They take care of cars and money. Make sure their four daughters are safe. I ask him how to be diplomatic. Tell him what I've been learning. Both of my parents say, "I'm proud of you," which is another way to say, "I love you." I love both ways of saying it.

I am the wind circling back to my makers. They send me rushing into the world with a wealth of combined knowledge.

History

My Uncle Richard is the first boy born to Richard and Odrie Singleton. He is a Richard Jr., and once that “junior” is given out you can’t just dole it out to the next son. The first-born son has and always will hold a special place in his father’s heart. The father will look at him and think how much they look alike and how they have the same mannerisms and like the same food. Richard is an artist. My mom says as a kid he was always taking things apart, seeing how he could rebuild them. That he was always finding uses for broken things and got art awards in high school. A few years ago, Uncle Richard disappointed his father by admitting that he’s gay.

Three of the four Singleton daughters were pregnant before talk of any weddings. Aunt Darla, the fourth daughter, the aunt who lives in Washington State, disappointed my Paw-Paw by having two mixed daughters before marrying a black man named Sheroid. Now, when she calls to check in on her mom and dad, Maw-Maw has to make sure to answer the phone herself. Paw-Paw hasn’t said more than a few words to Darla in decades.

My Maw-Maw and I write letters back and forth when I get the time to write. I never *ever* send a typed letter, because she replies in beautiful, flowing cursive, and I want to do the same. Paw-Paw keeps all my letters in a special place on his big wooden desk, less than a foot away from the only picture I’ve ever seen of his mother, her hair done in a 20’s wave. Her eyes forever searching for something off to the side of the silver frame she is encased in.

After attending church for decades, even becoming a deacon, my Paw-Paw won't forgive Darla. I think it's because he feels like his mother didn't want him - that maybe he uses rejection as a security blanket for his prejudice. No one has ever told him why he was abandoned. The one aunt who knew selfishly took the secret to her grave. Paw-Paw's mom dropped him off at his grandmother's house when he was three years old. She said she'd be back, so he waited. As far as I know he never saw her a day after that. He had five or six other brothers and sisters and none of them but him were left to be raised by a poor grandparent in Mississippi; forced to walk to school barefoot or in a pair of girl's shoes because that's all they could afford.

Maybe my Paw-Paw is a man who believes in some generational curse; the same one my mom used to mention when talking about her sisters and their "having babies out of wedlock." Maybe, if he does, he should stop believing and start forgiving. My mom hasn't mentioned any "generational curse" in years.

In New Orleans, where my dad was born and raised, the family dynamic was different. He doesn't talk about his father very much, but from pictures I can tell he was Sicilian: not too tall, dark hair, dark eyes, leaning up against an old Buick, a pack of cigarettes rolled up into his white crew neck tee. My dad is most proud of that heritage, telling everyone we are Italian. Proud of the fact that we look indubitably so. My great grandparents, Lucca and Rosa Volpi, never bothered learning English, and my Grandpa Joe resented them for it, never teaching my dad Italian because he didn't want to be stuck in the old ways. Dad grew up Catholic. He didn't find out until attending college at LSU that his father had been having an affair with a woman in

Baton Rouge for years. Catholics didn't divorce when my dad was growing up. From what I can tell, the truth was a dark shadow my Granny tiptoed around. There was no need to stir things up.

Alive

It is summer. I am eight years old. The air is heavy and rain is on its way. Cumulonimbus clouds have overtaken the sun. My three sisters and I are in our swimsuits waiting to hear the first drop of rain sizzle on the hot concrete. The front door is slung open wide, a torrent of mechanically cooled air rushing out to meet the wind. Our four tiny bodies squeeze through the door opening, one solid unit, none of us yielding to the other. All trying to get to the rain first. My hair, gathered into a long braid, is falling down my back towards my waist. Anna, the sister closest in age to me, has her hand around my shoulder. We stand together, heads raised towards the sky beyond the covering of our front porch. The green hedges in front of us need to be trimmed. Weeds surround them and we know we will have to pull them again soon. A bird is heard but not seen, hiding in the maple tree in our front yard, the only tree on our property - too fragile to climb. We regret that the hard soil in our Kentucky yard let the dogwood we planted die. We hope the maple will last.

My father opens the garage. Mom winks at him; sets towels out for us on the bumper of his prized forest green Land Rover. We pile our flip-flops next to the front door and take off, pushing each other like we are all running for the same prize. Like there will not be enough rain for all of us. I have taken my glasses off. The world is a blur of colors and that makes it even more exciting. It is lunchtime, but the sky is dark and the day is loud with thunder, the lightning hiding behind distant clouds. Mom keeps a watchful eye out. If the lightning comes too close, our game will end.

The four Volpi girls run a route from the front porch to the edge of our driveway, about 10 yards or so, following Lydia, the oldest. We play tag, our fingers sliding off of wet shoulders where they should be stopping. We find puddles and jump in unison, spraying each other with debris from the street, kicking up blades of grass from the neighbor's freshly cut yard. Dead bugs who are smaller than the rain drops. Ants whose homes are demolished by a single drop of water.

Lightning flickers. Like a light bulb's last explosive word before it burns out. The storm is moving closer. Mom wants us to come inside. Thunder roars close to our heads and we run shrieking to the shelter of the garage, watching the rain fall in slanted sheets. Lydia pushes me towards the rain. Thunder. I scream at her. Push her back. We forget the electricity circling above our heads. We all run towards the mailbox, circle the basketball goal my dad cemented into the driveway a few years ago. Pretend we are actors in *Singin' in the Rain*. I grab an umbrella and rest its cold metal shaft on my shoulder, spinning it and watching the rain fly off in a circle around me. I jump into a puddle. Mary, the youngest, joins me. The fireworks above seem to have moved on. Anna and Lydia run towards us. We all fit under the umbrella. We lock arms and try to do the can-can. Lightning. We stop. Thunder.

We run back to the garage, panting. Rain dripping off our fingers. Goosebumps. Adrenaline making our hearts pound. Mom yells for us to come inside. The clouds continue to send their rage forward. We watch, a tiny flock of sheep huddled in beach towels. I wonder if the same rain that falls on our new house in Kentucky will send my love to Louisiana.

Scared-y Cat

Doctor Kiteck's office is terrible. The room smells unnaturally clean; not fresh like the bathroom after mom cleans it with Scrubbing Bubbles, leaving everything sparkling white. It's more like Britthaven, the nursing home we volunteer at sometimes in elementary school, where there are grown ups who have to wear diapers and mumble about the past while playing endless games of checkers. We're supposed to be there learning to serve others, but there is a shroud of death that seems to push on my shoulders whenever I walk through the door, leaving me feeling nauseous the entire afternoon visit. I imagine Dr. Kiteck living in a nursing home. A few of the vertebrae in his neck are fused together, so he has to turn his entire torso to look left or right. He moves like the robot on the Lost in Space reruns my sisters and I watch on Saturday morning that always flails his arms while shouting, "Danger Will Robinson!"

At these annual physicals, we will spend much too long in the waiting room. I will peruse the old crinkled magazines left on wooden side tables that are supposed to make the waiting room feel more comfortable and homey. I find an Illustrated Bible. Jesus shown with a perfectly trimmed brown beard, wearing a pristine white robe, performing a miracle on a bright sunny day. Mary sits beside my mom, her head resting on her shoulder. I browse through most of the New Testament, stopping midway through Revelation. The end of the world is much too scary to think about. It's the only thing I hear in church sermons that sticks with me. Visions of weeping and gnashing of teeth for all eternity are terrifying.

On this particular visit I grow especially restless and squirmy sitting in the waiting room chair. I know that if I get up again Mom will narrow her hazel eyes, purse her lips, and give me that look that says, "Can't you sit still for 20 minutes?" and I will feel like some sort of problem child. I'm very sensitive after all. I flip through the pages of another magazine and see the image of a victim from a car wreck. Her head has been taken clean off, leaving a red and yellow stump that looks like a bitten corndog dipped in ketchup and mustard.

I shudder at the image, fighting a gag reflex, and clamp the magazine shut with both my hands. I look up to see that my mom is preoccupied with my younger sister Mary asking for another peppermint from the candy dish on the receptionist's desk. Slowly, I open the magazine again, bringing the picture close to my eyes, turning it to the right and to the left to see if a new angle makes it less disgusting. I cover the stump with my hand and look at the woman's outfit. Try to imagine what she looked like. My stomach churns. I close my eyes. The headless crash victim is there floating in the darkness. Dr. Kiteck's receptionist, whose eyelashes make it look like there is a caterpillar crawling along her top lids, calls my name. Letting the magazine drop from my hands, I jump out of my seat, startling my mom, who knows I hate the doctor's office more than just about anything.

Dr. Kiteck, in his monotonic robot voice, says sit down. Tells me to relax. Peers down his nose over his glasses. I can see his nose hairs moving in and out, in and out as he breathes. The new sheet of sanitary paper his nurse laid out on the reclining doctor's chair crinkles underneath my legs. He feels the nodes on the sides

of my throat, checks my heartbeat with a stethoscope that's always freezing at first, but warm by the time a beat has been found. I hope my heart is not beating too fast. Grown-ups always look to me as though they think I've been up to something. In church I feel like the sermons are directed towards me - like maybe the pastor can read my mind. I have a sinking feeling that all grown ups can, and it makes me nervous.

I wonder if he will find the reason behind my constant stomachaches, but then I decide not to mention them after all. I don't like the doctor because I've seen on movies where someone goes in for a normal check-up and the doctor tells them they've got cancer and better start living over the next 3 months. My mom can heal me with one of her natural remedies, which are always interesting - like this candle-like contraption she bought once to suck the wax out of my ears when I had an ear infection. She found it at the health food store.

The Doc gives me a clean bill of health, even though I smirk, knowing I lied a little at his doctorly questionnaire because I am sick of being there listening to his robot voice. I sachet over to Mary, planting the seed of an ice cream cone from McDonald's in her ear so maybe we can rally together and convince mom to stop on the drive home. My argument will be, "but we have to pass it on the way back to the house!" and Mary will pout, which she is good at.

In bed that night, I make sure to line up all my stuffed animal friends that I practice veterinary medicine on along the crack my twin bed leaves between itself and the wall. My protectors. I can picture that headless woman crawling in through

the window at the foot of my bed to steal me away. Every time I close my eyes she bobs up to the surface of my memory, and I have to repeat the words of church songs in my head to calm myself down. My parents wonder why I have bad dreams, but I can't tell them about the picture of the beheaded car accident victim. Instead, mom comes and sits on the edge of my bed and sings to me.

When she leaves, my eyelids finally feel heavy. I convince myself that I imagined the whole thing. I dream about the end of the world.

Sundays

The air inside of Victory Christian Fellowship is always cool, raising the hair on my arms in their own silent form of worship. The tip of my forehead under my perfectly curled bangs is slightly sweaty from running around on the playground. I pull open the glass paned door to enter a side hall. Halting by the bathroom door, I lean up against the wall by the nurseries, from which the smell of dirty diapers envelops me. I poke my finger far into my shoe to free my foot from a woodchip stuck there.

On Sundays before the first song starts to play I grab a few tracts from the plastic display hanging across from the water fountains. I stuff them into the pocket of my Bible case, where I keep all the sermon notes I've doodled on. It's a covert operation. Commander Keith, the leader of 'Children's Church', saw me take some once and said they're only for the people who don't already know about Jesus and need to be saved. I'm always scanning the halls for him. I've decided he's an enemy. He doesn't want me to have any fun because after all I'm a thief. His wife Glenna caught me stealing candy from their stash in the storage room. There are shelves and shelves full of candy just waiting to be eaten. They use it as incentive for kids to memorize Bible verses and answer questions. It's not my fault I tried the door and it was unlocked. I looked at it as Divine Intervention. My oldest sister Lydia and one of the pastor's sons steal candy from that closet all the time. She says it's the reason why she ever carries a purse. She's a tomboy, swopping her Panama Jack baseball cap for a skirt and blouse this one sacred day a week to appease my mom.

The tracts are appealing to me because of their pictures of little cartoon characters reading the Bible or, if not, burning in the orange and yellow flames of cartoon Hell. I try to stray from those though, unless I've kept up on my prayers and everything, because the pictures of Hell scare me to death, and my stomach will be in knots all service because I know I'm a little sinner. Sometimes the only friendly option are the tracts for Spanish people. I guess the artists don't want to scare any foreigners away.

I try to shuffle past those looking to make small talk without being seen, my ears picking up the sound of the air conditioner lending its almost silent whirring as an extra instrument to the musical ensemble on stage. The heavy wooden double-doors of the sanctuary are propped open before service starts and everyone files in to their seats. A large grey Tithing and Offering box in the shape of a church sits on a shelf near each exit, so that no one forgets to put their 10% in the slit on the tiny wooden church's roof before leaving. I try to remember to tithe my allowance, but I often forget. Above my head, a flag from every country in the world hangs in neat rows, each gently blowing in the current of circulating air above our heads. I'm guessing there are at *least* a thousand flags up there. Behind Pastor Mark's head is displayed a shiny gold outline of the major continents which catches the brilliant light emitted by expertly placed stage-lights, standing as a call to the church congregation to "go out and preach the gospel to all the world."

Here I sit in the fourth seat over of the second row, which everyone knows is *our* row. My dad is an Associate Pastor. Basically that means we're kind of like

church celebrities. I have trouble sitting still through service unless I've armed myself with plenty to do. Even from her position as resident Alto on stage, I fear my mom will see me bouncing up and down in my seat. Dad always catches us if we try to play Rock, Paper, Scissors. He has eyes like a hawk, even though he's completely blind without his glasses. More importantly though, he has the uncanny ability of communicating more in one look than some people can in an entire novel.

The thing with church seats is that pastors have figured out they can't make them too comfortable, otherwise the congregation will all fall asleep, given the fact that the typical sermon length is almost as long as a movie. Sometimes when it's over my butt is numb from sitting so long. And that's beside the point that Pastor Mark has a horrible lisp and never ever pronounces big words correctly. It's a terrible distraction. Our church attempts to break up the monotony by having a special musical guest every Sunday, usually Bill Perkins, an older man with perpetual coffee breath who only ever sings the one song about "setting sail" in a deep bass that resounds without the help of a microphone. I know how it all works, because my three sisters and I, along with our mom, sang a song called "Keep the Candle Burning" a few weeks ago. Everyone looks eerily tiny when you're on stage.

I leave early to go to the bathroom, and when I come back, service is over. I caught most of Pastor Mark's message about leading a nonbeliever in saying the Sinner's Prayer and accepting Jesus as Savior. I sit outside of the sanctuary in the foyer where there are fake plants scattered among some couches and side tables, waiting for service to end. A younger friend from children's church sits down beside

me, so close we are sharing the same cushion on the couch. The child looks at me in the same way an accusing adult does when they know they've caught you in the wrong, and asks in a very serious tone if I have asked Jesus into my heart. For a moment I doubt my salvation. I say, "Of course I have! I'm here at church aren't I?" and I leap up off the couch, holding my Bible close to my chest, my Jesus-filled heart thoroughly insulted.

I ask my parents when was it that I got saved? They tell me I was 3 years old. I prayed with Anna while watching the Gaither Homecoming on television at our old house in Baton Rouge. I pretend that I remember the exact moment I felt a change in my heart. All the images I search for in my memory seem to be fabrications. I think that if I cannot remember, it must not mean anything. I rededicate my life silently while sitting in my seat at church at least fifteen times during elementary school, never satisfied that I am truly saved.

Art Contest

In the fourth grade, I draw a horse named Misty from the cover of one of my favorite books. My adversary, Jim, draws a Clydesdale, but draws it in all its anatomically correct glory instead of just the head and neck like I have done. Jim has coke-bottle glasses that make his blue eyes look like the bugs in our science books. His bottom lip is always covered with a thin layer of spit. His mouth always slightly open. Sometimes I catch him mouthing silent words to himself. We show each other our half-finished or in-progress drawings, shutting our sketchbooks quickly, trying not to give secrets away. I only ever want to draw faces. I have to stare at them for a long time, making sure every detail is right, or else I know I'm changing someone's identity.

Jim and I, at the behest of our teacher Mrs. Dunlap, enter the same 4-h drawing contest. It is the first contest I have entered where a prize is at stake. I have spent hours on my horse, drawing with my favorite pencil and my pink eraser. Jim holds his pencil just like the picture shows on the diagram in our penmanship books. I hate feeling that confined. I hold my pencil how I want to, even though it leaves a bump on the top of my middle finger. I think my drawing is just as good as his.

Jim wins first place. I win second and pout, frowning at the green ribbon attached with a single piece of scotch tape to the corner of my framed portrait of Misty. My mother, out of pride, hangs the picture above my bed.

I whisper to God that He knows I should have won. I resent a 2nd place horse watching me sleep.

Leaving

"Hurry up!" she yells towards the bathroom. I'm shocked to hear those words come out of her mouth instead of mine.

"Alright, alright I'm coming." I dab my ring finger once more over my lips to spread my shiny pink lip-gloss on evenly. Washing my hands, I push my bangs back into place and smooth away any frizz from my hair, which has taken a good half hour to straighten. Sixteen-year-old me is ready to go break some hearts, even though Cassy always gets all the attention. I've still got braces and a flat chest.

Grabbing the keys, we run down stairs, yelling 'bye' to her weird stepdad and her mom, whose leather skin always reeks of the tanning bed and whose teased hair leaves an atmospheric haze of hairspray in every room she enters.

"You girls have fun," she calls after us, "wear your helmets!"

I reach the garage first, jump on the vespa and pull my skirt up mid-thigh, tucking it under my legs, wishing I had packed a pair of shorts in my weekend bag instead. Cassy hands me a helmet. I laugh at her and push it away.

We cram both helmets in the compartment under the seat.

"Ready?" I cast a glance at her orange face in the mirror, then ahead to where the sun is setting far away from her neighborhood, painting the sky with purple and red and gold.

After a brief ride, we come to a stop in front of Colin's house. I've known his family since we first moved to Kentucky when I was four. Our house on Summershade Drive wasn't finished yet so all six of us Volpis lived in his basement.

His mom Kathy was convinced for years that either Mary or me was going to marry her precious little Colin someday.

There were more cars than expected at Colin's. I felt my stomach do a somersault.

In a rush of movement, we approached the door, I was hearing the handle click, pushing the door open, someone was yelling "surprise" and I didn't know why. It is not my birthday, I thought. It is an unusually warm night in December and I'm here to eat pizza or something equally mundane.

I put my hands over my eyes, Cassy all the while tugging at my elbow, ushering me into the kitchen. There surrounding a massive, gaudy island in Colin's kitchen are all the kids I've grown up with - been in school with since kindergarten, and if not, since at least elementary school. Thoughts flash through my mind like moving cars: all their eyes are on me; it's strange not seeing them in their school uniforms; not a pair of pleated khakis or polo shirts anywhere in sight.

I am wishing to get away but smiling at the same time. There is cake, ice cream, pizza, soda, Guitar Hero. "Happy Going Away Party," is scrawled across the top of a store bought sheet cake in blue frosting.

Happy? Going away? Things are slowly, unwillingly registering. Everyone here knows that after Christmas break Mary and I will transfer to this new world called public school.

Someone says, "Promise to come visit us at SCS."

I give a sarcastic grin and say, "I'm not going to Africa, stupid. "I'm going further down the street. Southwestern won't be that bad." The words slink through my teeth and I imagine chanting, "We are Warriors!" instead of "Go Cougars," wearing blue and orange instead of green, maroon, and white.

The entire evening I imagine everyone is looking at me through that one-sided glass, smiling and happy, thankful even. But I can see myself on the other side, conflicted; knowing I shouldn't be celebrating when my dad just lost his job as Principal at Somerset Christian School. Some might call it a forced retirement. I guess his Christian colleagues, after twelve years of faithful service, forgot about loyalty, friendship, trust; that the entire reason we relocated from Louisiana was to start that school. Now all I could hope for was some kind of spontaneous combustion incident that would burn it away along with their guilty smiling faces.

My dad is there in the mirror too. Shell-shocked, walking around in his pajamas like a war veteran with PTSD, not knowing how to start a new career over in his 40s, with four daughters and a wife to take care of. The image makes me want to scream. I know there's nothing I can say to change a thing.

At sixteen years old I am left wishing life had a fast forward button so I can skip ahead to where these people fade into dust.

Leaving becomes easy when they throw you a party and gently push you out the door. But hey, at least I got a party. My Dad's colleagues tried to send him out penniless. Sometimes Christians do terrible things because, after all, they have forgiveness to fall back on.

Stay

My dad tells me you can't dwell on the past.

I've learned you have to pick out the bad memories, pack them up and pile them in a black suitcase; push them to the back of your mind and make new memories to replace them. I've seen death. I've been a part of it. I've seen what it does to a body. And I have never been able to conjure up enough emotion to help someone cope when it really counts. I don't know how my father reacted when his dad died of cancer. I know that I ran from the room, crouched on my bed and let the tears wet my pillow. There is a release in feeling that saline rinse on your cheeks; in feeling the weight of death released on a stream of clear liquid.

My mom tells me that Dad promised never to cry again after his father's funeral. I try my hardest to keep the tears in too. Sometimes that means punching tears into a pillow to remind myself in those fleeting moments when I feel most alone that I'm alive, and that's something to be thankful for.

The regular group of 17 year olds was lounging around at my house. Perched on arms of sofas laughing at whatever was on TV. We'd finished another Spanish homework study session. I was never far from Tyler. We weren't dating because I had trust issues. I liked flirting with other boys instead of sticking with just one. So I let him fall for me through long text message conversations. Being nonchalant in public. Telling him his butt looked good in his baseball uniform.

He was laying across the living room from me, head and back in a chair, legs hanging off the end of the ottoman, hands raised above his head to read a text message, probably from me. Yes, we texted each other from across the room. His phone rang.

"Hey guys, I've got to leave. Something's happened and they can't get a hold of my mom at work."

He was worried.

"Do you need us to do anything?" I got up and was handing him his jacket while he put on his shoes. Everyone else was fidgeting.

"No, no I'm sure it's nothing."

He tried to smile but his eyes couldn't agree. I gave him a hug. Said "text me later."

I've never been to a funeral. I'm dead-set on cremation. There's something about putting a person to rest under the ground that just makes me cringe. Only visitations, which, ironically, are most certainly worse. Once for a little girl who had died of cancer. Lacey Maynard. She was young; maybe six years old or so - her brother Joshua in the same grade as Anna. I couldn't cry for her, even though everyone else was. I wanted to sit by the casket, next to her swollen body, patting her hand and telling her she looked pretty in her new dress. I wanted to adjust her crooked glasses. Wondered why she was wearing them when her eyes were closed. I

was older than she, but didn't understand death. I had been too young to attend my grandpa's funeral years before.

Even now, I can't remember Lacey living. I can only see her with her arms folded in that casket, her brother crying a few feet from her 6-year-old body. Her mother sitting in a chair beside him because she couldn't stand from the sorrow, shaking hands that kept falling in her lap because she couldn't hold them up.

Tyler couldn't understand why his father had died. He had been driving home from another normal day at work and a truck hit him head on while trying to pass another car on a bridge.

Tyler's baseball coach was waiting for him when he got to his house after leaving mine.

"Hey coach! What are you doing here? What's going on?"

"Tyler, buddy, I don't know how to say this."

His hand on Tyler's shoulder. His throat tight. His eyes wet.

"There was an accident. Your dad..."

Tyler's knees hitting the grass in his front yard. His stomach lurching. His hands shaking, dropping his cell phone, his mother's cell number about to be dialed again. His world ending.

I had never met Mr. Blair. I knew he had to be something special to raise a son like Tyler, who was sweet and innocent and always laughing or making someone else laugh; who had blue eyes that commanded attention when he was talking to me

and who made my heart jump when I saw him playing drums on stage at one of his small town shows.

The visitation was at St. Mildred's, the Catholic church downtown. I had never been there and was distracted by the beautiful stained glass windows and the dark stained wood and the carved church pews and the pastor who was nearly 7 feet tall. I couldn't keep my mind on the death in front of my face.

Open casket. Eternally long walk down the aisle to see the body. Something in my mind not registering that this man was Tyler's father. That he was dead. That I would never hear his voice; never see if his eyes matched his son's; if they laughed the same; made the same jokes.

When I finally reached the casket, I saw Tyler there in his father's face and had to look away. I tried my hardest to cry. Mary, standing in line behind me, had burst into tears as soon as she saw the body. I felt heartless - like everyone was judging me for having dry eyes. I shuffled past the casket, gave Tyler's sister a hug, whispered, "I'm so sorry" in her ear even though by now the words were meaningless. Hugged Tyler. Held up the line for a minute, hanging on his neck, still trying to cry; feeling him sob next to my chest. I know death is a part of life, but it's something I'll never get used to.

I cried quick, stifled tears in bed that night so I could feel a little better about myself being emotionally imbalanced. My mom's cell phone was close to my head next to my pillow, a message from Tyler lighting up the screen: "I miss him already." I fell asleep without texting back.

Seeing Through the Haze

Jeff wouldn't even look into our eyes. He meekly stuck out a hand to shake when we introduced ourselves, quickly returning it to the appropriate pocket of his jeans, his shoulders hunched and head hung low. He was shorter than Anna, who stands around 5'7", skin-and-bones, and high as a kite. His American Eagle polo and torn-up jeans smelled of cigarette smoke. The smell had assaulted us when he opened the door of his supped-up, half-painted, obnoxiously loud Japanese car. Perfect first impression.

Lydia knew that this was all wrong, but I, being the naive, impressionable, third child, who at 17 years old was just finishing her first full year at a public school, didn't even notice he was high until she told me later. I just thought he was weird. All I wanted to do was get my cranberry slush and get back to cruising around with Lydia in her black Honda Civic, our normal summer ritual when we ran out of things to do at home.

We seated ourselves at a table outside of the Sonic on Highway 27 in Somerset, the plastic covered metal benches leaving grille marks on our legs. Jeff barely spoke. He certainly wasn't the valiant knight I'd pictured for Anna to marry. When he did open his mouth it was a mumble of unrecognizable words spoken with a Kentucky twang. His brown hair peeked out from beneath the baseball cap that was slung low over his blood-shot blue eyes. Anna's eyes kept darting back and forth between Lydia and myself, searching for the first sign of approval. She later excused

her new boyfriend by informing us that he was “shy.” I had no reason not to believe her.

My parents called Mary and me into their room. My mom’s eyes were swollen from crying, so I knew something was wrong. Seeing her crying, which never happens, made me feel a little nauseous. I leaned up against the wooden bed frame at the foot of their bed and folded my arms across my chest. Mary plopped down on the bed beside me. My dad started, “Girls, I don’t know how to say this without just coming right out and telling you. So here goes. Anna’s pregnant.”

My cheeks flushed. I sat down on the bed next to Mary. That is the last time I remember crying in front of my parents, but I let a few tears trickle down my face. You know what the first thing I thought was? “What are my friends going to say when I go back to school after summer break?” How selfish. I saw Anna falling into the stereotype of pregnant teenage Kentuckians. My dad told us that everything would be fine. That we needed to be there to support Anna and not to treat her any differently. He said to try not to be angry. “What’s done is done.” My mom just kind of sat there staring into space, wiping her nose with a snotty Kleenex. I don’t remember her saying much. Maybe she was remembering her sisters. After all, while the daughters are pregnant, what do the boyfriends have to do? They stake their claim, rally for the next climb, but that doesn’t mean they set up camp and stay.

I left my parents’ room and wished there was something I could hit to channel the strange feelings I was having. I walked out the front door with my fists clenched

and opened my mouth to yell a good old-fashioned four letter word loud enough for the neighborhood to hear, but it got stuck in my throat and I felt guilty for hoarsely uttering it there on the doorstep. Looking down at the purity ring I was wearing on my ring finger, the one my husband is supposed to take off on my wedding night, I felt betrayed by Anna. She had stopped wearing hers. She was 18 and I thought that she had ruined her life by getting pregnant. I would be Valedictorian. I would get a scholarship to college. Anna would be stuck in Somerset with Jeff.

I tried to imagine Jeff as a dad. Impossible. The only thing that was constant about Jeffrey Scruggs was the long-standing odor of cigarettes he left behind. He was a pill-head who rolled up joints with his friends to relax. He didn't deserve the title Father, and he proved that more and more after Anna had Vyana and realized that all Jeff had to give had already been enclosed in their daughter's DNA. He showed up now and then, even convincing Anna to marry him, after which they moved into a little trailer and tried their best to be a family. It just didn't work. Jeff let his fear drive him from a family that would have taken him in, and a beautiful girl who believed she was in love with him.

Sometimes you have to thank the runner for getting far enough away to end the pursuit.

Dream Date with the Wrong Guy

I was lying on top of my bed, staring at the ceiling, having what my mom would call a “pity party.” I felt as if I had gone through a break up. But Jason hadn't done anything wrong. In reality, our fling had ended pretty quickly, and justifiably so. I had known all along he had a girlfriend, but she lived in another town. He promised me they were going to break up. I'm telling you, a guy will say anything to a pretty girl to get her to stick around. What can I say? Summers are boring in Somerset unless you've got a boat to go out on the lake. We didn't have a boat, and our family wasn't going to Louisiana that summer to visit. We were all busy working in the Schlotzsky's restaurant Dad had opened in May, right after I graduated from Southwestern, in a Popeye's that had gone out of business a few years before.

Dad is working his way through a list of dreams. I am learning what chasing dreams means.

My phone rang, interrupting my momentary self-loathing. 'What are you doing?' a familiar voice on the other end said. “Laying in bed. Not tired,” I winced at hearing my voice whining into the phone.

“Well, look out your window. I brought you something.” I pulled my blinds down to see a black Porsche Boxster parked in the road by our mailbox.

It was 2 AM on a Saturday night in July. Everyone in our house was asleep except Lydia, talking on the phone to her boyfriend. I grabbed my keys from the banister by the door. No time to get shoes. Slid the front door open quietly and ran through the dewy front yard. Conley smiled at me. “Thought you could use some

cheering up.” He started the engine. I put my keys in a cup-holder, taking mental notes on the car. I'd never been in a Porsche. Black leather seats. Stick shift. Clean smell. Low mileage.

He drove to my favorite spot at the lake. I could hear the water moving back and forth on the cement boat dock few yards from the car. A splash from a fish. Burning embers from a bonfire. The moon's reflection on the water. Conley and I got out of the car for a few minutes. It was too cool by the water to stay long, and I knew I had to get up early to help open the restaurant the next morning.

Back in my dream car, he lit a clove cigar. He was the first person I'd ever seen smoke one of those. The end crackles as you inhale, a stark red light contrasted with the slender black cigar. It tastes like cinnamon and cloves and relaxes your tongue when you smoke one. Relaxes your whole body. He passed the one he'd lit over to me. Lit another for himself. Took my hand, said, “It's not like we're getting married or anything - just holding hands, why don't you relax?” He always pointed out how my body language gave me away. ‘When you cross your arms it means you're uncomfortable,’ he'd say. Apparently I was always uncomfortable.

I yielded my hand, laying it on his thigh, where his fingers, connected to a hand much larger than mine, laced themselves around mine. I rested my head on the headrest behind me and blew long controlled breaths out the window. I stopped thinking about the other boy. I kept telling myself to get over it. To stop being such a baby. That this is why being single is always better. I had been lied to, a pattern I saw developing with the guys I found myself interested in since my first boyfriend

experience when I was sixteen, in which Kyle told me over instant message that he'd had sex with his ex. I knew it was because I wouldn't go further than just kissing. I didn't understand why boys always asked for too much.

I released my hand from Conley's, reaching to turn up the familiar John Mayer song playing on the radio. We drove down to where his parents docked their houseboat, Charles telling the night guard at the gate that he wanted to show me around. I looked at him and smiled. Tapped my ashes out the window away from the car door. Felt butterflies in my stomach. Wondered if Conley, three years my senior, was trying to seduce me. I put the thought out of my mind.

We didn't get out of the car. He parked in front of the water and lit another clove. We shared it and he tried to tell me how beautiful I was and that I didn't need boys like Jack in my life. Told me I had been stupid. Made me laugh. Kept looking at my mouth when I talked, how I smiled between sentences.

He drove me home, his fingers twirling sections of his scruffy, light brown beard, his dark eyes smiling when his mouth was not. I wondered if he'd try to kiss me before I got out of the car. I wouldn't have let him. I had decided the day I met him that he was a brother, not a boyfriend, even though he confessed his love to me often. I gave him a pitiful one-armed hug before climbing out of the car.

I looked back at Charles before turning the handle to the front door. Thought about walking back and asking him to drive a little longer. I liked the attention, but I told myself I didn't need it. I didn't want anyone pitying me. Pity, like empathy, is an emotion lost on me when it comes to dealing with anyone beyond immediate family -

one that I can't force from my head to my heart. I want to think like my dad, who is always practical. Practicality is concrete and unwavering. Why cry over someone who wouldn't think twice of putting forth that emotion for me? I try to look at the world through the lens of pragmatism. Emotions such as sadness or regret for failed relationships are too taxing to deal with. I deny them. Denial is easy.

I crept back inside our house, a grey moth attracted by our bright porch light brushing my shoulder.

In-Flight Turbulence, Past and Present

Past

She was born out of a lie, the lie that said, "I'm going to spend the night with a friend, see you later on this weekend."

Her lies were cleverly arranged to be mostly true.

Her boyfriend didn't ask if her parents knew how they'd be celebrating her graduation from high school.

Maybe she didn't know either.

Present-Past

A blue egg lays cracked on the sidewalk, its yolk trampled by ants that will feast for days on a premature death.

Past

Four months go by.

Who can trace a lie's beginning; with a finger, point a daughter past denial and towards the truth?

Who will blame the Robin for pushing her egg out of crowded nest?

Present-Past

My mom and I pick out school clothes for my senior year of high school.

The birds are not sluggish in the hazy summer heat of August.

Past

When the sister that is fourteen months my senior said, "I'm pregnant," it was not a lie. It was true, her size zero blue jeans, stylishly riddled with holes, were tighter than usual.

When she saw her parent's faces lit with confusion and anger, it was not a lie.

When they asked her what next, she pledged her love to the skinny Scruggs boy sitting beside her.

When I ran outside after hearing the news, wanting to scream where no one inside would hear me, I startled a dove that had built herself a nest on the light beside our front door. Her chicks bickered over the dinner I interrupted.

Present-Past

Two can create a lie they imagine is love.

They think the more they practice this thing called sex, the more in love they will be.

One may tell the other, who is not on birth control, that when two bodies come together in the darkness, a new one will not be formed. That as long as they are careful, the tiny untouched package waiting in a black tunnel connected to her womb will not be attacked by a foreign army, somersaulting towards their goal, swift and searching – intent on completing step one in the task that is new life.

An egg does not want to be neglected.

Past

The truth was sucking life out of an umbilical straw, heartbeat like a hummingbird's wings; a ball of a connective tissues, bone, tiny arm here, tiny leg there – an infant encased in a gelatinous shell under a pad of muscle. An egg inside a mother hen.

Waiting to look at the world with the green eyes your genes gave her.

The genes your mother gave you.

Present-Past

The hatching is the hard part.

New life being born is always a struggle.

Do mother hens love their babies?

It seems the only chick that ever looks different is the runt.

Past

February brought the truth screaming to life.

A screech owl in a hospital nursery.

A tiny pink package of light, arms extended above wailing head.

Fingers stretched outward, searching for...something.

Clawing at the sky as if to ask, am I here too soon?

Don't worry new life - keep singing.

Perseverance is the key to success.

Irony

This time when we went to New Orleans, it was as if we had crossed some threshold into adulthood that heretofore had eluded my sister Mary and me on our semiannual visits back to the ancestral conduit. It wasn't the same city, previously overshadowed by the smell of fried pastry dough sprinkled with copious amounts of powdered sugar - the perfect mix of saccharine and salty. It wasn't perusing the myriad of displays thrown haphazardly onto any unadulterated sidewalk space, showcasing street art the likes of which can only be found in New Orleans; the vendors with a miasma of cigarette smoke, linseed oil, and coffee - a hint of chicory - encompassing them like their own atmospheres.

On this hot and humid day in July, three out of the six Volpi's trekked from Café du Monde in the French Quarter to Central Grocery Company, the store my dad used to visit on special occasions with his own father when he wasn't away on business. It was the first time our family had taken a vacation with an odd number. Lydia was married, and Anna had to stay home with Vyana, so Mary and I saw this trip as a type of bonding experience, watching Dad point to this building and that, revisiting his childhood, letting out a slight chuckle upon arriving at the sacred lunch establishment of his youth, its doors still slung open. Our goal was to relive this day from his childhood in New Orleans to the fullest, squeezing in as many things as possible in order to get back to Mom, who after having been hit with another one of her day-stopping migraines, had opted to stay at Dad's childhood home with his mom, Mrs. Belle, and her ugly, obnoxious black dog, Mopsy.

I'm sure it felt a bit ironic for my dad to have to play tour guide. Maybe it was the writer in me looking for some inspiration who kept badgering him to take us anywhere he remembered as interesting, our seventeen or so years in Kentucky still not enough to make him forget his true home. He led us from our shaded breakfast table at the Café up the street, past old brick buildings with black iron gates hanging from their hinges. I tried to take in everything with my 21 year old eyes, forgetting that the streets were crowded, and sweat was crawling down my hairline and in front of my ears. I was too distracted by storefronts selling sequined shirts emblazoned with fleur de lis in black and gold. Beads hanging from rooftops, reflecting the summer sun. Food wrappers stuck in sewage grates. Shops selling gris-gris and voodoo dolls – things made in China. Street performers covered in metallic paint, standing still like statues until a kid gets too close and they move suddenly, prompting screams and laughter. Dad was here to show us authenticity: Bourbon Street, Preservation Hall; a famous bar with a shamrock shaped sign. Things that as kids he would have felt the need to shelter us from.

Central Grocery mingles with the mix of old and new. Sandwiched between tourist shops, it is still a place for residents to come and get a few necessary groceries, read the paper at the stained wooden bar. Chat with the men who, like my dad, have frequented this store since they were kids. People come in search of the ingredients for the perfect gumbo. Browse the case full of salamis, sausage and other meats with corresponding cheeses that sits at the entrance. Gulp down an ice-cold RC Cola from

a glass bottle. It is the original home to this sandwich I've heard my dad talk about for years, but have yet to taste.

The illustrious muffuletta, while hard to spell, is even harder to eat, given the fact that it is constructed with feeding an entire army of men in mind. Regardless, my dad and I felt brave enough, and, dare I say hungry enough, to tackle the great feast, even though only about a trio of hours earlier we had scarfed down beignets the size of a tea saucer, guzzling cup after cup of cafe au lait on the side. A muffuletta is layers of salami and ham coupled with an olive spread with spices and a hint of garlic, melted cheddar and mozzarella cheeses, tomato slices, and a few other ingredients I don't remember, all on a toasted sourdough bun the size of a dinner plate. This monster is a towering inferno of heartburn waiting to happen, and I knew that even though my dad would soon be reaching for some Nexium, we both smiled, gaping our mouths open wide on their hinges, like boas preparing to swallow their strangled prey whole, attempting to get a taste of everything between those two slices of sourdough bread that we could in one bite.

Despite the fact that obtaining every flavor simultaneously is a relatively unattainable feat in itself, even for the snakiest of us individuals, we each managed to finish off a quarter of the huge sandwich before deciding to wrap the rest up to share with Mary, the youngest of the four Volpi girls, who was dealing with a bout of nausea. She and my mom have spinal issues that cause all kinds of bodily complications. Before leaving, I snapped a picture of a man I decided must be a regular after catching a glance of his ever-broadening paunch. I winked at my dad,

who had seen me trying to be inconspicuous by turning my camera on its side, resting it on the counter near my arm, and looking away when I snapped the picture, then hopped down from the worn bar stool and towards the case full of sausage and sandwich meats, glad I wore a skirt that could grow with my now fuller stomach.

I was impressed that Central Grocery could hold so much stock, given its closet like size and shape. Spices, and anything worth adding to a Cajun dish, were stacked on wooden shelves, flanked by rice, dry red, black, and green beans, bread, bottles of Coke. It was like stepping back in time. From the way he had described it, the store didn't seem to have changed a bit since his childhood. My dad was enthralled by the fact that the shop boasted a healthy selection of meats labeled "Volpe," a moniker deathly close to our own last name. Apparently Sicilians swamped New Orleans in the 30s and 40s.

My dad was chatting up the graciously patient cashier at the front of the store, constantly shifting his stance to allow tourists to walk in and out of the front door. Handing the greasy remains of our lunch over to me, he asked the young man, whose dark skin and hair rendered him rather Italian to me, if they had any extra posters lying around, in his casual, diplomatic tone which makes him anyone's friend right on the spot. The cashier, intent on filling orders and wrapping up sausage, yelled for an older man, who got a quick rundown of the scenario, looked at my smiling dad, hazel eyes emitting that friendly glimmer, and said, in heavy New Orleans accent, "Lemme see what I can do for you."

In two minutes or so, we were graced with an armful of rolled up posters, all bearing the name, "Volpe" on them in bold red and green fonts. Apparently somewhere along the line our distant relatives were meat people. I think right now those posters are sitting in my dad's closet behind rows of neatly placed shoes, waiting to be hung in our house in Kentucky, where they don't belong.

Another Kentucky Storm

I stood beneath the eaves - bits of wood poking the undersides of my bare feet
- while the storm blew me kisses of rain and pulled my hair with its wind. It lit up the
sky with flashes of white that I felt go up and down my spine.

This is Kentucky's summertime welcome.

My eyes wanted to close - stung by pellets of rain - but I wouldn't let them. I
could see past it. Still able to watch the world unfold in electric currents.

A storm in Kentucky won't bring a hurricane.

My legs ached to sit. The goosebumps on my bare arms and legs wanted me to
join my mother, inside watching TV. I wanted to be whisked away. To feel what it
was like for lightning to strike me.

If I die, bury my ashes beneath our maple tree.

All I could do was close my eyes and let the mist wet my lips and fall from
my lashes.

I will stand and wait alone in the darkness for the storm to envelop me.