LIMINAL SPACE, A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

A Project

Presented to the faculty of the Department of English
California State University, Sacramento

Submitted in partial satisfaction of
the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

English

(Creative Writing)

by

Elizabeth Arline Hicks

SPRING
2012
LIMINAL SPACE, A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

A Project

by

Elizabeth Arline Hicks

Approved by:

__________________________________, Committee Chair
Doug Rice

__________________________________, Second Reader
Joshua McKinney

____________________________
Date
Student: Elizabeth Arline Hicks

I certify that this student has met the requirements for format contained in the University format manual, and that this project is suitable for shelving in the Library and credit is to be awarded for the project.

__________________________, Graduate Coordinator

___________________

David Toise Date

Department of English
Abstract

of

LIMINAL SPACE, A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

by

Elizabeth Arline Hicks

“Liminal Space, A Collection of Short Stories” examines liminality, the in-between space that individuals encounter during a time of transition. The protagonists experience transformation, physically, mentally, or spiritually. In “Baptism,” the protagonist transitions from being an observer of life to a participant. “Singed” examines the protagonist’s struggle with identity. “The Classroom,” a non-fiction piece, examines the experience of the protagonist as she discovers the independence of adolescence and encounters an adult world that challenges her sense of security. In “October 5th,” another piece of non-fiction, the protagonist struggles with the grieving process and finding closure. Both non-fiction pieces examine the effects of memory.

_______________________, Committee Chair
Doug Rice

_______________________
Date
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my appreciation for the dedication of my professors at California State University, Sacramento. I thank Professor Doug Rice for teaching me to see the significance of a single word and to see the details in a moment of time. Professor Rice serves as an example of excellence and I value the experience of being one of his students. I appreciate his patience and encouragement. I thank Professor Joshua McKinney and Professor Peter Grandbois for helping me to establish the foundation I needed to pursue creative writing at the graduate level.

I would like to thank Randy Hicks, my husband, for his patience, support, and encouragement to pursue my education. I would also like to thank my children Julie Christy, Norman, Randy, Jonathan, David, and Joy, for encouraging me to follow them to college.

My parents have played an important role in my education. I would like to acknowledge my mother, Helen Arline Emerson Powell, who started her college education as an older adult. Before she passed away, she encouraged me to return to college to finish my degree. I would like to thank my father, Robert Allen Powell, for teaching me to set a goal, plot a course, and follow through.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acknowledgments</th>
<th>vi</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. BAPTISM</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. SINGED</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. THE CLASSROOM</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. OCTOBER 5TH</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Mark pulled the brown bedspread over the smooth, tan sheets, tucked in precise folds at the corners of his king size bed. With both hands, he fluffed the four pillows and positioned them across the knotty pine headboard. He ran the scalloped edges of the duster across Optimus Prime’s stacks, red tractor cab, and blue trailer and took a moment to park the rig parallel to the mirror. He sprayed a film of window cleaner across his reflection and wiped it until his image smiled back at him. Mark adjusted the Ranger hat on his head and gave a nod to his reflection in the mirror before he walked out the front door. His hiking boot caught the mat’s edge. He nudged it back into place with the rugged sole. At the end of the walkway, Mark paused to listen to the morning breeze rustle through the pine trees and grabbed his thermos out of his green truck. He stood with the toes of his boots on the line marking the shoulder of the road and looked to the left, to the right, and back to the left before crossing Main Street. The town of Pine Valley sprouted in two rows that lined the highway and spread to the north and south. Beyond Main Street, the highway followed the mountain’s contour and disappeared in either direction into the surrounding forest.

A string of bronze bells tied to the café’s door clanked against each other. Heads turned in Mark’s direction. Conversations hushed. Kate, the owner, dried her hands on a clean bar towel and held up the globular coffee pot. The hot, brown liquid sloshed against the rounded glass, steam rising from the opening. In her mid-forties, Kate served breakfast, lunch, and dinner to the town. Short, blond hair curled below her white ball cap and licked the back of her ears. Kate’s Café, embroidered in black letters over her
pocket, stood out on her spotless, white polo shirt. A white apron, tied against her lower back, hugged the hips of her tight blue jeans. Mark turned toward his regular seat at the end of the counter. Taken. Pink hibiscus inked on white skin peeked from the gap between a green t-shirt and khaki shorts. Straight, brown hair secured by a green scrunchie stretched from the nape of her neck to the middle of her slender back. Kate poured a fresh mug of coffee for Mark and motioned toward the counter’s available spot at the opposite end.

“You can’t write a ticket for that,” Kate whispered.

“Watch me,” Mark said, brows furrowed. He set his empty thermos on the counter in front of him. Kate slid the mug into place. The liquid lapped over the edge and dribbled down the mug’s side into a small pool of brown.

“Sorry.” Kate lifted the mug and cleaned the spill with one swipe of the bar towel. Mark rolled the silverware off the napkin in front of him and wiped away the coffee streaks lining the mug. He pulled a clean, white napkin out of the dispenser and lined up his knife, fork, and spoon on the thin, paper surface. He fidgeted with the mug, positioning it with his fingertips. He gripped the handle and lifted the mug to his lips. The mug stopped mid-air. Inside, a tiny ball of light reflected from the bulb above his head. Steam swirled up as Mark inhaled the warm Columbian aroma into his nostrils. He ran his upper lip across the rim’s smooth surface and took a sip.

“The usual?” Kate asked. She scooped fresh ground coffee into a new filter and slid an empty pot under the spout.

“Just a thermos,” Mark replied.
“Drinking your breakfast?” Kate pressed the urn’s button. Water trickled through the filter and into the pot.

“No time.” Mark looked down at his watch.

“What’s the hurry?” Kate rinsed Mark’s thermos in the sink while the coffee pot filled.

“Need to drive up to the lookout.” His fingers fumbled through his pocket. “Campers somewhere in the undesignated area.” He tapped two quarters on the counter. “For the newspaper.” Kate nodded and poured the full pot of coffee into the clean thermos.

Mark took his time crossing the room to and from the newspaper rack to study the woman with the hibiscus on her hip. She continued to look down at a notebook in front of her. Her attention focused on the letters flowing out of the pen in her hand. Mark rustled the newspaper. The woman glanced up from the notebook; long lashes fluttered. Her lips pressed together in a thin line. She dropped her head down again and fell back into the page. Mark guessed that she was about twenty-seven or twenty-eight, just a few years younger than him. Her ringless left hand lay curved at the edge of the notebook.

Mark smiled and looked down at the newspaper headlines, scanning the front page for anything.

Kate screwed the lid on the thermos and set it on the counter. “Nice to see you smile about something.” She turned toward the window between the kitchen and the wait station and grabbed two plates of bacon and eggs and juggled the side of toast.
“Later,” Mark said and laid a few ones on the counter, folded the newspaper in half and slipped it under his arm. He grabbed his thermos. With his free hand, Mark lifted the mug in the air and nodded at Kate. His reflection greeted him as he reached for the doorknob. The café door swung open, bells jingling.

In the late afternoon, the sun teetered on the tips of the tall pines. Rounds finished, Mark parked the green truck at the trailhead and hiked along the rim overlooking Feather Lake. The secluded lake, snow runoff from the high mountain peaks, mirrored the surrounding pines. Seated at the base of a pine tree, he leaned back against the sturdy trunk. He reached into his backpack and took out his sketch pad and pencil. He flipped the pages of the spiral-bound pad and stopped at Feather Lake’s unfinished landscape.

A splash sounded near the granite boulder on the lake’s opposite shore. Mark pulled field glasses out of his pack. A slender, white body glided under the water. He focused the glasses on the spot. Still underwater, the body glided back in the other direction. A head popped up out of the water and shook the loose strands of long, brown hair streaming behind. Mark scrambled to his feet. Camouflaged by pine branches, he watched the woman drop down below the surface again and glide in a synchronization of arms and legs. When she reached the granite boulder, she climbed up on the ledge. Long, brown hair trailed down her naked back. The water glistened on the pink hibiscus decorating her hip.
Mark let the field glasses drop to this side. He looked away, to the peak, to the rim, to the pine branches bending down and rising up in green waves, yielding to the breeze. He started to look back at the lake, but turned away again. Then, he removed his hat and laid it on the ground by his sketch pad. He turned toward the lake and stared at the sunlight shimmering across its surface. She stood still at the opposite shoreline, head cocked to one side, then the other, to study something in the water. Mark opened the large pocket of his pack and removed the citation book. He fanned the pages in his fingers. The woman dove back into the clear, smooth surface and sent concentric circles rippling outward. Mark squatted down, still fanning the pages in his hand, and watched her feet flutter. She kicked down, her white figure disappearing into the shadows below the boulder. He looked through the field glasses. The reflection of the pines wavered on the lake. The white figure darted out of the shadows and rose to the surface. Her head bobbed with each breath as her arms and legs propelled her forward in a breast stroke across a small inlet.

A green towel dangled from a branch near the shore on the other side. Not far from the branch, a strip of pink cloth marked a pile of green and khaki clothing on the rocky embankment. She reached the shallow area. Balanced on the rocks beneath her feet, her bare shoulders rose from the water line. As she waded toward the shore, the water line dropped to her rounded breasts, then her slender waist and hips. She swished her arms through the water and splashed the cool liquid up and over her head. Droplets ran down her face, shoulders, breasts, thighs. For a moment, she faced the sun with eyes
shut and palms open. Warm blood rushed to every corner of Mark’s body. He dropped his field glasses to his side again.

Hidden among the greenery, Mark didn’t move. The woman tugged the towel away from the branch. She pressed the terry cloth against her face, then circled the towel around her shoulders and let the green fabric drape down over her slim belly and hips. Mark held his breath and glanced through the field glasses again. The towel slid down while she slipped one foot, then the other, into the pink fabric. She shimmied the panties up to her hips. Mark glanced through the field glasses again. She fastened the hook of her bra; embossed white flowers hugged her breasts. Mark let his breath out between parched lips. The branches waved and dipped in the warm breeze, shoving pine needles through Mark’s shirt. The sharp ends stabbed into his skin. He looked away to the sketch pad cast aside under the pine tree. He looked back one more time through the field glasses at the woman and watched her fasten her khaki shorts and pull her green shirt over her damp, brown hair. She brushed the long strands into submission and fastened them with the scrunchie. Fingertips flicked the green towel and folded it into a bulky rectangle. She stuffed the towel and brush into her beach bag. Sitting on the rock ledge, she dusted her feet off and pointed her toes into white socks and hiking boots. She stood up on the ledge and gazed across the water at the boulder, then turned and disappeared into the trees.

Mark kneeled down by the pine tree, grabbed his sketch pad and pencil, and shoved them into his pack along with the field glasses and citation book. He rested his back against the pine’s straight trunk and scanned the empty shoreline. His lips curved
into a smile. Looking up through the whorls leading to the tip, Mark collapsed backward on the mat of pine needles underneath the towering tree. He studied the whorls. Beyond the green, the sky opened up into a great ocean and he imagined the woman swimming in the infinite blue.

The next morning, Mark woke up thinking about the woman in the lake, the silhouette of her body swimming in his head. He struggled through his routine, distracted by the clock’s digital numbers marking each minute. He completed half the reps of his typical workout. He made the bed, but the sheets rumpled under the spread. The folds at the corners bunched together instead of making flat creases. A single stroke of the yellow duster left scattered particles on Optimus Prime. Caught in a quagmire in front of the mirror, he brushed his teeth twice before running the floss in and out between every tooth. He glanced at the clock. Shaving cream lathered on stubble, he guided the razor across his face, each stroke skimming through the foam. Warm water cupped in his hands, Mark splashed his smooth skin over and over, until every trace of shaving cream disappeared down the drain. He patted his skin dry and finished by slapping after shave on the tender surface. The numbers clicked, 7:15 a.m. The faucet’s stream, deflected by his comb, splashed warm water on his belly. He imagined her belly, the hibiscus on her hip. Slipping on one sleeve, then the other, he fastened the buttons of his shirt and tucked in the shirttail. He ran a comb through his hair. Trained strands took their place on his head. Mark grabbed his Ranger hat and positioned it on top of his head. Fingers fidgeted with his collar and brushed imagined specks of dust off his shirt’s green field. He took
the hat off, ran the comb through his hair again, and lowered his hat once more. The
Ranger’s hat tilted to the right. He adjusted it again. His reflection smiled back and gave
him a nod.

Mark crossed the road to Kate’s Café. Through the window, he could see his
regular seat at the counter’s far end. Empty. The bells jingled with the swing of the door.
He glanced at the faces turned toward him and nodded a greeting. He gravitated toward
the empty spot.

“Eating this morning?” Kate whisked the coffee pot off the warmer and poured a
mug for Mark.

“The regular, please.” Mark reached for the mug. “Thanks.” He held the hot mug
suspended between his two hands and watched the steam spiral upwards from the liquid
surface.

“She’s not coming in today.” Kate ran the damp bar cloth across the counter and
scooped up scattered bread crumbs.

“Who?” Mark asked.

“Andrea,” Kate replied, “the woman with the pink hibiscus on her hip.”

“Oh.” Mark lined the knife up with the fork on his place setting. “Hard not to
notice.” He spun his spoon in a circle. The spoon whirled until he stopped it with his
fingers. “Who is she?”

“Andersons’ granddaughter,” Kate answered. “She’s working at the gift shop,
book store, gallery, whatever you want to call it, while they are out of town.” A plate
appeared under the warmer lights in the pass-through window from the kitchen. “Two
weeks.” She grabbed the plate with one hand and the side order of wheat toast with the other and placed them in front of Mark. Then, Kate topped off Mark’s coffee to the rim.

“Thanks,” Mark said. He removed the paper napkin from under the silverware and placed it in his lap. Framed by a mountain of fried potatoes and crisp, bacon strips, two fried eggs faced him. White, rounded mounds. “Two weeks,” Mark repeated. The red started to creep up Mark’s neck and into his face. He picked up the knife and fork and cross-cut the eggs into bite-sized pieces. He set the knife and fork down and lifted the coffee mug to take a sip.

“Hot?” Kate asked.

“Not too.” Mark let the steam from the mug hit his face.

At the end of Mark’s rounds, he drove to Feather Lake and parked at the trailhead. Tall pines flanked the entrance to the lake like sentinels. He wove through their ranks, keeping hidden behind the trunks. The sun lingered overhead in the cloudless sky; its white glare radiated heat. A doe stepped on the short grasses fringing the bank near the inlet. Her muzzle dipped into the calm stream not far from where Andrea stood the day before. The doe lifted her head. Ears twitched. She dipped her smooth, brown head down to sip the cool, clear water. Hooves anchored, she lifted her head and paused.

Mark leaned his backpack against a rock jutting out of the rim above the trail. He unzipped the large pocket of his pack. His fingers brushed against the citation book. Andrea’s rounded breasts flashed in his thoughts. He shook his head and removed the sketch pad and a pencil from the pack. Mark followed the dirt trail that wound down the
mountain between clumps of manzanita and buck brush to a formation of granite boulders at the lake’s edge.

Seated on one of the warm, speckled rocks, Mark flicked through the pages until he came to an empty sheet. He studied the doe, her sleek body still posed at the water’s edge. Mark feathered the outline of the doe’s head and the downward stretch of her neck toward its reflection. Light strokes penciled the long, muscular limbs. The tail flicked. Mark shaded tufts of dark fur. The doe lifted her head and froze.

A flutter of color danced along the line of small pines on the opposite side of the lake. A lone duck hidden in an alcove near the boulder quacked across the lake in a flurry of feathers. The doe balked at the sound, lifted her head, and twitched her ears. Muscles tensed, she sprung away from the shore and bounded toward the tree cover.

Mark slid his pencil into the spiral binding of his sketch pad and dropped down between two boulders. Still clutching the sketch pad, he squatted in the rock hiding place. He waited. Silence. With his other hand, he slipped the Ranger hat off his head and peered over the sparkling flecks of granite.

“Andrea,” Mark said the name under his breath. His lips curved into a smirk. He tossed the Ranger hat on a ledge behind him and stood up halfway, stretching his neck until he had a clear view of the opposite bank. Andrea’s peach top and khaki shorts discarded in a pile on a flat rock, she waded in the shallow inlet. The water lapped at her ankles. She stepped down into the deeper water, the lake rising up to her knees, her thighs, and her hips as her feet maneuvered across the rocky bottom. Her slender body sent a ripple of circles radiating outward. Standing waist deep in the water, she pulled
the scrunchie from her wrist and gathered her hair up into a long, brown pony tail. Her arms posed behind her head while her fingers drew the strands through the loop. Mark dropped back down behind the formation and turned the pages past the outline of the doe. He found an empty sheet.

The following morning, Mark ate breakfast at the café. Kate cleared his plate and topped off his mug. He sipped the hot coffee over the newspaper spread across the counter. His eyes focused on the lines of words stretching across the page, but each time the bells dangling from the front door jingled, he lifted his head and glanced toward the door. Mark folded the newspaper and stood up to leave. He placed his Ranger hat on his head, counted out a stack of ones on top of the tag, and put the folded newspaper under one arm. With one hand he grabbed his thermos and with the other he lifted his mug in the air.

“Have a good day,” Kate called from the kitchen.

“See you tomorrow,” Mark said and walked out the café door.

Mark drove down Main Street. He tapped his breaks as he passed the gift shop. A pot of daffodils propped opened the front door. Mark pulled over and sat for a minute, looking at the empty road ahead. He looked at the opened door in the rearview mirror. His hand clutched the door handle, his fingers grasping the cool metal. He opened the truck door and stepped onto the worn asphalt. Bits of gravel rolled under his boots as he walked along the uneven edge. His boot heels clicked on cement walkway in front of the shop. In front of daffodils, he stopped with the toes of his boots at the threshold.
From the doorway, Mark glanced around the room. Sunlight shone through crystal prisms dangling from the window frames on metallic threads and cast rainbows on the interior walls. Water trickled down the small, rounded stones of a fountain in one corner. Wind chimes clinked in the breeze that blew through the open windows and doorway. Stairs in another corner of the room led upwards into a dark space. As Mark stepped into the shop, he breathed in the faint aroma of chocolate. Mark crossed the room to ring the bronze bell on the edge of an oak desk. Next to the bell, a notebook lay opened with a pen placed in the crease of the binding. Mark bent over to ring the bell. The upside-down letters looped into words that he could not read.

“It says ‘celebrate everything,’” a soft voice came from the stairway.

“I’m sorry.” Mark turned toward the voice. “I was going to ring the bell.” He looked down at the notebook. “I didn’t mean to intrude.” The blood rushed up his neck and into his face.

“Would you like a cookie?” Andrea held a plate of chocolate chip cookies in her hands. Above the mound of cookies, Mark’s eyes focused on the words, Sweet As, printed on the front of Andrea’s blue t-shirt. She followed his gaze and noted the shirt, “I picked it up in New Zealand along with this.” Andrea balanced the plate with one hand and lifted the blue material enough for Mark to see the hibiscus blooming on her hip above her low cut jean shorts.

“Thank you,” Mark said and reached for the chocolate chip cookie teetering on the top of the mound.
Closing the journal with one hand, she placed the plate of cookies next to the bell and offered her hand to Mark.

“I’m Andrea,” she said.

“Ranger Matthews.” He shifted the cookie to his other hand and took her soft hand in his and looked into her dark blue eyes.

“Ranger Matthews.” Andrea read the name tag on his shirt. “That is what you do.” She reached up into the pile of brown hair on top of her head and pulled two brown marbled sticks. “I’d like to meet the person beneath that uniform.” She ran her fingers through the tangle until the long brown strands cascaded down her shoulders.

“What?” Mark smiled. His ears burned red beneath the rim of his hat. He took a bite of the cookie and let the chocolate chips melt against his tongue.

“You have a first name.”

“Mark.”

“Mark,” Andrea repeated. “Have you ever been in here before?”

“A couple of times,” Mark said and looked at the uneven edge of the books on the shelf.

“Clutter and dust.” She looked down at the ground and shook her head. “Nothing could breathe.” She glanced up at Mark. “Everything was stuck.” She touched one finger to the wind chimes, setting in motion a melody of tones. Then, she raised her arms and spun in a circle. “I need the wind and the sun.” A rainbow reflected on her skin. “And water.” Andrea smiled and motioned for Mark to follow her out the back door.
Mark took another bite of the chocolate chip and followed Andrea through a back door that opened onto a patio. A wooden porch swing hung from the eaves, its overstuffed cushions covered in a floral pattern of roses, daffodils, and daisies. Two white Adirondack chairs overlooked the creek. Andrea led Mark along the trail, fringed with tall grass. Her feet skipped along the path that paralleled the running water to an opening where the creek swirled in a shallow pool before cascading through the rocks downstream.

“The water makes everything new.” Andrea knelt down beside the creek. She motioned for Mark to come closer. “Here.” She closed her eyes and bowed her head. In the silence, birds chirping in the trees accompanied the trickling and gurgling of the creek. She dipped her hands in the flowing water and let it run through her fingers. Slipping off her sandals, she stepped down into the creek and waded in the clear water.

“Take off your boots.” Andrea smiled. The current pressed against the back of her calves, dividing itself and joining together again as it passed the obstacle of her legs.

“I need to get to work.” Mark looked down at his boots.

“You need some water.” She laughed and bent down to the creek’s surface. Cupping the water with both hands, she flung the spray onto Mark. The cool water splashed against his face and shirt.

“Whoa,” he said. Stepping back, his boot caught on a rock behind him. His arms and one leg outstretched, he tipped sideways before he regained his balance. Droplets formed dark water spots on his green shirt. Stiffening at Andrea’s laughter, he blinked away a drop that lingered on his eyelashes. He shook his head.
“I have to go.” A smile spread across his lips.

When the morning sun lit Mark’s bedroom, he woke with the image of Andrea in his head, the water flowing around her. He rolled over and covered his head with one of his pillows. He wanted to keep that image, to hold it, to hold her. He rolled again and flipped the pillow under his head to the cool side. Bunched between his arm and his head, he used another pillow to block the sun and the sound of a woodpecker attacking a tree outside the window.

The knocking stopped. Mark moved the pillow and rolled onto his side. A flutter of blue wings landed on the narrow ridge outside the window. The bird ruffled its dark blue feathers. Mark sat up. Wings tucked, it hopped along the wood toward a green bough of oak leaves, waving in the morning breeze. Its wings flickered as the bird hopped to a thin branch. Its tiny talons wrapped around the twig, standing motionless for a moment. Another flutter of wings and it floated across the gap between thick boughs and settled under a canopy of green leaves. The bird broke the morning’s silence with an arpeggio of sound, emanating from beneath the bower. Mark closed his eyes and listened to each note.

One kick flung his blanket and sheet upwards. Still tucked between the mattress and the box springs, the blanket and sheet twisted together and landed in a heap between the bed posts. Mark sat up and let his feet hit the floor. He looked at his bare feet, his long toes, his trimmed toenails. Mark leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands. He closed his eyes and tried to bring back Andrea’s image.
Mark jumped up from mattress. Between the bed and the bathroom, he grabbed a pair of shorts and pulled them over his boxers. He yanked his t-shirt over his head and stretched his arms through the sleeves. Hopping on one foot, then the other, he put on his socks. With one squirt of toothpaste and a swish of water, he brushed his teeth. One splash across his face and he slid the towel off the rack. His face buried in the soft terry cloth, he took a deep breath. The towel dropped to the floor. He jammed his hiking boots on his feet and squatted down to tie the laces. From the bottom drawer of his dresser, he unfolded a beach towel, striped shades of green. He tossed it over one shoulder and walked out the front door.

Mark sat on the flat rock at the water’s edge and watched a mother duck paddle along the shore. Her ducklings floated along behind, each taking a turn to dip its head into the water, tail feathers sticking out of the lake. A school of minnows scattered, darting in and out of shadows below the bank. Mark stared at his bare feet and then at the fleeing minnows. He pulled his shirt up and over his head. He held the shirt in his hands. Standing up, Mark surveyed the rim above the lake, the trail leading down the mountain, and the rocks and foliage lining the bank. He dropped the shirt on the rock, slipped off his shorts and boxers, and took a deep breath.

Arms stretched forward, Mark dove across the surface and disrupted the reflection of the pines and mountain peaks surrounding the lake. The splash distorted the mirrored images in the sloshing of waves. Mark glided under the surface. Eyes opened, he looked down at the variegated rocks below, shades of brown and grey. Black. Slow-
moving crawdads maneuvered along the rocks and brandished menacing claws. He kicked to the surface and took a breath. Flipping over on his back, he floated. The water buoyed him up and cradled his body in its gentle undulations. He spread his arms out and let his legs go limp. His eyes closed. He drifted, the sound of the lake lapping in his ears. Floating, he opened his eyes to the field of blue above him. Warm rays bathed him.

Mark rolled over on his stomach into a breast stroke. Arms and legs spread apart and snapped together, thrusting him forward. Head bobbed up and down in rhythm with his breaths. Above a deep hole, he treaded water and peered into the dark below him. He took a deep breath, paused, and then took another deep breath. Holding the air in his lungs, he shot down into the black hole. Cool water enveloped him, conforming to his body. Down into the deepest part, he plunged. His arms pulled and his legs kicked until he touched the rocky bottom of Feather Lake. Then, he swam along the bottom through the coldest water. The hairs of his body like cilia waved in the liquid surrounding him. He swam until the breath escaped his lungs. Mark launched off from the bottom of the lake and propelled himself toward the sun’s fluctuating light. He struggled upward to the surface, lungs bursting. The cold water rushed into his nostrils. The still surface of the lake erupted in a splash that shot Mark through the mirrored mountains. He gasped and filled his lungs with air.
Amber’s parents called her into the kitchen and shut the door between them and her boyfriend, Jeremy. Alone in the front room, Jeremy put his hands in the pockets of his black jeans and stared out the bay window. His reflection stared back at him. In the mirrored image, his short, dyed black hair appeared like a dark aura. He moved and the stranger in the glass moved with him. The murmur of hushed conversation between Amber and her parents hummed in his ears. He stepped out on the front porch and breathed in the crisp fragrance of grass clippings. The uniform blades waved in the mid-morning breeze. Eighteen pink rose bushes lined the fence, one for each year since Amber’s birth. Bees buzzed in and out of the pink petals. Amber’s neighborhood appeared vacant, unlike Jeremy’s neighborhood where children played basketball in the cul-de-sac and rode their bikes and skateboards up and down the street. With the exception of Jeremy’s blue and white VW van parked in front of the two story brick house, no cars parked under the oak canopy joining one side of the street to the other. The screen door banged shut.

“My parents want to talk to you,” Amber said. Two fingers stretched a clump of her short, black hair. Pulled taut in front of her blue eyes, she examined the dark strands.

Amber’s mother and father sat at the oval-shaped oak table and faced each other in silence. Brows furrowed, lines engraved around their eyes and mouths, they stared at the unfolded map and the flyer, *Fire Dancing Exhibition*. Amber and Jeremy stood in front of them and waited for her father to speak.
“I don’t like it,” Amber’s father said and looked straight into Jeremy’s eyes. The rigid lines on his face creased into a frown. Jeremy stared into the dark pupils, resisting the urge to look away.

“I understand,” Jeremy said. “I have a younger sister.”

“Isn’t your sister in junior high?” Her father paused.

“Amber and I went to winter camp together.”

“Chaperoned.”

“Really, sir, the chaperones needed us to chaperone them.”

“Really.” Her father motioned to Jeremy’s clothes. “What’s all this? Black clothes, black hair.”

“I’m still Jeremy.” He turned toward Amber. “And I would never do anything to hurt Amber.” Jeremy looked back at her father. “Or to break your trust, sir.”

“It’s only two nights,” Amber said, breaking the conversation between Jeremy and her father.

“Why overnight?”

“It’s on the coast. You don’t want us driving that narrow, winding road in the dark.”

“You’re right,” he said, his index finger drumming on a knot in the oak table. “I still don’t have to like it.”

Amber zipped her duffel bag, the field of white daisies on a pink background closed over shorts, shirts, and a mound of miscellaneous items that conformed to the contour of the canvas bag.
“What’s wrong with blond?” Her father shook his head and ruffled Amber’s hair with his fingers.

“It’s just an image,” Amber said. She smoothed the strands back into place.

“Well, I’ll never like it.”

“We’re dancers,” Amber said. “We just happen to dance with fire.”

Jeremy picked up Amber’s duffel bag in one hand and her sleeping bag in the other. Amber wrapped one arm around her pink pillow. She held the screen door opened for Jeremy. It slammed behind them. They bounded down the front steps and along the walkway to the van, the duffel bag colliding between them. Amber opened the passenger door and placed her purse on the tattered upholstery, while Jeremy opened the back door of the van and moved his backpack to make room for Amber’s duffel bag and sleeping bag on the mattress that stretched from one side of the interior to the other.

“Wait,” Amber’s father yelled through the screen door. “One more thing.” The man took two stairs at a time and reached Jeremy before his wife emerged from the front door with a large brown bag. Jeremy shut the van door and stepped up on the curb. Amber’s dad grabbed him by the back of the neck and pulled the boy towards him. Jeremy flinched. One burly arm wrapped Jeremy’s neck in a headlock. The man whispered into his ear, “Don’t touch my daughter.” His forearm flexed and pressed into the boy’s windpipe. He held it, bending Jeremy in half. He loosened his grip and released the boy. Jeremy gasped for air, still doubled over with his feet spread apart, hands on his knees. Amber’s father held out his rugged hand. Jeremy straightened up and looked the man in the eyes.
“Yes, sir.” He gripped the outstretched hand.

“Chocolate chip,” Amber’s mother said, joining them on the sidewalk. She handed the bag to Amber and touched Jeremy on the shoulder. She circled one arm around him in a half hug. Amber’s parents took turns kissing their daughter one last time before she climbed into the passenger’s seat. Jeremy retreated to the driver’s door and stepped up on the sideboard. He waved over the top at Amber’s parents before he ducked into the van. The older couple leaned into each other as the VW’s engine whirred. Jeremy shifted the van into gear and pulled away from the curb. Amber waved her hand out the window at the two hands swaying back and forth.

“What did my dad say to you?” Amber laughed.

Jeremy looked in the rearview mirror. “Take care of my daughter.” He looked in the rearview mirror and saluted the diminishing figure. The van rounded the corner and Amber’s parents disappeared.

“That’s my dad.” Amber smiled and settled into the indentation worn into the seat cushion.

“I understand your dad.” Jeremy glanced in the rearview mirror again. The empty road filled the rectangular space.

The VW rolled over the last hill and wound down the curved road to the coast. Weather-beaten houses clustered around the bay. Their roofs formed a patchwork quilt of silver, green, and brown. The jetty stretched its arm between the bay’s calm water and the ocean. Jeremy and Amber followed the line of red brake lights that extended down
the hill into the small town. Cars, trucks, and motor homes crawled along the mound of sand, forming ant trails on the peninsula. Funneled through the Ranger’s gate, the road branched into circular communities of domed tents and rectangular canopies.

Jeremy glanced at Amber. Her knees folded up and pressed against her breasts so that her bare feet rested on the dash. The crumpled map lay on the van floor below her feet. Jeremy swerved out of line and veered across traffic to a parking lot in front of a small café. Grey paint peeled from the wood siding. A clump of picnic tables sprouted red and white umbrellas from their centers. The van stopped and Amber lurched forward. Her feet slid from the dash and crushed the map.

“Sorry,” Jeremy said.

“What are we doing?” Amber unfastened her seatbelt.

“I’m hungry,” he replied.

“Me too.” She stretched her arms and yawned.

“Fish and chips?”

“Sure.” She slipped on her black flip-flops.

While Jeremy ordered, Amber waited at one of the picnic tables. He watched her through the window. The wind played with her hair. Invisible gusts blew it in wisps across her face. Black strands contrasted with her white skin. Another gust rocked the umbrella. Amber zipped her black sweat jacket and pulled the dark hood over her head.

“We can eat inside,” Jeremy yelled, his head poked between the opened door and the frame.
“No,” Amber said. “Outside.” She shut her almond-shaped eyes and let the breeze blow against her face.

“Okay.” Jeremy said and backed through the café door. His hands juggled a brown bag of fish and chips and two sodas. Amber met him halfway between the picnic table and the café door. They sat together on one side of the table. The warped wood creaked under the imbalance of their bodies. Jeremy nudged his knee into Amber’s. The table creaked again. His fingers tore the brown bag and laid the battered filets and glistening fries on the paper surface. A warm odor wafted upward. Jeremy breathed in. His stomach growled. He stopped and closed his eyes. The umbrella strained under another gust of wind. The long, metal pole squealed against the ring in the center of the table. Jeremy opened his eyes.

“Why do you always do that?” Amber asked. Eyes wide, she faced him. A blink swished the long, dark lashes.

“What?” Jeremy looked at the red outline of her lips, the neat line that defined the edges, the boundary between the white skin and the soft, moist mouth enunciating each syllable.

“Pray.” Amber smiled. A row of smooth, white teeth flashed between her lips.

“A blessing on the food.” He shrugged his shoulders. He tugged the corner of the brown bag toward Amber. “Eat.”

“Thank you,” Amber replied. Her fingertips toyed with one crisp, battered end. Jeremy waited for her to take a bite before he reached into the pile for the crusty, golden
brown piece that balanced on the uneven surface of another filet. He crunched through the batter shell and tasted the fish.

Seagulls screeched overhead. They flew in loops, circling the couple, and waited for a piece of crust to fall. The birds dipped down, examining the ground for crumbs, and then swooped out over the wetlands. White wildflowers dotted the green field of weeds. On the far side of the jetty, a barge inched along the rocky boundary and entered the bay. Waves boomed and crashed against the rocks, spray shooting up like a geyser. A foghorn blasted. The sun shimmered across the waves and teetered on the horizon.

By the time they reached their campsite, the fiery sphere dipped down below the undulating line. From outside the van, Jeremy watched shadows play on the interior wall while Amber changed into her long-sleeved, black top. Jeremy shook his sandals off his feet and left them under the picnic table bench. He lifted his black t-shirt over his broad shoulders and tossed it on the table. A silver cross dangled in a sparse patch of blond hair on his chest. His black jeans hung on his narrow hips. Amber emerged from the van. The stretchy fabric clung to curves and squeezed her breasts into the v-neck. A gap of white skin revealed a diamond-studded belly ring and stopped the eye at the line of the black leggings that tapered into long, slender legs.

“Cookie?” she asked and took a bite of a round mound of chocolate chips. She offered Jeremy the cookie in her other hand.

“Thanks.” Jeremy nodded, his eyes drawn to the shirt’s v and the line of cleavage that separated into rounded breasts. He looked down at the chocolate chips protruding from the browned cookie and took a bite. His face flushed. Jeremy turned toward the
back of the van and flung open the back doors. His tongue searched out the little mounds of chocolate chip. He took another bite and unsnapped the latches of the case. The remnant of the cookie in one hand, he held up one of the metal poi. The long chain clinked against the loops of the other chains. The chocolate chips melted on his tongue. He popped the rest of the cookie into his mouth.

Amber led the way over the dune that separated their campsite from the beach. Jeremy walked behind her, mesmerized by the movement of the stretchy fabric hugging her hips, the taste of chocolate still warm in his mouth. Chains clanked as they walked along the dune to the flat expanse of damp shoreline exposed by the ebbing tide. Amber raced ahead and leaped across the compacted sand. Her legs extended with each leap into mid-air splits, arms gliding like wings. Toes touched the swirling froth. She twirled on demi-point in a pirouette. Arms in second position, her foot pointed in front of her. She drew a half circle in the moist sand and then posed her foot on the back of the supporting ankle, bent her knee, and curtsied.

Jeremy lit the poi. Amber grasped the leather thongs. Fiery spheres dangled from the attached chains. She swung the blazing poi, swirling the flames in a criss-cross motion. One arm over the other, the globes swooped in glowing loops on both sides of her body. Jeremy gripped the leather straps attached to the chains of his poi, extended his arms and swung the flaming balls in backward circles. Amber mirrored his image. Synchronizing the flight of the spheres, they stepped closer and closer until her hips slid against his thighs. Her breasts touched his bare chest. The flaming globes spiraled
backward and twirled behind their bodies, drawing the two together in a fusion of light. The blazing trails fluttered like butterfly wings in the darkened sky.

“Awesome,” a voice said. A young man in a black sweatshirt and black jeans stood on the dune’s crest. The burning metal balls dangled from the chains in Jeremy and Amber’s hands. The man walked toward the couple, his features obscured by the shadow his dark hood cast in the moonlight.

“Thanks,” Jeremy said. He extinguished his poi and spun out the excess fuel.

“Dude.” The man stumbled in the dune’s deep sand. “Don’t stop. She’s smokin’ hot.”

“We’re done.” Jeremy helped Amber extinguish her poi and spin out the fuel.

“Let’s go, babe.”

“Hey, party at the bonfire.” The man motioned to the blazing mound of wood and the specter of grey smoke at the far end of the beach. He winked at Amber.

“Thanks,” Jeremy said. The hot metal dangled from his hands.

“Check out some of the other dancers.” The man nodded toward the poi.

“There’s a conclave from Vegas camped next to us.”

“Can we?” Amber asked. She looked into Jeremy’s eyes, glanced at the man, and then looked down at the ground in front of her.

“They do Burning Man,” he added.

“Exhibition’s tomorrow.” Jeremy shook his head. “We need sleep.”
“If you change your mind.” His hands in his pockets, the man gestured with his head towards the grey cloud growing over the bonfire. He turned and walked away, his black sweatshirt and jeans fading into the dark.

Alone, Amber and Jeremy trudged through the loose grains of the sand dune. The ground shifted beneath their bare feet. The scorched globes swung from Jeremy’s arms, chains clinking against each other. When they reached the van, Jeremy let the poi cool while Amber changed her clothes. The van door opened and Amber stepped out in a light blue T-shirt and matching sweat pants.

“I rolled out the sleeping bags,” Amber said.

“Okay.” Jeremy opened the van’s back door to put away the poi. His green sleeping bag lay unzipped and opened out, spread across the mattress; the blue material of Amber’s bag peeked out from underneath the flattened, flannel cover. Edges of their pillow cases touched. “I thought we could walk into town for some ice cream.”

“Great.” Amber smiled. She slipped on her flip-flops and sat on the edge of the picnic table to watch Jeremy. Her hands at her sides, fingers fidgeted with the bench’s rough, splintered wood. He turned his black t-shirt right side out and pulled it over his head and chest. He banged the sand out of his sandals and slid them on his feet. He grabbed their sweat jackets and tossed Amber’s to her. She zipped up the dark, hooded jacket while Jeremy circled the van and checked each lock.

Hand-in-hand, they wandered past the Ranger’s gate and down the road that curved with the headland. The beam from Jeremy’s flashlight created a bouncing spot on the asphalt in front of them. A single car passed. Jeremy shielded his eyes from the
headlights while Amber shut her eyes and leaned into him. He pulled her close; his lips
brushed her forehead. They followed the pavement until the field opened into a trail to
the main road and the ice cream parlor. The fingertips of Jeremy’s free hand touched the
tops of the weeds fringing the sandy soil. The path, pressed into existence by the passage
of hundreds of hikers, wound through clumps of white, bell-shaped flowers, their heads
nodding in the wind.

A floodlight drew the two toward the brick building and the parlor, tucked in the
corner between a book store and a coffee shop. A string of bells jingled as the door
swung open. They squeezed into a narrow space, big enough for Jeremy and Amber to
stand side by side in front of the glass display case. Amber bumped her hip into Jeremy.
He teetered off-balance and bumped her back. The momentum rocked her toward the
glass enclosure. Hands on the glass, they peered into the round tubs displaying an
assortment of flavors and laughed like children. A grey-haired woman in a white apron,
smudged with mint chip, greeted them. Her face crinkled into a smile.

“Single scoop, strawberry, please,” Amber said.

“And a single scoop, chocolate, please,” Jeremy added. Amber stared through the
window at the bonfire’s glow in the far corner of the beach. Jeremy watched the scooper
dig into the strawberry ice cream and roll the thin layer into a ball. The old woman
packed each cone to the tip and balanced a rounded, scoop on top. Amber pressed her
forehead against the window and peered through the dark, entranced by the shape-
shifting ghost billowing above the flames.
Jeremy paid for the ice cream and dropped a dollar in the tip jar. He elbowed Amber from her thoughts and handed her the strawberry cone. Amber pressed the frozen cream to her lips and breathed in the strawberry scent. Her red tongue caressed the cold surface. Jeremy ran his tongue around the cone’s rim, gathering chocolate drips with one continuous lick. He nudged Amber through the parlor door to a small table beyond the reach of the floodlight’s glare. The metal chair legs scraped against the concrete as Jeremy scooted his chair next to Amber. Her tongue swirled around the ball of pink, sculpting it into a peak. She touched the tip of her tongue to the point and closed her lips around it, letting the cream melt in her mouth. Jeremy bit into the chocolaty scoop and rolled the sweet, soft substance around his tongue. Amber leaned over and licked the chocolate from the corner of his mouth. He looked at her closed eyes and kissed the strawberry cream from her lips.

Finished, they chased each other back toward the campsite. Amber tugged Jeremy down on the path’s soft, grassy shoulder. She rolled him onto his back and straddled his hips. She held his wrists with her hands and bent forward to kiss him. He laughed and rolled her off, reversing the move and pinning her against the ground. One knee on each side of her hips, he pressed his lips against hers and tasted the strawberry still fresh in her mouth. He stood up and helped Amber to her feet. Jeremy’s arms encircled her and rocked her against his chest. He breathed in her fragrance.

When they reached the van, Jeremy opened the passenger’s door and dug through the glove box.

“What are you looking for?” Amber asked.
“Nothing,” Jeremy replied.

“This?” Amber held up the square packet. A round rim protruded under the foil.

“What?”

“I want our first time to be us,” she said. The hand with the packet dropped back to her side and she looked down at the ground. “Together,” she added and looked up at Jeremy.

“I was looking for a cigarette.” Jeremy rifled through the maps.

“You quit,” Amber said.

“I have one somewhere.”

“You promised.”

“It’s just one cigarette.” Jeremy held the cigarette between his lips and lit it. He took a long drag and exhaled the smoke. “I’ll take it down to the water.”

“Without me?”

“I just need a few minutes.”

He climbed the dune, his feet slipping in the loose grains. At the crest, he turned to look at Amber’s silhouette hunched over at the picnic table. He held the cigarette in his mouth and took another long drag. His feet slid downward on the opposite side of the dune, the loose grains giving way under each step. He puffed until the end of the cigarette glowed red. The deep drifts of sand melded into a flat, dark surface where the surf rolled back on itself. He blew the smoke into the air above him.

Waves washed against Jeremy’s bare feet. He waded into the water. It lapped at the legs of his jeans. The cigarette between his lips, he bent down and cuffed the legs so
that the waves swirled around his ankles. Mist clung to his face. Ash dropped from the end of his cigarette and left a red glow. He took another puff and inhaled the smoke into his lungs. A foghorn sounded. He counted the seconds between blasts. Jeremy tossed the butt into the ocean and wiped the mist from his eyes with the back of his hand. Head down, hands in pockets, he dragged his feet through the warm, dry sand.

“Hey, babe,” Jeremy called from the dune’s crest. Amber’s silhouette had disappeared from the picnic table. The van’s interior dark, Jeremy called again, “Amber.” He opened the back doors. The sleeping bags lay untouched. Empty.

“Amber,” Jeremy yelled. He shut the van door. He trudged back up the dune, the sand shifting beneath each step. From the top of the dune, he scanned the abandoned shoreline in both directions. The waves boomed and crashed. In the lull, he yelled again, “Amber.” The pounding surf drowned out his voice. He listened. The foghorn blasted. At the far end of the beach, the bonfire’s flames licked the dark sky. Jeremy’s stomach twisted into a knot and squeezed the blood into his face. Dark figures moved around in the glow.

Ribbons of light began to spiral up and down in flaming loops.

Jeremy wandered down to the dark line that separated the dry, loose grains from the wet sand. The waves broke and rolled up to his feet, bubbling froth inching across the flat surface, then turning back on itself. Jeremy followed the line left by the retreating wave, walking on the smooth, damp grains. Another wave rolled across the sand, its swirling foam encircling his feet. The ocean sucked the wave back and churned it under. He trailed behind the wave and stood at the water’s edge. Dark rippling waves stretched out beyond the jetty. A single ray of light flashed from the lighthouse on the
peninsula. The foghorn sounded. He counted the seconds until it sounded again. A wave brushed his pant legs, pushing him toward the beach. Another wave crashed, pulling him back with the tide. He reached the jetty and looked over at the bonfire. His eyes focused on the apparition that rose out of the inferno.

Amber stood next to the fire, sandwiched between two dark hoods, linked together like the chains around the men’s necks.

“Dude,” the familiar voice called out from under one of the dark hoods. “Look what I found all alone in the dunes.” The guy’s hand ruffled Amber’s black hair.

“Amber,” Jeremy said and looked straight into her eyes. “I need to talk to you.”

“We’re all friends,” the voice said. The dark sweatshirt held out his hand toward Jeremy. “I’m Nick.”

“Jeremy.” He leaned forward to grip the outstretched hand.

“Matt.” Nick motioned and the other hooded sweatshirt raised his hand.

“Amber’s going to show me some moves.” The arm circled around Amber’s shoulder and squeeze her closer.

“It’s okay,” Amber spoke up. “Practice gear.” She held up the ropes, flax balls dangling. She handed a set of poi to the hooded man and they walked beyond the fire toward the beach. The flaming poi of two small clusters of fire dancers reflected on the sand. In the open space, Amber began to swing the poi, one in each hand. Nick mirrored her. The poi swung in circles at their sides as they stepped closer and closer together until their bodies pressed together separated by the fabric of Amber’s sweats and Nick’s jeans. Jeremy saw himself in the hooded figure. Amber swung her poi in a criss-cross
motion behind Nick’s back. Nick tried to swing his poi, but the ropes tangled and he lost his balance. He pulled Amber towards him.

Jeremy watched their shadows fall down to their knees on the sand. His hands in his pockets, he trudged through the loose sand toward the couple untangling the ropes in the moonlight.

“Amber,” Jeremy said in a low voice.

“What’s the matter?” Amber smiled at Jeremy.

“Nothing.”

“They’re harmless.”

“You don’t know,” he said, putting one hand on each of her shoulders. “Trust me.” He looked over her shoulders at Nick. “We need to leave.” Jeremy’s hands slid down her shoulders to her hands.

“I’ll say good-bye,” Amber said and tugged her hands out of Jeremy’s grip.

“No.” Jeremy grabbed Amber’s sleeve and pulled her back.

“Hey, Jeremy.” Nick began to walk in their direction. “Don’t you want to share?”

“Sorry,” Jeremy said, taking Amber by the hand and leading her towards the beach.

“What’s your problem?” Amber looked at Jeremy.

“Don’t you get it?” He turned Amber to face him. “They want to pass you around.”

“You’re wrong,” Amber said. “I just wanted to have some fun.”

“So do they.”
“I can do what I want.” She looked over at the bonfire.

“Do it.”

Amber stood in the moonlight, her hands in the pockets of her sweat jacket and her lips pressed together in a thin line. “You can’t stop me.”

“I don’t want to.” Jeremy crossed his arms. “I thought . . .” He took a deep breath and let it out through his lips. “I thought we were together.”

“I thought we were going to have fun.”

“Have fun.” Jeremy waved his hand toward the bonfire.

“I mean together.”

“I promised to take care of you.”

“I don’t want you to.”

“Looks like you don’t need me.” Jeremy turned toward the beach. “I’m going for a walk.” He pulled his hood up over his head, stuffed his hands into the pockets of his sweatshirt, and plodded through the sand drifts.

Halfway back to camp, Jeremy looked back at the bonfire. The flames flickered in the dark. Off to one side, the conclave of fire dancers twirled their fiery balls. Circles of light, looping and spiraling around the shadowy figures. They all looked the same. He couldn’t see Amber. Jeremy crossed the dune and headed toward the water. The foghorn blasted between the boom and crash of the waves. Jeremy bent down and picked up a seashell. He held it in his hands for a moment, and then tossed it as hard as he could into the ocean. He bent down again and picked up another shell, tossing it into the surf. And another and another. Standing at the water’s edge, he looked out at the dark horizon, the
blurred line where the night sky blended with the black water. He sat on the wet sand and let the waves roll up to his toes. He lay down on his back and looked up at the glitter of starlight, scattered across the night sky.

“What are you doing?”

Jeremy turned his head and saw Amber’s face beneath the dark hood.

“Looking for shooting stars.”

“See any?”

“Here.” Jeremy reached his hand out.

“What?”

“Lie down.”

“Won’t we get wet?” Amber sat down on the sand next to Jeremy and slipped off her flip-flops.

“Who cares?”

Amber lay down on the sand next to Jeremy and looked up at the sky. The waves boomed and crashed, rolling up on them. The tide swirled around them and rolled back along the sand, churning under. They watched the stars twinkling above them and waited. The tide inched up the sand, swirling around them and over them.

“Orion.” Jeremy pointed to the three stars that form the belt. “And the Pleiades.” His hand motioned toward the cluster of seven stars. “Did you see that?” A point of light streaked through the field of stars.

“I saw it.” Amber reached her hand upward.
Jeremy clasped her hand in his. They lay there, watching and waiting, thousands of grains of sand beneath them, glimmering stars above them, and waves washing over them.
The morning sun shone through my dad’s kitchen window and reflected on his short, white hair. I don’t remember it being any other color. The lines in his face shifted, creasing into a smile. He turned the page of the photograph album, put down the magnifying glass, and took a long look at the empty, grey sheet. My mom stopped putting photos in the album when I was eleven, the year that our family moved to New Zealand. When she died, she left behind cardboard boxes heaped with red and blue envelopes filled with photographs.

“Tea?” he asked.

“Sure.”

Dad poured hot water into white mugs. I searched through the tea tin for a packet of green tea. My fingers unwrapped the small packet and dangled the tea bag over the mug. I dipped it into the steaming liquid. The small pillow of tea floated on the smooth surface, the water saturating the dry leaves. A stream of light brown dispersed downward from the bag. My dad settled into his chair. He dunked a bag of black tea into his mug, my mom’s favorite. He stared at the tiny waves splashing toward the mug’s rim with the plunging movement of the tea bag. He drank it black, like she used to, and I wondered when he stopped using cream and sugar. While he sipped, I reached down into the cardboard box on the floor between us and took one of the envelopes off the top.

We passed the photographs between us for hours, examining faces and backgrounds for clues to identify the people and places in each image. Near the middle of the box, underneath a layer of loose photographs, my fingers touched the corner of a
cream-colored envelope that stood out from the red and blue ones. I recognized the kiwi emblem on the envelope of the film developed in New Zealand. I had forgotten about the roll of black and white images.

I slipped the envelope under the table, placing it on my lap, and handed my dad a stack of photographs from my sister’s wedding reception. Scanning the crowded images with the magnifying glass, his eyes focused on the task of finding familiar faces. The cream envelope still on my lap, I opened it and flipped through the pictures until I found the image of my seven-year-old sister and me, sitting together with my friends in the deck chairs on the S.S. Oronsay. Mom took the picture on the day before we arrived in New Zealand. I looked at the eleven-year-old girl in the picture, squeezed together on one chair with her little sister, their faces side by side, white bandanas covering the rollers in their long, blond hair. I clutched the black and white photo in my hands.

*          *         *

The ship swayed in the turbulence, rising and falling sixty feet as waves beneath it swelled and receded. Unsteady, its white bulk moved forward while long tongues of water licked the port and starboard side and saturated the wooden deck. Thick ropes tied the doors shut, but their heavy metal shuddered with every gasp of wind and struggled against the interwoven cords. I stood in front of the wall of windows, my face pressed against the cold glass. Swirling my long sleeve in the condensation gathered on the pane, I made a porthole in the mist and peered into the torrent. The storm hit just off the coast of Seattle and with no land in sight I lost my bearings and the illusion of safety I fastened to the silhouette of cliffs and lowlands that extended the length of the horizon.
on the eastern side. I imagined the ship rolling over and casting me into the churning Pacific Ocean. The life jacket stowed under the bunk in my family’s cabin seven decks below could not save me. The waves dragged me down into an abyss below the surface and the dark swallowed me whole. It was the same dark that swallowed me the day my dad announced that he had sold the house. In the months that followed, my parents shoved everything that meant home into my grandmas’ garage, crammed into cardboard boxes or shrouded with her patchwork quilts. The ship pitched and I lurched sideways into a stack of deck chairs.

“Okay?” Dad asked.

“Yes.”

With the advent of the storm, much of the decks and common areas that teemed with passengers between San Francisco and Seattle appeared abandoned. Seasickness even affected some of the crew members. My sixteen-year-old brother, my sister, and my mom stayed in the cabin and tried to remain motionless in the midst of the rolling sea beneath them. Cocooned in grey blankets, they did not emerge from their bunks until the turbulence subsided into calmer waters. During the stormy days between Seattle and Hawaii, my dad and I explored the huge ship until I learned my way up and down the decks and through the maze of corridors without him. While eleven year old children were required to be supervised, either by their parents or in the children’s playroom, I also learned my way around the rules.

Beyond Hawaii, the cloudless, blue skies allowed the ship’s population to pour out of the confines of the ship’s interior and onto the open decks into the sunlight. The
brilliance reflected on the expanse of deep, blue water which stretched to the horizon in all directions. I stopped thinking about which way to swim if the ship capsized and spent the remaining days with two new friends. Lou Ann, a twelve year old from Texas, was a little taller than me and had short, blond hair and blue eyes in contrast to my long, blond hair and hazel eyes. She boarded the ship with her family in Long Beach and was traveling to Australia. Matt, also twelve, had blond hair that curled in tousled locks which crowned his tall, lean frame. He and his family voyaged around the world on the ship and were returning home to Australia. After I took my sister to the playroom, I often escaped to play Mahjong and to listen to the band practice songs. On one of those days, the roll of drumsticks from one drumhead to the next and the tinny sound of the symbol mesmerized me, until I noticed the drummer staring in my direction. He winked at me. I looked back down at the Mahjong tiles and tried not to look up again.

On the last night of the voyage, I wandered along the ship’s upper deck. Alone, I rested my arms on the rail and looked out across the vast expanse of nothing. The watery surface extended all the way to the horizon, marked by the sun’s crescent sinking into the ocean. A shimmer of light radiated toward me across the rippling waves until the remnant of the sun dissipated, dusk darkening into night. New Zealand’s shoreline lay somewhere beyond sight. I breathed in the ocean air and held it in my lungs until it became a part of me, then I let my breath escape between my lips. The night sky squeezed the moon into a sliver of light and a sprinkling of stars began to form dot to dot images against the black background. I scanned the sky for the formation of the Southern
Cross while I waited for my friends. Double doors swung open and familiar voices broke the stillness. Lou Ann and Matt stood in the shadow of the overhang joined by a third person. The triangular formation shifted toward me. My friends, followed by a man in a white uniform and captain’s hat, approached me. My shoulders and neck tensed in anticipation of a reprimand by the officer.

“This is our friend . . . ,” Lou Ann said.

The ocean breeze carried away his name. The brim of the man’s hat hid his features with the exception of the roundness of his face. I smiled at the three of them and then turned back toward the rail, my arms folded, one over the other. The conversation continued for a few minutes behind me, then ceased. I thought I was alone again and leaned forward over the rail to watch the ship’s bulk cut through the ocean, leaving a trail of froth in its wake.

“It’s quiet out here tonight,” a man’s voice came from behind me.

I nodded and kept my eyes on the horizon where the undulating waves melded with the night sky. The man’s feet shifted. His breath against my neck tensed every muscle in my back and shoulders. He placed his hands on my shoulders and ran them down my arms. His body pressed me into the rail and his fingers brushed my small breasts. I tried not to move. His hands cupped my breasts. I stopped breathing. I watched the rippling surface below me and looked down, deep into the water and wanted to fall into the dark. I don’t remember how long we stood there, only that he did not say another word and left me there surrounded by the night air, alone.
I swung opened the storm doors and descended down the long flights of stairs. I looked down at my feet and counted one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, A deck, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, B deck, . . . all the way to G. One long corridor after another stretched before me and I navigated the maze of passageways that led to my cabin. The door of the cabin swung open and my brother stood in the dim doorway. A night light glowed in the darkened room.

“It’s about time,” he said and motioned to the mound of grey blankets on the bunk; only the top of my sister’s blond head was visible.

“Sorry,” I said and looked away. The cabin door shut behind him and I climbed up the ladder to my bunk and lay on top of the bedspread. I buried my face in my pillow. When I rolled over, I stared at shadows cast by the dim night light across the plain, white ceiling. My mind wandered to a girl who had been kidnapped while walking near her home on the back road between Colfax and Meadow Vista. She escaped by jumping from the car when it slowed down to make a turn. I imagined jumping from a moving car. I thought about the day our station wagon door flew open and my sister fell toward the pavement, her head dangling toward the road below. My hands grabbed the waist of her black, corduroy pants and stopped her head from hitting the pitted pavement passing beneath the car. Lou Ann’s words repeated in my head, “This is our friend.” The man in the white hat touched me and I didn’t stop him.

*          *          *

When my youngest child left for college, I returned to school. Between classes, I retreated to my car. I did not venture out on campus until sometime during the fourth
semester. Spring’s warm sun filtered through boughs of green leaves, shading a long row of picnic tables in the middle of campus that I passed every day. One day I stopped. I sat for a while, distracted by the people walking along the sidewalk and bicyclists on the service road behind me. I opened my book and read under the leafy canopy. After several weeks, I didn’t notice the stream of students that flowed around the picnic table island.

During final’s week, a flash of black in the road to my right caught my attention. A man stepped up on the curb and then back into the road. He stepped back up on the curb behind me and hovered over my shoulder. I pulled my arms in close to my sides. The muscles in my back and neck tensed. My face red, I focused on a line of words on the page. I read the same line over and over, waiting for him to leave. He stood there, leaning over my shoulder. I could hear his breathing in my ear. I held my breath.

“What are you doing?” he asked. He leaned over and touched the page of my book with his right hand and then rested it on the table next to the book. A ring coiled around one of his tattooed fingers.

“Reading.”

He bounded around the table, a soft, black guitar case shifting on his back. The shape of the guitar neck formed a black shadow behind the brown hair that hung over his ears.

“What are you doing?”

“Can I sit here?”

“Sure.” I looked back down at my book.

His lanky frame slid onto the bench across from me and he began to talk. I looked up at the tattooed fingers and forearms that extended from a plain, black t-shirt
and stretched out on the smooth concrete slab. The diagonal strap of his guitar case pressed against his chest. I looked down at the same line of words and read it again.

He rambled on about engineering and music. I glanced up at his face. Dull pieces of metal pierced his ears and hung between the long, brown strands of hair. He turned my book cover over to see the title.

“You know about this stuff?”

“A bit.” I traced the crack in the brown concrete table with one finger.

“I bet you know all about it.”

I looked up at his eyes for something.

“Some of us are getting together to play.” He flashed a smile. “Come over and join us at the music department, if you like.” He motioned toward a building in the distance, shifted his guitar on his back, and disappeared into the crowd.

*          *          *

In the morning, the ship docked in New Zealand. On the stairway, between the cabin and the dining room, I passed men dressed in their white uniforms. Each one wore that same white captain’s hat. My cheeks red, I looked away. In the dining room, the server filled my glass with orange juice. I looked down at the white napkin in my lap. I poured milk on the little, oat circles in my bowl. Some floated in the small, white sea; others sank below the surface. I moved them around the bowl with a spoon. On the way back to the cabin, I kept my head down. My breasts stretched the knit shirt into two, small mounds. I counted each step, watching the soles of my tennis shoes press against the dulled wood. Alone in the cabin, I lifted the knit shirt over my head. The mirror
reflected the curves covered by a white bra. I slipped on the blue and white sailor dress, identical to my sister’s, chosen by my mom for us to wear when we met our grandfather for the first time. The cotton fabric bloused away from my body. I looked at the girl in the mirror, the red sailor tie criss-crossed against her chest and camouflaged the contours of her shape.

As my grandpa’s car drove away from the pier, through the streets of Auckland, and into the New Zealand countryside, the ship and the man in the white captain’s hat faded into a speck in the distance. When the ship sailed, he would be gone, but even with the ocean between us, I carried the shadow of his face with me. Through the car window, telephone poles whizzed past. My mind wandered in the green fields that rolled into hills dotted with grazing sheep and escaped the memory of the man. These grassy pastures stretched along the winding road in the way my dad had described them all of my life. He dreamed of the day when he could bring us to meet his New Zealand family and to see the land he called home, the place where he spent his childhood. One of eighteen children, spread out over the course of his father’s two marriages, my dad had parents, aunts, uncles, and cousins we had never met.

My grandpa stopped the car to let a flock of sheep cross the road from one pasture to another, their matted wool the same as the coarse hair of the bummer lambs my brother raised on the enclosed porch in Eden Valley. We fed them formula through black rubber nipples attached to tall, Coke bottles, their white muzzles butting against the rubber until they learned to open their mouths. They wriggled beneath the teeth of
the curry comb. Long tines untangled the snarl of wool and brambles. We ran and played with our lambs every day in the green pasture surrounding our house, unaware that a blue ribbon at the fair meant they would be eaten. Outside the car window, the sheep moved along the road in a mass of white faces, their bulky bodies bumping into each other. A man reined his brown horse to one side of the bleating sheep while his Queensland healer ran back and forth, nipping their heels and herding them into the gate on the opposite side of the road. The man nodded to my grandpa, his face shaded by the brim of a cowboy hat. I looked away from the man to the white faces that passed by my window, their wild eyes looking sideways at me.

Grandpa’s farm nestled in the hillside overlooking the bay and the small, coastal town of Ngunguru. His white, one-story house perched on a grassy mound shaded by tall, kauri trees. A colorful assortment of sheets and towels hung from a long line in the backyard and flapped in the breeze. While my dad and my brother helped Grandpa unpack our luggage, my mom disappeared into the kitchen with Grandma. My sister played with a calico kitten on the porch and I wandered along the fence line where two of Grandpa’s cows munched on long grass, green blades hanging from the corners of their mouths. Their coats were white with brown splotches and reminded me of our neighbor’s cows. I tore a handful of grass from the fringe at the fence’s edge and held it flat in my hand. The cow’s thick tongue swept the blades into its mouth and chewed it into a pulp that tinged its saliva green. Its long tail swished a fly from its side. Ears wriggling, the brown and white head dropped down among the tufts and tore them with its short, flat teeth. Dad had fenced in our property in Eden Valley so that the pasture
encompassed the house. The horse, the sheep, and the chickens wandered in the same yard where I played. I tore another handful of grass and held my hand flat.

When school began, my sister and I stood on the steps of the three room schoolhouse dressed in the same sailor dresses. Our white anklet socks folded down and white sandals sprinkled with brown powder from the long, dirt road. We were pakeha, but it was not many days before we unbuckled our sandals and walked barefoot with our New Zealand classmates. I learned how to sing “God Save the Queen.” I learned how to dip a quill pen into an inkwell and not make a mess of my paper. I learned how to write a cursive r that looked more like an n to me, and I learned how to say “zed” for the letter z.

Figs ripened in the enormous tree shading the schoolyard. We spent lunch recess harvesting the dark fruit with the withered-looking skin. The older children climbed high into the fig tree, girls tucking their dresses into their shorts. They gripped the branches with their knees and tossed the figs to the younger children below. Sometimes, the dark skin burst open on impact and the sweet and sticky insides would spill out. More than once, I went home with fig juice in my hair.

When the tide was right, the headmaster signaled for the classes to dismiss for swimming lessons. We changed into our swim suits. My mom bought me a yellow swim suit with a soft-cup bra that accentuated my breasts. I left it at home. I wore my old, blue swim suit that pressed my breasts flat against my chest. Even then, I wrapped a beach towel around my body like the older girls. We crossed the road in our colorful sarongs and stood at the edge of the inlet. Dropping our towels, we ran into the bay’s blue water.
Older students took turns as lookouts, posted at strategic locations.

“What are you looking for?” I asked.

“Stingrays.”

“How do you know if you see one?”

“Their fins dip in and out of the water’s surface.”

I scanned the surface of the bay for the flat, grey creature with the wide fins that I had only seen in a magazine picture. Any undulation in the water became grey and finned and I imagined them brushing against me as my arms slapped the waves and my feet kicked in a frenzied movement resembling freestyle.

Robin and Melanie invited me to row to the sandbar, a long arm of sand that separated the bay from the ocean. I ran home after school to ask my mom for permission.

“Wear your new yellow swimsuit,” Mom suggested.

“I like my blue one.”

I met my friends at the dock, my blue swimsuit beneath my clothes and beach bag hanging from my shoulder. The dock’s warped boards creaked under our feet. Water stagnated beneath wooden slats, dark and still compared to the perpetual movement of the waves at sea. Oil leaking from a motor boat spread on the surface in a rainbow.

Robin bent down to untie a small row boat. Melanie placed the two wooden oars into the oarlocks; the flat paddles slid into the dark water. The boat wobbled beneath the weight as, one by one, we stepped down inside the hull. Robin rowed the three of us across the bay. The oars moved back and forth with the motion of Robin’s body, dipping down and
pulling against the current with each stroke in a rhythmic splash. Halfway to the sandbar, Robin rested and let the boat drift over the deep, dark water. She lifted the oars again and pulled; the muscles in her arms tensed. As we drew closer to the shore, the dark shadows of the deep water lightened to reveal the sandy shoreline. While Robin steadied the boat with one oar, Melanie and I climbed into the knee deep water. Robin dropped the anchor and checked the line tethered to the boat. We trudged through the loose, dry sand to the other side of the dune where the ocean lapped and rolled up the smooth, damp beach in waves edged with frothy foam. The tide swirled around our ankles.

Robin pulled a pack of Winston’s and some matches out of her beach bag. She took one and passed the pack to Melanie. Placing the cigarette between her lips, she used her hands to shield the wind and struck the match. The end of the cigarette lit and she drew the smoke into her lungs.

“You smoke?” Robin asked.

“Yes.” I looked down at the sand and nudged a broken clam shell with my toe.

Melanie handed me the pack. She drew the match’s red tip across the strip on the matchbook in a burst of flame. A gust of wind blew it out. She took another match and struck it against the strip, covering it with her hands. She bent her head down to the flame and lit up the cigarette. She took a puff and blew the smoke out of her mouth. I held the pack in my hand and watched them inhale, draw the smoke in, and blow it out into the wind. I took a cigarette out of the pack. Melanie lit a match and cupped the flame in her hand.

“You don’t smoke, do you?” Robin asked.
“No.”

“Well, don’t waste it.”

I slipped the cigarette back into the red and white pack and handed it to Robin. Bending down, I picked up the broken shell and tossed it into the surf.

The cigarettes reduced to butts and a pile of ash, we played tag with the tide and scampered along the line of wet sand inching higher and higher on the beach. The waves boomed and crashed, then receded back into the ocean, changing the face of the shore with every pass. Robin and Melanie stood waist deep. Carried by the wave, they bodysurfed into the shallows. I waded out and waited for the next wave to swell, but it crashed over me and dragged me down and under. Churning me over and over in its dark curl, the wave grated my skin against the gritty, ocean floor. I gasped saltwater. Choking. Gasping. Drowning. Hands pulled me out of the water.

*          *          *

About two months after our arrival, the ship that brought us to New Zealand completed another loop and was returning to Australia at the end of its tour. Our family’s original plan did not include traveling to Australia, but Dad managed to secure last minute accommodations. Since tourist class was full, our family shared a cabin in first class. Located above the water line, our cabin had a porthole. Not only could the sun shine in, but we could look out and see the ocean rippling without climbing flights and flights of stairs just to find daylight. The drawback of first class was the absence of any other children, but the children’s director allowed my sister and me to join the children’s activities in tourist class, granting us passage between the two halves of the ship. The
door between first class and tourist class offered a certain amount of protection from the past and the man with the white captain’s hat. Crossing that boundary, I watched for men in white hats and looked down whenever they passed.

The crossing between New Zealand and Australia only took about three days. Within the first day, I made friends with another girl from the United States. After lunch, I took my sister outside on the Promenade Deck and let her look at the ocean. She stood on her tiptoes and stretched her neck as high as she could to see over the rail. Her long, blond hair trailed down her back all the way to her waist. I stood next to her and looked over the rail at the rippling waves, the ocean churning as the ship cut through the water.

“Where are your friends?” a man’s voice came from behind us.

I recognized the voice and turned toward the line of empty deck chairs. The drummer from the first voyage sat in the far corner. My eyes widened and I pressed my lips together in a thin line. He leaned back in the deck chair, his arms folded behind his head. His legs spread apart, shorts displaying the flesh of his inner thigh and part of his groin.

“In Australia,” I blurted and turned back toward my sister. Taking her hand, I tried to steer her toward the door leading into the lounge area, shielding her from the man. I whispered in her ear, “We have to go.”

“I want to see land.” She pulled her hand away and gripped the rail.

“There is no land,” I said and grabbed her hand again.

“Why do we have to go?”
“We need to go,” I tugged her through the door into the lounge, her hand tight in my grasp. She followed behind me as I maneuvered through the overstuffed couches and chairs between us and the playroom. I pushed her in the door and went to find my friend.

I did not see the drummer again until the next afternoon. He leaned against the wall near the stage where the band played.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“I’m going to find my parents,” I said and walked away.

“Where are they?”

“At the theatre.”

“I’ll help you find them.” He walked toward me, the gap between us closing.

“I can find them,” I said and started walking in the direction of the theatre. His footsteps sounded on the floor behind me. I walked faster down the long, doorless corridor to the theatre’s foyer. A red, braided rope hung across the entrance. Closed. I stood at the rope and looked at the darkened doorway that led into the empty theatre. Footsteps stopped behind me and the man placed his hands on my shoulders. My cheeks flushed red. His hands trailed down my arms and across my breasts as he pulled me close to him. I struggled out of his grasp.

“I thought we were friends.” He grabbed my arm.

“No.” I yanked my arm from his grip. “I’m not your friend. I’m not.” He stood between me and the exit. “I’ll tell.” I brushed past his extended arms.

“Wait,” he laughed.
I didn’t look back. The foyer opened into a long, empty corridor. I ran along the polished floor, the ceiling lights reflecting off the shiny surface in isolated spheres of light. I turned the corner and the passageway opened up into the common area surrounding the enormous, wooden staircase. My feet tapped against the steps and fingers glided along the oak rail that guided me down two flights of stairs to a lounge area in front of the purser’s desk and the doorway between tourist and first class. A man with a white captain’s hat stood at the desk. His head lifted at the sound of my footsteps on the stairway.

“Is everything all right, Miss?” asked the man.

I paused and studied his long, narrow face. His mouth formed a smile and the eyebrows, which had been drawn together, relaxed beneath the rim of the white hat.

“Yes, thank you.” I pushed open the swinging door and crossed over the boundary into the imagined safety of first class, exhaling a long breath through my lips. I navigated through the maze of empty corridors leading to the cabin. No one followed me, not the drummer, not the man in the white hat. I locked the door behind me and climbed up on my parents’ bed to look out the porthole. The waves undulated, glints of sunlight reflecting off the translucent water. I watched for stingrays.

At dinner, the children’s dining room buzzed with the sound of parents and children and the to and fro movement of the servers dressed in white coats carrying huge, round platters. Water sloshed from silver pitchers, a waterfall cascading into empty glasses. Ice cubes, riding over the rim, splashed and sprayed droplets of cold water. Knives and forks clinked against china plates as mothers cut the food into bite-
sized portions. At the end of dinner, my friend and I huddled over our creamed ices and I told her what happened.

Jolted awake by vibrations and the loud, scraping sound of metal being dragged across the rugged, ocean floor, my sister and I bounded out of bed in our pink, cotton nightgowns and crawled across our half-awake parents to look out the porthole. Through the circle of glass, we saw the unfinished peaks of the Sydney Opera House, its white frame in the vessel’s shadow. The ship stopped. Dad pulled his arms through his blue bathrobe and joined us at the porthole.

“Something’s wrong,” he said and ventured into the corridor to find the cabin boy. My brother rolled over and covered his head with a pillow. Mom tied the belt around her robe and stood up on the bed, her feet sinking into the blankets. My sister and I scooted over to make room for her, our feet tangling in the twisted sheets. She looked through the porthole at the opera house.

“Too close,” Mom said.

“We ran aground,” Dad announced as he came back into the cabin. “A near miss with another ship.”

Someone knocked at the cabin door. My dad answered. A man in a white uniform and captain’s hat stood in the doorway. I looked away and focused on the formation of the opera house and its cluster of peaked domes. Dad stepped into the corridor with the man. My brother’s head still underneath the pillow and Mom in the bathroom with my sister, I perched on the edge of my parents’ bed and tried to hear.
“. . . not pressing charges . . . ,” the man said.

After breakfast, my dad and I walked down the long ramp to the pier. The Sydney Opera House towered at the water’s edge at one end of the quay, further away now than it had been through the porthole that morning. I tried to keep pace with my dad’s long strides, but every step equaled two of mine and I trotted alongside him, watching our shadows shift in the morning sun.

“Bloody beggar,” Dad mumbled. “Your brother punched him last night for God knows what reason.”

I glanced up. The drummer from the band walked along the pier in our direction. The number of wooden planks between us diminished with every step. I slowed my pace and lagged behind my dad, pretending to play with my shadow. A wave of brown hair crested his forehead. Dark eyes focused on me. As we passed each other, my dad nodded his head. The man smiled and nodded back, a bluish bruise around his right eye. I looked at his face, his eyes, then past him at the white, hooded peaks of the opera house gleaming against the clear, sapphire-blue sky.

*          *          *

The first day of college, I stood at the end of the long corridor and took a deep breath. The hallway stretched before me, filled with students. I stepped into the human wave. Caught up in its motion, I tried to keep up with the flow along the expanse of tile, avoiding the bump of elbows and backpacks and navigating around little eddies of students that churned in front of classroom doors. The warm, thick air suffocated me. My face flushed. I couldn’t breathe. I attributed it to the anxiety of returning to school
after so many years, but it happened over and over again. Each time I walked down a long, corridor, whether it was filled with students or empty, I could not breathe. I decided to avoid the long halls and walk outside in the open air among gusts of wind that scattered the leaves, fluttering and spiraling down to my feet, and raindrops that splashed against my face.

*          *          *

My youngest daughter and her husband traveled to Australia a couple of years ago. They sent me a photograph of the two of them, faces smiling, standing together on the pier in Sydney Harbor, the opera house in the background. I looked past their faces at the white, hooded peaks. On the day the ship ran aground, the opera house stood untouched, the virgin of the harbor. The ship stopped just a few feet away from violating her, ramming its steel body into her and crushing her beneath its force. I could still see the wooden pier, long planks stretching out between the ship and the opera house. In the distance, I saw a man’s shadow. I stood on the pier alone and watched him until I could see his face. The drummer walked toward me. I looked down at the glimmer of sunlight reflecting on the dark, rippling surface of the bay. I stood still. The ocean breeze played in the wave of his brown hair. His dark eyes focused on me, a bluish bruise around one eye. I stood in front of him and I wanted to ask, but I could not open my mouth. I turned the photograph over.

*          *          *

On one of those mornings that my dad and I met for tea, he surprised me with something. He held the certificate in his hands.
“Mom saved this for you.”

I took the large, colorful piece of paper from him. A cartoon drawing of King Neptune in one corner, orange and pink sea anemones and long strands of seaweed bordered the proclamation in the center.

“I don’t know what it is, but it has your name on it.”

I looked at his blank face.

“It’s the certificate they gave me for crossing the equator for the first time.”

I couldn’t remember my dad standing in the crowd of people watching us crawl through the line of hands, sloshing each one of us with green foam as we passed through King Neptune’s court. A big, bare-chested man, wearing a green, seaweed cape and gold crown sat on the throne. In my yellow swim suit, I crawled on my hands and knees across the slippery floor through the aisle of green men. Their hands smeared green foam in my long hair and on my arms and on my legs and on every part of my body, until their hands covered me in the froth. My hands and knees sliding in the foam, I squirmed through the hands, fingers reaching toward me. I tried to get to the other side. I tried to get away.

*          *          *

My dad put down the pile of wedding photographs and took another sip of tea.

“Let me see the magnifying glass,” I said. He handed me the glass. I handed him another stack of pictures. “Christmas.” His hands fidgeted with the loose photographs, placing them in a pile on the placemat in front of him. One by one, he turned them over, looking at each face around the Christmas tree.
I held the magnifying glass over the black and white image in my lap, the last photograph taken before the man in the white captain’s hat, before the drummer, before. I looked at my face beneath the white bandana. My sister sat beside me, covering up one side, but the other side revealed a shoulder peeking out of the sleeveless, striped top, the stretchy fabric clinging to the shape of one small breast. My friends sat beside us. Beyond them, the long row of empty, deck chairs extended down the deck. In the last empty chair, I could see the drummer, leaning back against the wooden slats, his arms folded behind his head. He sat with his knees spread apart, shorts gaping. His long legs stretched out. I wondered how long he had been watching me.

I slipped the black and white image back into the envelope. I didn’t show want to show the photograph to my dad. I didn’t want to talk about the trip to New Zealand.
October 5th

We stood at the trailhead and looked up at the pine-studded mountain and the protrusion of granite that crowned the ridge. The October sun reflected on the amber leaves and warmed our faces in the mid-morning air.

“Are you sure you want to do this?”

“I’ve always wanted to.” The first time Randy and I hiked through the Lakes Basin area, more than thirty years ago, we lost ourselves in the intertwining trails just weeks after our wedding day.

“See that mountain.” He raised his hand and made a sweeping motion that encompassed the rocky outcropping. “Deer Lake is on the other side.”

“There is a trail.” I studied the granite face. “It’s not like we’re rock-climbing.”

“No,” he said, “but we have to go up, and I mean up, to get there.”

“I know.”

The trail ahead of us dipped down through a gully, obscured by a stand of pines. Manzanita and oak brush hugged the surrounding banks and Randy bent down some branches for me to pass. We crossed the shallow stream, the water trickling through the crevices of rounded rocks, stepping stones to the trail on the opposite bank. From this point, he led and I followed along the narrow trail toward the base of the mountain. The rise and fall of this portion of the trail lulled me into a sense that the hike would continue around the mountain easing us upward through the switchbacks.

Randy ran ahead and scouted the terrain. Bounding up the hill, he climbed an enormous granite boulder that overlooked the trail. I shaded my eyes with my hand and
looked up at him. Underneath his long, graying hair and beard, I saw the boy I first met in seventh grade. I imagined him walking down the school bus aisle, his sun-streaked, brown hair combed across in a surfer boy style. He wore blue jeans and a short sleeve cotton shirt, yellow and green bands criss-crossed into plaid. During that first year, I turned my head and looked down at the blue binder in my lap, waiting for him to pass.

“Hey, up there.” I yelled when I reached the blue jeans and cowboy boots dangling over the boulder’s edge.

“How’s it going?” Elbows on his knees, he leaned his head over and smiled.

“You don’t have to wait for me.” I smiled back at him.

“I don’t mind.”

Randy jumped down from his perch and took the lead going up the hill. As I trudged along behind him, the gap between us stretched until he disappeared over the next rise. I concentrated on the gritty soil, small round particles rolling beneath my walking shoes and took one step at a time. I started to count steps and when I reached ninety-nine, one hundred, for the seventh time, my mind drifted to October. The fifth had come and gone again and I still struggled, years later. Her birth. Her death. If life begins at conception, then I carried her in my womb for nine months. I remember the flicker of life inside me and the nights we followed the ripple of her elbow or her heel moving across my belly.

*   *   *

I promised myself I would keep my eyes open this time so I could watch the birth, see the baby being born, but I scrunched my eyes closed with the last, long push.
Randy’s arms supporting my back and shoulders, I opened my eyes. Tiny arms and legs moved in slow motion.

“It’s a girl,” the doctor announced. He held her in his hands and glanced at the nurse. Balancing her tiny body in the palm of one hand, he ran the other hand across her chest. He touched the bottoms of her feet. “There’s a problem.”

I leaned forward to see my baby girl. Her little mouth formed silent gasps, but no sound. The doctor cut the cord and whisked her into an isolette in the far corner of the room. In a flurry of green scrubs and white coats, doctors and nurses came in and out of the room, clustering around the small body, her head in one doctor’s palm and her body and legs extended on his forearm.

“We need your permission to put her on life support.”

“Yes,” I whispered, still half-exposed on the delivery bed. The bright light above me glared in my eyes; I needed to close them for a moment. When I opened them, I was alone. Randy had disappeared. I looked over at the empty isolette. The baby, the doctors, the nurses, all gone. The sound of something sliding on the floor caught my attention. I looked down at the white linoleum and saw Randy sitting on the floor in his green scrubs with his knees drawn up to his chest and arms wrapped around them. His shoulders shuddered in silent sobs. A pile of film laid next to him in loops of brown, translucent ribbons. I leaned back against the pillow and closed my eyes until a hand touched my shoulder.

“She’s gone,” the doctor said.

*   *   *
I sat down on a flat rock bordering the trail. Randy appeared at the crest of the hill, backtracking to find me. His chest bare, the summer tan lingered on his skin. The long sleeves of his western shirt wrapped around his hips and a strand of something tied his long locks behind his head.

“Are you all right?”

“Yes.” I exhaled a long, breath between my lips.

“You’re not going to die on me out here.”

“No, I just need to sit for a minute.”

“Here, let me tie back your hair.” He yanked a vine-like stem out of the soil and stripped the roots and leaves with his pocket knife. Holding the stem in his mouth, his rugged hands brushed back my blond hair into a ponytail. “Hold this.” He guided my hand back to the clump of hair. While I held the ponytail in place, he tied the stem.

“How’s that?” He put his hand on my shoulder.

“Better.” I smiled up at him and our eyes brushed.

“You should take off your shirt,” he laughed.

“Right.” I laughed with him. After the first hill, I had tied my sweatshirt around my waist.

“Do you think the bears care?”

“Now you’re trying to scare me.”

He sprinted back up to the crest of the hill and disappeared. Alone on the trail, I thought about bears. In all the years that we had camped and hiked in this area, we had only seen one bear. Fuzzy and brown, it lumbered up the slope toward a dense stand of
pines at the rumble of our truck. The oak brush swished against my jeans as the trail narrowed into a rut that ran through the thicket of stiff branches, green with leaves. Tiny acorns clustered at the tips of each branch, the rounded shells cupping miniature nuts.

Baby acorns.

* * *

Jill struggled for an hour before she died, somewhere. Somewhere away from us. And in those last moments between life and death, did someone hold her? We never saw her again.

I covered my head with the blanket as the orderly wheeled me down the hall and into a room. Randy walked alongside the gurney. I think they gave me something to make me sleep. The first few hours blurred together with my only memory being Randy sitting on a chair beside me. Nothing had prepared us for her unexpected death. There were no warning signs. We had four healthy children and expected that this birth would bring another.

Sometime in the mid-afternoon, conversations in the hospital hallway woke me. Randy emerged from the chair and poked his head out the door to see what was going on. A voice drifted through the opened door, then a woman from church entered the room. Whatever else she may have said, I only remember she quoted Philippians 3:8:

“More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ.” I looked at her and said nothing.
Randy told the nurse we did not want to be disturbed. Later in the afternoon, our Lamaze instructor broke the silence with a knock on the door. She noticed the birth certificate form placed on the nightstand, the name blank.

“What did you name her?” she asked.

“We haven’t named her,” I said and looked at the blank line.

“You need to give her a name,” she said, taking a seat on the edge of the bed.

“She has a name.” She leaned toward me and asked, “What do you want to call her?”

“Jill,” I whispered.

*          *          *

A strip of mud, four feet wide, blocked the trail. Beyond that a marshland stretched to the slope of the next ridge.

“Hey,” I yelled. “Where are you?” No answer. I walked along the grassy edge, the long blades bent over into inches of water above the muddy base. I touched the toe of my shoe into the mud. It sank down, water covering the top, mud sloshing up the sole’s edge. I pulled my foot back. “Where are you?” I yelled again.

“Up here,” Randy shouted from the ridge. “Follow the edge of the marsh this way.” He motioned. “I’ll meet you.” He climbed down from one rock ledge to the next until he reached the slope.

“No trail?” I asked.

“You saw it,” he replied. “It’s under water.”

“All this way,” I looked down at the mud on the toe of my shoe.

“We can still make it,” he said, “It’s just over that rise.”
“Which rise? That one, that one, or that one?” I pointed out the three knolls, each one a little steeper, culminating in a rocky climb upward. “Have you seen it?”

“No, but we can make it.”

* * *

The burden of Jill’s death lifted during the moments between waking up and awareness. The sterile walls of the hospital room, the unfamiliar white sheets and blankets, and the blue pattern of the gown brought me back to reality. Randy sipped a cup of coffee in the corner of the room. They brought me a tray of Cheerios, milk, scrambled eggs, toast, and orange juice. Not hungry, I drank the juice.

A nurse with a clipboard collected the birth certificate form and then proceeded to ask a bunch of questions.

“Do you smoke?”

“No.”

“Do you drink alcoholic beverages?”

“No.” I pulled the rumpled sheets and blankets up to my chest.

“Did you take any prescription drugs during your pregnancy?”

“No.”

“Did you take any other type of drugs”

“No.” I hugged the blanket.

“Do you have a microwave oven?”

“No,” Randy answered and rose up from his chair. “I think that’s all the questions we need to answer today.”
“I’m sorry,” the nurse replied, “but this is routine.”

The doctor entered the room and dismissed the nurse with a wave of his hand.

“We do need to handle one or two more things while I have you both in the room. We would like your permission to do an autopsy.”

“Why?” I asked, still leaning back on the pillow with the blanket pulled up around me.

“It would be helpful for us to understand this type of anomaly.”

“Okay,” I said, clinging to the word helpful. I didn’t understand what an autopsy would involve and if anyone would have explained it to me, I would have said no.

“And we need to know whether you want a cremation or burial.”

I blinked. I may have been sitting on the bed, but I was no longer there. I don’t remember anything the doctor said after that.

The doctor released me from the hospital just before noon on Monday and sometime during those last minutes before check out, someone gave us the only physical evidence of Jill’s existence. When we left the hospital, instead of our baby girl, I held in my hands a hospital birth certificate, a memento imprinted with Jill’s tiny footprints, two little crescent shapes with five toe print smudges of ink over each one.

*          *          *

“Cross over here,” he called from the far end of the marsh. “It’s drier.”

I crossed the mat of grass pressed into the mud, my feet sinking into an inch of sludge that seeped into the soles of my shoes. I followed Randy over one knoll after
another until we reached the slope upward. A tree had fallen over a gully, its bark flayed
opened and its orangish-brown wood deteriorating.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Probably a bear looking for grubs.” He held his hand out and helped me cross
over the trunk. “Watch your step.”

Crossing the gradual slope between the gully and the rocky base, I caught my
breath before beginning the ascent up the rocks. One rock at a time, I climbed until I
reached the ledge. Randy gripped my forearm and pulled me up the last couple of feet.

“Where is it?”

“Not far.”

“Did we go the wrong way?”

“No.”

“There’s no trail.”

“We don’t need a trail.”

Randy raced ahead and disappeared beyond the ridge. I lagged behind still
thinking about Jill.

* * *

Still clutching the birth certificate, I stared out the truck window at the hospital. I
wanted to go back to that minute, the minute before we knew that anything was wrong.
Randy started the engine. He looked at the gas gauge and shook his head.

“Sorry, babe,” he groaned. “We need to stop for gas.”

“Do we have to stop?” I asked.
“We’re on empty,” he said. We drove in silence to the gas station. I looked out the window at the uneven pavement and the movement of the white line along the edge. Tall, golden weeds waved, while orange and yellow leaves skittered and cartwheeled in gusts of wind along the shoulder of the road.

“I don’t want to see anyone.”

“Just go in and say hello.” He pulled into the station and waved to the older couple behind the counter. They waved back from behind the rows of Wrigley’s, Snickers, M&Ms, and Baby Ruths. A nod signaled for Randy to begin pumping the gas. I opened the truck door. Forcing a smile across my lips, I walked toward the entrance, pushed the glass door opened, and stepped inside.

“Hello,” they greeted me with big smiles. “You haven’t had that baby yet!”

I looked down at the checked pattern of red and white linoleum squares. “Where is it?” one asked.

I didn’t know what to say. I just kept looking at one red square. “What’s the matter?”

I ran out the door and passed Randy on his way inside to pay for the gas. “What’s going on?” he asked me.

“I can’t do this.”

“Can’t do what?” His smile vanished. “Please, take me home.”
Except for the imprints of Jill’s feet, it was almost like nothing had happened. And we tried to move on like nothing had happened. I don’t remember when I opened the door of the baby’s room, but it was empty. The wooden crib dismantled and moved somewhere. The blanket knitted by Randy’s grandmother and draped over the side, along with the little teddy bear that I placed in the corner of the crib, had disappeared. Someone emptied the closet of the infant-sized assortment of boy and girl clothes, little pink and green dresses and dark blue cotton shorts and matching t-shirts. Only the imprint of crib wheels on the beige carpet remained. I closed the door.

Sometime during that first week, Randy went back to work and the children came home from Grandma’s house. Life went back to normal, with its calendar full of activities and everything that happens in a house with four children. At some point, I needed to buy a gift for my sister-in-law’s baby shower. Living in a small town, it was inevitable that any trip out would mean an encounter with someone I knew. I rehearsed a response. Inside the clothing store, I wandered toward the baby clothes. A maze of blue, pink, green, and yellow culminated in a mound of teddy bears with pink or blue ribbons tied around their necks. A friend touched my shoulder.

“You had your baby,” she said and wrapped her arms around me in a big hug.

“What did you have?”

“A girl,” I blurted the words out, but before I could finish she had already moved on to another question.

“What’s her name?”
“Jill, but . . .,” I hesitated, “she died.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry, so sorry.” She hugged me again. Stepping back, she wiped her eyes.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I just don’t know what to do.”

“You don’t have to do anything.”

*          *          *

I didn’t think it would take so long. I looked around for bears, across the rolling knolls, among the shadows of the gully, and the flat of the marsh far below. Wondering if we had gone in the wrong direction, I sat on a fallen tree and looked at the puzzle-like pieces of bark. I ran my finger around the shape that looked like a little turtle, the same shape I used to cut out and glue to the single, rounded cup of an egg carton for my children.

“Where are you?” I yelled. No response. The long stem tied in my hair had loosened. I pulled it tighter, but the strands of hair bunched up. I loosened it again and started over, pulling my hair back and wrapping the stem around the clump. The stem crossed and tucked through, I made a knot. Years after Jill’s death, we talked. We made mistakes. We should have done this or that, but we never did anything. I leaned back until my head rested against the log. Reclining on its rounded surface, I watched the clouds float high above me in the blue sky. I drifted along with them to that place where only I can go and no one else can find me.

*          *          *
Six weeks later, the doctor arranged for Randy and me to meet with genetic specialists at UC Davis. We arrived early, clutching Jill’s file. Surrounded by a team of interns, a couple of specialists, and a psychologist, we listened while words like anencephaly and tri-somy thirteen and neural tube defect volleyed back and forth.

“As you can see in the photograph . . .” one started.

I turned my head away.

“You don’t want to look?”

I looked down and shook my head. I did not want to see a dead baby curled up on her side with her knees drawn up and her fists clenched. I wanted to remember Jill alive, the pink body with tiny arms and legs moving in slow motion and her little mouth opening and closing.

More weeks passed before our copy of the autopsy report arrived. I opened the envelope as if there would be some further explanation for everything inside. Reading through the description of the procedure, I began to understand what an autopsy involved. It was all there in print, a detailed account of how they cut open Baby Girl and dissected her brain and her heart. They noted the ink smudges found on her feet. If they didn’t clean off the ink after they imprinted her feet, did they put her back together after the autopsy? We never heard from the hospital or anyone concerning her body or her ashes. I lie awake some nights and wonder if she is in a jar somewhere, a specimen of anencephaly tri-somy thirteen.
Maybe it was the not knowing what to do that brought about the collision between Randy and me. We tried to step back into our lives, his work consuming him in the same way that the children’s activities consumed me. I don’t remember what led up to the argument, only the middle and the end.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Nothing.”

“There is something wrong.”

“Shut up.”

“No.” I said, my back against the bedroom wall.

“Something’s wrong.”

“I want to kill myself.” I slid down to the floor. Head down, I wrapped my arms around my knees.

“I can’t stop you. Just do it somewhere so the kids don’t find you.” And he walked out the door.

I don’t know what I expected.

* * *

“Hey, I see Deer Lake.” Randy’s voice came from somewhere over the ridge.

“I hear you,” I yelled back. Brambles covered the hillside between us. I pressed through the first few feet, but sharp thorns poked through my jeans. I backed out and headed around the thicket and up the bank to a small clearing. Deer Lake shimmered in the mid-morning sun.

“Where are you?”
“I’m over here,” I called.

A splash sent ripples radiating outward. Randy’s silhouette glided under the clear water. The outline of his body stretched out and then snapped as he stroked down into the deep, dark shadows of the lake. I sat on a flat boulder near the edge and slipped off my shoes and socks. Still damp from the marsh, I laid them out in the sunshine. I rolled the bottoms of my jeans and stepped along the muddy shoreline. My feet sunk in the soft earth and made footprints. Tears stung my eyes. I waded into the shallows, the water lapped against my ankles. Mud from my feet mingled with the clear water. I bent down and cupped the water in my hands. Splashing the water on my face, I let it run across my closed eyelids and cheeks. I dipped my hands again and again, washing the cool water over my face. The water sloshed against the dampened edge of my rolled jeans. I looked up at the blue sky and the shifting clouds and closed my eyes again.

The boys were one and three years old when Jill died, and don’t remember much about what happened, but the girls were five and six.

“Did the baby go to heaven, Mommy?”

“Yes.”

“Did you see her fly up to heaven?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“How did she get there?”

“I don’t know.”

A granite rock, still cool from the morning shade, protruded from the bank. I waded through the water and sat on the rock with the tips of my toes touching the lake’s
surface. Minnows darted in and out of the shadows of dark rocks beneath the clear water. A breeze blew a wisps of hair across my cheek. I closed my eyes and listened to the rustle of aspen leaves and to the water lapping against the shoreline. Sunlight warmed my face.

I opened my eyes to the swish of water, Randy’s arms pulling down and back with each stroke. A flutter kick bubbled up behind him. He stood waist deep in the lake and let the water stream down from his hair. His muscular body waded to the shore. Naked, his skin glistened in the sunlight. He pulled his long-sleeved shirt off a branch and dried his chest. Putting on his jeans, he balanced on one foot, then the other. Dressed, he sat down next to me on the rock.

I smiled.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked.

“What’s the matter?”

Silent we sat with his leg touching mine, his shoulder against mine. He released her long ago, the one I still carry inside me. The lake’s clear, smooth surface reflected the rocky crags and the towering pines. Billowing clouds in the October sky drifted across the canvas of water. If I had Jill’s ashes, I would scatter them in this place.