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Stopping for Death: Plays, Poetry, and Prose

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Mealworm World
Second of Six First Communions

My father held me over the sink.
I was dressed in white.
In the same dress
my older sister once wore.
In the same dress
my younger sisters would wear.
We were going to be late. I forgot
to brush my teeth before I put on
the layers of tulle, of ruffles and lace,
of Catholicism.

I could not accept
Christ’s body, Christ’s blood
with a dirty mouth.

My father held a towel around the
front of my dress as suds dripped
into the sink. The mint hit my nostrils and
I wondered what wine would taste like
after toothpaste. He scolded me
for being forgetful. He told me
I looked beautiful. He asked me
to practice saying ‘Amen.’
I mumbled it through white foam and bristles.
Mom was getting the other kids dressed,
the boys in suits too small or
too big because they were borrowed.

I could not believe
I got fifty dollars
with a rosary inside a white purse.
I held the money in gloved hands, white gloves.
My dad kept the money, for “safe-keeping.”
I was punished for pouting, for not understanding.
I asked for forgiveness and first
wondered when it was my turn
to hold my own.
Flood

I was drooling, wearing pigtails.
My dad came to shake my older sister and me awake.
*Girls, get up, we have to go.* It’s late or early; we cannot lift our lids. But, we’re the oldest, we need to set an example.

The little ones were crying. I think there were four of us then?
This was before I was responsible for everything.

I tried to stay awake and dreamt I did instead.
But there are things I remember.
My mother kept telling us
*there is water in the basement,*

*water everywhere,* but I don’t understand: maybe the basement matters.

Dad hoisted me in my footed pajamas through rain
to the car. Mom told us *we’re going to Grandma’s house, where it is dry; safe.*
She buckles us in.

The police were mad at us; at my father
who waded the basement waters and stayed alive.

There were sparks of electricity
in that water; in that house.
There was something to die from, for.

My mind was young and water-logged,
*I do not understand.*

My drowned house cannot be saved. All our pictures stained,
ruined or washed away.
I do not know what I looked like as a child.
While Waiting for Bus 305-A in the Early Morning, Wearing a Rain Jacket and Pigtails
Right After My Mother Reminds Me Not to Judge Books

like the rock that’s dark-bellied
after I’ve plucked it from the soil.
I remember that.
There were worms there that
fell away from the light,
found new ground to eat up, to make their meals.
The same worms that would stretch
their way to the surface after the rain,
smelling of those early school days waiting
for the bus.

I remember Scott Green,
third grade, eating a mealworm— our science
project. We failed because it died.
Scott Green grew up to be
not a serial killer or child pornographer
like you’d expect—
he dotted his I’s when we
learned cursive, and that means
something in this worm eat worm, human
eat mealworm world.

I remember the rain getting heavy and the rocks
and worms nestling themselves
back inward. The rocks didn’t mind
their heads getting wet
while the rest of the worms crawled
under their stomachs so as to not
get cut to pieces while us children wondered which parts
were male, which parts were female and which,
of their thousand beating hearts,
were bleeding out into our washed away sidewalk chalk.
Defenses Animals Use

The only time I went to the pond was that once with Connor. That was two summers ago, when Connor was eleven and I was only nine. Even though he was older, and he pretended to be big, Connor was still a little kid, like me. Kelly and the big kids warned us about the pond; they told us ghost stories to keep us away. Kelly is my big kid neighbor. She would always tease me about hanging out with Connor; she said he was my boyfriend. I didn’t think he was. Connor told me that the big kids told those stories (about dying and drowning and ghosts of little kids) so they could have the pond all to themselves. He said I was lucky the pond was practically in my backyard. It was in the woods behind my house, and my mom told me that didn’t belong to us. Connor said it didn’t belong to anybody, and when something doesn’t belong to anybody, then it can be anybody’s to have. I thought that was so brave; I thought Connor was brave.

Even now that I’m eleven like he was, I still don’t feel like Connor felt. I still feel like a little kid. I remember one night that summer: he snuck me out of my house, when we were both supposed to be sleeping. He told me I wouldn’t get in trouble because I was younger. He told me that he would get blamed. I snuck out the glass sliding door in the back of my house. I wanted to feel brave.

We were lying down on the dirt and grass in my backyard. We looked up at the stars and held hands. It was the first time I held a boy hand and it didn’t feel like my friends said it would. It was hot and wet, and the ground was wet too. I told him a secret of what I always thought. A secret I never said out loud until he held my hand.

“I know we’re people and we are still growing up and we still have to learn to become big kids and then grown-ups. I know we love God, but I always think we are a
little science experiment.” I was looking up at the stars; he was too. Then he turned his head toward mine; I kept looking up. “I always think maybe those stars are the fork-holes that let in the real air and we are all just bugs crawling about in the jar God made for us.” Connor laughed at me and told me I was silly. But, he must have liked silly because he kept holding my hand and he kissed me on the cheek before we went inside to be warm. I never told anyone about that time with Connor, just like I never told anyone else about us being bugs—those were our secrets.

That was the night before Connor and I went to the pond. We weren’t allowed to go. We went when we told my mom we were playing capture the flag with the neighbor kids. We ran past the first trees; no one could see us, then we walked. I kept looking behind us because I thought we’d get caught. Connor told me I was chicken. Connor reminded me what the big kids said, and that they really all go there, and that’s why they tell us to stay away. That’s why no one wants us around; we’re little. We got there, but there weren’t any big kids, there wasn’t anybody. The pond was a whole lot smaller than I thought it would be. I guess since it was supposed to be so scary I thought it’d be huge. It was just green mucky water surrounded by mud. Connor said he was sure he could jump right over it without even getting wet, but he didn’t try. I told him I was nervous, and I thought we’d get in trouble, but I forgot about that when he splashed me with water. I laughed and didn’t let him know I was really mad. I was thinking of how I had to take another shower then, because I was wet with smelly pond water. Before I liked Connor, I took a shower to get feel clean or because my mom said I had to, but once Connor told me I smelt good. From then on I only took showers to make sure he said those things again. Since I was already wet I decided to jump in the shallow of the pond with him. We
splashed each other and laughed really loud and Connor told me jokes only grown-ups thought were funny, about lawyers and how married people don’t have sex anymore they just do dishes. They didn’t make any sense, but I laughed anyway. I could hear the cars on the street next to the woods, and I wondered if they could hear us, but Connor told me that was stupid.

“Look!” Connor whispered and pointed behind me. He crouched over in the water. With one hand he held a finger to his lips, and I hushed my giggles and crouched too. His other arm was still pointing to the opposite side of the pond. It was green and so filled with gunk and seaweed it looked like land. I didn’t want to go over there, but Connor got out of the pond and walked around it slowly to the other side. I stayed where I was and watched him. He knelt on the ground, getting the knees of his wet jeans muddy, then, slowly held his arms out; he was going to catch something. I looked below him and saw a small painter turtle sunbathing on the muddy edge of the pond. I let out a giggle, quieted, and bit my lip. Connor cupped his hands as he lowered them around the turtle. It moved and tried to scuttle forward to the water, but Connor grabbed it and held it tight in his hands. He ran back to me squealing and laughing and yelling.

“Quick, Emmy, help me hold him! We need a bucket!”

I raced to him and clamped my hands over his. The turtle squirmed around and I could feel his wet nose and tail at my fingertips, I held tighter and we ran back to my house to get him in a bucket so we could look at him. That was the second time I held Connor’s hand. I don’t think it counts.

When we got to my house I had Connor stay in the backyard, and I ran to find a bucket. I grabbed a big, yellow, plastic one, the kind we’d to take to the beach. I ran back
to Connor. His eyes lit up; the bucket was just right. I set it close to Connor’s hands and
he placed the squirming turtle at the bottom.

“Did he bite?” I asked and watched the baby turtle claw at the sides of the bucket;
his little nails scratching and groping for a way out.

“Nah, he’s not a snapper. Look at how dirty he is, he’s got all that moss on him.”
Connor wiped his mucky hands on the butt of his jeans.

“Maybe we should clean him up. We could name him and give him a clean shell.
He’ll be the prettiest turtle in the pond.” I smiled down into the bucket.

“How do we clean a turtle?”

I wondered for a minute and then turned and ran into my house; I knew just what
to get. I came back out with a cup, dish soap and an old toothbrush.

“We can’t use soap, it’ll kill him. Wild turtles don’t use soap.” Connor hid the
bucket behind his back. He glowered at me as if I were going to kill our new pet.

“We can! This is Dawn, and I once saw some people on TV using it on ducks.
There was oil and dirt all over them, so bad they couldn’t fly, so the people got gloves
and Dawn and they cleaned all the ducks.” I nodded and dipped the toothbrush in the
sudsy water.

“Well that’s the same stuff my mom uses to clean dishes. And this isn’t a duck.”

“Well it is a turtle, and I know it won’t hurt him.”

“If it dies, it’s your fault. This wasn’t my idea.” Connor set the bucket between
us. He ran to get the hose that was hanging off the back wall of my house.

“Fine! I’ll make sure to let everyone know it was my idea! And then they can say
‘Emmy, look at that pretty turtle, it’s such a good thing you saw those ducks on TV.’” I
yelled after him and scooped the baby turtle in my hands. He was so tiny, and still wet. He slid around in my hand and clawed at me, I felt bad then for taking him from the pond, and wondered if he had a mom turtle. She probably warned him about humans.

Connor came back with the hose and put a little water in the cup, then took the turtle from my hands. I put some soap in the cup and made it foamy.

“I’ll hold him, you scrub,” he said, and I nodded and dipped the toothbrush into the water, I scrubbed gently on the turtle’s back, but the moss didn’t come off easily; it was growing on his shell. I scrubbed harder, and slowly the gunk wore away and revealed a shiny back that felt like my fingernails. I thought about how a turtle’s shell is really just its fingernails, but big.

“See how much better he’s going to look?” I smiled and Connor nodded back at me. Pieces of blond hair fell into his eyes. He shook his head to move them, keeping the turtle in place. I dropped the toothbrush back into the cup; pieces of moss and bits of dirt clung to its bristles. We petted the new shell of the turtle, proud of the work we’d done. I squatted and pulled some grass from the ground. Connor held the turtle with one hand and started scooping up dirt with the other. We put the dirt and grass at the bottom of the bucket and Connor carefully placed the clean, shiny-backed turtle on top of his new home. The turtle didn’t claw as much at the sides anymore; he was probably happier. We looked down at him, and smiled. I wondered how he felt, if he was scared looking up at us; if he thought we were nice kids looking out for him or just strangers with a science experiment. I’m glad he stopped clawing, or else we’d have to put a top on the bucket and make fork-holes like the sky; then he couldn’t even see us. I thought we should name him, but then thought better that he probably already had a name his mom called him. I
didn’t say anything out loud. Connor wasn’t holding my hand and it wasn’t night with the stars.

“Where are we going to keep him?” Connor carried the bucket over to my back porch. He held it with both hands, walking carefully and keeping his eyes on the turtle.

“I can’t keep him here, my mom would know that we went to the pond. He won’t freeze outside at night, will he?” I stayed put and took my shoes off to let the hose water run cold over my feet.

“He lives outside, or he did before we took him; he can’t freeze.” Connor sat on the porch chair with the bucket between his feet on the wooden porch, pulled the little turtle out and held it so they touched noses.

“You keep him for now,” I said, forgetting my ignorance. “Are we going to put him back, though? Maybe he misses his mom turtle, or his friends. I want them to see how clean he is.” I watched him stroke the turtle, slowly, feeling the smoothness.

“You guys are in big trouble!” I heard the shout from behind me and whipped around. My neighbor, Kelly leaned on the fence that separated our yards. The fence posts were wide enough so that she could stick her feet through and stand on the bottom. My mom hated when she did that. Kelly was 13 then, and thought she knew everything. I rolled my eyes at her and turned back to Connor.

“Shut up, Kelly, you’re just jealous!” Connor yelled at her and danced the turtle in the air. I smiled at him and laughed, trying to forget about Kelly on our fence.

“Jealous of what? Killing a turtle and getting in major trouble?” She held the bars of the fence and leaned back on her heels.
“We didn’t kill it, we’re helping it. Dawn doesn’t kill ducks so it won’t kill the turtle!” I started walking towards the fence and crossed my arms.

“It’s going to die anyway.” She said, and I stopped walking. “We learned in my science class about defenses animals use. You cleaned that turtle. You rubbed off all the seaweed. So, now, when that little turtle goes back to the pond you took it from, all the big turtles will see him and they’ll eat him. That gross stuff on his back was the only way could have protected himself; he was hidden with it on.” She nodded matter-of-factly and jumped off the fence.

“That’s not true!” I shouted after her, but she just kept standing there, knowing everything I didn’t know. I walked back to Connor. “That isn’t true, is it Connor?” I looked back and forth between him and the turtle. We were protecting him.

“It was my idea. It’s my fault.” Connor lied. I hoped Kelly was lying.

“Well, then you killed him. And you helped, Emmy.” She smiled, satisfied with herself and walked back to her house. I kicked the cup of soapy water and watched the suds and toothbrush hit the grass.

“We didn’t kill him, did we? He’s going to be fine.” I reassured myself and waited for Connor to agree. He didn’t say anything. Finally, he set the turtle back in the bucket and left with it; he walked back to his house. And didn’t kiss me on the cheek. That was the last day we ever played together that summer, even though it was only July. Connor told me that year at school that he put the turtle back; that it lived and he saw it later with more moss on its back. I think now he was just lying, but I won’t ever know, because that once was the only time I ever went to the pond.
Connor didn’t come play last summer either, or come into my backyard when it was my bedtime—even when that got later. I held a different boy’s hand this year at school, but I never told him about the stars. I tried to stop thinking of the sky that way, about God that way. Now, I just act like a big kid, and I tell all the little kids to stay away from the pond. I tell them the ghost stories, the ones Connor and I heard when we were younger. I don’t know why the big kids tell those stories. Maybe because we still aren’t allowed to go, maybe because we are afraid someone really did die back there a long time ago. I tell the little kids those ghost stories because I can’t tell them about the turtle, or about the stars. And I know why the little kids believe me: because I’ve been there, and I know what I’m talking about. And, I’m a big kid. And really, little kids will believe anything. But even after all that—all those stories about the pond that aren’t even true, it’s only the little kids who ever believe anything. It’s only the little kids that ever go.
Why It Is So Loud
Oh, Holy Night

I saw the first snow
in bed beside the smallest
window and the largest
television in my house- where the
newscasters would tell me
of the days passing, after that first
snowfall refused to stop.
And the cars and the deaths and the snow days were piling up.
And it was all so impersonal.
And it was beautiful. Enshrouding tulle
before it crushed the breath out of my
mother on the side of that road.
And never that kindest
stranger to dig her out. Dig
her out of all the beautiful white.
Train Sonnet

There is a chug-a-lugging somewhere far off while
Grandma tells her grandson a story;
“Butter was a rare luxury, I had one pair of shoes.”
The boy nods, sits on her lap.
He’s eating a chocolate chip cookie, wearing light-up sneakers.
She looks out the window, remembering
when her parents were alive, when things were-
“Gramma, can I watch cartoons?” He is impatient.
He scrambles to the floor, his grandma
folds her hands into her empty lap.
The chugging is closer; he covers his ears and asks why it is so loud.

The train sounds.
“It’s crying,” she says.
Sonnet of Sound

There is a sound that is made when everyone in a house
is sleeping, and it is not the same sound as when everyone in a house
is missing. Either way, the clocks tick, soft, in their places.
Either way, the weather is outside, tapping on the windowpanes, asking to be let in.
And houses sigh on their own, and houses sing quiet lullabies
of electricity and pipes and heat and cold
when there is nobody there.
But, I tell you, a noise is being made

when there are all the bodies in a house
capable of laughing and crying and screaming and
talking and talking and talking
and singing, but all they are doing
is breathing,
is breathing.

Maybe if someone asked me, I’d tell them, that’s what home sounds like.
Maybe, I’d tell them to listen.
The Aunts Go Marching

SETTING: Two-story home in West Michigan
TIME: Present

CHARACTERS
LYNN: Woman in her 40s, sister of Benji
BETHIE: College student, daughter of LYNN
ELIZA: Woman in her 70s, mother of LYNN, KARLA, Benji and Bob
KARLA: Woman in her later 40s, sister of Benji
RITA: KARLA and LYNN’s sister-in-law; Bob’s wife. Woman in her early 50s, but clearly trying to look younger. She talks in an almost comical southern accent, breathy like she’s selling herself as Southern.
APRIL: Woman in her 50s, Benji’s widow, KARLA and LYNN’s sister-in-law. Southern accent.
Setting: Lynn’s Bedroom; Second Floor of the House

Time: 4:00 AM

(The stage is entirely dark except a clock radio SR that is glowing red reading 4:02. LYNN and KARLA are asleep in king-size bed. After a moment and for a while there is movement across the room while LYNN goes down and up the stairs to makes coffee silently and in the dark. The stage lights should glow as LYNN opens her laptop, it is very bright, then dims. Silence. Suddenly the tacking of keyboard keys can be heard, slow at first, then frantic.)

KARLA:

Lynn.

(The tacking stops.)

(beat)

(The tacking begins)

KARLA

Lynn, for crying out loud; it’s four.

LYNN

Go back to sleep.

KARLA

Oh, sure. Your tic-tacking away will be just like a lullaby. How does Ron do this? No wonder he offered for me to sleep here with you.

LYNN

It’s not that loud. I turned down the screen light.

KARLA

(rolls over and looks at her, visible through dim lighting now on stage)

LYNN

Well. Well, I’m sorry. I can’t sleep. Sorry.

KARLA

Just lay down.

LYNN

Fine.
(The stage is dark again and silent. Slowly the light comes back on and the ticking begins at a slow and unsure pace, then suddenly, ”Amazing Grace” is blaring. Both Lynn and Karla jump.)

KARLA

Lynn! Ah, God! What is that?

LYNN

(turning off the music and on the light)
It’s the song, the earphones thingy, it came out. Sorry. I have to do this.

KARLA

Well, can’t you wait for a decent human hour?

LYNN

I’m up, I can’t just sit around if I’m up.

KARLA

You had coffee, didn’t you?

LYNN

I was up.

KARLA

For Christ’s sake. (beat.) Well, then, what are you working on?

LYNN

Benji’s video—hey, now that you’re awake I can show you his video.

KARLA

His what?

LYNN

His memorial video, I need to hear the music.

KARLA

I wasn’t planning on staying awake.

LYNN

But, it’s not finished. I can’t finish it. I can’t end it like I did with Dad’s video. Something feels so off. That funeral we went to, that didn’t seem like it was for him. It didn’t seem like it was for April either, or anyone. We were all just in a room. And we couldn’t see his face. I just wanted to see him. And I couldn’t ask April.

KARLA
Lynn, about—

LYNN

Just watch this.

(The song Amazing Grace is heard at a softer level which dissipates into soft piano melodies until the sounds completely fade.)

KARLA

You have a special knack for making people cry, don’t you?

LYNN

They should cry. This is what crying is for.

KARLA

I didn’t cry.

LYNN

Well, no, it’s not finished yet. (beat) I can’t finish it, (beat.) Just wait until—

KARLA

No. No, I mean, I didn’t cry when I found out.

LYNN (beat)

You cried in Georgia, at April’s house, and with me in the car after that.

KARLA

When Greg told me. When he hung up the phone and told me.

LYNN

It’s different. When you first find out. You’re stunned, in shock.

KARLA

Did you?

I answered the phone.

KARLA

Cry. Did you cry?

LYNN

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Yes. What does that matter? Benji would know – everyone knows we’re devastated. We don’t owe him tears.

KARLA
But we owe them to one another? I’ve gotten so sick of social graces.

LYNN
Don’t think for one second this is about social graces.

KARLA
It is, that’s all it is. We’re being tolerable to Rita, that’s a miracle. We drove in the same car as her. We saw April and the boys and we went to Georgia in August, wearing black. Mom wasn’t even there.

LYNN
Mom couldn’t drive to Georgia, she’ll be here tomorrow.

KARLA
So will we. But we went down there. You and I. Not Mom or our own brother.

Or our husbands.

KARLA
Why are women always stronger than men when it comes to this stuff?

(beat)

LYNN
When we put Missy down. When we had to put her down I asked Ron and all the kids if they’d go. I said the vet told us it was up to us. Whoever wanted to go. They could go, and the rest—(beat)—So, soon as I asked everyone. Just as soon as I was done the girls stood up. So stoic. And the boys let their heads fall, they couldn’t do it. So we all were there, right in the room, all of us girls, putting that old dog down to die. And those boys, they stayed back and dug up the grave.

KARLA
Well, they’re not diggin’ a grave now.

LYNN
Someone’s got to.

KARLA
No. No, that’s what I meant to tell you. April is cremating him.
LYNN
She’s what? What? And where- and when did she— he was there at the service last week, his body, in that awful closed casket.

KARLA
No. (beat.) No, that was just a casket. He wasn’t in there. I found out before we left. Rita told me.

LYNN
Rita is a bitch. She’s lying.

KARLA
No, I asked April. (pause.) How will we tell Mom?

LYNN
Why didn’t anyone already tell her? Tell us? We went to that terrible service without pictures of him or a video or any remembrance of him and cried and cried and he wasn’t in the goddamned room? He was where? Being burnt up? And what for?

KARLA
April knows we’ll hate her for it. April knows Benji would have hated it.

LYNN
She’s going to do whatever she wants. She’s going to raise those boys all wrong. Benjamin was finally getting them to be independent.

KARLA
There’s nothing we can do about it. It’s social graces. (beat.) Finish your video.

LYNN
I can’t. Why didn’t April tell us about that? I want to know what happened to him. What really happened.

KARLA
He died. He was in a car accident and died. It was dark. April said—

LYNN
April said a lot of things that didn’t make any sense. She mentioned life insurance in front of all of us. Like, logistics were really all that were on her mind, rather than the death of her husband.

KARLA
She’s in shock, remember? We all are. We don’t act appropriate. She told us what happened. They were together, then they drove home separately. And she got the call that
he was in the hospital. We got that same call, but it was too late then, and we weren’t in Georgia. Let it go, Lynn.

LYNN
Why? Why did they drive separately? Why didn’t she see him crash? They were going back home, to the same place. I have so many questions. I want so badly to trust that my baby brother is dead and it’s nobody’s fault, that it’s not her fault. I can’t finish this video wanting to know that.

KARLA
They aren’t our questions to ask. Not now. You’re being paranoid.

LYNN
I’m being rational. I’m wanting to know something—something huge. You want to—

KARLA
No. I don’t. Go to sleep. He’s gone. He’s just gone. End the video with two dates and a picture. (beat) He’s just gone and we have to go through these motions like maybe we don’t really just want to cry for the rest of our lives or sit in silence in a bathtub waiting for it to get cold.

LYNN
But, you have to want—

KARLA
I want to go to sleep. Let me sleep. (beat) Let me sleep.

(The stage goes dark while KARLA exits.)

(Lights up. Lynn is in her bedroom kneeling by her bed, praying.)

LYNN
Dear Lord, No. No, that’s not right. Heavenly Father, (beat.) Stupid. (long pause) God, please bless my children. And my husband. And my mother. God, bless my mother. On a day like today? Bless everybody. This whole house needs your blessing. I’m sorry for not—for not always—(beat) my kids always say we’re “Chr-Easters” you know? We only go to church on Christmas and Easter. (beat) They forgot funerals. We remember you during funerals, too. Help me today, help me forget that I want to ask questions people can’t ask during funerals. You know what happened to him, to Benji. Tell me he’s in heaven. And, if he is, tell him I love him. Tell Benji I need him. We needed him. Those kids need him. Dear God, those boys needed him. You know he’d do anything for them. He’d do anything, my baby brother, and today—

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BETHIE
(Walks up the stairs then knocks on LYNN’s door)

Mom. Mom, Liza’s going just about berserk downstairs, like it’s a regular party. She thinks it needs to be cleaner.

LYNN
(rising from her knees)
Then clean. There are enough of you down there to help your grandmother, the last thing she needs to be worrying about is sweeping.

BETHIE
Sorry.

LYNN
This is stupid, isn’t it? This wake? We should have done the memorial, the funeral.

BETHIE
No, this is nice. Everyone’s here; that’s what matters.

LYNN
Everyone’s here. Right. (beat) Right. Do I look alright?

BETHIE
You look great; it looks appropriate.

LYNN
What’s Rita wearing?

BETHIE
You’ll just have to see it.

(LYNN sighs.)

BETHIE
Ready for the video?

LYNN
No, just wait. I can’t get the ending.

BETHIE
You’ve done these videos one hundred times.
LYNN
(Falters, then regains composure)

Almost.

BETHIE
I’m sorry, you know what I meant, what I mean. Can I see it? Maybe it just needs to end with his picture, like the one you did for Grandpa.

LYNN
No, no. It’s not finished; no one can see it until it’s done. (beat) Just, the ending is so final, so much closure has to be there. And there’s none of that here, there’s just us and not him.

BETHIE
That’s why everyone is here. This is the closure, mom. Finish the video, it will be fine.

LYNN
No, just wait. Just- wait.

BETHIE
You’re sure? Everyone is here already.

LYNN
I’ll be down in a bit, then we can play it.

BETHIE
Right.
(BETHIE walks downstairs. LYNN kneels again in silence. Finally, she rises and walks down the stairs and is met by KARLA)

KARLA
(looking around)

Who are all of these people?

LYNN
Our friends. From when we were little, and high school. Benji’s classmates, marine buddies who live here. Our friends.

KARLA
I guess this is better than another empty casket.

LYNN
That’s what Mom wanted. This is better. She’s in denial. Hell, I’m in denial.
KARLA

Are you playing your video?

LYNN

Soon.

(KARLA and LYNN walk away from each other to greet others. BETHIE approaches LYNN)

BETHIE

Mom, who are all these people?

LYNN

(beat.)

Strangers.

(Lynn exits)

ELIZA

(to herself)

This isn’t right. I’m burying my baby. This isn’t right.

(Shes cries silently as she wipes around the dishes of food with a wet rag.)

He’s not even here, we should have had a casket.

RITA

(RITA should stand out. She’s wearing a black dress made entirely out of tulle, which can be seen through to reveal a black tank top and slip. She should also be wearing a large-brimmed black hat. Finding Eliza and hugging her dramatically, hitting her in the face with her hat)

Eliza, hunny, it’s okay. Everything will be okay. I think its normal in some cultures for the body to be some place else. I don’t know where I heard that, but I think it sounds true enough. ‘Sides, we already had the proper funeral in the South. Everybody knows that.

KARLA

Bethie. Get that woman away from your grandmother. I don’t care if you have to talk to her. Get her away from Gramma.

BETHIE

(reluctantly rushing to ELIZA and RITA)

Aunt Rita. Aunt Rita, um, where did you get that hat?

(ELIZA walks away to put dishes in the sink)
RITA
Isn’t it lovely? I mean picture perfect, isn’t it? I always say ‘The only good thing about a funeral is that you get to buy new clothes!’. Every woman needs black clothing—it’s slimming and always in fashion.

BETHIE
Yeah, yeah, always.

RITA
Why in The Lord’s Dear Name is your sister not wearin’ a dress?

BETHIE
I—I don’t know, Aunt Rita.

RITA
(nods violently with her hat, hitting KARLA as she passes by them)
I’ll have a talkin’ to, with her! Yess’m.

KARLA
(walking past BETHIE)

RITA
Bethie, why is it were not doing this in church? Aren’t you good Christian folks?

BETHIE
(under her breath, but Rita hears her) God. (now loudly) I don’t know, Aunt Rita.

RITA
(tsk-ing her teeth)
Child, you best not take the Lord’s Holy Name in va-in.

KARLA
Vain? Did someone say vain?

BETHIE
Aunt Karla, where did my mom go?

KARLA
To finish the video.
RITA

I'll find her!

KARLA

No! No, you stay here. You watch the guests.

RITA

Sticky fingers? I understand. Not that there's much to steal here.

BETHIE

I'll find her.

(She exits to LYNN's room and finds LYNN on her computer.)

Mom, you have to at least say something to everyone. I won't and Gramma Liza definitely can't. You haven't even addressed everyone being in the house. Dad tried, but this is your brother.

LYNN

(not looking at BETHIE)

Why?

BETHIE

What? Mom—

LYNN

I can't do this.

BETHIE

You can. We can do this. We have to.

(She walks to computer and ejects a disk, then stands waiting)

LYNN

Watch it without me.

BETHIE

No. You have to be there. (beat) You have to.

LYNN

Benji has to be here.

BETHIE

It's not fair, it isn't fair. I know. But, please, mom. (beat) Mom.
KARLA  
(walking in the room)  
Bethie, go tell everyone to get ready for the movie.  
(Bethie Exits)  
Lynn, come on. That was your daughter. You can fall apart later, without her having to feel like she has to put you back together.

LYNN  
Karla, what if—

KARLA  
What ifs are for later. Right now we have to do this. I want him here too, I want to know what happened. I do. I need to know. But I can’t know, and neither can you. And we have to do this.

(LYNN and KARLA exit and stand in the crowd of people gathered around the screen as the movie begins)  
LYNN  
I can’t do this.

ELIZA  
I can’t bury my son. A mother can’t bury her son.

RITA  
I can’t hear! Shhhhhh, there’s a film startin’ up, I can’t hear!

(The lights dim and a picture of a small boy comes on the screen, Amazing Grace begins to play while the lights fade to black. When the lights come back up the stage is now the kitchen and a dining room, and a screen door and deck far SL. There is a kitchen and dining table, both are covered in dishes and glasses. KARLA, LYNN and BETHIE march into the dining room followed by ELIZA, APRIL and finally, RITA. They are going back and forth between rooms cleaning up and setting dishes in the sink. The rooms are cohesive, but should be made apparent that when in one room the characters can no longer hear one another in the other room. At present, all women are in the dining room stacking plates except for APRIL who is sitting silently in one of the chairs. She should be perfectly detached, rather than sad.)

ELIZA  
Well, this was nice. It was good to have everyone together.
Mmm

APRIL

LYNN

It turned out alright, didn’t it?

KARLA

I cried the whole time during your video, Lynn. Nearly all cried out, by now.

APRIL

Mmm

RITA

Will ya look at that? Now it’s just us girls. All the boys couldn’t take it.

Where are they?

KARLA

LYNN

Watching TV downstairs. (KARLA and LYNN enter the kitchen alone.) Digging the grave. (KARLA nods)

ELIZA

I’m glad we could do this memorial here. With everyone here.

LYNNE

It’s only right to have everyone here, to say goodbye to someone with everyone who is still here.

KARLA

It doesn’t feel real.

(beat)

ELIZA

That video was nice, Lynne. Just like the one you did for your father. Remembering the good times

APRIL

(Exiting to the porch)

Hmmph.

RITA
(Pronouncing LYNN’s name dramatically with two syllables)
Oh, yes, why, that was just a dreadfully beautiful video, Lee-anne. Wasn’t it just *dreadfully* beautiful?

Bethie
Dreadfully.

(BETHIE and RITA exit to the Kitchen with their stacks of dishes)

RITA
Why didn’t your mama make your sister wear a dress, missy?

BETHIE
The point is mourning, you don’t need to wear a dress.

RITA
The point is respect, but that’s not the point. You young ladies ought to know what a woman ought to know, and that’s what a woman ought to wear. Your sister, she really needs some teachin’. She’s even downstairs with the men! It ain’t natural. But, Bethie, hunny you look like you know a thinger-two. Where’d you get that top?

BETHIE
A gift from Christmas last year.

RITA
Oh. You know what word that top makes me think? Straight from the Bible. Covet. Yes, I covet that top.

BETHIE
(beat)
Thanks.

RITA
Really, now, you really know *how* to dress, teach your sister some sense. Oh! I was meanin’ on tellin’ y’all but was waitin’ for the right moment. You know. Anyway, you’re the English major at the University?

BETHIE
Comparative Religions and World Lit. Close.

RITA
Right. Well, I’ve been in this book club for, oh, a couple years now, and we just started readin’ this new book. *The Secret*, ever heard of it?
BETHIE
Sure.

RITA
Well, tell me what your thought of it. Go ahead!

BETHIE
I didn’t say I read it, just heard of it.

RITA
Well, do your Aunite Rita a favor? You go on and read that book and send me an uh- (trying out the word) e-mail about whatcha got from it!

Why?

BETHIE
So’s I can tell the girls!

RITA
You’re not going to read it?

BETHIE
Heavens, no! (laughs at the absurdity) We all get together and gossip so much about what we think’s inside, we never get around to readin’ none of ‘em!

(RITA returns to the dining room and turns to LYNN to address her, BEHTIE takes this opportunity to take some dishes to the kitchen)

BETHIE
(exit ing)

RITA
Oh, thank-you, hunny!

(RITA returns to the dining room and turns to LYNN to address her, BEHTIE takes this opportunity to take some dishes to the kitchen)

LYNN
I couldn’t sleep.
RITA

Poor thing.

LYNN

Late at night, you know, thinking, I just had time late at night.

KARLA

(clearing her throat, raising her eyebrows)

Early morning.

RITA

Well, it really was just- oh, what was the word I used?

Dreadfully beautiful?

LYNN

RITA

Yes, well, it was. It sure was.

ELIZA

Where’s April? Bethie, go find your Aunt April.

(BETHIE enters the porch to find APRIL leaning on the white railing, smoking a cigarette.)

BETHIE

Aunt April? I’m so sorry. About Uncle Benjamin. (beat) I’m (beat.) (long pause.) I didn’t know you smoked?

( long pause, BETHIE picks flowers from the hanging potted plants and twirls them nervously. April smokes, then finally nods.)

APRIL

We was fightin’

BETHIE

Um—

APRIL

We was fightin’ before he died. (takes a long drag) Fighting and talkin’ (blows it out) About money and the boys. We didn’t have enough money to give ‘em what they need.
That’s what we was always fightin’ ‘bout. And I don’t mean right before— which we was—

but I mean a lot before.

BETHIE
Listen, Aunt April, I just, I mean everyone’s inside and—

APRIL
I know you don’t want to hear your poor old Aunt whine about this, but you just gotta. That’s what you gotta do sometimes, and now is one of them times.

(she flicks her cigarette multiple times, no ash comes off)

We was fightin’. And now those boys don’t have a daddy, and there isn’t a chance I can raise ‘em. (long drag) Raise ‘em, like they need raisin’. (exhale) They’re 20 and 23 years old. They’re men, but they’re boys. See what I’m sayin’? Benji’d never admit their bein’ (goes to drag, pauses) special, (takes a short puff and exhales.) but there ain’t no way around it. It’s what they are. And God love ‘em. Now they don’t have a daddy.

(A long silence settles between them.)

BETHIE
Everyone’s looking for you inside.

(She turns and opens the screen door behind her)

APRIL
Bethie. (beat) I didn’t know I smoked, neither.

(The lights go down. When they return, LYNN is alone doing dishes at the sink, seemingly washing the same dish over and over again. BETHIE enters and helps.)

LYNN
Hey, sweetie.

BETHIE
Hey, Mom.

LYNN
Long day. Long week.

BETHIE
Yeah.

LYNN
You okay?
Are you okay?

(putting down her hands to rest them on the sink)
Nothing will ever prepare you. Not even seeing all this now. When your grandpa died I thought that was it. That was the worst pain I could ever feel. But, my brother? Before me? With those boys? That’s it. (Scrubs again.)

I’m so sorry, Mom. I tried imagining it. I kept thinking of what it would be like to hear that about Jacob or Stevie. I couldn’t.

No, no, I don’t ever want you to feel that. Things will be okay. It will get better.

(They do dishes in silence)

When I went to get Aunt April, she was smoking outside.

Yeah, she’s been smoking a lot. Those boys, though. All I can think about is those boys. (beat) He would have done anything for them. Anything. I don’t think I can say the same for her. (beat) I guess they have money now. She has her dead husband’s money.

Mom, don’t say things like that. They’d rather have their dad.

(shes doesn’t look at BETHIE)
She’s not sad, she doesn’t seem like she’d rather have that. She’s not sad like I’m sad, like your gramma is sad.

She was sad. I think. Out on the porch, when I found her. Smoking.

Crying?

...
No, but she kept telling me all these things. All these things about her and Uncle Benji fighting before the accident.

LYNN
That’s why he was speeding, no doubt.

BETHIE
I mean, like, a long time before, too, not just before the accident.

LYNN
What about?

BETHIE
She said about money, about Little Benji and Mark, what to do about them, take care of them. She said they didn’t have enough money. I guess for their medical treatment. I don’t know, I think she was—

(LYNN throws the plate she’s drying and it falls noisily into the sink. She pulls the rag to her face and sobs violently. BETHIE drops her hands, but stands without touching LYNN)

LYNN
(Drops her hands from her face, pounding them on the table)
God damn it! Benjamin! God damn it!

BETHIE
Mom. Mom, stop I mean I don’t think that—you don’t think--? It was an accident. A coincidence.

LYNN
(Regaining all her stoicism)
What’d you say to her?

BETHIE
What?

LYNN
What did you say to her? When she told you all of that? What did you say?
Nothing. I said—Well, I just said we were waiting for her. Back inside. I didn’t say anything.

LYNN
(beat)
My brother. My brother. God damn it! He would have done anything for those boys. He did everything for them. He did. (beat) My brother.
How Bad It Is
Nothing Good

I've never heard such singing—
and all coming from the lungs of a baby
in the next room, or down the hall.

Nothing good ever comes from these places—
except babies. My mother
hustles down the hall with a fresh pillow

for my sister, and a glass of ice water.
She checks her messages
and her missed calls, all the missed calls.

Something bad is happening, and people want to know
how bad it is, because this isn't
about a baby.
This is What Happened

When nobody
you know ever dies
and then
this girl you know—
her dad dies suddenly
and everyone is shocked and
she is too and
all you have to say
to her is: nothing
because no one you
ever knew really died,
you grow up.

But that never happened
to me, so I watched you swell
and grow thin with
a word I couldn’t pronounce
in your blood, because
you really were dying,
and you were somebody
I knew.
The nurses all know
your name without looking
at a chart to remember.
And it makes me want to
hurl all the pillows and tubes
and gifts and that plastic
toilet bowl in case you don’t make it
to the bathroom
outside these locked windows
that keep you sterile, keep
you here like some pigeon
without wings without bread
without a lady at a park to
tell you she loves you.

That clean fluorescence is shining off
of your baldness while I am counting
the drips from an IV. Counting
down until zero, because everyone
tells you it will: it will
reach zero. It is at about
199, 198, 197, you look up,
catch me right in the face and ask,

“Would it be heaven
or hell if after you died
you got to remember
all the things you ever
forgot?”
Holy Pink Pagoda

That summer—the summer before we found out, before she was even sick or feeling like she would be—my best friend and I bought our first two-piece swimsuits. We decided we wanted to look like the pictures we’d cut out from our magazines of actresses and models. One-pieces were for little kids. Her parents thought it was funny, laughed as they bought them for us. My parents thought it was inappropriate for a girl my age to wear so little clothing. They told me I’d have to wear more sunscreen, or else I’d get skin cancer. I think my English teacher would call that irony. But, irony is usually funny when we read it in our assigned books, and this isn’t. That summer, Hazel and I tried out our new suits at the country club pool my parents belonged to. We bronzed our bellies and stopped doing flips off the diving board, stopped swimming with goggles on our eyes and getting our hair wet. Those things were for the kids with one-piece swimsuits. We made pacts and rules to our friendship, talked about forever like it was this gift everyone got and no one got it taken away. We were going to be friends forever, going to have our kids be friends, going to grow really old and laugh at how stupid school was. I try and remember every word, every time we painted her nails, every sleep she slept before she would never wake up again.

“I want to grow up, I want to be in college and go to movies by myself, or with a boy. I want to buy my own food, and candy.” Hazel was braiding her hair into pigtails. We were lying on my driveway, hoping the black asphalt would attract the sun and make us targets for the tan.
“I want that too. And, I want to drive a car.” I watched the cottonwood seeds falling all around us; we called that summer snow. It made my eyes itch and water, but I grabbed at a few pieces, held them in my hands, then let them go to watch them swim in the breeze. I wanted to see where they’d fall, and wondered if that’s where they’d end up, where they would bury their heads to start a new life to start growing.

“What if people had babies like trees have seeds, or frogs have eggs; what if we had a lot of babies, so many, just so that one or two of them would grow up to live?” I asked and Hazel laughed for a really long time. I laughed too, but I still wondered, and I knew Hazel didn’t think it was a stupid question, even though we laughed about it.

“Then we’d be those two grown-ups. We’d be the ones to make it.” She let out her last little giggles and we settled our heads back onto our towels, soaking up that snow-globe summer.

That summer before she was sick is the only thing I hold onto now, it’s the only reason I think maybe there is someone watching us and that I should start saying *Amen* again. Because it was good, and it was slow and hot and filled with laughter and freckles and OPI’s brightest pink nail polish, “Holy Pink Pagoda.” I stopped believing in God once Hazel got sick because praying never did anything. And I found out *Amen* is just another word in another language; it’s not some magic spell. It means, “I believe.” So I guess I stopped saying that because I didn’t believe. My mom and dad don’t know this and neither did Hazel.

She got sick when we went back to school. Right before then, I remember we picked out our first day of school outfits. I was going to wear a plaid skirt. Hazel always wore jeans. I hoped the boys at school would think our tans were pretty and ignore my
new braces. I only changed the colors on my braces once before Hazel started missing more school than she was going to. I never saw her at school anyway because we didn’t even have the same teacher. But our lockers were next-door neighbors and I got sick of being alone in the hallway. I would call her after school to ask her what was wrong and she just told me she was really sick. I’d never missed more than one day for being sick, and I’d never seen my mom pray so much as those few weeks. I didn’t know what to think, how to feel. I was even jealous; I wanted to be missing all that school. My mom bought me soda pop on my sick days, and a new book. But my mom was beginning to be different, kept telling me to be strong for my friend, that she was really sick. That was all. Sick, sick, sick. No explanation, no mention of hospitals, doctors, spinal taps—all the things Hazel had been going through without my knowledge. My mom told me later that she thought it was best I didn’t know anything until all the tests were done, that I wasn’t ready to hear something like that. They were waiting so we could all be sitting down, so it was quiet in my house, so I could cry and ask questions when I was ready. That never happened. Tommy Hartman told me at school; his father was a doctor of Hazel’s.

“Your friend’s gonna die.” He walked right up to my locker and just said that, hands in his pockets, scowling. A group of his friends stood five feet behind him, mouths open wide, waiting to see what I’d do. In my mind I punched him, but really I didn’t do anything. “My dad said she’s a patient of his, and his patients die. Not ‘cause he’s a bad doctor, but because they’re too sick. My dad’s job is to find better ways to kill the cancer, but the people usually get killed along with it. Anyway, she’s gonna die.” He paused, looked back to his friends, then looked at me and leaned in close. “I’m sorry, I guess,” he whispered before turning to run.
The first thing I felt was anger, I think. I was mad at Hazel for lying, for thinking she could just go on and die without me knowing. I wanted to go home and scream at my parents for thinking of me as some weak little girl who couldn’t handle it. I ended up running home and falling on the foyer floor to cry. My dog came and licked the warm tears off the ground. My parents came home to find me there, after they’d gotten a call from the school. My dad scooped me up from the floor, brought me into their bed. I never wanted to get up again; I wanted to die too. But that’s the day I decided I would probably never get to. I knew I’d never get to die because then it would be fair again. If Hazel was dead and I got to die too, then everything would be right. But it had to be wrong. Hazel died and now I have to live forever to be sad or to live in her honor, or whatever the reason, I have to be the one left.

Dr. Hartman called my house that night to apologize to my parents; I held my breath behind a pillow as I listened on the phone in my parents’ room. They were in the kitchen. I tried picturing them: my mom on a dinner chair, my dad standing, pacing? His head down and serious, he’d rub the back of his head, find his bald spot and rub that harder with just his first two fingers. He’d be stressed. My mom with the napkins she’d been soaking with her tears all wrung up scattered on the counter, her eyebrows raised, looking to my father, waiting for something, maybe the good news she knew was never coming. I hung up the phone. I didn’t want to hear his apology. He was sorry Tommy said it, but he couldn’t save my friend. I lifted my shirt; looked at my tan stomach and fell asleep in my parents’ bed.

Two days later I got to see Hazel for the first time in a hospital room. It was the scariest thing I’ve ever done. Hazel was sitting up on all these pillows with machines all
around her. She said she was sorry but that made me feel worse because I was mad at her and she was all black and blue around the eyes. I never said sorry back, but I wanted to.

“I was embarrassed,” she was following the pattern on her gown with her little finger. “I felt like everyone would hate me or think I was some kind of freak.” She didn’t have any hair left. It was all gone.

Our parents had left the room to let us talk. I knew they were outside getting coffee talking in big, scary words. I still don’t know what many of the words mean; the words the doctors used, or the words my parents used. I don’t care. I don’t care about those fancy words, all their syllables. They all add up to the same thing. Your best friend—who was allowed to wear nail polish, had long brown hair in pigtails and wore sparkly eye shadow that was forbidden in classrooms and church pews—can die of cancer. That you can wish and pray and pray until you realize you’re squeezing nail marks into your hands and your knees have those funny carpet markings knitted into them, and she’ll die anyway. She’ll lose all her hair and grow fat and thin all at the same time and look sad and scared and happy for you and her eyes will sink back and make shadows on her face as if she’s ninety-two and then she’ll die. That’s what those words mean. I knew those were the words they were speaking outside. I knew that’s all they knew. I knew Hazel was sick of it.

“Kara Laughlin fell down the whole flight of stairs at school today. She just fell all the way down, I didn’t see it but Lilly did and she said it was so funny, she said Jonah S. peed his pants after that. She said he just started laughing at Kara until he was crying, then he peed his pants and then he was really crying. The two of them went home after
their moms were called.” I said it all as fast as I could so I remembered exactly how Lily told me it happened. “Too bad we didn’t get to see it.”

She smiled, and we laughed about it, and after that, she and I never talked about cancer.

The only words that matter now are the words that I have left to talk about it. The word “tomorrow” lives in my mouth. It has somehow rolled itself in cotton and stuck to the back of my throat. I wish I had words like Amen left. But, I’ve given them up. I’ve grown so used to those kinds of words being meaningless. So, tomorrow is my word. The word for a girl who has to keep living.

Right before she died, she talked to God. Hazel spoke in words for the dying. She did it in front of me, with her eyes closed, her breathing heavy and loud. I sat on the bed with her and closed my eyes too. I didn’t pray with her then, I just listened and wished the words to be dead and underground, wished she wouldn’t have to be. But everyone had told me it was going to happen, no matter how much anybody wished or prayed. Hazel used to say wishing was the same thing as praying, that it was just people asking favors.

“It’s the same thing, but people who pray are talking to God, and people who wish aren’t. Or, maybe they are, but they don’t know it, or don’t want to admit it.” That made so much sense, so I didn’t tell her that I didn’t pray, that maybe I only wished. She was so ready to die. It was the weirdest thing. We never talked about it, but we both knew it would happen; terminal, that’s what she was to the doctors. We never talked about it, but we did things that reminded us, we did things to get her ready.

“What color?” Hazel held out four nail polishes. Pink, green, blue and white.
“Green.”

“Well, I do like green. But, green isn’t my favorite. And, if this is what I’m going to be wearing forever—“

“Blue. Blue is your favorite color.” I said it fast and pushed the nurse button, just for fun. We could get popsicles any time we wanted with the nurse button.

“This one. Like summer,” she said. Hazel Dorgan was buried wearing “Holy Pink Pagoda” nail polish and brand new jeans.

Those were the only times we ever acknowledged it, when we planned. Like the time we were allowed safety scissors and we cut my hair and her hospital gown. And the time she gave me a page from her journal. It was dated exactly 14 days before her funeral.

My mom sat next to me, holding my hand. My dad was next to her. Up at the front of the room was a casket, opened wide, next to a podium and a lot of flowers. The whole place was filled with the kids from our school, with their parents, with some people I didn’t know, and all the pictures ever taken of Hazel. In the back of the room, all in a row of chairs sat a group of kids I’d never seen before. They were all different ages, some as young as four, holding the hands of the bigger ones. They weren’t related to each other, but they all looked exactly the same. They were bald. These were friends she’d made, friends “like her,” friends dying. These kids were all going to die. Maybe one wouldn’t and that one would live forever like me. I never thought about what was worse than dying. Watching everyone else die before dying is worse. Almost dying and then living to watch everyone else die—that’s worse.
She has a piece of my hair down there. In the ground, six feet I think. She’s got a piece of my hair in her closed hand. I cut it that day at the hospital with the safety scissors, and she cut a bit of her gown for me. When I went to see her up in her casket you could see the blonde fringe of it sticking out between her thumb and forefinger. I touched it, felt that part of me that was no longer any part of me, felt the only thing dead about me. Then I touched her head; it was smooth, too cold, felt wrong. I prayed. Right there, for the last time, and I didn’t even ask God for anything. I just doubted him, right there in front of Hazel. At her casket I didn’t ask for favors. I just looked to the ceiling and furrowed my eyebrows. *If you’re real, then it’s your fault. If you’re not, then I was right.* I screamed it in my head. That’s all I said, that’s the last thing I prayed. Then we all went to watch her get buried. As she was finally placed in the ground I brought my shirt up a few inches, saw my winter skin taking over, the tan we’d gotten already leaving my body. My shoulders and freckles held their color, but my belly was white as the summer snow, white as the belly of a frog. One frog, out of ten thousand eggs that never made it, one frog wriggled its way from the water to the earth, and survived.
Make Believe
Our Father, Who Art

It rings, then
he hangs up from where he’s calling.

_It's like I always told you, it is like_
_I always told you._
_That is just a telephone_
_and a dial tone and a make-believe._
_And, what did Mommy say about make-believe?_
She’s not telling me something. I sit on my hands and wait for her mouth to take the weight from her eyes.

My mother has truthful eyes. They’re silver-grey, they’re wet. She moves closer to me. We’re in a waiting room; I think that’s important; the waiting room of a hospital. My brother’s wife had a baby he never got to meet. Neither did we, but I think that’s less important.

I think she’s telling me something soon. Yes, yes, here it will be: *I never really forgave you.* About the abortion. My eyes aren’t so truthful, I had to tell her the old-fashioned way. Just how she likes things.

Now, I’m thinking of my son or daughter. Now I’m thinking of my neverniece and how I hope she tells him or her about me and Grandma, and how both of us really, really do mean well.
Princess of porcelain, a little girl
sits splashing the suds of her bathtub.
Her ducky is capsized, is playing dead.
The bubbles are glistening like the pearls
her mother used to wear. She would say *Ma-Ma
can I wear them too? Darling, when you’ve grown.*

The little girl towels off; admits she is grown,
alone, and still a little girl.
She no longer plays with dolls that cry for ma-ma,
and the ducky lies drowned in the tub.
She still wants some day to wear pearls
like Jackie Kennedy or other women that are dead.

Sometimes in her sleep, she cries for the dead
*lift me in your arms, I am not so grown.*
Her mother is buried in lipstick and pearls
and cannot reply to the cries of a *darling* girl
that sleeps alone in a clean and dried bathtub
whispering, crying for her ma-ma.

Pale and lipsticked ma-ma
found beautiful and dead
in a frothy, bubbled bathtub
that had grown
luke-warm and made the girl
cry round, wet pearls

that lap the floor, and chatter like the pearls
that were still on the neck of her ma-ma
that she promised the girl
before she was dead
she could wear *when you’ve grown*
and could fill her own tub.

Up to the brim; that tub
with tears, not pearls,
with her unwashed body so grown,
with the thought of her ma-ma
and the pretty women; dead,
and the empty shape of a *darling* girl--

who’s grown body fits in that tub,
--of a girl who has water for pearls,
and a ma-ma cleaned of that place and dead.
Over My Head

SETTING: Children’s playground in the park  
TIME: PRESENT, AUTUMN

CHARACTERS

TED: A man aged around 40.  
ASHLEY: A woman in her late 20s.
ASHLEY sits alone on a park bench with a child’s coat in hand, and a bag lying on the ground next to her. She is looking up to watch the action on the playground, which is set SL, the end of a swing set is the only piece of equipment seen by the audience. She spends the rest of the time concentrating on picking up helicopter leaves from the ground and letting them fall one by one.

TED  
(Sitting on the bench)  
(beat)  
You got a kid here?

ASHLEY  
(looking up from her leaf-dropping, meeting his eyes.)  
I’m not a pedophile if that’s what you’re asking.

TED  
(moves his hands over his legs, settles back into the bench.)  
No, no. Sorry.

ASHLEY  
There. Down the slide, in green. (beat) Laela. She’s— my niece.

None of your own?

TED  
(beat)

ASHLEY  
Where’s yours?

TED  
(pointing.)  
Oh. Trevor in the sandbox and there’s my Joey on the swings, jumping off.

Both yours?

TED  
And my wife’s.

ASHLEY  
Two boys? (drops two leaves in quick succession) How do you do it?

TED  
And a girl. Teenage girl. Stacy’s too big for this place; too cool.
ASHLEY

Me, too. (leaf.)

TED

What do you have there?

ASHLEY

Helicopters. They’re from the Maples. (She holds her hand out to him, holding several leaves in her palm)

TED

(takes a leaf, drops it and watches it fall.)

Soothing?

ASHLEY

Passes the time.

(There is a long pause while Ashley drops numerous leaves and Ted bends to get one and drop it again.)

TED

Stacy is adopted. Does that make things a little different?

ASHLEY

Listen, I don’t know. Sorry. I’m not even a real parent. (leaf. She moves her head as if she’s watching her niece on the playground.)

TED

(beat)

ASHLEY

Laela’s my kid. I mean, she is my niece, I wasn’t lying. Her parents died. My sister and her husband.

TED

I’m sorry. I didn’t. I’m sorry I said anything.

ASHLEY

So, yeah, her being adopted makes things different. But, a lot of things makes things different.
TED
You don’t—We don’t—I mean. (tries another leaf.) (pause) I don’t know how to let her know we love her the same. That we don’t feel differently about her now that we have the boys.

ASHLEY
No matter what she’s a teenage girl, she loves you today and hates you tomorrow. That’s usually not different.

TED
What will you tell—?

ASHLEY
Laela. (laughs through her nose.) (leaf.) I don’t know what to tell her about anything. It’s only been a few months. I think she’s waiting for them to come home. She asks for them a lot.

TED
(Both their heads move as they watch the children running)
She about five?

ASHLEY
Six, next week. Wants Mommy to bake her a black-and-white cake like last year. (Drops a leaf, watches) I think I’ll die.

TED
You’re alright, she’ll be alright.

ASHLEY
She’ll be clothed. She’ll be fed, loved. But what the fu-udge. I’ve been working on that lately. What do I tell her? What do I say when- (looks up at Ted.) I’m sorry, this is not your problem.

TED
You’re not burdening me. Besides, I started it. (beat.) What do you say when a little girl you’ve raised and loved completely wants her ‘real’ parents back?

ASHLEY
(Bends down to pick up more leaves. Looks up into the sky, squinting.) It’s tough. It doesn’t make any sense.

TED
Are your parents alive?
ASHLEY

No, no. They’re gone, too.

(Leaf. Leaf. Leaf.)

TED

Any other siblings?

ASHLEY

This is it. I’m it. (leaf) Sort of (leaf.) depressing?

TED

You and Laela.

ASHLEY

Me and the kid. And the fish. The fish is ours, now, too. It’s a goldfish, thank God. It will look the same as all the other goldfish at the store after I surely kill this one.

TED

Silver linings.

ASHLEY

(Twirling a leaf in her hand, watching intently.)

Glass half-full, right. Laela’s that way, too.

(Tears a wing from the seed.)

I wonder if she’ll stay that way.

(Tears the second wing off the leaf, throws the seed.)

TED

Don’t worry too much. Ifs and tomorrows? We have a lot of todays and realities to sort out yet. Thanks for reminding me of that.

ASHLEY

(She brushes her hand on her pant leg and extends it to TED)

Ashley. My name is Ashley. Thank you.

TED

(Shakes her hand.)

Ted Behr.

ASHLEY

Ted Behr? Your parents called you teddy bear. How long did you keep that up?
Eleventh grade.

(Ted laughs.)

No shit! Sugar—no sugar.

Ted

My sister’s name is Koala.

Ashley

Fuckin’ liar!

Ted

Yes. Yeah, I don’t have a sister.

(Ted laughs awkwardly halts.)

Ashley

I was beginning to think someone’s life was worse (leaf.)—stranger than mine.

You miss them?

Ted

Ashley

I miss them, I miss them. But, the worst? The worst is that more than me missing them, I want them back for things to be normal again. And not even for her, I mean yes, for her, but in the most selfish of ways. I’m terrible.

Ted

We don’t know the real parents. She wants to find them. I don’t want her to. Not yet. Not ever? I’m terrible.

Ashley

(Leaf. Leaf. Pause.)

This is where I tell you their tragic death, how it all happened so quickly. This is where you tell me about bringing home Stacy and how great that was and how that’s all you ever wanted, and then came the boys. And this is where we analyze one another, on the spot, as strangers, as people who really know nothing of the other’s past. Well, it’s not happening.
TED

I, I didn’t mean—

ASHLEY

I get it. It’s okay, it’s just everyone.

(Bends to retrieve more leaves.)

Teachers (leaf.), doctors (leaf.), other parents (leaf.). They knew her parents, or they
know her, and now they meet me and they want to help. But, I don’t even know what
questions to ask. I don’t know how to ask them without being upset that whatever answer
I get is going to be futile to me, because it’s the answer normal parents give normal new
parents, and that’s not me.

(Pause.)

TED

This is where I’m supposed to remind you that there is no normal, that you’re looking at
‘normal’ and I’m not what you expected.

(Beat.)

And you’re right. Stacy was beautiful and everything we wanted. Then we had the boys
and found out three was all we ever wanted.

(ASHLEY is distracted by something OS. She stands, she walks to the edge of LS and
begins yelling OS to LAELA who cannot be heard.)

ASHLEY

It’s not raining. Laela, it isn’t raining! You do not need that umbrella!

ASHLEY

It doesn’t always rain when people have umbre—Well, not because they have umbrellas.

ASHLEY

Play ‘helicopter’ instead. (beat) Find some friends to do it with. (looking around,
reluctantly, but still loud, sings.) Helicopter, helicopter over my head, I went to the doctor
and this is what he said. Laela, Laela dressed in red, put down that umbrella before you
hurt your head!

ASHLEY

Go play, now, with the kids.

(ASHLEY returns to the bench. She watches LALEA, disappointed.)

(Ashley is still aside from her head moving to follow LAELA.)
ASHLEY
What do you tell them? (Beat.) When they ask questions too big for their brains?

TED
They don’t ask those questions—they can’t. If they ask a question, their brains are already way bigger than the answer. It’s us. We shrink our thoughts to fit what we think someone that little needs, but that’s not how it is.

ASHLEY
Big questions. When they ask big questions. What do you say?

TED
The truth.

ASHLEY
The big truth?

(She picks up more leaves, one by one, occupying her eyes, hands.)

TED
The big, bad truth. As it is. Not in grandma’s clothing.

ASHLEY
I can’t even handle that.

TED
You’ll learn to. I had to, when Stacy started asking those questions. My wife was better at it, at first.

ASHLEY
(Leaf.)

How?

TED
She’ll teach you.

ASHLEY
Seems like she’s the one taking care of me.

TED
Life is unpredictable.
ASHLEY
What life were you planning for? Did it look like this, teddy bear?

TED
Sure, in its general sense. Like, planting these seeds. You plant so many just so a couple can grow. And then what? That’s not planning, that’s hoping. They eventually fall so randomly, it’s as if you might as well have not planned at all.

ASHLEY
Well, I never even planted.

TED
Look how different my life is, I was planning on one, my wife was planning on never giving birth.

ASHLEY
(Many leaves all at once.)
Unfit to be a mother. You hear people say that sometimes. Well, I didn’t want to be a mother—I am unfit.

TED
You’ll grow together, to fit.

(Long pause.)

ASHLEY
(Leaf.)
She’s a genius.

TED
They all are. Those big questions, sometimes they make up better answers.

(They watch the children.)

ASHLEY
It’s been raining a lot ever since they died.

TED
She seems to like it.

ASHLEY
I forgot about rain. Now she reminds me it’s real, it’s a miracle.

TED
Isn’t it?
ASHLEY
You can’t think everything is a miracle.

TED
Then nothing is.

ASHLEY
No, then nothing is surprising; nothing takes your breath away.

TED
Rain doesn’t take my breath away, you’re right.

She loves it.

(Throws a leaf, rather than dropping.)

I’m always telling her to get out of the rain, the puddles, keep dry—safe. I think that’s what I’m supposed to do. Keep her warm and dry.

TED
Yes, but she likes the rain.

ASHLEY
(She scoops the leaves sitting in her lap into her hands, cupping them.)
She says—(beat.) She tells me she loves the rain. (beat.) She says: I like the rain because I can hold it in my hands.

TED
You’re angry.

ASHLEY
(drops her hands to her lap, still cupping the leaves.)
It’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever heard. And these leaves? She showed me them, she likes it when she lays on the ground, looking up at the sky and I drop them over her. She likes to see them fall; dance, she says they dance. And before that? I stepped on these leaves like anybody else does, I didn’t care.

TED
Those are wonderful things.
ASHLEY
(Ignoring him.)
I can’t. (beat.) You get to be Stacy’s parents, and maybe she’ll find her ‘real’ parents and the she’ll remember who loved her, who raised her. You can show her the old and the new. Do you understand that one day I’ll have to show her why holding something in your hand is not all there is in the world? (lifts her hands for effect, lowers them again.) And then she won’t like the rain, and she won’t jump in puddles, she won’t jump. And then she’ll never want to see a single leaf fall anymore; she’ll be sick and tired of watching everything fall, just like me.

TED
(restless silence.)

ASHLEY
So, everyday we look for rain, and when it rains we like it, and we laugh and laugh and hold it in our hands and wait at the end of my puddle driveway for Mommy and Daddy. And when it doesn’t rain we lay on our backs and take turns watching these helicopters fall to the ground like maybe the plane did, the one that buried that Mommy and Daddy in the ground. I realize I’m telling you now. I’m that stranger telling you her whole life. But, its not my whole life; it wasn’t. But it is now. (beat) Those seeds are seeking shelter, trying to be buried in order to grow. And when she’s old enough to realize the sick irony in that she’ll only have me there to blame. When she’s old enough for me to recount the funeral for her, so she can try to put all the pieces together and remember that (shallow breath.) she was really happy for a while, with her parents dead: I’m there. I’m the only one there, standing there holding some wet, soggy leaves in the rain. And where’s the miracle? Ted, where’s the miracle? I don’t know you, we’re strangers, but I’m asking you the most important question of my life. (She passively slips her hands over her knees and empties them, sending all the leaves in her hands tumbling to the ground. Beat.)

END OF PLAY
Illumination
This is my neighbor’s favorite story:
There is a boy and he is lost—
recalling, I can’t remember how.
But, in these frost-bitten mornings
he tells me while I wait
in my visible exhale for my car to warm.

He ends always with “doesn’t it just warm
your heart? I love that story.”
I nod and smile, blowing heat in my hands while I wait.
He never makes sense; I’m perfectly lost.
And it’s like this every Midwestern winter morning.
He’s always shoveling snow, I don’t know how
so much snow can build up, don’t know how
he can stand not being warm
while his wife sleeps on her oxygen tank all morning.
“But,” he bends over his shovel, “that’s another story.”
Scrapping snow off my windshield I am lost.
He’s shoveling behind piles of it with all his weight.

I stomp the snow from the tires and wait.
I’m always thinking of where and how
that little boy from the story got lost.
But I cover my ears to stay warm—
not listening then, to the story.
Then, later, thinking of it all morning.

He must be in premature mourning—
while his wife is dying he has to wait.
I wish that weren’t another story;
wish I could ask where and how
they met while we are struggling to keep warm.
And now, in inventing their story, I am lost.

Wishing I had something I’d be sad if I lost
instead of one cup of coffee every morning
and only one side of my bed that is warm,
and thinking my mom always said ‘you wait’
when the thing with waiting is you can’t remember how
--but that’s another story.

One morning he wasn’t there to tell the story
I went back in my house to warm and wait.
Un-shoveled snow would tell me of how their battle was lost.
Nesting

I once took one thousand birds home with me,
by their shadows--
All wound up with their nesting strings, my hair
bows and hair strands that fell out
fell out and fell out.

I'm growing skinnier each day,
have I told you?
You'd maybe think I'd found
a purpose
in life.
But

everything I do is an accident.

I'm screaming it-- can you hear me
and my birds screaming?

Some people call that
singing.
Defining Metaphor

I’m as cobbled as these streets and I am broken. I am nothing that begins with something so definitive as I am.

A bottle is broken on these streets, and it is shining. Someone emptied it of its reverie and found a bit of themselves as they never wanted to be or, not to see themselves. I held a part of that past when I picked a piece from the ground. I held it and listened to its din of light. I thought of church buildings and their stained glass. I thought of people being able to hear people smiling through a telephone. I thought about déjà vu and about déjà vu.

I am a piece of colored glass on these streets, I am an unpromising ocean. I am in need of something rushing through me. I am in want of illumination.
Ralph Grange’s house is on fire. It’s burning to the ground, and we’re just standing here. Ralph is laughing, actually. He’s laughing at my face; I’m terrified. His eyes are reflecting the flames, and his whole face is orange and yellow, flickering with the blaze of his house. I can’t stop looking back and forth between his face dancing with the glow, and his house completely on fire. I watch his bedroom window as the flames gulp it down; we’ll never sneak out of or into it again. His roof is finally catching fire; we’ll never escape to that flat sanctuary to steal cigarettes, booze or a slice of quiet ever again.

The summer sky is bulging with smoke and noise; the fire trucks are close. Ralph can’t stop fucking laughing; he’s gasping for breath; his mouth is probably filling with the ash and smoke that’s keeping mine closed. Poor kid, everyone else is probably thinking. I look at all their faces: they’re horrified, they’re silent. Poor kid doesn’t know how to handle this kind of thing. I look at Ralph again, he’s laughing harder, near tears at this point; maybe it’ll look like he’s crying. Maybe it’ll look like he’s normal. I look at the people around me, some crying, some screaming, some in silent awe and wonder. There are about a dozen of us standing here. People are stopping in their cars to gather. Mrs. Grange will be here soon. I wonder if anyone called her or if she is going to see it and that’s how she’ll know. That’s how she’ll find out her house is burning down with all her things in it. I wonder who called the police.

Ralph and I smelled the smoke, and got back into the house from the roof through his mom’s window. Then we ran out of there, his dog on our heels, and then we watched. I’ve never seen such a fire. The Grange’s house was small, but it’s holding so long under
the flames, like there’s too much of it; I’m kind of wishing it were just over with. But there it is, still burning to the ground.

“Holy shit!” Ralph screams at me, still laughing, over the noises around us. The fire trucks and their men can be heard over the crash and whispers of the fire. He laughs some more, as if it were only some movie he and I are watching, and the main character did something funny to begin this catastrophe. I stare at him in disbelief. Then suddenly, and uncontrollably I start giggling. I don’t know why. Nothing really was funny. But I couldn’t stop. I just looked at his face and ignored everything else. And as if he told me the secret joke, I raised my eyebrows and laughed harder. I look back at the house and burst in to a fit of hilarity I should be embarrassed about. We can’t be stopped. Everyone will talk about it later; Ralph Grange and Amanda Remy standing together as the Grange house burnt to the ground, laughing their fucking heads off.

*

Before the fire, I decided I was in love with Ralph. But now—maybe because his house is gone and things have to be different, or because he was laughing so I knew something was really wrong—I know he doesn’t love me, or that we’ll never be in love even if we both really love each other. The things he told me on his rooftop will never come true—stupid clichés like us getting married if we never found “the one,” that he loves me like no one ever loved anyone else in any movie because the movies are fake and it’s all just for money or drugs or sex, that he’s slept with three girls but wanted to take back those nights because I am different. But, now I’m not different. Before the fire, Ralph and I had sex for the first time, and we left our cigarettes burning in his room when we went to do it on the roof. He joked that our passion was what lit the place up. It was
our stupidity. I know I put mine out. I’m sure I did. I don’t know anymore. I know my clothes still smell of house smoke, which is different than cigarette smoke. That is, the clothes I managed to put on before we ran outside to watch the place burn. I didn’t wash my clothes in hopes to taste that sweet sweat again, in hopes to hold onto something that was on that roof with us; a witness. But they don’t smell like me or him or our first time or my first first time. They just smell like house smoke.

My mom told me not to call Ralph for a while, but I’m going to anyway. He has a cell phone so I call him and he tells me to meet him by the river next to my house. He’s living in a hotel with his mom and nine-year-old half-sister, Janice. When the fire started, Mrs. Grange was picking up Janice from her after-school daycare center; she doesn’t trust Ralph and me to watch her, and thinks it’s unfair for a teenager to have such a burden anyhow. I always thought Ralph and I would have been good at taking care of a kid. Anyway, it’s just them at the hotel because Mrs. Grange wouldn’t stay at her boyfriend’s house with the kids and their dog ran away last night; everyone is still searching for her. Everyone’s collecting clothes and blankets and food and money for them, everyone’s trying to get them back to normal. I have no idea what’s going to happen to the Grange family. I have a deep pit in my stomach; so far it’s kept me from eating and sleeping. I wanted to stay in the same clothes for a long time, like the Granges have to, but my mom told me to change today.

When I meet Ralph at the river he acts like everything is fine. Like, maybe his house is still up and he didn’t laugh when it burnt down. I ask him how his mom is doing, how mad she is, how much she knows what really happened. He sort of shrugs his shoulders, reassuring me it isn’t a big deal.
“We just need a new house,” he says, leading me down the path next to the river. It leads to the dam. “That’s all. It’s just a house, insurance will pay for most of it.”

“It’s more than a house, Ralph, your whole life was in there. Your clothes, your pictures, your CD’s. Britta ran away. You don’t care about that stuff?” I’m trying to hold his hand, but he busies them with skipping rocks. So now we’re stopped on the edge of the river; I’m just watching him skip the rocks.

“Nah, I mean with Britta it’s different, she’ll turn up. The rest is just stuff.”

“What about all the memories?”

“I’m still alive, we’re all still alive. I remember everything perfectly well.”

“What does your mom think?”

“She hasn’t talked to me. She knows what happened because of the firemen’s report, so she doesn’t need to ask me any questions. She would have known anyway. She knows ‘what were you thinking’ would garner some smart-ass comment and she leaves me alone.”

“Leaves you alone? You burnt down her fucking house, Ralph. You burnt down your house and then fucking laughed about it.” I can’t help swearing because I’m so weirded out by everything. “And when she showed up we were still laughing. Janice even saw us laughing; did you see her face? That poor girl will never be able to forget the time she watched her house burn to the ground and her brother and his—“ I couldn’t say girlfriend because Ralph never asked me to be his girlfriend for real. “—friend laughed at it, laughed at her, she probably thinks. Fuck, Ralph. You burnt your house down. We burnt your house down.”
He throws bigger rocks so they don’t skip, they just clunk and splash and sink to the bottom. We don’t say anything, we’re just standing there, so I start thinking about my grandpa when he was alive, how he tried teaching me to skip rocks and I could never do it. I just made ripples that messed up the skips of his rocks. His could skip fifteen times before they sank. I ended up just throwing them and watching them splash. It was always easier that way, knowing that I wasn’t trying for something else. There was no strategy or special stance and hand positioning for throwing rocks; I could just do it while I listened to their last noises and watched them drown.

“My dad is dead.” Ralph says this, but he isn’t looking at me. He has a rock bigger than my head and he’s concentrating on lifting it. He swings it back behind him to gain momentum and lets out a grunt. He throws it four feet in front of us into the shallows of the river. It yells and echoes as it hits the water and other rocks. Our feet get wet. I take a step back and we both stare at where the rock went.

“How do you know? Where is he? How do you even know that?” I know he’s annoyed by all my questions, but the thing is: this is weird. Ralph doesn’t know his dad.

“He died the day of the fire, maybe the night before but I found out that day, I just never told you. It was in the papers in California or on the news, and my aunt who lives out there called my mom early yesterday morning. Seven-car pile-up, motorcyclist killed instantly. My dad rode a bike.” He lets out a short breath; lets his eyes follow the currents of the muddy water at our feet. “My mom cried. She actually cried for that son-of-a-bitch. Janice walked into the kitchen and found her crying and dumping out all the Corn Flakes onto the floor and came and got me.”
I didn’t say anything; I was confused. I thought he might be too, but he kept talking.

“Corn Flakes were my dad’s favorite when he and my mom were still together. Every fucking morning I would see those damn boxes in the back of the pantry and wonder why she bought them. Nobody eats them. But when we run out of cereal we have to eat those before we get the kind we like. Every time she’d get more Corn Flakes and put them in the back of the shelf. It was just in case he came back. For 17 years, it was just in case he came back. Well, now he’s dead. And I’m just fucking grateful I don’t even remember the last spoonful of cornflakes I had to gargle down my throat.” He picks up another rock and throws it as far as he can across the river. I look at the dam and wait for all the water building up behind it to push through, to break everything and come flooding in around us, taking us under, killing us with pressure and force before suffocation. It stays how it is, pumping out just enough dirty water. Why didn’t he tell me? I feel bad for thinking selfishly, so I just keep it to myself.

“Ralph, I don’t know what to say. I’m so sor-“

“No!” He screams it and we can hear it bounce of the dam’s walls.

I wait for it to silence.

“I know, he doesn’t deserve that,” I say, “or we don’t know if he does, but you must be really hurt or something. You must be something.”

“I’m homeless and searching for the first clothes I buy after all of mine were eaten by the fire we started— an outfit to attend the funeral of a man I’ve never met who everyone tells me I’m the spitting image of.”

“We’ll get you some clothes. I’m going to go with you.”
Ralph and I are having sex in my car by the river. It's daylight out, but I guess we
don't care. I'm really confused. I let myself forget we had sex the night before and he
knew about his dad. I let myself forget that he didn't tell me, so I didn't know anything
except that I was losing my virginity and it was different. I let myself think it really was
different. And, I let him forget the condom. So many things are broken and old and
empty, I want something to be new, to be worth happiness, to be full of life. In the car,
Ralph is quiet and forceful. He's not even looking at me; his eyes are glazed over, as if
he's not even there. As if all the while we're in my car he is somewhere else. In
California maybe, meeting his father; in the river sinking with the rocks; in Graceland,
he'd always wanted to visit Graceland. I let him go to those places and I stay and keep
feeling because I know this won't last forever. When we finish we just put our clothes on
right away and sit smoking cigarettes. I keep feeling my hands and looking at myself in
the rear-view mirror. It's strange to have everything intact when we're done, to have
nothing be on fire, to have the dam still working and pumping water like it should. I wish
something would happen, something catastrophic like before, but we just stay in the car,
smoking our cigarettes and watching the river, dark and slow.

"I gotta go. This was good." He flicks his butt out the open window and gets out
of the car.

"Ralph," I'm reaching for his hand, it's on the door in the window. "I'm sorry. I
will go with you."

"Whatever, you didn't even know him." He shakes his head and I can hear his
shoes kicking the rocks below him. "I guess that doesn't matter, does it? Me and Janice
are going.” He lets out a laugh and squints at me through the sun. He pulls his hand out from under mine and scratches the back of his head.

“It’s different, though, with you and Jan. But, if you want me there, I’m there.”

“It isn’t. Different I mean. Fuck it, I’ll just call you later.” He shoves his hands in his pockets and walks to where he parked his car. I stare after him for a while, then just turn up my radio and drive away from the river wondering if it was really different.

* 

There’s no body at this funeral, so I guess it’s just a memorial service. There can’t be a body because the body is in California somewhere and Ralph’s mom didn’t want to have it shipped, and didn’t want to fly all the way over there. I’m sitting in wrinkled khakis and a black button-down shirt next to Ralph. My mom steamed my khakis but then I just kept wringing my sweaty hands on them, so they’re wrinkled again. My mom didn’t come with me to the funeral because she doesn’t even know Ralph that well, or Mrs. Grange. Looking over the piece of paper some guy handed to me when I walked in, I get really weirded out: a name I’d never heard, a picture of a man I’d never seen, the listing of songs I wondered who picked out. Mrs. Grange is crying silently and patting Jan’s head, which is in her lap. Ralph’s eyes are far away again, and he’s sitting on his hands. It’s so odd that this is all in church; we’d never been to church together. I only went for the Christmas or Easter masses with my family, and the Granges aren’t religious. I wonder if Ralph’s dad was religious when he lived in California, or wherever else he was living. I wonder if he had time to pray before he died, or if it was too quick.

I only know Ralph, Jan and Mrs. Grange at this entire service. It’s not quiet yet, so Ralph is pointing out different family members and the people he doesn’t know either.
Suddenly, everyone is standing, and I know the funeral started. Ralph sits like a rock on the pew. I’m happy I got to sit next to him, even though I’m not a family member. But when we listen to the Eulogy I feel really out of place. I busy myself by looking through the stained glass windows and I try to be somewhere else, with Ralph. It isn’t my business to hear the words about some guy I’d never met, some guy who abandoned his girlfriend and never bothered to meet his son. They’re beautiful words, words about a man who didn’t do those things, or words covering up the fact that he had. They’re words about his “free spirit.” Ralph laughs, because we both know “free spirit” means “didn’t settle down” or “irresponsible” or “got up and left a knocked-up girlfriend he always promised he’d marry.” I wonder how these words are affecting Ralph, Jan and Mrs. Grange. This was a man I’d never met—was he handsome and charming when he was with Mrs. Grange? Did Ralph ever hear his voice on the phone, or see videos of him? We never talked about that. When I snuck into his bedroom window we talked about Kim Larky and her new boyfriend or which teachers were lesbians, or how much money it would take for us to fuck so-and-so.

The memorial is really short and when it’s over the Granges stand in a line and waited while everyone passes and gives their condolences—like a really fucked up receiving line after a wedding. Ralph is just nodding at everyone, just one nod downward. When it’s my turn to go through the line Mrs. Grange hugs me for a long time and then she just holds me at arms’ length and sits there silently looking at me through tears. She finally squeezes my arms and lets me go. We never said one word to each other, and I feel like I should have at least said sorry. I think she knows that I wanted to. I hope she does. She looks really fantastic in all her funeral-wear, though. I don’t know if that’s a
strange thing to say, I don’t know if anyone is supposed to notice how you look at a
funeral, other than sad or in mourning. Mrs. Grange is beautiful, and she’s wearing less
makeup than usual so it’s not running down her face.

The memorial service is done, and Ralph and I are at the river. Ralph is sitting on
the hatch of my car, with his legs hanging over the trunk’s door. He brought a bag of
clothes to change into so he’s changing out of his nice clothes and putting on jeans, a T-
shirt and sneakers. He’s silent, so I fill the space.

“I remember my first funeral.”

“That wasn’t a funeral. That was stupid.” He’s pulling at his clothes with silent
force. I keep talking; our backs face one another. I can see him if I look in the rearview
mirror, but I just stare ahead at the river.

“At my grandpa’s funeral my grandma wore her finest things.” I just started
talking, like I had to say something. I just started talking. “And her fur coat. So did all of
her sisters. We rode in a limo to the service and the gravesite. I was dressed nicely too;
my mom had all four of us kids dressed in our best clothes and shoes, even though it was
raining. We all crammed into the limo and I remember my grandma laughed the whole
way there; thinking out loud how ridiculous we all were, getting dolled up for someone
who couldn’t see us, driving in some fancy car to a funeral. My younger brothers and
sisters don’t remember that day, but we have it all on tape. My mom was really big into
videotaping every moment of our lives.” I pause and wonder if he’s even listening, if he’s
going to say anything. I don’t know what else to do, so I just keep talking to the
windshield.
“Sometimes, I walk over to my grandma’s house and she is watching her copy all by herself. She would always laugh when I found her that way. She’d laugh and comment on the fact that we all look so happy in that limo in our best clothes, in the rain. We did look happy, but it wasn’t any sort of happy I’d ever seen before or felt again after that. It was this dreadful happy, like—“

“Like when you’re happy your dad is dead?” He lets out a laugh, like the one at the memorial, and I stop talking. “Sorry.”

I keep talking. “Yeah, a dreadful happy with this backdrop of rain and graveyard and funeral home and thinking my Papa is dead and never coming back to make us search for stray golf balls in his yard again. I think my grandma likes watching that video because she can see herself close to the time when my grandpa was alive, but she doesn’t have to see him. We also have the tape they played at his funeral. It was this montage of all these pictures and videos of him barbecuing and smoking cigars or holding babies and grandbabies with this terribly sad piano playing in the background. I can’t watch that tape, and neither can my mom or my grandma. Seeing him is too sad, because that was a long time ago and there aren’t any new pictures even if there are new grandbabies. The tape of us at the funeral is comical and ironic and makes you think of him in a less conscious way, and that hurts a little less. Sometimes when I find my grandma watching the tape I don’t say anything, I just stand in the doorway and we watch it together, without her knowing I’m there.” I wipe my tears away, “So, maybe, maybe that’s what you felt when they called your dad a ‘free spirit.’ Maybe you were dreadful happy?”

We never talk about this kind of stuff, and Ralph has never seen me cry. It feels safe now that I know he might cry too, and since he can’t really see me.
“No, that wasn’t happy, that was angry. That was laughing in anger. It’s still messed up, though. Emotions shouldn’t mix together like that. We should only cry when we’re sad and curse when we’re angry and laugh when we’re happy. We shouldn’t laugh when a house burns down or at a funeral and cry when we get too happy about something.” He throws his nice shoes into his duffel bag and zips it up.

“I think it’s okay to do that kind of stuff. Why not? I cried later that night, after your house was gone. I cried because I was sad that your house was gone, and happy that I was with you and angry that it was our fault. Crying shouldn’t be so clear-cut. Babies cry when they’re born because they are breathing—do you think they’re happy or sad or angry? Maybe they are happy to be alive in the world and breathing, or maybe they’re sad because they left heaven or something. Maybe they are just crying because they are human and they can, I think it’s just something we can do, and sometimes it’s the only thing we can do.”

“I guess. But I think that’s a load of bullshit.” He says this so quiet, but he’s making a lot of noise, throwing things around in the back.

“What part?”

“All of it. I think we cry because it’s all we can do—please. I think we cry because we’re all just a bunch pussies that can’t handle anything and we’re afraid of dying. When somebody dies we cry because we remember that we’re mortal and that we’re gonna die too.” He’s pulling at his shoestrings. He ties them and gets out of the car, slamming my trunk shut. I get out too and we start walking along the river to where all the skipping stones were.

“Not if it’s somebody we love and cared about, then we’re sad that they’re gone.”
“Maybe.”

I stop walking and wait for him to stop, but he keeps walking and kicking stones out of his way. I talk to his back. “How can you say that? Don’t you care about anything? What if I died, or Jan or your mom? How can you say something like that?”

He turns around and looks right at me, then turns to face the river. It’s dirty, opaque. “How am I supposed to know? You’re not dead, and neither are they. I’ve never had to cry about anyone being dead that I cared about. My dad is dead, and that means nothing to me except that half of what physically made me is not walking this planet anymore. I don’t even know if I’ve got half-brothers or half-sisters or anything like that. Jan and my mom and you are the only family I know of and you’re all alive, so I don’t know how to answer those questions.” He bends down and picks up a rock. He holds it in his hands like he’s going to skip it; positioning and repositioning his fingers. Finally, he clenches the whole thing in his hand, winds up and throws it as hard as he can into the river. It swallows the rock whole and we wait while the ripples, as faint as they are, make their way back to us. He picks up another rock and throws that one too. Over and over again, he throws them as hard as he can. I just watch him and listen to the rocks hit the water. He keeps throwing them until he’s exhausted and panting, red in the face. He picks up one the size of a baseball and throws it, falling forward with his momentum. He lands on his knees and hands in all the rocks and just stays there with his face looking down at the ground. I watch his back rise and fall with his deep breaths and watch as they slow themselves down and become normal. Suddenly, he picks his hand up from the rocks and punches it back down, scattering some. I watch him fall, his head landing on top of his hands, and finally, I hear him crying. I stand there as he cries and don’t know what to do.
or what to say. I pick up a rock and wind up and throw it as hard as I can. It doesn’t feel like before, it doesn’t feel okay that it’s easy. I don’t expect fifteen skips and I don’t get any, but I don’t get the feeling that it’s okay. I throw another one and listen as it hits the water. I don’t know what else to do, I have nothing to say. I have no more stories about my grandpa to tell Ralph and I knew they wouldn’t help him, I knew my dad and he was alive, and I couldn’t throw rocks to feel better anymore and I never learned to skip them. I walked up to Ralph, so I drop to my knees right next to him. I have nothing to give him that he doesn’t already have. I lie down on my back with all the rocks sticking into me, scraping and bruising me. I let silent tears fall down my face and wet the rocks below me as Ralph gasps for air and weeps into his hands beside me. The clouds move, I watch them and hope it rains. If it were raining this moment would be perfect. We’ll get completely drenched and we’ll have to retreat to my car or his car or my house and we’ll take our sopping clothes off and forget about funerals and the people that they were for. I guess it’s the kind of irony the day was missing. It can’t rain, then it would be all bad, and nothing is all bad.

I turn my head and look at Ralph. He has spit and snot draining from his mouth and nose onto the ground beneath him, I’ve never seen him like this, never seen him so emotional or worked up about anything. He never cares about anything, that’s what he always tells me he’s afraid of. He’s afraid of not caring about anything enough to want to do it for a living or enough to want to live solely for that thing, or that person. I’m not sure if he’s crying for his dad’s death or his absence prior to it, or maybe he’s crying because he finally can, or because his house burnt down or because I am just another girl he’s had sex with and he wants to take those times back too. I don’t know why I’m crying
either, maybe for all of those same reasons, but maybe because I know that Ralph is actually feeling this, whatever it is, and that’s new. I think about how it’s okay that we don’t know why we’re crying. I picture Mrs. Grange sitting there with all those cornflakes around her legs and Jan finding her like that. What did Jan feel? Nine-years-old and your brother’s father and your mother’s only real love is dead. To her it’s just a man, it’s just some guy she’s never met and never will meet, it’s just the guy her mom bought the cornflakes for, if she even understands that. It’s just a memory for her to have later, of wearing her prettiest things and it wasn’t raining and she went to a funeral and heard the words of a stranger about a stranger.

I let the tears fall from my face and am silent while Ralph slowly stops. I sit up, then we sit in that silence for a long time, I watch the river pass on by and wait to say something I was supposed to.

“I’m not pregnant.” I know he’s not even thinking about that, but I have to say something. “When I was getting ready for the funeral I got my period, right on time. I cried in the bathroom for a long time. I know it would be messed up and we aren’t supposed to want to get pregnant, but I wanted something to be left after all of this.” I take a deep breath and just keep looking at the river. I’m holding my breath and staying under the water with all the rocks we’d thrown. I am far away.

“Amanda,” He’s wiping the snot and wetness from his face on his T-shirt. Then, he grabs my hand and tugs on it to make me look at him. We’re both sitting up now, looking at one another. His face is serious, his eyes are right there, right by the river with me. “I will leave you and get a motorcycle and drive it to some place far away from you.”
“That was him, that was some fucking guy you’ve never even met. That was some guy who died all alone on a motorcycle and never even bothered to meet his son. That is not you.”

“It could be. You could have some fuck-up kid who, seventeen years from now, burns down your whole damn house and feels nothing about it. You could try and explain to him every day that his father is a good man and he will never believe you. You can tell him of the times you sat by the river or held hands on his roof and those moments will mean nothing to him because through birth he will not have inherited your same in-love rose-colored glasses. You could meet some random men while you’re waiting for me to come back, have another kid, or hell a whole lot of them, and stock your damn shelves with Lucky Charms for the rest of your life waiting to hear from me and I’ll be long gone. I’ll be in Memphis; I’ll be visiting Graceland. I’ll be gone.”

“Lucky Charms?”

“I hate Cornflakes.”

“I like Lucky Charms.” I smile at him and he tries not to smile back. I pick up a smooth stone from beside me and let it rest in my hands. He gets up and helps me up too. He grabs my hand and the rock and places my fingers around it neatly.

“Like this.” He says. He’s standing behind me with his arms around me. We pull the rock back together and let it fly. I watch it sail through the air, really close to the water, just like my grandpa said it should. I watch the single splash as it sinks. We don’t say anything. The ripples come back to us.

“Fifteen skips.”
“I counted twenty.” He turns me around and kisses me, then pulls away and grabs my face with both of his hands. “I will leave you Amanda Remy. I promise. I will leave you.” He’s looking me in the eyes. We are both right there. We are both standing by the river on all the rocks that still have to be skipped or sunk.