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WAXING WANING WAKING

a collection of poetry and prose



BROOK VANBRUGGEN

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NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

THE FOLLOWING COLLECTION OF poetry and prose is a selection of pieces from throughout my undergraduate career. While a handful of pieces were written for coursework or submitted for peer editing, they have since been revised. I chose these pieces not according to any one style or theme, but rather for the sake of variety.

The written word is powerful and adaptable in a way that few other art forms are; the right combination of letters, spacing, and punctuation can achieve any number of feats. Words can evoke even the most visceral emotions. They can record moments that would otherwise be lost forever. They can teach crucial skills, raise important questions. And they can accomplish any of these tasks in an infinite number of ways. This variety is what keeps creative writing from becoming stagnant. The pieces I've chosen to include here were chosen accordingly to reflect and explore some of the countless ways we can use words.

The included short stories feature language and events that may be unsettling or offensive to some readers. Although these stories are fiction, they are very much informed by real life.

DEDICATIONS

A MASSIVE THANK YOU to both of my parents, who've always encouraged me to shoot for the stars. Thank you, Dad, for supporting me in all my writing endeavors since day one. Thank you, Mom, for showing me that a life that doesn't go according to plan can still be one worth living.

Thank you to my friends, who have stood by me through some of my highest highs and lowest lows. I love you more than words can say, and I only hope that someday I can repay you.

Thank you to Jane Baas, my thesis chair, trusted mentor, and supportive friend, for your patience and support throughout the past four years. I absolutely could not have done this without you, and I wish you all the best in your upcoming retirement.

And thank you to Tim Conrad, who taught me the following things: first, to try; second, to tell the truth; and third, to do the damn reading.

GENES

Loneliness rests in a niche
Somewhere on the X chromosome,
Passed from mother to child and on again.
My mother is lonely, as was her mother before her.

I am eight years old and stale air scalds my lungs.
Glass detonates against drywall downstairs.
I hold my breath until I am fourteen,
When a soft-spoken surgeon
Delivers what he thinks is bad news:
I may never have children.

Thank God.

I would hate to pass on

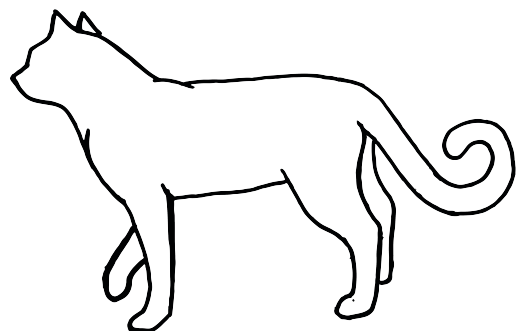
One towel on the rack.
One toothbrush in the drawer.

The row of mugs I never get around to washing properly.
The same sad dishes always in the sink.

Bananas that brown before I can eat enough of them at breakfast.
Lettuce that begins to decompose before I can pack enough salads for work.

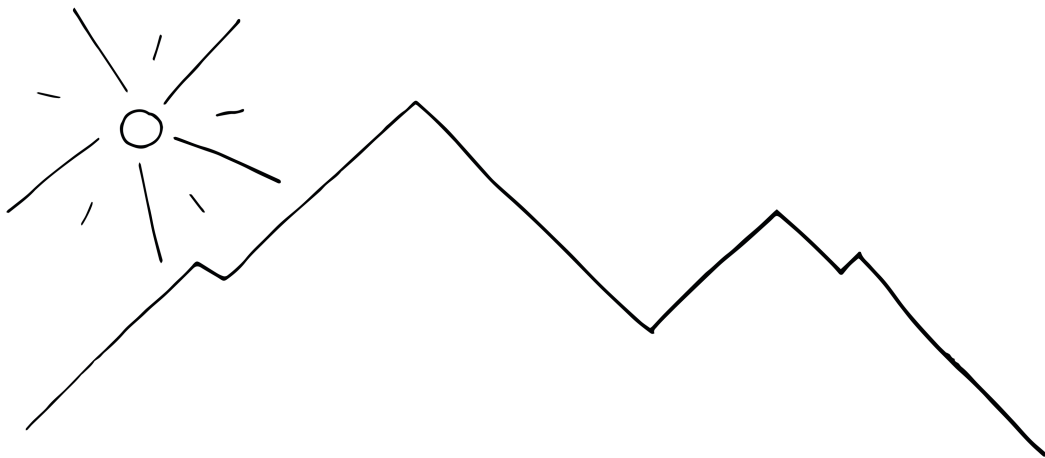
One car in a two-car garage.
A house that is dark when I pull into the drive.

A calico cat who only comes home when she's hungry –
Until, one day, she doesn't come home at all.



COLORADO

The mountains told me their secrets
And I listened closely. They said
Rain will come.
Stand tall, and you will not drown,
But it will change you.
Even when you are cold,
Colder than you have ever been before,
Be wary of ash and flame:
A single spark can ruin you.
With time, pieces of you will fall to the foothills.
You are still whole.



ODE TO A TREE

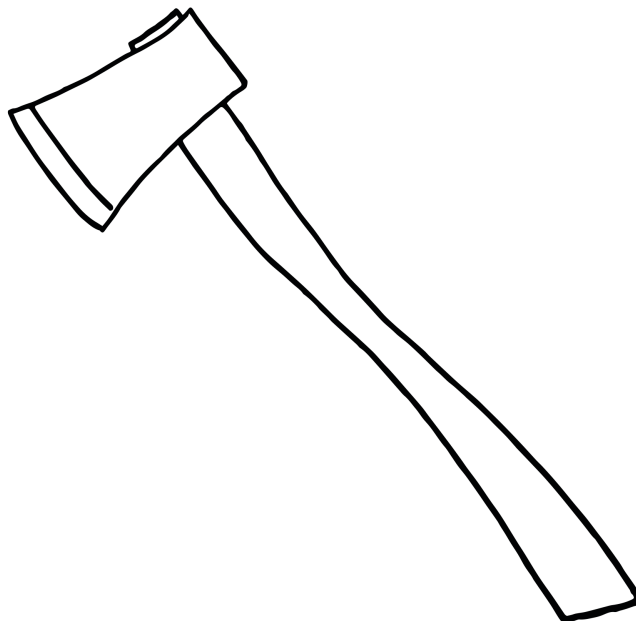
I'm really sorry, weeping tree
Believe me, please, I beg of thee
I did not know the ghastly plan
To wrench you from your promised land

Your roots were deep, your trunk was tall
You held on tight, you gave your all
Yet still he took all that he could
All for the selfish want of wood

I saw him come with axe in hand
A barely sober, unwashed man
He torched your limbs; smoke stung my eyes
He would not heed your forlorn cries

Why would he listen to a tree?
Why would he hear its wretched plea?
He wanted warmth, he wanted light –
I watched my dear old friend ignite

I love you so, my weeping tree
Forgive me, please, I beg of thee
All that remains where once you stood:
A lifeless, lonely stump of wood



THE DROP OFF

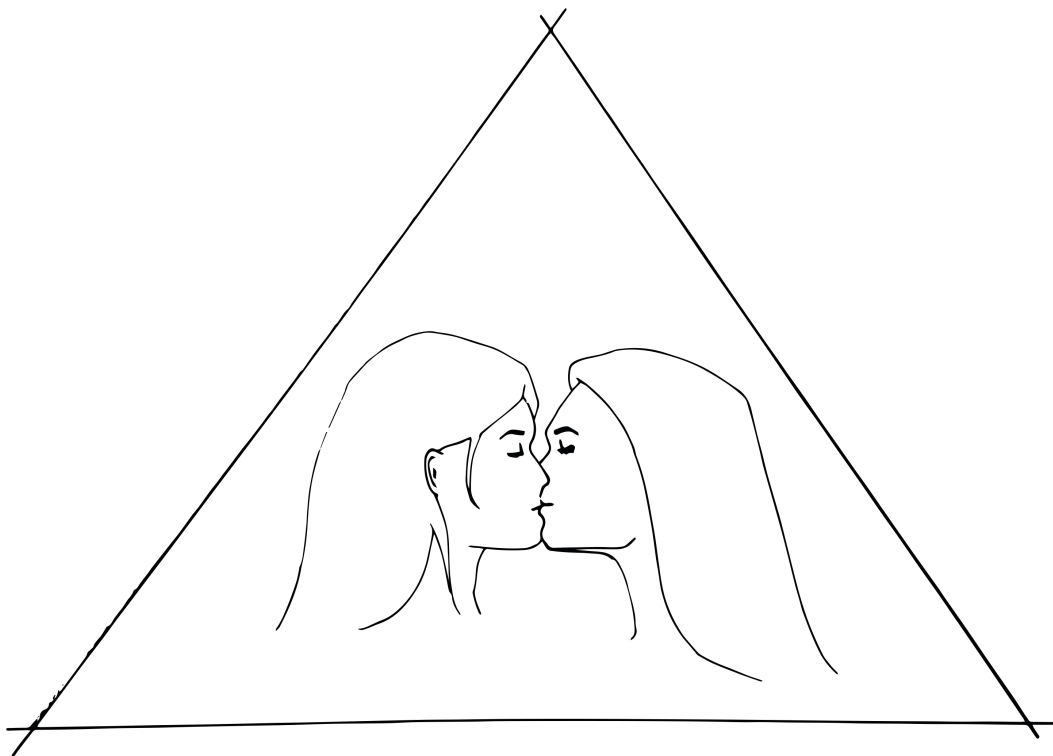
The first time I kissed her,
She tasted like salted ocean air,
Like waist-deep in blue.

The second time I kissed her,
She tasted like salt water splashing in your eyes,
Like shoulders-deep,
Like soles of your feet barely grazing the seabed.

The third time I kissed her,
Toes outstretched,
I could not touch,
Could not breathe.

The last time I kissed her,
I became dark matter.
I devoured light and stars,
Collapsed in on myself,
Pulled planets towards me on fish hooks.

The first time you kissed me,
Water and starlight poured from my throat.
My lungs swelled with the tide;
I was alive.
I was alive.



VANILLA

My coffee tastes like the Sunday mornings
I sipped when I was sixteen.
Pushing sleep-swept hair from my face,
I trudged to the kitchen.
My father always made me coffee,
Rich with sugar and vanilla creamer.
We exchanged banter
Like a tennis match,
Picking up speed
As caffeine dripped into our veins.
I hardly see him now;
If I did, I would make coffee on Sundays.

BROWN RECLUSE

Butterfly dust on your fingertips,
Cobwebs in your hair.
You're a killer.
I tie my thighs in noose-like knots
To try to keep you out,
But spiders thrive in darkness.
When I'm asleep, you're alive,
So I don't sleep anymore.

OPPOSITES

In movie theaters,
The strangers who sit behind us sway
Like trees,
Trying to see around your head.
I sway, too,
Just like they do,
Trying to see around the heads
Of strangers who sit in front of us.

JONAH

I was in the belly of the whale, swallowed whole. For five dark nights – maybe it was three – I cut my wrists and bled sacrifices for the gods. I prayed, I prayed, but no one came, and there I died, in the belly of the whale.

PAST LIVES

There are crescent moons in my palms. Fists clenched, I am extraterrestrial. I am stars reincarnate, galaxies reborn. The hands of the universe have shaped and reshaped me hundreds of times, working me like clay, sculpting me like stone. When the sun swallows the earth, we will taste our beginnings and burn our tongues.

HOMELESS

My mother's house is a simple single-story home, firmly planted on a backcountry road. The constellations breathe there. I left in September and moved into a second-story apartment. Here, the parking lot lights bleed into the night sky. They suffocate the stars. The howl of police sirens replaces the cry of the coyotes. And when I went back home, I found that it doesn't feel like home anymore. The rooms are too big, the silverware too thick. But I still can't sleep through the sirens. Nowhere feels like home.

INSOMNIA

The inky sky lingers, sucking light from the earth like a leech. Far-flung stars stare at me, whispering. "That's her – the mirror girl."

Claustrophobic, I dry heave stardust. Giles Corey was buried alive under boulders, one by one, for witchcraft. People like to blame each other. I find myself collecting rocks.

He died after three days.

She sucks in her belly; I suck in mine. We are concave. She pivots, I pivot. We work our bony fingers through the lifelong tangles in our hair. She closes her eyes, I close mine. Giles Corey demands my soul.

COLOR

I am only three steps out of bed when broken promises bite the soles of my feet. When the sun blinks the sleep from her eyes, she flings light from her fingertips, scatters sunbeams through prisms of dishonesty, paints rainbows on my walls. My feet bleed crimson; I can see color.

SCHISM

I'M A SINGLE CHILD, the firstborn and only son. Things might have been different, but my mother miscarried my little sister when I was two years old. My parents never tried again, and for good reason: my mother drank, and she drank often. I was eight when my father finally painted the second bedroom, replacing the pastel pink with a light shade of beige.

Like any other only child, I wanted desperately to succeed, to make my parents proud. In high school, I played football and baseball, took the lead role in *Hamlet*, played trombone in marching band, joined the debate team, and took photos for yearbook. I tried almost everything at least once.

My father, a man with tired eyes and perfect posture, always told me he was proud of me for “sampling” life. He came to every game, every opening night, and every marching show. He was always the one to drop me off and pick me up for practices and rehearsals, and, on the home front, he did most of the cooking and cleaning. Meanwhile, my mother stayed home and followed soap operas more closely than her own family's lives.

A warm evening shortly after I graduated high school, the three of us sat down at the dinner table, the windows cracked to let the first gasps of summer air through the dining room. Like every other night, my father sat at the head of the table and my mother sat to his right, while I sat to his left. My father opened the meal with a brief prayer. At “amen,” I opened my eyes and reached for the mashed potatoes.

Half an hour earlier, I had stood in the kitchen, potato masher in hand, while my father slaved over our chicken.

“I’m going to tell her tonight.”

My father glanced up from the chicken. “Are you sure that’s a good idea, Ry?”

“Does it matter?”

“I guess not. If you want to tell her, I won’t stop you. I just want you to be sure, that’s all.”

“I’m sure. The Supreme Court announced their ruling. Today’s as good as any.”

While my father and I served ourselves, my mother poured herself a glass of red wine, filling it almost to the brim. We all knew it was the first of many. In the living room, the anchor for the six o’clock news introduced herself.

“So, Ryan. How did work go today?” my father asked.

“They offered me a raise,” I told him. “I guess they think I show management potential.”

I glanced over at my mom; family dinners were one of the only times I saw her away from the couch. She’d slept most of the day, her soap operas playing nonstop in the background. But at least when she was sleeping she wasn’t drinking. She took a gulp of wine and spooned some

potatoes onto her plate.

“Maybe you’ll amount to something after all,” she said wryly. She alternated between potatoes and wine, each gulp bigger than the last.

Hastily changing the topic, my dad asked, “How’s Tyler doing? He hasn’t been over lately.” I cast him a measured glance. He met my eye and gave a subtle nod, which I took to be supportive.

“Come on, man. How bad can it be?” Tyler asked me. We were sitting on the couch in his basement. He was flipping through channels looking for something to watch.

“Bad,” I answered. “She hates gay people. Whenever something comes on the news about gay rights she goes nuts.” My voice rose an octave as I quoted her: “‘I can’t wait for the day those freaks burn in Hell like they deserve!’ Besides, she wants grandkids.”

Tyler was quiet for a moment. “What about your dad? How’s he taking it?”

“He’s fine,” I said. My mother poured herself a second glass. Under the table, my knee bounced with nervous energy. From the living room, I heard the news anchor’s muffled voice: “A long-awaited victory for many, the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled the same-sex marriage bans of Michigan and twelve other states unconstitutional.”

Tensing, I shifted my gaze to my mother, but she hadn’t heard the newscaster. She was staring absently into her glass.

“My mom has been an alcoholic for sixteen years. I’m sure he’s just glad I’m not as fucked up as she is.”

“Good point.” Tyler reached over and squeezed my hand. “Well, whatever happens, we’ll figure it out, alright?”

My mother reached for the wine bottle even though her second glass was still half-full. She’d finish this one and open another bottle in fifteen, maybe twenty minutes at most. The more she drank, the more unpredictable she became.

Say it. Get it over with before she’s drunk. Just say it. My heart began to race. My knee kept time with my pulse, bouncing faster and faster. *You can’t spend your whole life hiding from her. Say it!* I threw down my fork; it clattered against the table and fell to the floor, drawing my parents’ eyes to me.

I blurted it out: “I’m bisexual.”

Tension swept through the room like a draft.

My mother blinked; leaned in, lips curling downward. “You’re what?”

I took a shaky breath before repeating myself. “Bisexual.”

She delivered her opinion as fact. “Are you trying to tell me you’re a faggot?” Casual sip of wine.

My father began, “Mary, come on, wait a second. Let’s talk about this like adu—”

She leapt to her feet, her chair screeching against the wood floors. “I will not have a faggot for a son.”

“Mary, relax,” he pleaded.

“Bill, you’ve seen the news! All these gays marching around town in their rainbow underwear and calling it ‘pride.’ As if sticking their dicks in each others’ assholes is natural!”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw my dad flinch, but the words didn’t phase me. I sat back in my chair and cleared my throat. “Mom. I’m not gay.”

She turned on me again. “You like dick, don’t you?”

Embarrassment scorched my cheeks, silencing me.

“Don’t you?” she demanded.

Clenching my jaw, I stared down at my hands, defenseless against her. The subtleties were lost on her, would always be lost on her. I said nothing.

“Then you’re a fucking faggot!”

My father jumped up and slammed his hands on the table. The wine in my mother’s glass trembled. His voice rose to a shout. “Marianne!”

“What?!” she shrieked.

He lowered his voice. “He is our *son*.”

She lowered her voice, too. Planted both hands on the table. “*Not* anymore.” Her words fell like a gavel.

My father turned to me, his expression caught between rage and sorrow: a picture of emotional tug-of-war. He deflated himself with a slow, self-contained exhale. My father had always loathed confrontation, and now, like always, he would leave her rage to extinguish itself. When he spoke, his voice was a creaky floorboard, threatening to splinter under tremendous weight.

“Ryan, come on. Let’s go catch a movie or something. Let’s celebrate that raise you got.”

I wore a scowl that rivaled my mother’s. Spite swept over me. I would never be good enough for her. It didn’t matter that I’d graduated with highest honors and near-perfect attendance; it didn’t matter that I’d outperformed my peers in sports, debate, and marching band; it didn’t matter that I did my chores and that I’d never broken rules, only bent them. All that mattered to her was that I was not the child she lost. And now I was part of a group she

viciously and unapologetically loathed. I got to my feet and met her eyes; my voice was flat as I repeated myself for the last time. “I’m not gay. I’m bisexual.”

For several cold, rigid seconds my mother and I scowled wordlessly at one another. Finally, she scoffed and broke the stillness to reach for her glass.

My father’s suggestion became a command. “Ryan. Let’s go.”

Soon there would be another empty bedroom in my parents’ house.

KANSAS

SWEAT GLISTENED ON HER sun-darkened skin as she limped back and forth across her backyard, her lawn mower snarling as it beheaded countless blades of grass. Prominent collarbones and sharp shoulder blades jutted out beneath her gray, skin-tight tank top, and a black braid hung down the center of her back, swaying from side to side with each step she took. Kansas wiped sweat from her brow with the back of her hand, momentarily squinting into the sky as she vainly hoped that the sporadic clouds above would soon overtake the sun.

The front left wheel of her lawn mower dropped a few inches.

Her hands sprung free of the handle, and its roar softened and died.

“Goddamn gophers,” Kansas muttered. She dried her sweaty hands on her shorts and peeked around the mower. Her forehead creased as her eyebrows knit together in confusion. “What the...”

The mower sat not on a gopher hole, but rather perched at the edge of a gaping, circular chasm roughly a yard in diameter. How had she not seen that? She swore it hadn’t been there a moment ago. Kansas sidestepped the lawn mower and inched closer, wary of falling in. A front-page headline from the month before surfaced in her mind: “Sinkhole Swallows Car Carrying Family of 4.” Careful to maintain her balance, she leaned forward and peered into the gulf; all she could see was darkness.

A muffled cacophony of voices, barely audible, rose from the depths.

Kansas’s eyes widened slightly; she dropped to all fours, leaning in. Hesitant, she called into the tunnel. “Hello?” The voices babbled on, oblivious to her beckoning. She cleared her throat and called again, louder. “Do you hear me?” But the voices continued the same as before, overlapping one another in chaotic, unintelligible murmurs.

As she listened, they began to crescendo into a clamor, growing louder with each passing second. A violent gust of wind assaulted her from behind, as if trying to push her headfirst into the pit. Kansas craned her neck, glancing around in bewilderment. Above, the sky was clear but for a few ponderous clouds; the leaves on the trees were frozen in time. And yet, another savage wind flung itself at her, only her, leaving even the grass beside her untouched. The wind howled, intensifying the tumultuous roar erupting from the abyss.

Kansas turned, starting to her feet, only to be knocked to her knees again by another ruthless gale. A pull not unlike gravity began to draw her towards the fissure. Her fingers clutched frantically at fistfuls of grass as she strove to anchor herself, and yet she slipped towards the hole, inch by inch, as if dragged by an unseen, malevolent entity. Supernatural wind thrashed around her, stinging her eyes, and the inarticulate screams of the voices below drowned out all

else. Kansas lurched backward, and she felt the earth beneath her legs vanish.

She fell.

As she tumbled into the void, the shrieking voices and the howling wind fell inexplicably silent. The eerie sensation of flotation washed over her, accompanied by an unforeseen calm. All thought vanished from Kansas's mind. She did not act; she simply was. Surrounded by darkness and quiet, even time itself became null. There was no difference between an hour or a minute, a millennium or a second.

Then time began again, and Kansas found herself standing at the end of a hallway with plain beige walls. Photographs were hung here and there, featuring a family of five. One of the larger portraits showed them all together; the mother and father stood side-by-side, the mother cradling a blonde-haired baby girl. In front of the father, a girl and a boy who looked to be twins stood with their lanky arms looped around one another. Another picture, the last in the row, showed the family again a few years later. The boy and girl were now in their mid-teens, and the youngest looked about four. Their parents looked tired but cheerful.

At the opposite end of the hall, a thin sixteen-year old girl stood pounding on one of the doors. Her long black hair fell into her face, briefly concealing her stormy expression.

"Colton! Get out of the goddamn bathroom or I'm going to piss on your floor!"

No one answered. As Kansas watched, the fuming teenager strode away from the door and disappeared around the corner; when she reappeared, she had a bronze key clutched tightly in her hand. She muttered under her breath and slipped the key into the lock. Kansas heard a click; the girl shoved the door inward and marched across the threshold, out of sight once more.

Kansas heard a faint gasp.

"Colton! Colton!"

Kansas clenched her jaw. She remembered this. She stepped forward, inching closer to the bathroom door. She knew what was on the other side, but she had to see. This scene had replayed over and over in her head for ten years; she remembered the anger, remembered the shock. Kansas paused, holding her breath. She stepped into the doorway.

There she was: Kansas, ten years younger. She was on the floor, hunched over a limp body, her hands on its shoulders. An empty orange prescription bottle lay against the wall, and vomit pooled on the tile floor. "Colton!" she shrieked again, but he remained motionless.

The girl scrambled to her feet and turned towards the door. Her gaze passed through Kansas, looked beyond her as if through a window. Present-day Kansas was a mere apparition, watching powerlessly as her younger self lunged in her direction. The left half of the girl's body passed through Kansas; goosebumps rose like a rash across her body.

When her younger self returned, phone in hand, she punched a number into the keypad,

visibly shaking.

It rang twice before a muted voice answered. “9-1-1. What is your emergency?”

“My...my brother,” the young Kansas stammered. “I think he t-took a bunch of p-pills...He won’t wake up.” Her voice broke, and she began to sob.

Kansas blinked, and the bathroom vanished, replaced by a sterile hospital room. The family from the photographs sat together, crowding the cramped space. The room was silent. The mother’s red, puffy eyes indicated she’d been crying. Her husband pulled her closer to his side. The little girl was curled up in a chair, fast asleep, unaware of the pensive turmoil around her. The young Kansas sat perched at the window, staring into the distance with bloodshot eyes.

In his bed, Colton stirred.

The hospital gave way to a living room. From where she stood, Kansas could see the hallway with its beige walls and photographs. She spared it a glance before taking in the rest of the scene. Her younger self sat on a plush black couch beside her brother. His hair, dark like hers, was cut short. Black stubble darkened his angular face. A sitcom played on the TV in front of them.

Between the couch and the TV, their younger sister, now six years old, sat on the floor, drawing what looked to be the beginnings of a horse. To her mother’s delight, she’d inherited a natural knack for art.

A commercial came on, and Colton stood up from the couch, stretched, and ambled to the bathroom. On the floor, the little girl turned to face her sister. She clambered onto the couch, sitting closer to her than she usually would.

“Kansas, can I tell you a secret?”

“Of course, Ana. You know I love secrets.” Kansas smiled down at her sister’s pale skin, rosy cheeks.

“You have to promise not to tell anyone,” Ana insisted, glancing toward the hallway.

“Pinky promise,” Kansas pledged, holding out her hand. Ana locked pinkies with her, then she leaned in to whisper in Kansas’s ear.

“Sometimes, at night, after you and mommy and daddy go to bed, Colton and I play doctor.”

The faint smile on Kansas’s face disappeared. Dread flooded her chest. She turned to her sister. Speaking slowly, keeping her voice down and struggling to keep it steady, she asked, “What do you mean you play doctor?” She glanced over Ana’s shoulder towards the hallway as she heard the toilet flush.

“I show him my private parts. He makes sure that they’re okay and I’m not sick.”

In the bathroom, Colton turned on the sink.

“Ana,” Kansas murmured briskly, “does Colton ever touch you?”

“Sometimes, when I’m sick, he has to touch me to make me better.” She frowned, then she added as an afterthought, “I don’t like that.”

The bathroom door opened. Ana sprung off the couch and went back to drawing.

In the corner, present-day Kansas looked on with moist eyes. She blinked, and the house and the people were gone. She was alone in a park. The sun was low in the horizon, leaving faint streaks of pink in the sky. A breeze danced across her bare shoulders, rustling leaves along the perimeter of the park.

A gravelly voice interrupted the quiet. “Hello, Kansas.”

Kansas whirled around, and her eyes met those of an elderly man, of average height and build, clad in a black suit. He was bald, but he sported a neatly trimmed white beard and bushy eyebrows. His face was worn; he had the wrinkles of a man who had smiled and wept often.

“Who are you?” she demanded, a note of anger in her voice. “Are you the one responsible for this?” Her voice rose to a crescendo as she spoke. “This is completely fucked!”

The man met her eyes with an apologetic smile. “Of course it is. I’m sorry for that. Maybe I can help.”

Kansas pressed her lips together, narrowing her eyes.

He stepped forward and placed a hand on her shoulder. “Do you want to change it?”

She scowled back at him, knocking his hand from her shoulder as if swatting an insect. Exasperated, she opened her mouth to respond, but he held up his hand to silence her. “I know what you’re going to say.” His voice droned on, as if he was reciting words he’d heard many times before. “‘You can’t change the past.’ But Kansas, dear, this time you can. So let me ask again. Do you want to change it?”

Kansas was still and silent as she considered his question. Was he serious? He didn’t seem like a joking man. Her mediocre afternoon had already become impossibly bizarre – even time travel no longer seemed far-fetched.

When she answered him, her voice was barely above a whisper. “Yes.” The moment the word left her mouth, she was met with the overwhelming sense that she had made a choice she could not take back.

As if the earth itself had heard her, the ground jolted from beneath her feet. She fell forward, instinctively squeezing her eyes shut as she braced herself with outstretched hands. But several moments passed, and still the impact did not come. When she opened her eyes again, she found herself between two beige walls, each awash with a sea of family photos. Once again, she was in the hallway of her childhood home. Kansas listened for a moment; it was quiet. She waited for her younger self to turn the corner shouting, demanding her brother to unlock the bathroom

door, but the silence persisted. Hesitantly, she took a step closer to one of the picture frames on the wall. She peered into the glass at her reflection, confirming what she already suspected: she was sixteen years old, and she was about to relive one of the worst days of her life.

Her eyes darted to the closed bathroom door. She reached out her hand and tried the door-knob. It was locked, as she'd known it would be. Her feet carried her down the hall and around the corner, to the door to her parents' bedroom. She reached up, fingertips blindly feeling along the top of the door frame until they found cool metal.

Kansas plucked the key from its hiding place and carried it back to the bathroom. She inserted it into the keyhole, and the lock sprung free with a hollow click. She knew what she would find on the other side of the door. She had tried to forget, but the image was branded into her memory. Her knuckles were white as she gripped the knob. She took a breath to steady herself and threw open the door.

There he was: body sprawled across the floor, cheek pressed into his own vomit, empty pill bottle lying a few feet away. She fought the urge to gag as the smell washed over her. Phantom panic coursed through her veins, the ghost of what she'd felt so many years ago. The muscles in her legs tightened as she thought to run, to call an ambulance, to ride with them to the hospital and wait behind a curtain while a doctor rushed to pump her brother's stomach.

Then she remembered her sister's secret.

She knelt down beside her brother and pushed the sweaty, matted hair from his forehead. It was a Sunday; their parents would be gone most of the day. Kansas and Colton openly hated church and quietly disbelieved in God; after countless arguments, their parents had finally given up on dragging the two teenagers along. After the morning service, they would drop her sister off at her aunt's and go serve lunch at the soup kitchen downtown. They would politely decline a free meal of the leftovers and instead go to a restaurant, where the food was rich and warm and made for one person rather than fifty. And when their stomachs were full and they were convinced of their own benevolence, they would find some trivial hobby to spend their time and money on, maybe a visit to the art museum or a tour of the nearby winery. They'd return just before dinnertime, Ana in tow, so her mother could cook dinner while her father watched television. It would be four or five hours before they came home. Kansas knew that was more than enough.

She rested her back against the wall and pressed a hand against her brother's chest. She felt it rise and fall beneath her hands, felt the irregular, feeble flutter of his heartbeat against her fingertips. She waited with him as his ragged breaths gradually became more shallow, more infrequent. The minutes stretched into one hour, then two. Her muscles began to ache; her spine hurt where her vertebrae met the wall.

As the second hour melted into the third, his tired heart gave.

Kansas clenched her jaw and got to her feet. Her hands trembled as she relocked the door; she left the bathroom, pulling the door shut behind her. She went down the hall, around the corner to her parents' bedroom. She stood on her tiptoes, returning the key to its home above the door frame. Only then did she feel the weight of what she'd done – or rather, what she hadn't. She didn't kill him, not really, but he was dead all the same. Her eyes began to sting. As she closed them, she felt hot tears spill onto her cheeks. If her parents were right, if there was a God, then maybe her brother could see her now. "I had to keep Ana safe," she whispered. "I'm sorry."

When she opened her eyes again, she was in the middle of her lawn. Her push mower was slightly askew: a tire had sunken into a gopher hole.

THE OTHER HALF

I'M ON THE FLOOR of the handicap stall in a worn-down bar, slumped with my head resting on the seat of the toilet. I'm vaguely aware that there is vomit in the toilet and vomit on my face. The friends I came with left; I have no car, but I'm in no condition to drive anyway. I hear the bathroom door creak open and a panicked voice calls my name. "In here," I answer. My voice is weak, pathetic. A voice comes from above the divider between my stall and the next, begging me to unlock the stall door. I open my eyes for a moment and take in the familiar face gazing down at me, fingers curled over the stall like a rock climber clinging to a handhold. "I can't get up." I try to lift my head and open my eyes, but the world begins to spin like a top; my stomach heaves and I return my head to its porcelain pillow. Scuffling ensues as Nicole tries to climb over the divider then abandons the effort. A few moments later, she is on the undoubtedly-filthy floor, sliding herself under the stall door. I know she hates this. In the days to follow, I will ask her too many times if she's mad at me (she isn't). She grabs a fistful of toilet paper, wipes my face, flushes the toilet. When she drops me off at home, she watches me climb the double flight of stairs before she drives away.

It's three and a half years earlier. I open the door to my dorm hallway and I'm met with the faint but distinct stench of smoke and melted plastic. The smell grows more pungent with every step towards my room. When I get to room 102, the second-to-last door on the right, I let myself in; the stench increases by tenfold, despite the draft of brisk autumn air coming through the open windows. Nicole is sitting in her desk chair and spins to face me sheepishly, a rosy blush spreading across her round cheeks. Her loose dirty blonde curls frame her face. In this moment, she is childlike.

"What the Hell did you do?" I ask. My words are harsh, but my tone is light.

She confesses that she microwaved soup. In a metal can. For five minutes. Or at least, for what would have been five minutes, if it hadn't caught fire and left a cloud of smoke in the room that forced her to army-crawl to the bathroom for breathable air. The walls of the (my) microwave are permanently scorched.¹

¹ Nicole and I were not originally supposed to be roommates. We met at freshman orientation and were both going in blind. She not-so-fondly recounts the first message she received from her randomly assigned roommate, Laquitta: "I have one rule. We respect each other, and we respect each other's stuff." (I think technically that's two rules.) Laquitta went on to insist that they bring their own of everything, including separate mini fridges and microwaves. I thought the latter was a bit extreme, but after the microwave incident, I started to think she had the right idea. My own roommate was on the WMU Class of 2018 Facebook page seeking a replacement for me after I failed to respond to her message within the first eight hours (I was working). We mutually panicked and filled out roommate switch request forms, and a couple of months later we were inseparable.

My comforter smells like smoke for the next three days. In the months to come, Nicole refuses to microwave anything without guidance. In class one afternoon, I receive a text from her: “How long do I microwave popcorn for?”

We’re in our first apartment. I’m three hard ciders deep already and drinking Fireball from the bottle. I drunkenly confess to her a secret I thought I’d take to my grave, and Nicole looks glad that I’ve shared this piece of myself. Soon I’m puking in her bathroom. Nicole sits on the laminate tile floor next to me. When I go to bed, I lock my bedroom door, but my keys are hung up in the kitchen like they always are. In the night, she unlocks the door and comes in to check on me. (I don’t remember this. I sleep like the dead.)

Nicole is dyslexic. She usually keeps this to herself; I don’t think she would have told me if she could have avoided it, but when we met I was tentatively planning to major in English, and she needed (still needs) someone to proofread her essays. To her credit, they invariably land in my student inbox at least a few days before the due date, albeit with subject lines that would raise the eyebrows of any university administrator combing through my emails. For example: “My Essay on Why People Should Respect My Sex Tape,” “Guess Who?! You’re fiend thats’ ain’t no good at writting,” and “Hot Editor Wanted.”

Nicole lives her life by a Magic 8-Ball’s orders. It’s a fickle creature, the Magic 8-Ball; one night it declares that we should take shots, while another it mandates that Nicole attend class instead of skipping it to meet Nick Jonas. (I was never a Jonas Brothers fan, so the appeal is lost on me. When I tell her this, she remarks, “Of course you weren’t. Too mainstream.”)

She’s more comfortable asking a Magic 8-Ball for help than an actual person.

She’s hiding in the basement closet, better described as a storage room. Surrounded by concrete and Christmas decorations, Nicole is clutching her family’s cordless phone. It’s late at night, and she’s not supposed to be making phone calls. The suicide prevention worker on the other end of the line urges her to keep breathing. When she hangs up the phone, she opens the door and finds her mother and father sitting on the couch, holding the other handset between them. Her father, stoic as always, remarks, “She seems nice.”

Within a week of us being roommates, Nicole explains that the little orange pill vial that

sits on her desk is filled with Zoloft, an antidepressant she's been taking since she was sixteen.² I'm caught a bit off-guard by this; immediately upon meeting her, I could tell that she was funny, outgoing, popular. In high school, she was the senior homecoming queen. I'd been the girl at the back of the classroom, pointedly drowning out my classmates with a constant stream of music pouring through my earbuds. She grew up in a safe suburban neighborhood with green lawns and picket fences; she has one younger brother and a dog. Her parents have been married for twenty-eight years now. She gets good grades and has always been involved in extracurricular activities. Depression does not discriminate; I know this, and I'm ashamed to admit that I still sometimes resent these people and their happy upbringings. I catch myself in the same line of thinking that other people so often fall into: "They have no reason to be depressed." As if anyone needs a reason; as if faulty neurons cannot exist without psychological trauma.

Nicole isn't like that. She has never asked me to prove that I'm entitled to pain.

It's months later when I learn that Nicole does not fit into the box of People Without Tragic Backgrounds. She has known pain far beyond what anyone would expect upon meeting her. She has a way of making jokes at exactly the right moment, igniting the room with laughter. And I think maybe I've misjudged the people who had white picket fences and happily married parents; maybe we've all suffered. Maybe I'm only preoccupied with my own Tragic Background because I'm convinced it's the most interesting thing about me.

It's the summer between Nicole's fourth and fifth grade years. Her family is at her aunt and uncle's house; they live in the same neighborhood. Nicole and her brother are upstairs with her cousins watching TV while their parents are downstairs playing euchre.

Her brother and cousin are thundering in and out of the room on the lightning-quick feet of elementary-age boys. Her uncle, an intimidating police officer who towers over the rest of the family, climbs the stairs and fixes the four children with a stern stare. His words come out as a command: You are not to come downstairs. The children hear the admonishment and begin to settle down.

It's a matter of minutes later when Nicole's other cousin says that he sees flashing lights in the neighborhood. They don't believe him; it's a quiet neighborhood, not the type of place

² Nicole later tells me that her mother offered to give her the bottle to an over-the-counter allergy medication to hide her antidepressants in. I'm not sure if this is because she thinks Nicole is ashamed of her depression or if her mother is ashamed to have a depressed daughter. Her mother is profoundly interested in Nicole's appearance, both literally and figuratively; over the four years I've known Nicole, her mother has gifted her with a Weight Watchers subscription, several "healthy cooking" cookbooks, and, most recently, a gym membership. Her parents have always been kind to me, and despite being the conservative, pray-at-the-dinner-table type, her mother's first response when Nicole told her that I was dating a girl was to ask, "Is she happy?" Her mother isn't a bad person, but her fixation on Nicole's weight bothers me almost as much as it bothers Nicole.

frequented by ambulances or police cars.

After awhile, Nicole is tired and ready to go home. She trudges downstairs with heavy feet and heavy eyelids. Her uncle tells her that she and her brother will be staying the night; this isn't abnormal, especially during the summer. As an afterthought, she inquires about her missing parents. Although they frequently spend the night here, her parents typically say goodbye before they leave. Her uncle says, "Your dad didn't feel well, so they went home. Your Aunt Allyson is driving them." Nicole assumes her father has the stomach flu.

Before bed, she is ruminating on the lack of a goodbye from her parents. She wants to talk to her dad. Her uncle allows her to make a phone call, but tells her to keep it short.

"Hi, dad. How are you?"

"I'm good." He sounds groggy, but this makes sense. He is sick, after all. "Be good for your Uncle Alex. And sleep tight – tomorrow is Sunday and we have church in the morning."

But Nicole doesn't have an Uncle Alex. She has a cousin Alex and an Uncle David. And it's Thursday, not Saturday. Her father asks to speak to her brother. She says no; she hangs up the phone. Something isn't right, but she's not sure what it is. Maybe her dad is playing a prank on her, she tells herself. They're always joking with one another.

One night at their aunt and uncle's turns into a few nights. Nicole's aunt and uncle give her and her brother practically anything they want; they rent movies and play games. Still, Nicole starts to tire of them, and she wants to go home. But a few nights turn into two weeks, and she's hardly seen her mom. She hasn't seen her dad at all.

He's in the hospital. The doctors still don't know what's wrong with him; they've done countless tests, but they still don't have an answer.

Eventually, Nicole and her brother are allowed to go see him. Children aren't allowed in the hospital room, so they are brought to the front of a window through which they can see their father, wires connecting him to countless machines. Nicole waves to her dad. Her brother sees the wires, sees his father more machine than human, and runs away.³

Three weeks later, Nicole's father is diagnosed with a brain tumor. He goes into surgery almost immediately. While his surgeon is able to remove some of the tumor, it's declared stage IV. Terminal. Her parents promise to be honest from the outset; they will never lie about the gravity of her father's illness. He's given six months to live.⁴

3 Nicole later found out that her father sat in his hospital bed and cried because his son couldn't stand to look at him. He is not the type of man to cry; he was a sheriff, attending law school. He was smart and strong, the type of dad who is a hero to his kids, as many are.

4 Nicole tells me that she that she didn't understand. Her father was indestructible; nothing could happen to him. Her brother cried while she tried not to. "I didn't think there was anything to be upset over, because nothing was going to happen." His sickness seemed exaggerated, unreal.

In the coming months, everything their family does is a last: last Christmas with dad, last birthday with dad, last first day of school with dad. He wasn't home much before this; as a sheriff, he often worked nights and slept during the day. But now he's home all the time, and he's different. He goes to the cancer center for chemotherapy once a week, and on the rare occasions that Nicole or her brother come with him, he's visibly disturbed: he does not want them to remember him like this.

"He looked like Frankenstein," Nicole says, referring to the rows of staples in his head.

Nicole is sixteen. She usually gets a ride to school from her friend, but her friend's car won't start. She goes to her father's bedroom⁵ and rouses him from sleep. But he can't move; he can't even lift his head. "You're going to have to skip school today," he tells her.

Nicole's parents never let her miss school. If she's puking, her dad makes her take a bucket with her.

He's in crippling pain. She gives him pain medication and pours water into his mouth. *This is it. This is it*, she thinks. She calls her mother crying. That night, he's back in the hospital. More machines, more diagnostics.

His back – the back of a man who spends most of his time in bed or on the couch – is broken. He's diagnosed with multiple myeloma, another form of cancer, this one originating in the bone marrow. This, too, is terminal.

Nicole is twenty-two now.

She takes her antidepressants every day at 9:30 PM. She's doing well.

Her father is not in remission. His cancer simply hasn't grown enough to kill him. Her family has had eleven last Christmases with him. When Nicole got her period for the first time, her dad bought her tampons, drove her to school, and told her that it was okay. When he was teaching her to drive (no small feat; she failed her driver's test twice before she passed), he took her to a bird sanctuary, where they spent the rest of the afternoon in the company of songbirds. When her ex-boyfriend cheated on her, he offered to kill him if she just said the word. And when Nicole called him crying about her score on the Law School Admission Test

⁵ Nicole's parents have had separate bedrooms since she was six years old, not because they hate each other but because he worked nights on the police force. They kept to the arrangement even after his diagnosis partly because of his insomnia and partly because he has to be "quarantined." Chemotherapy weakens the immune system, and something as simple as a cold can kill a cancer patient. During flu season, Nicole's dad wears a hospital mask on the rare occasions he leaves the house. Nicole's out-of-pocket balance for school during the fall semester was about \$2,000 this year, which her mother agreed to pay on one condition: she cleaned her dad's room. It took her two full days.

(LSAT), he took her to the bar. Seven years after his initial diagnosis, he watched her graduate from high school; and in a couple of weeks, ten and a half years after he was expected to die, he'll watch her graduate from college with honors.

In my parked car, under the dim parking lot lights, she holds up her acceptance letter to the law school he graduated from.

