

# Chasing Martins

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Artist's Statement

My first steps onto campus at Bemidji State University transferred rain onto the soles of my well worn shoes. It was a gray April afternoon, and my family and I were being led toward the academic side of campus. Lake Bemidji peeked through the cracks of landscape, the restless blue pushing through the void between one bricked building and the next. Our tour guide, a senior from the Student Senate, said something about the football field being so near the lake. As I looked at it, I thought of how dismal this day was, and tried to think of the lake being bluer, the grass greener, and the trees bearing signs of life.

All my life, I had lived on water. As a child, I grew up on Lake Norway, only to retreat in the summers to my grandparent's resort on Lake Mary. In the fifth grade my family moved next to the river that gave our town its name, and when I turned in the application for Bemidji State University I knew its footprint-shaped lake would seal the fate of my next destination. As I looked down at my newly wet feet, I knew that this place had claimed me, beginning from the feet up.

This tour would provide a pivotal point in my life. This was not because of it being my first tour of campus, but because I was being led toward the door of the Chair of the Creative Writing Department. Soon after I crossed her threshold, she welcomed me into her classroom, a place where I would soak in the heaviest wisdoms of my life thus far. Here, on our first meeting, she would convince me that though I could plan my destinations, I needed to keep my mind as fluid as the water I settled by. My first step out of that door, I knew I wanted to become a writer.

On the ride home, I contemplated my chosen fate. Though I had always had a

place in my heart for stories, I did not begin to write them until early adolescence. The stories began by being influenced by dreams, and though the words seemed to come naturally enough, I could not claim any inborn talent for the craft. I was a writer by choice. The stories that had formed through my pen, my instrument of choice after the violin, were chosen, tempered, and delivered. This consciousness of my own power of choice would help me temper the talents that I possessed, and would help me to mold those which I needed in the future.

In my second year as a Creative Writing student, I took a class that would further my journey of consciousness. This specific course was titled “Women’s Writings in the Middle Ages.” The course brought to my eyes a whole new perspective on the freedom to write. These women, whose stories were fantastical triumphs of faith against grisly opponents, had to rationalize their voice and talents with every step towards their projects’ completion. Each woman, in turn, wrote a letter before their text to proclaim that they “had to” write the stories down. They feared that if they did not, they were ignoring a God-given talent that, if gone unused, would surely ignite the fury of God. Though I supposed this fear to be ridiculous, I kept in mind that whether they believed it or not, it was necessary if they wanted to be published in a literary world that was, at the time, dominated by the male sex.

After this course, I counted my blessings. I chose to be a writer. There are a few other professions which would have suited me (though not as well or as satisfying to my spirit as this one). I will never claim that I have any God-given talent, or that it will waste away if I do not use it. Instead, I will state that I write because I enjoy getting to know my own mind and exploring the voice one can only give breath to through the

creation of literature.

The portfolio which follows this letter is the life and body of my creative thesis. In pieces, it is reduced to threads which are meant to form a thicker and better whole. Its pieces, as a whole, depict the exploration into my voice as a writer and my journey to better writing as a student of Creative and Professional Writing at Bemidji State University. Through my three years of courses I have developed my own voice to suit a writing style that is finally reflective of my own mind and ideas. Its growth, however, was not an easy process. Three years of encouragement, nurturing, and exposure to the elements taught my writing a lesson: time alters all.

The greatest lessons of my life have all come to me through times of waiting. Sometimes, I waited for my troubles to be over, and sometimes I waited hoping that they would not return. In either story, I learned the value of time, and though three years at Bemidji State University has taught me to be patient with my own writing, this patience was a lesson of a much older year. This lesson took place in the spring.

Every spring, my grandfather awaited the arrival of the Martins to his custom-made birdhouses. Each house (for he had several) was like a little bird-hotel, suspended on a single stilt of steel which he had planted himself in the deep Minnesotan dirt. The holes, about two inches in diameter, were several across and three high, providing three stories for the social-minded birds, who always traveled in flocks and families. After burying the pole and steadying the little home, he waited for its feathery tenants to appear. They seemed to come later every year, and with child-like impatience I waited, my grandfather even more eagerly so, for the friendly little birds to come.

All my life I seemed to chase after what I knew I had to wait for. My impatience

was not abated by years or maturity, and the older I grew the farther ahead I planned my future. College was an easy step for me to make--I had been waiting for it for two years. Now, as I look into the face of graduation it scares me a little, because up close everything seems to look differently than I supposed. As I bring my thesis to a close, I look out my window at the end-of-winter snow that veils the grounds of Bemidji State University. I can already see the spring returning, and I remember those little black birds lining up in my grandfather's houses, and how up close, the tufted feathers shone from black to a gentler purple.

# Fiction

Red Land

Sam liked the way the cigarette smoke teased the ball of her tongue ring to different temperatures. She filled her hollow cheeks with smoke, savoring the sensation of the stud, something she couldn't always feel. Exhaling, all sensation left her and her tongue was numb again. She spat into the gravel and into the silence of the bat cave around her.

The walls were made of iron mesh, making a safe separation from the inside to the out. The bat cave was an overlook to a man-made lake, carved out by miners who had needed the land. Sam looked into the deepness below at the pine trees that sprung from the red cliffs and wondered why the water was so blue and why anyone would need this land.

It was late evening and the summer sky above was announcing dusk. Sam looked down at Lake Orebegone one more time, taking the last drag from her stubby cigarette. Snubbing it out in the gravel, she flicked the smoking husk through the iron mesh, knowing without seeing that it would drift into the water below, its death announced by its swelling and falling apart, until the water, too, would forget that she had ever been here.

Rising, She dusted off her jeans and re-zipped her thin jacket, knowing what the summer night ahead would bring. The bike she had taken wasn't hers. It was blue and made for a man, the bar that crossed horizontally was unfriendly to both skirts and Sam's knees; it was Eric's bike. He had insisted she take it, though she had tried to protest. He wouldn't need it where he was going, Eric had said. So Sam had taken the bike.

Hooking her tennis shoes into the pedal straps, Sam pushed off the gravel and left



the lake behind her, though the hills would not leave her. Snug between the cliffs and the red hills was the high school. As Sam swung past it she pedaled faster, knowing its face too well, its gaping doors stiffly closed for the summer. In the fall she would return for her senior year to be swallowed yet again by the gaping doors.

Sam pedaled toward the grocery store, noting to herself that she only had about an hour until the sun went down. The sky had gone from gray to purple as she pedaled into the grocery store parking lot. There wasn't much traffic in town. Setting her bike by the side of the store, she slipped easily past the sliding glass doors. Inside, she was instantly cold, the artificial temperature intended only to keep the produce comfortable, giving little comfort to its summer shoppers. Without too much deliberation, Sam bagged a few plums, feeling even colder as she held the cool fruit in her palm and, one by one, she dropped them into the long plastic bag.

As she twisted the now heavy bag with one motion, she heard the store radio system turn on, a few broken lyrics slipping above the humming sound of freezers. Her heart beating faster, Sam clutched the plastic bag hard as she heard Eric's favorite song flood the fruits and vegetables section.

“Who's gonna give their heart and soul

To get to me and you

Lord I wonder, who's gonna fill their shoes.”

Holding back bulging emotions, Sam closed the plastic bag full of plums, knotting it twice, and headed for the only check-out open, its flickering number three a fading beacon.

“Hello, did you find everything all right?”

Sam looked up. The cashier was a middle aged woman with orange hair, the color an unpleasant contrast against the powder blue uniform vest.

“Yes,” Sam answered, handing the woman her money. As the cashier took her time weighing Sam’s bag, Sam let her eyes fixate on the woman’s vest, which was adorned with a nest of spider pins. Golden legs glinted in too many places, gems encrusted in bulbous bodies suggesting too many eyes. Above her bedecked breast lay a single nameplate which announced the cashier’s name: *Joanie*.

“There you are, honey,” Joanie said. Sam took the bag and waved away the receipt as she headed for the door. “Have a nice night,” Joanie called after her. Sam turned back and muttered a “thank you” before leaving. Outdoors, she felt free as the smell of frozen meat and bagged bread left her nostrils and she could smell the cool night air beneath the scent of gasoline. Mounting her bike, which now had the heavy plums tied to the right handle, she wondered why the cashier liked spiders.

Jerking her bike wheel up and onto the boardwalk, Sam maneuvered along, trying to admire the sight of the park that she was passing while she retrieved a plum from her bag. Ripping a hole in the plastic with her thumb, she was able to recover one of the fruit. It was easy to lose herself in the swift movement of the wheels against the boardwalk, each uneven plank sending a shock shivering up the metal body of the bike, where it would be absorbed by her own body. Letting a low rumble escape her throat, Sam enjoyed the fragmented sound her voice made against the ribbed walkway.

As a child Sam had always thought plums should be purple inside, but they never were. Some were pink and most were yellow. Either way they were a fleshy color and not purple at all, which only made her remember that they were alive. Sam bit into the

plum and felt the flesh of the fruit chill her teeth.

The ride home was silent, and there were no other passengers save for a few deer and a single snowy white owl. She was curious to find it perched on the yellow meridian as if the bars were solid and meant for perching upon. Sam eyed the trees aside the ditches and the woods beyond them and wondered why the bird hadn't chosen a smarter spot.

Several seconds later, Sam saw her first car. She caught a look at the distressed driver behind the wheel and wondered whether they had killed the owl. As the car sped past her, a few white feathers tufted out from beneath the vehicle, tumbling in the night air. As the yellowed light from the headlights faded away, its lantern eyes blinking, she no longer saw the feathers, but imagined them scattering across the pavement to be seen tomorrow.

Sam's home was only a mile out from town, and she was lucky that she had such little distance to ride in the dark. Her first trip back alone had been full of anxiety; in the trees she heard the haunting song of wolves, and in every car she saw a potential predator. Now, she only saw the road and the trees and the dead owl feathers. She didn't think of death anymore but instead she thought of the bed that awaited her, its hollow covers an empty cocoon that she had left unmade from the morning.

Before long her tires hit the gravel driveway of her home and she saw that her father had left on the porch light, though it glowed dully behind the glass, which was thickened by a layer of gnats. Sam drove her bike up next to the shed and left it there, its handlebars resting crookedly and happily against the rugged wood siding. Slipping the bag of plums from the handle, Sam headed up the three unstained porch steps and opened

the squeaky screen door to her home.

Sam noticed first that the lights were off and that her father sat in the small dark living room, asleep in front of the Discovery Channel. As Sam kicked off her shoes she listened to the smooth chocolate voice of the narrator explaining the dangers of lobster fishing. The documentary was at its close, and the fishermen were recounting the devastation of the storm. The captain's weathered face looked sad and too young to be a captain. Painfully, he recounted how the winds had ripped apart the sea along with one of his crewmen. Sven had fallen into the storm-torn water, his only companions now the blister-red lobsters and the hollow voice of Poseidon. Sam turned away as the captain cried.

Her father began to snore as Sam tossed the bag of plums into the refrigerator. The whine of her father's snore almost drowned out the dramatic music of the documentary, which Sam recognized as Canon in D. Sam tip-toed to the back of the recliner to kiss her father's forehead goodnight. His hair was a ruffled black tuft, his thick hands ruffling it in his half-slumbering stage so that two tufts protruded like ears. Often, Sam and her father would sit around the television in the evenings, waiting for her mother to arrive home from work, and Sam would watch her father's digression from 9 o'clock to 10. At first, he would draw his large hand across his face, stretching the skin downward. His eyes would get heavy and pink, and eventually his head would tilt back, mouth open, and he would begin to snore. Sam would turn the volume down slowly before clicking off the television. She would wander off to bed alone.

As she kissed her father's forehead she was assaulted with the familiar scent of bubblegum and beer. Seeing the empty cans on the small coffee table, she lifted one in

each hand and carried them off to the kitchen where she would crush them in the morning. As she set them next to the refrigerator, she glanced at a photo that was pinned to the dimpled door by an American flag magnet. Eric's smile winked back at her and his face looked dark in the unlit kitchen. Sam never looked at it anymore; she had seen the picture so many times that she couldn't remember his face outside of the photograph. She remembered how she hadn't looked at her grandfather at his wake, afraid that all she would remember of him was how he looked in the framed casket, his face waxy in death.

Plucking Eric's photo from behind the magnet, Sam looked it over in the dark, memorizing the crisp folds of his collared uniform and the gentle curves of a face which would never be that young again. Sam turned it over in her hand, reading the love note on the back with a familiar sadness. In the silent kitchen she slipped the photograph in her back pocket, feeling the warm tile beneath her feet, and thinking of weeping captains, flattened flags, and death. Without waking her father, Sam walked silently across the carpeted hallway to the bathroom, the photo cradled in her pocket.

Flicking on the light, she could see her face in the sink mirror, an ivory oval, interrupted by a wide nose--her father's nose--which flared outward past the corners of her rabbit-black eyes, making her look always aware and somewhat unhappy. Sam, seeing this, knew that she, too, would never be that young again. Turning into her bedroom, she fell into her narrow bed, hiding the photo in her nightstand drawer. Shrugging easily into the cocoon of covers, she slipped into sleep. Sam dreamt of summer, of plums and golden-legged spiders and the young captain weeping into the sea.

When the sunlight perforated Sam's cocoon she awoke to the smell of Saturday and coffee, which was wafting in from the kitchen. Fevered with sleep and

unconditioned air, Sam slid out of bed and into a t-shirt and jeans. Barefoot, she headed for the kitchen, following the scent of burned coffee grounds. Her father sat at the kitchen table, his face buried in a scattering of bills, his fingers engaged in a calculator.

“Hey, fetch me the file box for me, would ya?”

“Sure.”

Sam took a sip of her bitter coffee before draining the cup down the sink. In the living room, she reached underneath the computer desk to retrieve the file box, which was heavy and blue. She dropped it on the table with a thud.

“Thanks.”

“Hey Dad, I think I’m going to Land of the Loon today with Jeanette. I’m meeting her at the park at 11.”

“All right. You better tell Mom.” Sam’s father continued punching numbers into the little gray calculator, his freckled forehead wrinkled in thought.

“I will,” Sam answered, heading for the door. Shoving her shoes on, she rifled through her jacket pocket to grab some cigarettes before heading out the door. “Bye, Dad,” she called as she walked out the door and onto the porch, where she could see her mother working in the garden. All she could see of her mother was her floppy white hat bobbing up and down as brown arms dug a gardening trowel into the soft black dirt, making way for peonies, rhubarb and the occasional raspberry plant.

Every year Sam’s mother would plant a new garden, and every year the plants didn’t match. From the dirt beyond their porch unnamed plants would sprout, healthy new seeds would intertwine with last year’s misfits, and the flowers that lived to bloom would be faded pastels of many colors, the brighter ones always eaten by deer and the

occasional rabbit. As Sam watched, a rabbit darted across the yard, careening close to the garden where Sam's mother let out a sharp exclamation and shooed it away with a dirt-caked trowel. The rabbit hurdled forward, branching on a path toward the neighbor's yard. Sam's mother sighed and muttered something about damn rabbits.

"What're you planting?"

"Peonies," her mother replied, squinting underneath the wilted rim of her hat. "I don't know if they'll bloom this summer but at least they'll be here for next year. They're from Grandma's garden. I think they're dark pink but I'm not sure."

"I thought Grandma's were light pink."

"Maybe," Sam's mother replied.

"I'm going to Land of the Loon with Jeanette. Is there anything you want in town?"

"Nope."

"All right," Sam answered. "I'll call you when I'm heading home."

"Have fun," Sam's mother called after her as she lifted her bike from the side of the shed, tucking the cigarettes in her back pocket. Swinging her leg over, she kicked off down the driveway and headed back toward the park..

Sam glanced at her watch: 10:45am. She tried not to swerve as she felt around her back pocket for a cigarette, which she paused on the road to light. Placing the lighter back in her pocket, she filled her lungs and exhaled, wondering if Jeanette would show up on time. Land of the Loon was something they did together every year. It was a festival that supported local Minnesotans, which meant it was practically a garage sale of useless crafts that people would only buy in the summer time. They would mill around

the winding rows of stands, lulled into thoughtlessness by the relentless heat and the thick country music which pulsed from the huge speakers of some unknown local band. Sam liked Land of the Loon. It was a monument of summer, and if it were gone she would miss it, though the whole time she were there she would be thinking of what she could have done instead.

As Sam's bike wheel rolled onto the boardwalk, she could see Jeanette waiting for her under the basketball hoop. It was hard to miss Jeanette. She was bold and beautiful and uncommonly short. Her platinum blonde hair was chopped off and stood flat against her head. The way she crossed her arms against the low-cut tank top made her look little and mean. As Sam drifted closer she got a better look at Jeanette's excessive jewelry, her earrings solid from cartilage to earlobe, each piercing adorned with a different fishing fly, the feathers an assortment of colors: sunfish yellow, seaweed green, and salmon belly pink. As Sam drew her bike to a stop she dropped her cigarette, putting it out with the toe of her tennis shoe. She exhaled the last mouthful of smoke and set her bike in the rack beside the basketball court.

"Hey, Jeanette."

Jeanette lifted her chin slightly in answer, wrinkling her nose as she looked on her friend.

"Got a smoke I could borrow?"

Sam slipped a cigarette out of her back pocket and handed it to Jeanette.

"Thanks," Jeanette murmured, lighting up. "So," she said, exhaling, "what do you want to waste your time looking at first?"

"I don't care."



Jeanette spat slowly into the grass and headed toward the bustle of the park, Sam following behind. There were stands of every sort of thing one might imagine they'd never need. There were windsocks, wood carvings, rainbow makers and water toys. Lemonade stands accompanied every fried bread stand, where buyers would sweat in lines for a fresh crust of dough and cinnamon from the fryer.

The people who had come to the festivities were more than actually populated the town, or so it seemed to Sam. Children infested the fountain's benches, chubby hands vying for a spot near the water. Teenagers milled about, sunglasses covering familiar eyes; classmates of Sam's weaved through the crowd, and she tried to avoid as many as she could, attempting to escape as much gossip as possible. As she and Jeanette rounded a corner toward the fountain, they were spotted by a classmate.

"Sam," a voice called out, too happy and too loud. Sam turned around to see Whitney approaching, and to see the sneer on Jeanette's pretty little mouth, the puckering in Petal Pink making her look like a fish. Sam tried not to look at either of them.

"So Sam," Whitney said cheerfully, her smile accentuated in the unnecessarily long S's. "When's Eric coming back?"

Sam hated Whitney.

Whitney was an ex-girlfriend of Sam's brother, David, and Sam hated her smallness, and the way her pretty face said nothing when she spoke.

When Whitney had dated David, she had entered into their family home without welcome. Torn between the roles of peer to Sam and girlfriend of David, she found a solution in silence. When they would close themselves up in David's room a wall away from Sam's, she could hear their whispered arguments waft through the heating vent.

“She hates me,” Whitney would whisper fiercely. David’s calm voice would attempt to assure her.

“No she doesn’t, Whitney. Sam doesn’t hate you.”

Sam would bury her face into the pillow to keep from exalting “Yes she does,” through the slotted vent.

Sam had heard through a mutual acquaintance that Whitney had a plan to marry David and move to Japan. Sam almost smiled at the idea of her brother assimilating into Japanese culture, his curly head an awkward exclamation, his speech heavy and calm and unyielding. Sam remembered trying to help her older brother with his eighth grade Spanish, unable to teach his tongue the acrobatics of the language. Instead, it would fall flat, unable to rise at the right syllables, stumbling over *leche*, its milky smoothness made chunky by his American voice.

Whitney’s parents, strict in their faith, forbid her such dreaming anyway, Whitney being no older than Sam and still in high school. The next day David and Whitney were missing. They had run away together, less than ten miles away, where David had rightly broken down and turned around.

Sam cleared her parched throat and lifted her heavy hair with one hand. The sweat at the back of her neck didn’t feel any cooler in the windless air and Sam could sense the pungent scent of BO as she lifted her arm.

“He’s coming back soon.”

“You must be so excited,” Whitney exclaimed, ignorant of her volume.

“Yeah.”

A silence followed, in which Jeanette elbowed Sam in the ribs.

“So, I suppose,” Sam said flatly.

“Oh, right.” Whitney smiled. “Well, I’ll see you later then. Bye, Sam.”

“Bye,” Sam answered.

Jeanette led Sam away toward a stand full of wooden birdhouses. Jeanette cleared her throat loudly until Sam looked at her. Her friend lifted an unnaturally thin eyebrow.

“What was all that about?”

“Nothing,” Sam answered, not knowing for sure herself.

“Eric is coming back, isn’t he? And you’re excited about it. Right?”

Sam picked up a birdhouse with ladybugs painted on it.

“Yeah.”

She put back the birdhouse without actually looking at it.

“He’s coming back.”

Jeanette eyed the birdhouse, but didn’t say any more about it.

The rest of the day was a blur of activities, of shopping and lying in the heated grass. Sam and Jeanette had chosen a spot near the fountain beneath the shade of pine trees to rest and had fallen asleep.

It was evening now, and Sam had awoken with the distant clang of electric guitars and the tenor of a male country singer, belting into a muffled microphone. Head clogged with sleep, Sam sat up and stretched her stiff back, waking Jeanette with a tap of her hand.

“Hey, get up.” Jeanette groaned, her pretty little nose sneering in protest.

“I don’t wanna.” Turning on her side, Jeanette curled her arm over her head.

“It’s getting late, Jeanette. I should be getting home.”

With loud complaints, Jeanette uncurled from her grassy spot and removed her sunglasses, which had shielded her sleeping eyes from the sun. The sun, now, was getting lower and though it had not yet gone down, was on its descent.

Looking over to the fountain, Sam could see that most of the people had gone home; only a few children straggled behind, getting last fistfuls of water before being dragged off to home and to bed. The festival had died down, and only a few clusters of people remained, wandering in and out of closing stands, birdhouses being boxed up, wind catchers folded away. Jeanette rose to her feet.

“You going to need a ride home?” Jeanette asked, offering Sam a hand. Sam took it, wincing as her knees were forced to straighten and stand.

“No, I don’t think so. I like riding my bike.”

“Whatever you want,” Jeanette shrugged. “It doesn’t matter to me.”

“Thanks anyway.”

“Sure.”

The two girls wandered back toward the entrance, following the winding walkway which, inside the park, was paved with reddish tar, its color tainted with the iron that had dusted the landscape red. When they reached the entrance to the park, Jeanette made a call for her older sister to pick her up while Sam retrieved her bike from the rack outside the fence. Feet snug in the pedals, she pushed off, waving back at Jeanette as she left the park and merged onto the side of the highway.

Sam wasn’t going home. Instead, her feet cycled hard, the wheels of the bike

feeling heavy as she pushed her way uphill. As she climbed higher, the flat landscape gave way to dirt, then to rock, and then to bigger rock. Each step brought a darker shade of red, the color ripening the higher up the hill she went. Scraggly grass sprouted from the rocks, and pine trees emerged from eager roots among the otherwise bare hill. The narrow path that Sam had taken was made for cars as well, though none were there now. Instead, her single bike sped upward, higher into the winding and empty wood which topped the only sight-seeing spot in town besides the mine.

Leonidas Outlook was a perch above the city. As the path leveled out, Sam realized that she had reached the top of the hill. Before her lay a dusty parking lot, large stones marking the edges of parking spaces which lay in a half circle around a horizon of sky. Above the string of boulders nothing but a few reaching limbs of trees were seen, the only thing above them the cloudless sky which was now tinted purple.

Sam set her bike down gently, laying it in the dirt. Determining the largest rock, Sam slid onto it, the hard surface smooth and warm with the heat of summer and the fading life of daylight.

Below her, Sam could see the town sprawled out beneath the trees. Red hills separated the houses, making them like water cracks around ant hills, their buildings like water finding the most hospitable spot. The smooth blue water tower stood erect and alone not far from Leonidas Outlook, where Sam was perched. Its letters were on the opposing side, making the town below it seem a nameless harbor among the hills.

The boulder she sat upon, as well as the others, was misplaced. Sam's teachers had insisted that the boulders were deposited by glaciers which had traveled, melting along their journey southward. Sam knew this couldn't be true. These were mining

mounds, things unearthed and exposed to daylight. These were mountains of secrets that were red and known.

Sam slipped her cell phone out of her back pocket. Holding the smooth plastic in her hand, she noticed how warm it was and how heavy it seemed, though it weighed almost nothing.

Flipping it open, she dialed a number.

The line rang once.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Eric.”

“Hey, baby.” Eric’s voice hummed on the other line and Sam could hear a wave of comfort in his voice, though her own felt numb.

“I’m so glad you called,” Eric said, “I couldn’t wait to hear your voice.”

“It’s been awhile,” Sam agreed softly.

“Fourteen months,” Eric corrected her. “But I call every month.”

“Yeah, you do.”

“I’m coming home next Tuesday.”

Sam closed her eyes, her elbows digging into her knees, free hand cupping her forehead. Behind her closed eyes she attempted to see the face which accompanied Eric’s voice; she tried to see his open eyes staring into foreign soil, cell phone pressed to his sunburned ear. It had been fourteen months since he had left for the Middle East, and fourteen months since their last kiss, their mouths filled with sweet words of returning. Though she tried, she couldn’t remember his face. The photograph hidden in her nightstand wasn’t him anymore.

“What’s wrong, baby?”

Sam opened her eyes and saw the sky had darkened, the sunlight quickly turning black. The water tower blocked out the last rays of sun so that a halo of orange light circled its metal dome, making the town for once seem bright and important. Seconds later the light began to sink downward, being pulled past the horizon to light another morning, another hemisphere.

“I’m just not the same anymore, Eric.”

“What do you mean, Sam?”

“I don’t want to see you again.”

“But I’ll be back Tuesday, baby. You won’t have to miss me anymore.” Sam was silent for awhile as she watched the sun go down.

“I can’t see you again.”

Slowly, Sam closed her phone. Below the rim of rocks Sam could no longer see her town. Instead, there was only blackness. Fireflies danced above the night-dark air, golden sequins flashing. Retrieving a cigarette from her back pocket, Sam began to feel the evening chill her skin. Clammy hands clutched the lighter, and the little flame looked too bright in the night air. Inhaling, Sam took in the thread of smoke, intertwined with night. The mixture was heavy on her tongue, the strange flavor pooling around her tongue ring. Sam spit out the bitterness with impatience, and watched as her saliva sunk into the red dirt.

The Willow Witch

“Don’t be a chickenshit, Isabelle,” Kat warned. Stepping onto the beach first, Kat let the sand filter between her toes, giving her skin a grainy feel. Lifting a fistful of dark curls with one hand and bracing the opening of her towel with the other, she let the cool air off the lake kiss the skin at the back of her neck, which was slick with summer sweat.

“What if the water’s cold?”

“You said you wanted to do this,” Kat scolded, letting her hair fall against her back.

“I know, I know.” Wrapped in an overlarge bath towel, Isabelle looked even smaller; her curly chestnut hair spiraled youthfully around her tiny ears, and there was a look in her eyes that Kat had always read as “*easily wounded*,” a label that didn’t peel off. Gazing at Isabelle’s frightened expression, Kat saw more than just a difference of three years. Isabelle was twelve, but when Kat looked back at her little sister she saw a child standing there. There was a frailty in the set of her rounded chin, and in the curve of her sweet, heart-shaped face. Kat didn’t have patience for fear.

Isabelle had been born right after their father had left for the war. In those three silent years Kat had grown old, and Isabelle had stayed a child. Even after his return, Isabelle had remained with that look in her eye, that fear in her reluctant step.

With a calming rhythm, the water slowly reclaimed the shoreline, sometimes depositing sand dollars and shells as it combed the beach for its belongings. The girls stepped quietly to the edge of the lake, where the waves slipped from the shallows to pull



the darkened sand back into the deeper water.

“It’s awful bright out here, Kat. What if a boy sees us?”

“Shh,” Kat hissed. “No boy is going to see us, and the moon won’t be full ‘til tomorrow anyway. Follow me.” With that said, Kat let her towel fall to her ankles. Feeling as naked as a seal, Kat bit her full bottom lip and stepped one naked foot into the water. No longer shielded from the summer night air, Kat felt her skin tingle with fear and adrenaline. Without giving herself time to second-guess, she let her other foot slip into the water as well. Turning her head, she beckoned to Isabelle.

“Come on, Is,” Kat said softly. Kat watched as Isabelle’s tiny chest rose with a gasp of air, watched as she dropped her towel and rushed into the water, arms braced protectively across her undersized chest.

Somehow, as both girls sank knee deep into the shadowed water, swimming in the moonlight meant something different. Kat dipped her fingers into the water which had risen past knee level. Her fingertips disappeared. The black water, Kat knew, meant “secret,” and their nakedness a passing into womanhood. Wading deeper, Kat lifted the buoy line and passed beneath the dripping rope, holding the opening for her sister to follow through. As they crossed into the dark mirrored night, the fish were forgotten. “Carp” was a four-letter word they didn’t think of.

“Kat...” Isabelle called, a sadness in the name. Kat looked to her little sister, at the shadow of her delicate profile, her body hidden in the black water. Following Isabelle’s gaze, Kat saw the shore where the beach fell away to the Willow Hill, and she saw the house that sat atop it, hidden in the night and in the wood that thickened the sky.

“The kids at school say the Willow Witch lives there.” Kat considered her sister

for a moment before speaking.

“You believe those idiots?” Kat said, not unkindly. “You know that’s the Hanson house.”

“Yeah,” Isabelle replied, looking down at the feet she couldn’t even see. She tucked her hands tighter into her armpits. “But Robbie dared me to go up there. And since I’m twelve now and I like Robbie, Kat, and you know what he’ll think if I don’t do it. I have to do it, Kat.”

“Robbie’s a stupid boy,” Kat grunted. “And only old Mrs. Hanson lives there. You know how her son died in the war. You heard Mom and Dad. She lives all alone up there, and just because she’s a lonely old woman doesn’t make her a witch, Is.”

Isabelle hugged her chin to her chest.

“You know what he’ll think, Kat. I don’t want him to think that. I don’t want to be afraid anymore.” Kat felt her body shiver in the cool, slick water. She felt weak in her nakedness, and suddenly old.

“Then don’t be afraid anymore!” Kat said, her arm jerking up in the water. Water droplets slapped Isabelle in the cheek and dribbled down her neck. Isabelle wiped the water away, leaving more behind with the back of her wet hand.

“How?” Isabelle said desperately. Tears wet her eyes.

“I’ll go with you,” Kat said reluctantly. “I’ll go with you tomorrow, okay? We’ll go see Mrs. Hanson and her dumb house, too.” Isabelle nodded, still looking stern, still looking afraid. Kat thought of her sister’s sad patience, and of the war, and of Robbie; and she wondered whether she knew her sister at all. Walking slowly back to the beach, Kat gathered her towel about her without drying her skin. The water on her

body and in her hair stank of fish and damp sand, but she didn't care.

"Come on," Kat whispered to Isabelle, knowing that her sister followed, though she did not look into the darkness behind her. They walked in silence to the house. Their path was pocked with night crawler hills, which they flattened with their bare feet and their ears were brimming with the lull of crickets, those solemn singers of lonely summer nights.

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When the next day began to fade, and the last hours of light were shadowed in sleep, Kat and Isabelle returned to the beach.

"If I go with you, just do one thing for me, okay?" Kat asked. Isabelle nodded fervently, her brown curls bouncing. "Just shut up and follow me." Before she could see her sister's chin drop, Kat began to walk.

Willow trees were not uncommon in this area. Where Kat and Isabelle lived, several of them had taken root in the soft soil surrounding their house. Monstrous branches were shed on their lawn, looking like eyelashes of a nameless beast. Though, Kat couldn't imagine where the eye would be. Alive, they swayed in the breeze, breathing life in the summer air as Kat passed them now. When one would dry out and die, falling to the ground, Kat's father would haul away the wood and carve the remaining stump into a bird. Their yard now had several, among them a Woodpecker, a Bluebird, a Canadian Goose, and a faded red Cardinal.

Although the hill before them was thick with Willow, other trees were entwined

in the wood as well, leaving gaps for Pine and Oak and Birch. Kat didn't know much about trees, but this wood had always been thick, always dark, and always forbidden. They weren't supposed to be here. This was the attractiveness of Robbie's dare. He had dared her little sister to enter a wood that was private property, on a hill that was hard to climb, up to a house with a supposed "witch" in it. Though, Kat was sure there were no witches here.

Once, in the town grocery store Kat had happened upon Mrs. Hanson, and had hidden away behind the stacks of bread. Hair silver with age and skin wrinkled, too, the old woman looked too tired to care about harming trespassing children. She opened the glass case to retrieve a carton of milk, her hands grabbing the handle with one tired movement, and closing the case with another. She had let the carton down painfully, heavily, into a swooped basket that was nearly empty. Kat wondered what she had been like before her son died.

"Isn't there a path we could follow?" Is asked, slapping away branches that Kat cleared through first.

"No, Is. This isn't a park, it's somebody's property. Mrs. Hanson doesn't have any need for a path through the woods. Besides, you don't want to be noticed do you? She might notice if we just come waltzing up her driveway."

"Oh," was all Is said.

As they approached the top of the hill, Kat got a glimpse of the house between the trees. The roof was slouching to the left, and its shingles were gray and missing in places, looking like many rows of unkempt teeth. Seeing the place for the first time, Kat began to understand where Mrs. Hanson had gotten a bad reputation. As they reached

the edge of the clearing the woods opened up into a well-kept yard, and Kat was able to see the full house. She could see why someone would associate black magic with it. The house was probably a handsome home a generation ago, but was now as exhausted in appearance as its owner. The paint, which used to be white, was now peeling, the trim an unknown color that had been worn away by wind and rain. Windows sagged like heavy eyes, closed for weeping. Swallowing, Kat tried to forget the woodland smells of clover and rotting wood, and imagined instead the home as it had looked to the woman who lived behind the quiet door.

“Kat,” Isabelle whispered. Kat looked at her sister now, who was clutching on to a sapling for support, as if standing on her own, she would topple over. Her eyes were wide and owl-like. “What do we do now?”

Kat wasn't listening. She had already turned back to the house, and was studying the landscape of the yard, which was sloping gently downward, down into the willows that led to the lake. A garden of flowers spilled down the hill, lining the walkway as well, which led to the broken down house. Lily of the Valley scented the air, and Kat saw how it had spread all the way to the house, where it stopped abruptly at the wood planking, too rooted to climb the wood and too weak to ascend the stone steps.

Kat had been told never to cut Lily of the Valley. Once it was cut and put in water, the water became poisonous. Inside the vase would be a sweet smelling poison, colorless and unsuspected.

A hand clutched Kat's shoulder, and she jerked her head backward to see the body that was attached, a gasp stuck in her throat. Isabelle was there, pawing at Kat's shoulders, attempting to pull her sister backward. Wide-eyed still, she pointed back to

the garden. Following her finger, Kat looked at the doorway to the house where now an old woman stood, gray hair loose about her shoulders, hands clutched together as if to pray. As the old woman stood unmoving, the two young girls turned and scrambled back into the veiled wood, and into hiding. As Kat ran behind the sneakered heels of Isabelle, her heart thundering in her breast, she could already see the old woman hobbling after them, garden spade in hand, to reprimand their trespassing.

Kat stumbled down the hill with guilt weighing down her heart. She knew that the old woman had not moved--she had seen it herself, had seen Mrs. Hanson stock still on her own doorstep. Only now that Kat had fled, after she had broken the edge of the woods and her feet had fallen onto the sandy beach of her own home, she saw in full color the memory of Mrs. Hanson. Around her throat lay a string necklace, ornamented with claws of assorted animals, each perfectly turned downward and to the left. Catching up to Isabelle, she wiped the image from her mind.

“Kat,” Is called, panting, “did you see her? She was just standing there. Did you see her standing there?” Kat nodded, making way for their house as the sky tinted a mandarin above them.

“Yeah, I saw her, Is.” Isabelle was quiet for a while.

“Do you think Robbie will like me now?” she asked sullenly, kicking a pebble out of her way as she said it. Isabelle’s pouted lips looked odd on her face, which was atop a body that, though small, was growing into a woman. Kat had taken her sister to the lake to tempt her into bravery, but it had had no positive result. Isabelle would remain pretty and breakable, like the dolls she was already too old to play with.

“I don’t know, Is,” Kat said impatiently, the rush of being caught atop the hill still

hurrying her feet. "Maybe."

The girls got home as the sky was turning over to evening. The colors, though, would last at least another hour before they sunk into night. Kat gave a sigh of relief as they reached the house, a little white one-story. Isabelle's cat, Apollo, was strewn across the steps, and he stretched lazily as they approached.

"Apollo," Isabelle cooed, stooping to lift him from the step. The cat was enormous in Isabelle's arms, and she staggered as she carried him to the door, purring all the way. "We're home, Mom!" Is called too loudly as she walked through the door and into the kitchen. As Kat followed, she saw her mother washing dishes that she had just removed from the dishwasher.

"Hi, girls. How was your walk?"

"Fine, Mom," Isabelle answered as she heaved Apollo into a living room chair.

"Isabelle, would you mind stripping the beds for wash? I'm taking in the laundry tomorrow."

"Sure," she answered, and disappeared into a bedroom. Kat began to follow her sister, wishing to escape into the quiet of her own room.

"Kat, come out here, will you?" Kat stopped in her tracks and turned around, swinging her arm around the kitchen doorframe to peek in.

"Yes?" Her mother turned her head from the dishes. Her unnaturally blonde hair was pinned in a bun at the back of her neck, though unruly tendrils curled around her ears, coming loose to tickle her cheeks. Taking a soapy hand out of the water, she brushed away the stray curls with her dry wrist. Her mother was smiling.

"You didn't tell me you had a date tonight, Kat."

“What?” Kat asked abruptly, as if she hadn’t heard the question. Her mother returned to the dishes.

“You didn’t tell me you had a date tonight.”

“That’s because I don’t, Mom.” Kat’s mother smiled, mischief in her green eyes and in her pursed lips, which were a permanent shade of peach lipstick.

“Well then,” her mother exclaimed, and Kat could still hear the smile in her voice, “I guess I don’t know why Lucas J. Walker would be walking up our driveway, then.” Kat rushed to the window in front of the sink and stood next to her mother. Sure enough, there was Luke, already rounding the corner of the house. Clutching the side of the sink, her hands slipped into the soapy water.

Frantically, Kat tried to dry her hands on the pockets of her cotton dress. When she heard the knock on the screen door, Kat froze, and lifted her eyes to the screen where the nervous boy stood.

“Isn’t he two years older than you, Kat?” her mother chided, not looking up from the sink. Kat didn’t answer. “You better open the door before he goes away.” She turned to look at her daughter, who stood frozen to the ugly orange tiles of the kitchen floor. Her mother smiled once more.

“You look like a mouse in Apollo’s paws.” She turned back to her dishes. “Fear doesn’t have to be a bad thing, honey. All smart women have it.”

Lucas knocked again.

Kat cursed one more time and answered the door.

“Hi there, Kat,” Lucas smiled nervously. Kat shoved her own nervousness back down her throat and waited for him to say something else. He didn’t.



“What do you want, Luke?”

“I needed to see you. Wanted to show you something.”

Lucas’ appearance was not a common occurrence in Kat’s household. In fact, she had never spoken to him before outside of school. Lucas J. Walker was more popular and more beautiful than Kat would ever be. As he smoothed his dark hair back into its waxed position, she tried not to think about his perfectly ironed, plaid button-up, or his un-dirtied jeans. She simply wiped the remaining water from her hands onto her already stained dress and closed the door behind them.

“Okay, Luke. Where are we going?” At her acceptance of his offer, Luke smiled widely, all of his white teeth showing. It reminded Kat of a cob of corn.

“I’ll show you,” he stated simply, and began to walk off into the gravel drive ahead. Trying to understand what was happening to her, Kat followed behind Luke, the dust clouds from his boots forming a layer of dust on Kat’s brown curls, and on her damp hands, where it would smudge when it dried.

Luke led her to a barn down the lakeshore, the family home that the Walkers had always inhabited. Without a word, Kat followed him past the house full of people, which she only glanced at through the small square windows. She followed him down his drive and into the large, barn door which was painted an untraditional green.

“In here,” he motioned, and Kat followed. He then dodged farm equipment and abandoned sheep pens, maneuvering around each in fluid motions that made him even more interesting. Kat absorbed the whole experience, taking it in with her senses as if she was nothing but an observer, and wasn’t truly living this at all. She noticed that Luke smelled like soap and leather, the scents mingling and touching the air behind him,

where she would follow, feeling even more as if she didn't know him, or this place, or even herself.

Finding a ladder at the far wall, Luke began to climb. He looked back once to see that Kat was following.

"The Hay Mow," he stated, and didn't say any more. He said it as if this explanation was enough. Kat followed anyway.

When her hands reached the top rung, she saw a large hand, Luke's, extended through the opening. She took it as she heaved herself through the hole, and she noticed that his hands were rough, and she remembered that he was the only son in his family, and that he worked too hard to get good grades.

"Come on over here, Kat, I want to show you something," he said again, and Kat wondered if he had thought this thing through past getting to her door, and if he had anything else to say. Sighing, she joined him as he sat at the edge of an opening that was used to load and unload the hay. When open, the doors allowed a view to the lake which was unhindered--the mandarin orange of sunset was darker now, and the water mirrored its beauty like a looking glass.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" he smiled. Kat tried not to look at him.

"Uh-huh," she answered. She swallowed down the knot in her throat, and started to accept her surroundings. This place, she pondered, wasn't that bad. "Is this what you wanted to show me, Luke?" she asked for sake of the conversation, already knowing the answer.

"Yep," he said, happy she had asked a question.

They sat there for awhile and watched the sun go down. Kat was almost glad to

see it change from orange to red, to black. This day had been a long one; but as the silence pressed and the night pressed harder, she saw the moon and felt it was too big, too bright, and for some reason this scared her.

“I saw you last night, Kat,” Luke whispered. His lips were suddenly too close to her ear, and his warm breath on her skin sent an involuntary shiver down her spine. Kat hunched her shoulders from the sound, but was too afraid to move away. “I saw you in the water,” he whispered again. “I see you a lot, Kat. I think about you a lot.” Kat couldn’t move; she was frozen like a rabbit in fear. Below her, she saw the beach, which was bathed in moonlight. It illuminated her pretty face, her scared eyes, and her silence.

“I think you’re really pretty, Kat.”

“*Shit*” she muttered. “*Shit, shit, shit.*”

“Will you be my girl, Kat?” Before she could answer, Luke had sunk his hands in her curls and pressed his lips to hers--his wide, dry lips which matched his wide teeth, his wide shoulders, and his wide, dark eyes. Even as Kat kissed him back she felt the wrongness in his size and in his maleness; she found it even in the smell of hay and leather, which was broken by the smell of his sweat. She tried to move away but his hand was clamped to the back of her head, his fingers twisted in the curls. A rush of fear and sweat rippled through Kat, and she opened her eyes to see Luke’s were closed, his skin bright in the wide moon.

“I gotta go, Luke.”

“Kat, wait!”

Kat was already down the ladder and maneuvering around the farm equipment. She smacked an elbow into a trough as she ran. Cursing, she broke through the door,

leaving it open behind her. She jogged down the gravel drive, past the quiet house and the road and continuing on until she had reached her own driveway. Her jog broke to a walk, and she breathed hard as soon as her speed softened. Though she knew this road, in the darkness she felt blind. Her feet stumbled on rocks she knew were there. Tucking her hands, which had gone suddenly cold, into her armpits, Kat kicked the dirt in frustration.

There was a shadow in between the willow trees beyond her house. Kat didn't notice it until she had reached the attached garage and was about to pull open the old screen door. This was when Kat remembered that the moon was full, and that there would be shadows tonight.

Something scraped against the dirt, and the noise was unfamiliar. It was neither the swish of willow branches across the ground, nor the sound of leaves in autumn. There was no summer wind blowing. As Kat squinted into the darkness she caught a glimpse of an animal, and saw that it was accelerating, its four paws scampering loudly on the gravel. Acting on the instincts of her father, Kat slipped one hand into the garage door, which she had opened silently and quickly. Her hand searched for the shotgun that her father always kept hanging on the wall for easy access. When she didn't find it, she remembered how he had cleaned it earlier that day. Desperate, her hand searched the wall, and just as she was pulling it back through the door her hand grazed metal, and she closed her fingers around the barrel. He had left it sitting on the floor. Kat clasped the wooden handle, maneuvering it out the door and onto her shoulder awkwardly. As the animal came within sight, she saw a rush of gray bristled fur.

Kat fired once.

Her hands felt clumsy against the rifle, and Kat almost let it slip in her sweaty hands. Swallowing, she made her way to the horseshoe pit between the willow trees, where the heaped animal had fallen.

Stopping within two feet, she could see that she had shot a raccoon. Its open mouth was dripping with foamed saliva, its teeth unseen beneath the pool. Kat remembered her father's stories of rabid raccoons that lived in nests beneath the houses, but she had chalked it up as just another of his stories.

Kat had only ever seen raccoons dead on the side of the road. This animal was whole-bodied and freshly dead--whole like road kill never was. Shaking slightly, she retrieved a string and a shovel from the garage, and remembered to return the rifle to the wall. When she returned to the dead raccoon, she paused, wondering whether she should pray for it. She decided against it. Instead, she lifted the shovel, and sunk it hard into the ground, severing a single claw from the foot. Patiently, Kat wrapped the string around the thicker end, and tied it about her neck.

Alone, she buried the raccoon beneath the willows.

# Nonfiction

## Hell Village

My uniform consisted of an overlarge maroon t-shirt, jean shorts, a bun so tight no one knew it was curly, and tennis shoes so old they'd seen the eighth grade. The drive to work was slow, and the thick Autumn air outside my window was a dusty morning gray, the color that promised rain but usually didn't deliver. At the stoplight I stole a look at the clock, which read 8:11. It took exactly twelve minutes to get from the mouth of my driveway to Base, and only three minutes from the stoplight--just enough time for exactly four and one-quarter tracks of heavy metal, which I never did switch out all summer.

Before the light turned green, I snuck a hand into the cup holder and fished out my laminated nametag, which I clipped crookedly onto my t-shirt. Below the company name was my own, printed in pale green letters. The clip pinched the maroon fabric just enough to permanently wrinkle it, and I attempted to flatten it sufficiently without taking my eyes off the road, all the while trying to summon the reason I cared at all. I didn't find it. Instead, I thought of the word "maroon."

Although I had learned to hate the color, the badge of all the Narveson housekeepers, it wasn't this that bothered me. It was the sweat stains which were not my own, the tiny holes which multiplied daily, and the ever-present, pungent smell of hotel garbage chutes, which stubbornly refused to leave the fabric. I pulled up the dirt road to Base, which was always too short, and glanced at the passenger's seat, where my sister

lay, sleeping, heaped against the car door exactly as she had been for the past ten minutes. I woke her up and we both stepped out of the car and into the dirty Friday air.

We punched in early, stocked our caddies with vinegar, the pink bathroom cleaner that made everybody cough, and green scratchies that weren't caked in oven grease. Somebody, one of the Linda's, grumbled that someone had taken all the new green scratchies again. I stuffed mine lower into the plastic pockets, and took the seat next to my sister, who had already sat down. Our "spot" was marked by memory, the only two chairs separated from everybody else, who took their seats at the mismatched tables in chairs that were missing feet. Thinking of feet, I raised mine to rest higher on the metal legs of my chair to avoid the daddy-long-leg spiders which crawled the giant storeroom floor of Base.

Some of their bodies were still smushed against the concrete from days before, their deaths varied--some by feet, others by vacuum cleaners, some deliberate and some not. I settled further into my chair, careful not to back into boxes of garbage bags on the shelf behind me, which were also crawling with spiders. Waiting for our boss Diane to appear from her office, I habitually cracked my knuckles as my sister Gwen squished a spider with the toe of her left tennis shoe.

It didn't take long for Diane to appear. After all, it was Friday, "pep-talk day." Diane would prepare us for the work ahead by describing exactly how horribly understaffed and overworked we were about to be. As I expected, she used her famous lines with just as much force as she always did: "Let's kick 'er in the ass today, girls. There'll be no draggin' ass, because you'll be makin' a hell for all the rest of us. Let's get 'er done and put some steam in them asses, okay?" Friday preps always consisted of



an excessive use of the word “ass.” Although, if asked, I prefer it to the Saturday lecture, which included the word “shit” as much as possible.

After Diane was done, the clipboards were passed out. As I had expected, Gwen and I were assigned to High Village, known to us housekeepers only as “Hell Village.” Hell Village was the birthplace of nearly every horror story a housekeeper had ever told on this resort. Once in a while there would be a bad one from somewhere else, but almost always they took place in “Hell.”

The hallways surrounded a pool, and so were heavy with the scent of chlorine, thickened by the moisture in the 90° air. The backs of air conditioners stuck out of the walls from every unit and kicked out hot air in constant, noisy waves; the heat waves coated my calves as I passed. They leaked, too. There was a constant dripping of thick, dirty water into dishes at the corner of every AC which looked unmistakably like dog bowls; we emptied them daily.

Twelve rooms, highlighted in an offensive yellow, were ours to clean for the day. We waited for the first family which, just like our luck, had several children under ten. When they had gone, the last toy stuffed away in a duffel, we hauled our things: rag bag, caddies, and lunch boxes, into our first filthy room, turned up the AC, and began to strip the unit. It was a boring, methodical procedure--first strip, then stock, then clean. Dusting, windows, then vacuuming came last, followed by a move to the next unit where we would repeat the process.

As I had hoped, we received help at four o'clock. Alyssa, another girl about our age, was assigned to our group. The unit, our last, was relatively small--all first-level 700 rooms in Hell were the same size. We felt significant relief as we entered the

semi-conditioned unit. It appeared to be mostly clean--the used sheets and damp towels were balled up in the bathtub as they should be and the dishes in the dishwasher were hot to the touch, but they were clean. We divvied up the work between us in silence, knowing we were nearing our escape from Hell. To keep the other two from having to do it, I volunteered myself to clean the bathroom.

The only time I ever saw the summer was when guests tracked it onto the kitchen floors and washed it off into the bathtubs, where I would scrub it out with an old yellow sponge that was now gray. As I scrubbed this bathroom, it reminded me of a unit on Third Floor, which I had cleaned last week. I used so much glass cleaner on the shower doors that the fumes, in such a small space, made my vision fuzzy and my head light. I took a small break to recover, but from then on I got random nosebleeds that had nothing to do with the weather.

As we packed up our things, we did so for the last time. We relieved ourselves from the newly vacuumed floor of the unit, and then from the dirt-crusting floor of Base, where Gwen and I kept walking until our feet could finally rest inside our car. Limbs heavy, I turned the key and pressed sleepily on the gas pedal. Our car slipped from gravel onto pavement. We simply traveled forward, past Base and past the split deer carcass, which had lain aside the road for three weeks. Driving into the night which wasn't dark, we didn't look back at what we knew we would see again.

Pelican Lake

It wasn't raining. As I swept somebody else's deck, I didn't think of whether or not they would appreciate that I had ridded their vacation haven of two pinecones and a gum wrapper. There weren't any cigarette butts this time. It's not that there hadn't been smokers here last week, it's just that they had stuffed the butts in a kitchen glass and left it out in the rain. Without smelling the wet ash, I tipped the glass over the garbage can and scooped out its innards, not watching as the fetid clump slid off the slippery, glass rim and fell heavily into the wastebasket. Instead, I watched the deck through the double glass doors.

Erin stood solidly on the edge of the balcony. As I watched her not sweeping the deck, I saw her better; she was popular and beautiful and didn't belong here. Her fluid blonde hair was too free against the wide frame of her shoulders, her arms, thick from volleyball practice, too strong to hold a broom. But she was here. The dark red color of our housekeeping uniforms connected us somehow; we were sisters only in the blood-red smocks, burdens bearing pockets, which we slipped over our shoulders like ill-fitting armor. Each girl dealt with this burden differently. Some wore flip-flops, Capri's, and jewelry. One had even fringed the edges of her t-shirt and tied them together in a stitching of knots, looking like some dead-beat cheerleader on her plan B, but I only thought things like that in my head. After all, there wasn't much time to talk in this place. "Ready?" Erin asked. I nodded, lifted my caddie full of various bottles and

concoctions of harmful fluids, and joined her past the double glass doors.

I asked Erin what she was going to do this weekend as I took the broom from her hand. She was going canoeing, a trip down the Pine River from one end to the other; the outing would start as soon as she got off work. Then she pointed out a spider web in the rafters, and I knocked it down with the stray bristles from my broom.

“How about you?” she asked back.

“Working,” I replied.

She scolded me for not doing anything remotely fun, and I stopped sweeping to look out at Pelican Lake. Sweat slipped from my tightly bound hair onto my cheeks. I wiped the sweat from my temples with my wrist and let it dry there. Though my skin was wet, it had never touched that lake; and though I was here every day this place was not mine at all. The pillars of the deck looked like bars, and I didn't feel the summer air and I couldn't see the point of Erin's canoe escape. I wanted to tell her that, though water was constantly moving it was not free. Though I was constantly moving, I was not free. I clutched the broom handle with both hands and brushed the last leaf under the gap between deck and bars. It disappeared, falling to the deck below to be swept up by another broom. The spider web was still stuck to the bristles, but I didn't do anything about it.

“I hate spiders,” I said.

The Sleeping Clams, the Weary Fisherman, and the Dreamer

Wind hisses through old walls as air bullets find solitary paths through wounds of cracked plaster. Veining outward, these cracks seek healing away from the dying heart, from a healer that has yet to return. Ravaged by winds and rain and years of paint-jobs left undone, the rest of the house has fared no better.

Several scars remain from a past life. Carved into a bedroom doorframe is a stick figure, the badge of a child who left before the march of years, though not before the march of war. This house, like any heart, holds secrets. The stone fireplace harbors hidden messages behind the large gray stone; crumpled notes are stashed away for further reading. The chandeliers tell secrets of tall sons, their story's remnants lying in the smiling gaps between the crystals, three teeth short of an antique masterpiece.

The only light comes from the windows now, which battle stubbornly against the storm. Frayed edges of untrimmed plastic flap against the house, protection against long ago winters. It is late summer now, and the apples have fallen from the trees with no one to catch them. The boats have been taken in, though the sand beneath them and faded tarp above them have long replaced the memory of water. The fish are uncaught, wild and free in the wind-whipped whitecaps. Though, their freedom tale is lost among the water, and among the howling wind that wakes the sleeping clams, the weary fisherman, and the dreamer.

The wind hisses through the window blinds, penetrating the warmth of my thin blanket. As I sit up from my dream, the call of the wind and the smell of cold lake water

drains from my memory, and I no longer remember the little fishing boats, the sleeping clams, or the broken chandeliers. I no longer remember my grandparents' house. With two fists, I rub the heritage from my blue eyes.

Plums Aren't Purple

Dad almost never climbed the stairs. As I heard his heavy footsteps fall on the pinewood I thought nothing of it. It was two days after Christmas day, and I was applying a soft pink lotion to my hands, the scent of "Dream Fields" pleasantly foreign to my Minnesotan winter skin. Even my fingertips were pale, and the skin was thick where calluses had formed from hours of laboring at my violin, the rough-spun metal of the strings toughening each finger with each and every note played. As I rubbed in the lotion the same rough way I washed my hands, I thought of how my dreams never smelled of anything, and how they were always scentless and full of heartache. The lotion, in contrast, was saturated with the scent of August roses and sugared fruit. I imagined the "Dream Fields" filled with strange, sugared-plum trees and Jasmine flowers, neither of which I had ever seen. The only flowers I had grown were sturdy Marigolds, the only plums I had planted turned out small and bitter and a shade of purple that was closer to black than violet. However, the accuracy of this title did not concern me, and instead of caring I soaked in the fantasy that goes along with letting go. My father reached the top stair.

He didn't come into my room; instead, he stood in the doorway and went no further.

My sister Gwen had entered my room before him so that she, too, could hear what Dad had to say. She stood next to my dresser and did not take a seat. As I looked at Dad's expression I began to worry. He looked tired, his face mask-like but still functioning, the same kind of look I often saw after he had been up all night repairing

power lines from a bucket truck that suspended into the night air, his two hands repairing power for someone who had to eat their dinner in the dark. Instead of sleeping when he got home, he usually sunk into the old, brown recliner in front of the television and watched with blood-shot eyes until his eyelids were too heavy to be propped open and fell together in sleep.

We didn't ask what was wrong; we didn't say anything.

"Your Grandpa Feller died this morning," Dad said.

There was a small silence after that, and after hearing no questions Dad began to describe that Grandpa Feller had several strokes at once and died in his Arizona home. He said a little more and after he knew that we had heard it he went back down the stairs.

Gwen and I said nothing more. I don't know what Gwen was doing but I think she went into her bedroom to cry, and I sat on my bed as I had been, only heavier, and I stayed there for quite a while. The first words Dad had given me rushed to my chest like adrenaline, both stunning and activating my heart, flooding me like so much water.

In a dream I had had a night before, water had risen from outside the house and began to seep into the cracks and doors and windows until it rushed like a giant wave independent of ocean, its wet shoulders breaking in the screen doors and spilling from the windows on the second story like two square eyes weeping. A lonely, lost whale was thrown by the water into the side of the house and broke open the wall. The water, then, was rising until it reached the second story and me. I was being pulled by the strangely warm water out onto the platform at the top of the stairs, and I held onto the broken pine railing and watched the large whale's eye, almost level with my own. At this moment I knew that the water would not flood the town I lived in, the woods beyond my house, or



even my little dirt driveway. Instead, it only meant to fill my home and leave it empty, until nothing was left of it but dampened pinewood ruins.

I still sat on my bed, the weight of me curving my small mattress downward in the middle. It was December, and the river outside the windows of my home was frozen over, and the fading scent of the lotion on my hands reminded me that the holidays were over. The New Year would begin with my grandfather's funeral.

Minnesotan Marigold

My first memories of marigolds belong in the box beneath the stilted sign of my grandparent's resort. The box was a simple rectangle of four logs which had been filled in with darker dirt than what lay outside of it. Here, the marigolds grew thick and in lines, their musky scent solid and golden. Though they smelled more like pollen than perfume, the odor meant to send away unwelcome garden pests, I preferred their scent to roses. Roses, with their full petals and foreign colors, weren't natural to this Minnesota soil, and I couldn't understand the nature of their transient beauty or their finicky bushes, which needed more grooming than I did.

Marigold boxes hung from my grandmother's deck railing and now hang from my mother's. Though one house was white and the other dark, each had its connection to the other. Often, the grandchildren would climb the faded steps up to the deck, where we would delight at the familiar sight of flowers and wood and the ice cream pail of soapy water that Grandma would set out for our dirty feet. Here, we would dip in one foot at a time and wash away the beach sand so that it would not worry its way into the deep crevices of her mottled orange carpet, blending into the earthy tones as naturally as another layer of the Grand Canyon. After scrubbing off what we could, we would stamp our feet on the towel provided and hurry into the warm house, leaving a trail of damp footprints from the door to the towel cabinet.

The photograph of the resort is outdated, and as I cradle it in my hand, the glare from my bedroom lights obscuring the sign, I see the ground before the house is bare and uncovered by leaves; I cannot decide whether it is spring or autumn. Either way,

everything is dead.

A plastic owl sits sadly on the edge of the wooden sign that reads *Sportsman's Paradise Resort*. Its eyes are vacant, and I find myself pitying the plastic creature. I find myself in those eyes, and pull mine downward, down to the barren flowerbed where once there were marigolds shamelessly spilled across the small expanse of ground. I inhale sharply, thinking of my grandmother not planting the flowers again next summer. An imagined cold burns my throat and I realize that it is winter and that Grandpa is dead.

I barely remember the last time I had seen him. It was Thanksgiving and my mother's side of the family was gathering together to celebrate turkey-day and Christmas in the same sitting. When the celebrations were over and everyone parted I had held my grandfather one last time as he softly patted my shoulders as he always did, gently releasing me for home. I don't remember watching him go, but I know I thought of how fragile he seemed, and knew that his gentleness was not from old age but from kindness, and I hoped now that I had inherited it, and that it would not be lost on me.

It is winter now, not autumn or spring or summer, and there are no flowers to be seen. Instead, it is late January and the house is filled with potted ferns. Most of the guests at my grandfather's funeral had given flowers, but those who were more sensible or sensitive brought us plants in pots, gifts that would not die away so quickly. The flowers, in contrast, would dry up in the water-hungry air. The petals, so much like the marigolds outside, would turn brown and soon be thrown out onto the lawn where new snow cover would sink their memory.

I learned at an early age that marigolds were one of the first and easiest blooms of summer, and would often last through autumn and sometimes through the beginnings of

winter. At last, winter would claim them; their petals would darken to brown and curl in dryness and death. They would join the others, which had been pinched from their stems when had they lost their color and scattered un-gathered just outside of the box.

Grandfather

I do not have a memory of any grandfather of this native Midwestern soil that is not a farmer or a fisherman. My grandfather was a farmer and a fisherman, and I cannot separate him from this vivid picture: he is in a little boat of his own making, its unpolished planks painted green as the eyes of my grandmother, and her name is stenciled on the side of the boat like a charm. The blue eyes I will inherit are fixed on the water before the boat as he pushes the oars, the motion pulling him deeper into the shallowness of Lake Mary.

It is not a photograph, only a picture I have in my mind, like the images of childhood friends I no longer remember the names of. They exist anyway, their favorite play games and fears equally memorized and filed away into some dark corner of my abandoned memory. I revisit them at will, each time trying to remember why I have forgotten what I have forgotten, and blessing the few parts that have remained. As I search, it is like wading through water without a boat, and I remember why people use oars and why my grandfather liked to fish.

In the darkness (of the morning, not the night), my grandfather would awake, dress for warmth and head outdoors to hunt for Night crawlers. Though I had never gone with him, I would hear exciting tales from my brother about the nighttime hunts which for him had held so much anticipation. Though I did not know what they looked like by moonlight, I knew that the worms had dug little mounds all around the yard, coming out only at night when the sun had left the dirt cool and cold and habitable. With a colored piece of plastic over the flashlight, my grandfather would trick the worms

into coming out of their little homes, thinking that the moon had risen. Instead, they never knew another moon, and he would grab them and collect them into containers where he sold them later for fish bait out of a refrigerator in the unused garage. In the morning the little boys would rush from the cabins with anticipation, fishing poles taller than themselves in hand, and bring out the change to buy a single container. My grandfather would retreat to the refrigerator, take out a single container, and place it lightly in their hands.

The maintenance and upkeep of the family resort was mostly Grandpa's job. While Grandma would haul all the washing to the Laundromat (the one with the machine that deposited plastic bubbles with rings in them), he used to mow the lawn ceremoniously. The grass remained always a pleasurable height and no matter how many times he mowed it the Night crawler mounds would remain. As I walked uneasily over them, I could feel them underneath my shoes, making my footprint distorted in the dirt. Grimacing, I would get an uneasy feeling, knowing that worms were beneath me and would come out at night.

When my grandparents sold their resort my grandfather was 81 years old. I couldn't imagine what they would do in their new home without such a large lawn to mow or six cabins full of people to talk to. Though they would escape to Arizona in the winter to live among the desert as Grandpa had always wanted, I didn't know how this life would compare to the freedom of his little green boat, alive and moving as fast as his arms could push the oars. I didn't wonder long, because he died in Arizona that winter before they ever entered their new house on the grassy hill at all.

For my grandfather's funeral, the other granddaughters and I made three picture

collages of my grandfather. With every picture I became more earnest to the cause, more dedicated to the task of remembering what he had looked like when he smiled. The white tag board disappeared as we discovered more and more; here, there was a picture of him in uniform, there on his wedding day, and on the third would be Grandpa holding my sister and me on his lap as we happily sang “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” without knowing the words at all. When the picture collages were done I couldn’t look at them.

The collages were hung on the wall at his wake, and as the surviving family saw them they held closer his memory and theirs. I received many consolations that night; among these I remember hearing an old woman tell me it must be hard to lose a grandfather. I thought to myself, “It is harder to lose a father,” and I looked at my mother and then looked away. I remembered that in some cultures at 13 I would have been a woman, but I only felt like a granddaughter and a child. It didn’t occur to me that the speaker was a granddaughter as well, and that her grandfathers had been gone a long time. Instead, I thought of the photographs of him that I had Scotch-taped onto the board with devotion and that I now could not look at.

My grandfather was buried in Alexandria, a picture of his wedding day etched in the stone of his double-plotted grave. I have only seen it in pictures.

### My Sister's Story

Preparing a piece of paper and a pen, I pressed the little black button that would dial the number to my sister's cell phone. It rang a few times before she answered, and instead of greeting me as usual she said hello and asked what I wanted. It was unusual to call her at this time at night, she said. Unaware of my usual passive way of keeping connections, I continued to explain that I needed her for an interview about our Grandpa's death. A week beforehand, I had read over the phone to her my previous three essays on the subject and so she was more prepared to answer me than she was last week.

I asked her if she remembered the day we had been told by our father that Grandpa Feller had died. She answered yes, she remembered some details very clearly. Though I had already influenced her memory with my story on the subject, she seemed to remember well some parts I had left out, or remembered differently. She informed me that on that day in December (which she had thought occurred three days after Christmas, not two) it was a Saturday and the family was planning to go on a trip to the nearest city, Brainerd, MN.

When Dad climbed the stairs to speak with us, she remembered us both being in my bedroom. My sister Gwen remembers his first words being "I have bad news." I heard regret in Gwen's voice over the phone. She told me that instead of being afraid she had felt frustrated, thinking that our trip was going to be cancelled for some trivial reason. His next words were what I had recorded in my story as his first. "Your



Grandpa Feller died this morning.”

Dad had gone on to explain the circumstances of Grandpa’s death, but she couldn’t remember what he had said, either. Both of us had been stunned, and eight years later would both be unable to remember what he had said.

Gwen told me that we went to Brainerd anyway. She did not remember what we did there, but as she spoke of it I remembered that day. Our shopping day had turned into a search for funeral clothes.

I remember that it was cold that week. Gwen selected a black and red sweater, and I picked out a green sweater vest. It was my intention not to choose black, so that I could wear it again without thinking of it forever as the thing I wore to Grandpa’s funeral. I could never wear it again, anyway. The vest hung in my closet for years; every time I took it out and put it on, I would end up looking at myself in the mirror, unzipping it, and putting it back.

The wake and the funeral fused together in my memory, and the only separating detail Gwen remembered was our Grandma taking her by the arm to look at my Grandpa’s open casket. Grandma forgot to do this to me, and I remained as far back in the room as possible from the box with my grandfather in it.

My grandmother recorded my grandfather’s funeral. Gwen, after reminding me of the tape, told me how Grandma had later moved to our town of Pine River, and how there she had us listen to the tape again. What Gwen had forgotten I filled in. When the tape began to play, my mother left the room and then the apartment complex, where I imagined she circled the building slowly, looking into the transplanted white gravel and trying not to hear the memory replaying in her head.

“Perhaps it’s a blessing to forget,” Gwen said.

Someone in the Red Hills Loves Me

The snow gathered slowly and stubbornly on the moving vehicle as it chugged along the highway toward Iron, Minnesota. The densely packed trees of the north woods eventually gave way to the Iron Range, a landscape of manmade hills constructed of rock refuse, leftovers from old mining exhibitions. The Red Hills were capped with the recent snow, twins to our little red car, its roof white-capped as toothpaste. Passing them filled me with a drowsy excitement; I felt as if I had entered territory as new as the November snowfall, though I had passed the same landmarks numerous times before.

My senior year of high school, I sat on a cold school bus, carted alongside ninety-some other students, assorted instruments, and scarlet, gold-tipped choir folders. My right of passage was my violin, which rested vertically between my legs. I had not trusted the promised security of the bus trailer, for fear of frozen horrors such as snapped strings, cracked heart-wood, broken horsehair, and warped bridges. I squeezed the case tighter between my legs, willing the heat of pressed knees to provide its contents with some comfort.

Carelessly, I had rested my right shoulder against the window, three hours later having to peel the cold leather coat from the glass; it protested with a discomforting sucking sound. Slipping my hand in my dented case handle, I stepped off the bus and into the air. It was heavy with the scent of earth and iron, but I saw only the barrenness of the land and thought, “Why did they have to bring us *here*?” I looked out now at frozen earth and sky and flake and thought softly, “I can’t believe I’m here.”

It was Nathan and my first car trip together, and we were traveling closer by the minute to meeting his family: mother, brother, father, and sister. I couldn't help but think of my mother's advice: you can tell a lot about your partner by how well you get along in the car. I wondered what it told about me, that I had brought along the Meyers-Briggs personality test as a last chance to pick apart his brain.

As he drove, I relayed the questions, documenting his answers into a hand-drawn grid.

"If the phone rings do you A. rush to get it or B. hope somebody else picks it up?" After having to scold that he can't pick "sometimes" and had to choose one or the other, I wrote down B.

By the time we reached Hibbing, Nathan had tested out as a hybrid INFJ and ENFJ, the Teacher and Counselor Idealist. After reading portions of the text to him and analyzing both his type and mine, I dropped the book in my bag and retired myself to sleep against the nylon folds of Nathan's football jacket.

I awoke as the tires hit the pavement of Highway 7, the last stretch before our destination. With one finger I slid my contacts back into place, letting sleepy tears wet the thick plastic lenses.

"Ready?" he asked, and I nodded, repeating in my mind the well rehearsed names of Brenda, Tim, Jake, and Erica. As we turned onto a dirt road, I eyed the sign which stuck out from the snow cover, resting above the rows of long, narrow-roofed homes.

"Iron Bowl Mobile," reported the sign, its speaker a metal bear, melded to the frame as decoration. We drove onward, arriving at the second lot further down the winding road. This hidden village was veiled by quiet line-formations of pine trees,

which, like everything else, were coated with a wet layer of snow. We arrived in the driveway moments later, and as Nathan killed the engine, the knot in my throat tightened with its last, low rumbling breath. Nathan urged me out of the car, exiting his door with formal excitement. Trying to betray my nerves, I followed, making myself useful by grabbing clothing-stuffed bags in both hands, a laptop case also slung across my back. Nathan, bearing a similar load, managed to scoop one out of my hands and hobble off with it. I chased him playfully up the four wooden porch steps as quickly as the weighted bags would allow.

I opened the screen door to a life that would welcome me, setting my shoes at the carpet's edge. Brenda offered her arms out first, meeting me--duffel bags and all--in one well meant embrace. Nathan's father was quieter about it, but seemed to have accepted that his family was full of huggers. Erica welcomed me, too, with an infectious laugh that revealed her tongue ring; I decided that I liked her immediately.

Jake was last. As he leaned downward, I hugged the most enormous 14-year-old I had ever seen, pleasantly puzzled by the mixture of height and mop of perfect, blonde ringlets that I imaged him proudly tucking under a hockey helmet several times a week.

It seemed, in retrospect, a jumbled mess of introductions, followed by a night on the living-room floor and a morning as early as the coffee pot would allow (which was at approximately 6am every morning). I arose reluctantly, and was awarded with a cheerful snowman coffee mug, which was filled and refilled by Brenda's insistent hand. While I retreated into the bedroom to change, I heard Brenda insisting to a half-asleep Nathan (who still lay on the living room floor), that it was cruel to forget Jade's morning coffee. It seemed as if she saw the steaming little cup of caffeine as my

comfort-addiction, and perhaps it was.

By the time I returned to the living room Tim had headed out to work, and the coffee was being drained into travel-mugs in preparation for our journey to Duluth. After a bagel or two, we gathered ourselves into the truck and headed off onto the powdered sugar-road, passing the white-dusted pine trees, the cinnamon hills, and a sugar-dipped sign which I knew read “Granite Lane.”

Before I could give another incorrect answer to Nathan’s pop quiz on 80’s rock bands, we had reached the city of Duluth. After deciding on where to park, we abandoned the truck and entered the labyrinth of hallways and alabaster stairs that was St. Mary’s. The room we were to reach was at the far end of the far building, and we reached it only after two separate elevators and a giant spiral staircase. As I looked around, I decided that, though the waiting room was overlarge, it was comfortable; even the tinny music coming from an old radio filled the background with a calm familiarity. We stayed awake just long enough to hear Brenda’s name and watch her disappear behind the large wooden double doors.

I dreamt of rain, so bright that its damp glow melted my hair to gold, which ran down my forehead, ears, neck, and collarbone. Wet tendrils slipped down my back, my body shivering despite the color.

I stood on a swollen dock erected from the flattened river, and contemplated submergence. The rain darkened the trees, the sky, and my clothing. I had no intentions of jumping in. My last encounter with the river had been a decade past, before its body was thick with weeds, its river-bottom encrusted with clam shells, and its waters the unappealing color of moss.

In that older day I had thrown my treasure in the water: a fist-full of white blossoms, and watched them be carried away. I imagined that I was a geisha pleasuring in the rich hues of Kyoto; my soaked tennis shoes telling a younger story. A story of a child who fashioned a boat out of twigs and grass, a leaf as the sail. With a wish on its ill-made deck, the little boat weathered the rain, bobbing along, tugged forward by the lazy current. The wish carried away. The rain fell harder.

I stirred awake. The waking world was a flood of florescent light, the view becoming gently realistic as I rubbed my eyes. Nathan's head was resting against mine, and was motionless, his eyes still closed in sleep. I wanted to stretch my limbs, but they were sunken into the plastic seat, curved against the adjacent chair. I was comfortably stuck.

Across the waiting room was a panoramic view of Lake Superior. It was familiar to my sleepy eyes, and fragments of dream lodged themselves within my mind. I imagined the little wishing boat, wandering through the freezing waters below St. Mary's Hospital. "How far will it get?" I wondered.

I caught the eye of the receptionist. She beckoned for us. "Your mother is ready for you to take her home now," the woman said. In response I shrugged her son awake, and we uncurled from the plastic chairs, gathered our things, and shook out pockets for the truck keys. As we pushed open the tall double doors the rush of air lifted my curtain of hair, but did not move me; a hand was at my back, gently propelling me forward. As the doors clicked shut behind us, my wish was carried away.

The hospital visit soon shifted, fading away into the Sunday morning sunlight. Nathan and I team-lifted duffel bags into the trunk of his car and said our goodbyes to his

family. After donning hats and gloves we packed ourselves last into the little red Oldsmobile, and pulled away towards another home. I watched out the back window until I could no longer see the house through the trees. Twisting back around, I sighed as Nathan switched on the radio to another 80's rock station. I thought of my home--of the accumulated silence in the high wooden ceilings, the hushed darkness that filled the nighttime, and the moon shadows the woods cast upon the snow-crueted lawn; and I thought of how no one was ever awake to see them. It had been my sanctuary, but it was only a safe haven for voices soft enough to appreciate such a noiseless place.

“What do you think of my family?” Nathan asked me over the din of radio and engine. I slipped both hands around his right arm, burying my face into the folds of his coat.

“They're wonderful,” I replied, and meant it. As my eyes filled with the quiet blackness of football jacket and sleep, I said my silent goodbye to the Iron Range. Though I could no longer see them disappearing behind us, I knew as we passed the dusty Red Hills. My imagination giving way once more to dream, I imagined myself back in that cold school bus, advancing into late November. I stole a last look out the frosted-over glass, seeing the Red Hills despite the distorted light. I could not see them clearly, but I did not need to. I knew the gentle red hue of their bodies, their sharp-hewed edges softened by the late November snow.

## Epilogue

Through many writing and literature classes, I have learned to look more critically at the work I have produced. Though in high-school I was used to seeing red pen supporting and destroying the structure of my paragraphs, it wasn't until I began my college career as a Creative and Professional Writing student that I truly started to look critically at my own writing and its influences.

Literary criticism is a difficult thing to learn because first one has to accept it; however, once I was past the obstacle of my own pride, the possibilities of growth were endless. Through reader's responses, oral criticism, conferences, and workshops, I learned what worked and what didn't when writing for an audience. From reader's responses, I learned what people liked in my writing (such as my use of connective images, poetic prose, and the use of sound). When receiving oral criticism, I learned to look out for repetition and the quietness of my plot lines. From the writer's conference I learned grammatical rules and the art of story structure; likewise, in writing workshops I became aware of looking for specific errors in a piece which distract from the whole. In retrospect, each writing class had its own way of teaching literary criticism, and I learned something different from each new encounter. Now, having learned these lessons, putting them into practice was the next and final step.

When I took a first look back on my thesis, I began to absorb the writing in the same way I imagine that water collects upon itself, remembering the parts that once belonged and have now returned. The first step of critiquing is to understand where the writing is coming from, and to do this I knew I had to understand my influences. The



influences on my writing have carried my work not unlike a body of water carries itself. With each new river rock in its path, a river (so much like the essence of my work) changes and adapts to the new shape, and becomes a newer and freer version of itself.

My thesis took a three year journey to complete its development, and now it is closed before me. For the last three years it was an open portfolio, exposed to the influences of my environment. Now, as I reopen it I realize how those influences have formed the book that it is today.

As an early avid reader, my mind, vocabulary, and communication skills progressed faster than I could have developed them otherwise. What I read built the framework for my thoughts. Each new chapter evoked emotions which created a ripple effect across my actions for the whole day. When I read, I was in my own world. Each year I grew older and my tastes changed, but a theme developed in my choices of literature that has not strayed from the contents of my first book bag. I have always enjoyed fiction. This is not to say that I would and will only read about the surreal. What it means is that I had an affinity for creative, imaginative literature as well as for writing that was elegant, older in style, and that provided grammatically correct dialogue. These likes are still true for me today. What I choose to read now, though no longer fantasy fiction, is romantic and gothic literature that affects my thoughts as well as my writing in ways that it did similarly then.

The love for romantic, gothic, and modern fantasy fiction literature will not leave me. I have, through my absorption of these books, learned to write with the complexity of Charles Dickens, the vivid romanticism of Ann Radcliffe, and the emotional-responsive writing of modern fantasy fiction novels. I do not adopt wholly

the style of writing of any specific writer. Instead, I adopt bits and pieces of the styles of each writer I read (this includes other students' work), and with this adoption my own writing style becomes more complex and fluid. Though it has influences of romanticism in it, it is not defined by that description alone.

I do not define myself as a modern writer and there is no group with sticky nametags that claims my name among theirs, either. Though I am a fan of modern novels as well as gothic ones, I am a writer of neither. I'm just a fan; my writing is label-less, though the influences of my writing are many. My affinity for old British novels is a lasting one, and my adoption of elegant, descriptive writing is a result of this. However, each new change in style is made as a conscious effort to evolve into a new aesthetic. With each change, I try to mold the writing into something even more beautiful. My subconscious aesthetic is always at work, creative vivid and compelling images which connect throughout the story much like the brushstrokes in a painting. Each overlaps the other, sometimes repeating what was seen before, and sometimes creating something new. In any case, the wording is meant to stand alone as a piece of beauty and self-contemplation. It is meant to communicate, relate, and connect to the world outside of it.

The influences of my thesis are tied to each age, each individual, and each new encounter that I have lived to see. My writing is meant to connect others with my own experiences and to communicate to them my thoughts in hopes of influencing others with the same beauty, elegance, and complexity that so enamored me to literature in the first place. The works in my thesis reflect who I am as a person as well as a writer, and as a whole they act as a confession of my influences throughout life as a writer and as a

human being. The stories are riddled with references to and influences of nature. They are self-explorative. So much like the water which reappears in my stories again and again, they are fluid, reflective and quiet; they are sanctuaries for the imagination.

