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Honors Program

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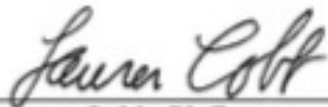
Rings in the Trees

Creative and Professional Writing

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Bemidji State University
Honors Program
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Rings in the Trees
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Artist's Statement

Whether one likes history or not, history affects everyone. Everything that has happened in the past has led us to where we are today, as individuals, a society, and the world. We all learn in school about the concept of history, and we are taught about major historical events such as wars, prominent people, and cultures, at least to some degree. I define major historical events as public events that can be researched in books, online, and in documentary films and television footage. It is my belief that literature can recreate history in ways that are exciting and fresh. In "Rings in the Trees," I write about historical events, but depict them in a different form than say a textbook or a lecture would. I use poetry, creative nonfiction, and fiction to explore historical events. Some of my pieces just barely touch on a historical event or era while other pieces focus completely on a historical event.

"Rings in the Trees" also includes personal histories that depict events in a person's life that are not public knowledge and cannot easily be researched. These personal histories include two personal narratives and one creative nonfiction story about my father, written from my memories of the stories he told me as I grew up. Personal histories are as important as public historical events because public history is created by particular people living their lives. Major historical events such as World War II or the Enlightenment were made up of individual lives. The major events of the future will occur only because of the individual lives of people who live in a current moment and whose choices culminate into something beyond themselves. The people of the past did not know what the consequences of their individual histories would be, just as today we do not know how our lives will affect others in the future, in good or bad ways. Since our stories affect others, even if in a small way, it is important to share our stories with the

world. No one lives the exact same life as someone else. Even if they live through some of the same experiences, they have their own opinions and ideas about them.

By reading individual stories, we gain empathy for other people. It is hard to relate to thousands of people affected by an earthquake, for example. But when it is one person or a few people talking about their experiences in an earthquake, it scales it down and strong emotions can be created by this closer look at an event. We also can better understand situations and outcomes by looking at each person's side of the story. We gain insight and understand why things might have unfolded a certain way. For example, we learn why the armed civilian shot the man who was robbing the store at gunpoint and why the man was robbing the store in the first place. This is important because otherwise we just have a list of facts without any reasoning behind them: a man with a gun robbed the store; another man shot him. We gain no understanding that way.

The poems and short stories I have selected for this project were chosen to create a well-rounded project, both historically and emotionally. Some pieces are lighthearted; for example, "Hit by Love" is an essay about a dodgeball game. Others are serious, addressing topics such as 9/11. Some pieces are personal; "A Kid's Brother" is an essay about my childhood dog. Some pieces are historical, such as a poem about when the Twins won the World Series. The poems and stories I chose to include are my most polished pieces, having undergone revisions and been reviewed by others. I feel that they are my most successful poems, essays, and short stories.

I did not arrange my project by genre or by personal versus historical events. I have eight poems, three essays, and one short story, arranged in a pattern of two poems followed by a prose piece throughout the project. I wanted to mix up personal and historical pieces to suggest that one is not more important or more interesting than the other. I also want to show how history is

not linear but flows and overlaps. Rings in trees are circular and encompass other rings, which in turn encompass other rings. Likewise, history is made up of events that encompass other events and so on. However, every tree ring is still unique just as every essay, story, and poem is unique.

My goal is to interest my readers in history and in their own stories as well. Readers do not need to love history to read my work but my ideal audience would be open to reading about historical events and learning about the personal lives of people they likely do not know.

I have always loved history and that has influenced my writing and the subjects I research. I am fascinated by the Tudor era in England. The promiscuous scandals of King Henry VIII and the break England made with the Catholic Church intrigue me. I have been influenced by 9/11 because it was one of the most catastrophic events in my lifetime and have written about 9/11 a lot and have researched it to increase my own knowledge. I am also interested in my own family tree, which is mostly a mystery to me. As I discover new branches and roots, I tend to write about my discoveries.

My writing process varies depending on what I'm writing. When writing poetry, I am usually emotionally charged about something. I cannot just sit down and write a poem. I write an emotional first draft, then edit it for clearer content, flow, and form. With my fiction, I start with an idea. I build that idea in my head until I have some sense of where I want the piece to go, but I don't know everything that will be in the piece yet. Then I flesh out a first draft which will connect the dots I have created in my head on the paper. With creative nonfiction, I usually write about events in my or another person's past. I must know these events well enough to do them justice.

Regardless of genre, the first draft is about content. My next drafts add details and depth, alter word choices, and discard unneeded material. In these middle drafts, I play with form and

point of view. My last drafts are focused on editing punctuation, grammar, and spelling. I save these alterations for last because, as the story changes, the punctuation changes and whole scenes might change or be completely removed.

The most difficult thing for me, as a writer, is finishing a piece. Many times I start a story, but abandon it because I get busy or chase a different idea instead. Other times, I get frustrated with messy drafts and no longer know what the piece is meant to be. I need to learn not to give up so easily in these seemingly challenging situations because some pieces I give up on could have the potential to become great if I put in the time and effort.

One of the easiest things for me, as a writer, is rendering scenes on the page. I always try to paint a picture in my reader's head, but I don't overload them with descriptive information. I also have a talent for subtle humor and "one-liners." I love to laugh and enjoy making my readers laugh; however, comedy is usually not my genre of choice and so my pieces are not just reliant on my humor. I am also good at hitting emotional nerves in my readers without saying things outright. For example, I render sadness through scenes, dialog, and subtle clues to hone in on raw emotions without saying, "The girl was sad."

I tend to write about what I know. Whether that means I do a lot of research on a topic before writing or that I dive deep into my personal experiences, I always want to be confident when writing, and I am most confident when I am knowledgeable about the subject. It is a rarity for me to make up worlds, write fantasy, or write science fiction because my strengths are in developing real world events and relationships. Even when I write fiction, I often base scenes on real life experiences. A good example of this is in my short story "Pieces." The proposal scene in that story is based on the way my stepfather proposed to my mother.

Many authors have influenced my writing and “Rings in the Trees.” Arthur Golden’s historical novel Memoirs of a Geisha is a great example of what I want my project to do. The novel explores the world of Japanese geisha during World War II. Reading this novel, which follows the life of one geisha, I emotionally connected to the hardships of geisha life and understood a way of life that I had never even heard of before reading. Once I was emotionally connected, my interest was sparked, and I went on to do my own research on geisha. This novel and my research inspired my poem “Chosen.”

Similarly, A.E. Housman, one of my favorite poets, has influenced my work. His book A Shropshire Lad and Other Poems has been particularly influential because many of his poems depict historical events as well as his personal histories. Some of his poems are about ancient Greek battles and Biblical events while others are about his struggles as a gay atheist in England in the mid-1800s and early 1900s. His work helped me realize that historical events and personal histories are both important because his poems were not separated into historical and personal; they were mixed up together.

The Triggering Town: Lectures and Essays on Poetry and Writing by Richard Hugo helped me with technical aspects of writing. It helped me to look more objectively at my poetry and prose and to break out of my comfort zone and become more daring. After reading this book, I tried my hand at writing in second and third person narrative points of view instead of sticking to my go-to first person point of view. For example, my essay “The Hunting Chronicles” is written in third person, even though I am a character in the essay.

I hope to continue writing literature to teach and inspire others. I would like to write historical fiction and creative nonfiction. I want my writing to bring people closer together by

creating bonds in understanding and emotions. This is important so that there is less ignorance in the world and more peace.

Fountain

I've never seen a fountain here,
 there may be one. The town's namesake
 never my concern. White building
 with paint chipping, a sign reads
 "Willie's Grocery and Lockers."
 Used to bike fourteen miles
 for homemade beef jerky
 and Spring Grove Soda Pop.

Willie, age weighing him down so
 he couldn't stand straight, a constant fixture
 behind the cash register.
 His beat up, rusty pickup perpetual out front.
 "How're you folks doin' today?"
 I'd been there many times.
 We always had to be introduced.
 Never have I met a man so happy
 to meet me again for the first time.

Now Willie is gone, the pickup nowhere.
 Store boarded up and empty,
 "FOR SALE" sign out front.
 A piece of history lost.

Sometimes I wish I was like Willie.

I'm not old enough, not wise enough
 to forget yet.

Eva

On the outside she looked so delicate, as if she'd break if you'd touch her. On the inside, a fiery rough old woman. Old-fashioned immigrant, Croatian, a distant cousin but more like a grandmother to me, she'd snatch the hat off my head as soon as I walked in the door. Girls shouldn't wear hats inside.

A scared little girl hiding behind her mother's legs when the Gestapo showed up for another visit. She did not like those men. The family fled. She had to stop going to school. Never went back; second grade education.

She's buried in a cemetery that only those who know it's there can find, next to her husband. No one told me until three months later. Not sure why.

Her broken English, her accent echo in my mind: all that remain now. Stories.

A Kid's Brother

After my parents got divorced, my dad asked me and my brother, Jacob, if he should get a dog or a girlfriend. Jacob and I, about seven and eight years old respectively, didn't hesitate in answering, "Dog!" That settled that.

A woman who lived an hour away from us was selling purebred black labs only a few months old, so we hopped in the car and took off to see them. When we got there, however, all the puppies had already been sold except one. He was a big puppy, the biggest of them all.

The woman told us she was leaving on vacation the next day and didn't want to pay kennel fees for the pup. She said we could have him for \$50 if we took him home right then and there. All the other puppies had been sold for over \$300. It was a no brainer. We took him.

Now we had to come up with a name. We didn't like the name the woman had given him. To keep track of which puppies were which, the woman had put a little splotch of paint on each puppy's hind end. Our pup had gotten green paint and so, due to his green butt, she had named him Hulk.

He didn't look like a Hulk to us. At the time, Jacob and I were obsessed with the movie Brother Bear. Coincidentally, the street we had gotten him on was called Bear Paw Path. He also had enormous paws. My dad said he would undoubtedly grow into his feet and be a huge dog, as big as a bear. That's how we decided; his name was Bear.

My dad was right; Bear did grow into his feet. He eventually became a 100 pound puppy. He wasn't fat though; the vet was always amazed at his health. My dad loved that he was a strong, healthy dog. He used him as a hunting dog.

My dad is a crack shot, rarely misses. However, I remember one time he went out pheasant hunting, and Bear was having a blast, getting birds up left and right. My dad was off his

game and kept missing. Then, all of a sudden, Bear had a bird trapped under his foot. It was wiggling like crazy, but Bear just held it there until my dad got up to him. We always tease him that Bear got tired of him missing and took matters into his own hands that day.

Bear was a smart dog. He figured out how to open our camper's screen door by pushing on it with his nose. He understood the words "Walk" and "Swim" so well that we would have to spell the words if we were considering taking him on one. If he heard the actual word, he would freak out, jumping up and down and whining until we took him. But even though he was smart, Bear didn't always think with his head. Usually, his stomach thought for him.

We always joked that Bear would eat himself to death if we let him. He slept in my dad's bedroom at night and woke him up at four o'clock every morning to eat. My dad had to give in because it's hard to ignore a crying 100 pound dog jumping on your bed. My grandparents had a dog, too, but their dog didn't think with his stomach and usually left food in his dog dish. Whenever Bear was over, he would steal their dog's food.

Our neighbors also had a dog, a female yellow lab. We said that she was Bear's girlfriend, although Bear wasn't always the best boyfriend. Besides stealing her food, he would come home with her toys. Our neighbor, Dawn, was really cool about it. She loved Bear just as much as we did.

Bear wasn't picky about food. He didn't just steal dog food; people food was fair game if he could get his paws on it. Jacob was eating a burger once and left the room to go to the bathroom. When he came back, his burger was gone.

"Where's my food?" he asked my dad.

My dad, not really thinking about it, said, "You ate it."

"No," Jacob said.

Bear was lying on the floor, licking his lips.

His love for people food was probably our fault. The day we got him, we stopped on our way home and got McDonald's and gave Bear a lot of the french fries. Ever since then, he has had a french fry addiction. If he was in the car and we drove by a McDonald's, he would just about lose it. He would start whimpering and jump around in the bed of the pick-up. He knew those golden arches meant french fries. You could almost hear him say "french fries" when he was whining. If we drove on without stopping, he would stand at the rear windshield and watch the arches until they disappeared.

Even though my dad had taken our advice as kids and gotten a dog, he eventually did get a girlfriend who eventually became his wife. She and her son were new, welcome additions to the family, and they loved Bear just as much as we did.

In my family, you accumulate nicknames over the years. Bear was no exception. He had many. My dad called him "Fred" because, according to my dad, "He's just a Fred." My dad sometimes called him "Clown" because of his goofy antics. My stepbrother called him "Bamboozle" which was eventually shortened to "Boozy." We also called him "Bearcat" because sometimes he would rub up against you or the couch like a cat. I always called him "Honey Bear."

"Puller Bear," playing on the words Polar Bear, was another name Bear earned. This nickname came from the fact that, when we took him on walks, he would about yank your arm off. We had to put a harness on him because if we just put the leash on his collar, there would be no holding onto him; he would just go.

Even though Bear usually slept in my dad's bedroom, occasionally he would sleep with me, hogging my small twin bed. I would have to wrap my legs around him or just use him as a

pillow. He never cared. He loved to cuddle, and he thought of himself as a lapdog. If you were on the couch and didn't stop him, he would jump up and sit right on you.

One night, Bear had slept with my dad as usual, but I was awoken in the middle of the night by loud whining. I opened my door (I always slept with it closed), and Bear was standing in the hallway. As soon as I opened it, he ran to the stairs (my room was in the basement while everyone else slept upstairs) and then looked back at me. I said, "What, Bear?" He bolted up the stairs, and I followed him. I found him at the front door. I opened it, and he barely made it to the grass. Apparently, he hadn't been successful in waking my dad up to let him outside to pee. I was amazed that he was smart enough to come downstairs and wake me up.

As the years went on, things changed in our household. My dad divorced my stepmom when I was about eighteen and Bear was about ten. My now ex-stepmom got the house, and my dad, Jacob, Bear, and I moved into a duplex that my grandpa owned until my dad could get a new house. When we moved in, we noticed something strange: Bear was running into everything.

"He can't see, can he?" I asked my dad.

We aren't sure exactly when he went blind, but we had lived in our old house for so long he had it memorized and didn't run into anything. Once we moved, he was in a new world and couldn't figure it out. We had to be his guides from then on. My dad always joked that we were his "seeing eye people." When my dad would get home from work, Bear would still jump around in his kennel due to excitement. My dad would always say, "Have you ever seen a dog so happy not to see you?"

Eventually we moved into a new house, and Bear was just as disoriented there as at the duplex. We led him around for over two years. Then one day my dad came up to me at work (I

worked summers at the factory where he works) and said, "We need to have a family meeting about Bear." Over the past couple months, Bear's health had gotten worse. He wasn't just blind; he had hip dysplasia and could barely walk, let alone stand up.

My dad wasn't talking about that, though, when he said Bear had gotten worse. In a matter of days, Bear had stopped eating, and he would throw up what little he would try to eat. My dad had always said growing up, "If Bear ever loses his appetite, we're in trouble."

We knew it was time. We made an appointment with the vet for noon the next day. The next morning we got out all of Bear's old toys. He couldn't see them, but he recognized them by their smell. His tail wagged for the first time in days. My dad and I also made a special trip to McDonald's and got him french fries. We were surprised when he actually ate them all.

As it neared noon, my heart started to pound. My dad felt guilty because he wasn't sure if he was doing the right thing. After all, Bear was tough and, even though we knew he was in pain, he never whined or cried about it. I reassured my dad and he reassured me that we were doing the right thing. At noon, we loaded Bear into the car; I sat in the back and rested Bear's head in my lap. Only my dad and I took him to the vet; Jacob didn't want to go, and we understood.

The vet was really nice and let us have time with Bear before it happened. My dad and I hugged him and kissed him and cried and kept telling him how much we loved him. My dad kept saying, "Forgive me, buddy." We held on to him and each other as the vet put him down. It was fast, and they said he didn't suffer.

Bear was twelve years, seven months, and fifteen days old. For a lab, that's pretty good. We buried him in his favorite hunting spot. Jacob met up with us after the vet to help bury him. We laid Bear in his favorite blanket, and we buried all his favorite things with him: his squeakers, his fetcher, some dog treats and dog food. He loved chewing on empty Gatorade

bottles so we put a couple of those with him, he also loved chewing on wood so we found a nice stick to put in too, and lastly we laid his leash and harness in with him. To mark his grave, we wrote his name in rocks over the site. It started sprinkling right after we placed the stones and my dad said, "How fitting, tears from Heaven."

Bear died on Saturday, July 30, 2016. We didn't bury his collar with him. We kept that to remember him by, and it's sitting on a shelf in our living room. Not that we could possibly forget our brother, Bear.

Tossed

He picks you out
of the crowd, wraps
you in warmth. Maybe

you're the one.
You blush,
believing in the love

that hides the lies.
He's a modern day
Henry VIII and doesn't

want only you.
An Anne or a
Catherine, you exist

only for a time
in his mind, there
yesterday, gone today.

Root River

We walked the dog
Down the wooded path,
Always stopped
At the second bridge.

Underneath, the water deep,
Shallow farther downstream.
My brother jumped off once,
Twenty foot freefall.

In the shallows
We played fetch.
Swam.
Caught crayfish.

Now the dog is too old.
We don't swim anymore.
The crayfish have moved elsewhere.

Rivers always change.

The Hunting Chronicles

Rodney Borchert was sitting in his portable deer stand, suspended between three trees. His hunting party had three tags left to fill. As he sat in the cold, he scanned the terrain. His stand was on a small patch of high ground in the middle of a swamp. The swamp had mostly short, spindly trees which he could easily see over from his position. His stand was between three large trees, the tallest ones around.

It was quiet. Then he heard a sound, one he was familiar with. He turned his head and instead of one deer, three were walking into the high ground. He raised his rifle and dropped all three using only four shots. The extra bullet was just a precaution as one deer didn't fall right away.

Rodney had cell service in his stand so he called his father, Alvin, to tell him the news.

"I have three deer down. Get Scott and Don and come help me."

"What?" Alvin said in his husky voice.

"I have three deer down. Get the guys; we're done."

"What?"

This went on for awhile until Rodney finally convinced his father that he really did have three deer and thus their tags were full. Alvin got out of his stand and drove his four-wheeler to Scott's stand, as it was closest to him.

Alvin yelled, "Rod's got three deer down! We're done!"

Scott replied, "What?"

"Rodney's got three deer down! We're done!"

"What?"

This also went on for a while before Alvin could convince Scott that Rodney did in fact have three deer down.

A different year deer hunting, Rodney was in a different stand and was distracted as a flock of ten chickadees flew into his tree. He was watching the little birds as they fearlessly hopped from branch to branch, not caring that he was within arm's reach. Then that familiar noise came again, a stick snapping.

Instantly, his senses were on high, and he scanned the woods until he located the source of the sound. When he found the deer, he raised his rifle and looked through the scope. However, instead of seeing the brown of a deer and the surrounding sticks of the woods, all he could see was gray. At first he thought the scope was fogged up so he tilted his head back and looked at the lens. Nope, not fogged up, but there on the end of the barrel of his rifle sat a small gray chickadee. Rodney shook the gun, and the bird got the hint and took flight. Rodney then retrained the gun on the target and bagged the deer.

In 2015, Rodney saw a one horned buck while in his stand. He did not have a doe tag that year and was unsure if the buck would be legal to shoot. In Minnesota, a buck must have at least one antler that is at least three inches long. Rodney, however, could not remember if it had to be one antler or two. So he decided to play it safe and not shoot the buck.

At camp that night, he told his hunting party about the one horned buck. His daughter, Jordan, laughed and said, "You saw a unicorn?" The party got a kick out of that.

Rodney had a regulations handbook in the camper and so was able to look up the law. Upon discovering that he could have taken the buck, he said, "Oh well, I'll just get him tomorrow."

Scott, one of his best friends, said, "You'll never see that deer again."

But sure enough, the next day Old One Horn was back. Rodney did not let it walk away a second time.

Upon hearing that Rodney had gotten the one horned buck, Scott said, "How the hell? You bastard." Scott never had as much luck as Rodney seemed to have.

Rodney also liked to grouse hunt. One year he was out with his daughter. They had not seen a grouse all day and so were getting a little antsy. They came upon a squirrel, which was a good twenty yards up in a pine tree.

"Get your gun ready," Rodney told Jordan. "I'll scare it down."

He pulled out his .22 pistol and aimed up at the small target. Jordan raised her 20-gauge shotgun and waited. Rodney, who could only see the tail of the squirrel, fired; the squirrel plummeted to earth.

"Why did I have to get my gun ready?" Jordan teased. "You killed it, should've known you would."

Rodney gave the squeaky laugh that was always surprising coming from a man of his build. Being mostly air, when each laugh came out there was a squeak at the end of each breath. He laughed about that incident for years.

One year grouse hunting, Rodney decided to tent out in the woods with Jordan and his son, Jacob. After a day of walking through the woods, they sat around a bonfire outside the tent. It was dark, and howls floated to their ears over the trees.

"What's that?" Jacob asked.

"Wolves," Rodney said calmly, "They're not far. Bet they smell us, and that's why they're howling."

A little while after that, they heard a drumming noise.

"Grouse," Rodney said. A grouse will beat its wings fast and hard to locate other grouse and also during mating season. This grouse was also close. It was too bad it was nighttime and shooting hours were long over. They went to bed.

The next morning, Rodney was awoken by the sound of a grouse which had flushed into a tree just outside the tent. When grouse fly, they are very loud. Rodney listened and waited, trying to pinpoint where the grouse might be.

Then the grouse flushed again and landed right on the tent. The tent shook violently, awakening Jordan. Jacob kept on sleeping. The bird, unable to get good footing on the tent, quickly flew into a tree again.

Rodney signaled for Jordan to be quiet as he slowly unzipped the tent. He crawled on his hands and knees to his truck where the shotguns were. He got a gun out and for the first time he looked up in the trees to try to find the grouse. It was sitting in a branch only twenty-five feet away.

It probably goes without saying that he got the grouse. The report of the shotgun startled Jacob out of his slumber. Rodney thought this was a good way to start the day.

Though Rodney has had many successful hunts, one hunt was memorable for a completely different reason. Scott and Rodney were grouse hunting, and it had been a slow day. They found a squirrel and were attempting to shoot it.

With their guns trained at the top of a cedar tree, one of them fired, and the rodent was no more. As soon as the squirrel hit the ground, a stick snapped behind them, and they whirled around.

Expecting a deer or maybe a fox, they were caught off guard by, standing in front of them and staring them down, a large black bear. Rodney, when telling this story, always says, "The only sound we heard was two safes getting clicked off." Click, click. Guns ready to fire.

Scott whisper-yelled, "Don't look it in the eyes."

Rodney replied, "Why not? It's looking right at me!"

Luckily, the bear lost interest, turned, and wandered back into the tangle of trees. Rodney and Scott just stood there for a moment, hearts pounding. Then they laughed nervously, thankful that nothing bad had happened. Rodney would have shot without hesitation, but he was beyond grateful that the bear just left. Sometimes, it was better to not have to pull the trigger.

Family Ties

Eva Stomberg,
a distant cousin
on my father's side,
gentle, strong willed.

As a girl,
her family fled Croatia
to escape
the Nazi invasion.

Reinhard Gehlen,
a distant cousin
on my mother's side,
German Nazi general.

My family
doesn't speak
his name often.
I don't know much about him.

Did Eva and Reinhard meet?
Did they know their lives
would conjoin down family lines?

Where does that leave us?
Should we pick sides?
Continue wars thought over and done?

Can peace be made through me?

Chosen

I never asked to be one,
 A man just took me away.
 Sold to an *okiya*¹
 To become a *geisha*.

I'd seen them on the streets in Gion²,
 Elegant as an empress.
 White face, red lips, exquisite
 Kimono and hair ornaments.

I go to school all day and train,
 Entertain in teahouses all night.
 My older sister by ceremony only
 Introduces me to men twice my age.

Kneel, bow, pour tea.
 Joke, sing, dance.
 Flirt.
 Entice.

Guard my maidenhead
 Until they bid
 High enough,
 Rich men will pay for *mizuage*³.

I may look
 Like royalty but
 I am only a girl
 Who's lost her innocence,

Her identity⁴,

And will never get it back.

¹ Lodgings where geisha and apprentice geisha live.

² District of Kyoto, Japan, most famous for its high number of geisha.

³ When an apprentice geisha loses her virginity, seen as a coming of age ceremony, often is bid for by high class men, if a geisha doesn't lose her virginity in *mizuage* it could ruin her reputation.

⁴ A geisha almost always had to change her name and usually she didn't get a say in the choice, her given name is picked by her "older sister," the geisha she studies under, and her family name will become the family name of the owner of the *okiya* if the owner officially adopts the geisha.

Hit By Love

"So why don't you like dodgeball?" my boyfriend, Omar, asked me.

"Because I always get hit in the face," I said. We were sitting cross legged facing each other on his bed. We had been dating for a couple months. I was a senior in high school; he had graduated the year before.

"Yeah, well that's bound to happen sometimes," he said.

"Well, I have a special talent for it," I said, "For example, in my freshman gym class."

My gym teacher had decided that we were going to play medic. If you've never played medic, it's like dodgeball except there is a "medic" on both teams. If you get out, you sit down right where you were standing. If the medic on your team can tag you, you can get back up and continue playing.

It didn't take long for me to get hit by a ball. I sat down and turned to look for my friend, Isaac. He was my team's medic. While I was looking over my shoulder for him, a dodgeball came flying out of nowhere and smoked me in the face. I was still recovering when a second dodgeball hit me in the throat. I sprawled out on the gym floor, gasping, the wind knocked out of me. My teammates shouted, "You should be out for that!" and "She was out!" and "What the hell are you aiming at her for?"

I looked up to see Isaac standing over me. He yelled, "Are you okay?" I nodded, and he helped me up and brought me to the side of the gym. Then he ran back and grabbed my glasses which I hadn't even realized had flown off my face. I was lucky they didn't break. I sat on the sidelines until I could breathe again and rejoin the game.

"Well?" I said to Omar. "Isn't that the stupidest thing ever?"

"Where were you sitting when you got hit?" Omar asked.

"By the big blue curtain," I said. It was a divider in the gym to separate one class from another. "Why?"

"And your glasses flew off?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said, wondering why he was asking these things.

"Ooh," he said, "I think I threw that first ball."

"What?" I said. "That's not possible, you weren't in my class."

"Yeah but I had lunch at that time and your teacher was Davis, right?"

"Yeah."

"Davis was my wrestling coach. I came in and saw you guys were playing medic and asked to play. I remember I threw a ball that curved and hit this girl sitting by the curtain. Her glasses flew off." He was laughing now. "I can't believe I hit you!"

In disbelief, I smacked him playfully on the arm, "That was you? What the hell, Omar?"

"What?" He shrugged. "I didn't know you then."

"I can't believe this. We basically met before we actually met. My life is a lie." Thoughts ran through my head. Would I have liked Omar if I had known this earlier? Would we still have become friends and then dated? I liked to think we would.

Omar laughed again, which made me laugh, too.

"No wonder I'm dating you; you knocked something loose up there," I teased.

"Hey, works for me."

Home

I was five, almost six,
Sitting in the dark,
No one was talking.
My teacher said we were going
Home.

Mom picked me up.
We got my little brother
From daycare.
Dad met us at
Home.

Mom cried,
Dad didn't speak,
My brother and I played;
We were having fun at
Home.

Following Dad, we went
Downstairs. He turned on the TV,
Some movie was playing.
We had to watch it together at
Home.

"Don't let them see this," Mom said.
"They have to," Dad said. "It's history."
I knew it couldn't be real, though,
So I wasn't scared. I was safe at
Home.

Today I know
It was not just some movie.
9/11 was real.
Now many people will never go
Home.

Autumn 1991

The end of October,
The season is done,
Only one series left
And it should be fun.

The smell of hotdogs
Floats down the hall,
Can't wait for the umpire
To yell, "Let's play ball!"

The Minnesota Twins
Versus the Atlanta Braves,
As they take the field
The crowd cheers and waves.

The fans are excited.
It sounds like a zoo.
The Twins win Game One,
Five points to two.

Game number Two
Also goes to the Twins,
And things sure look good
Because of these wins.

Games Three, Four, and Five,
However, go to the Braves,
Looks like they're sending
The Twins to their graves.

Game Six was tied up
Until inning eleven.
Kirby Puckett stepped up;
Sent the ball straight to Heaven.

As he rounded the bases,
Atlanta fans were upset,
Kirby fist-pumped the sky,
This thing's not over yet.

Fans rush in to fill
The big Metrodome,
Game number Seven
Is at the Twins' home.

Atlanta's chopping tomahawks
Flash through the crowd,
Battling Twins hankies;
It's extremely loud.

Twins pitcher Jack Morris
Put up a great fight,
Never let that baseball
Fly out of sight.

The score's zero-zero
After the ninth inning,
The game must go on,
For neither is winning.

In the tenth inning,
Larkin swings his bat,
It's deep to left-center;
Do you believe that?

Screams from Twins fans
Echo through the Dome,
They cheer even louder
As Dan Gladden touches home.

And just like that
The World Series is done,
But the good news is
The Twins have won!

And the smell of hotdogs
Floats down the hall.
It's America's pastime-
The great game of baseball.

Pieces

July, 1997

The hum of midday traffic rose above the crashing waves, but I tried to drown it out. It was my day off, I was at the beach, and the city did not exist to me. What did exist were cold cans of beer and my two best friends, who were hoping to enjoy the sun and the sight of the water and any good-looking men who might be in it.

“Anne,” Colleen said, “pass me another drink.” I handed her a beer from the cooler.

“Why can’t every day be like this?” Mary asked.

“‘Cause if we stayed on the beach all day we’d lose our jobs and then lose our apartments and become homeless,” I said with a sigh. We all laughed.

“Hey, Anne,” Mary said, “I think you’ve got an admirer.” She cocked her head towards a couple guys swimming in the ocean; one was looking over his shoulder in our direction.

“No,” I said, “he’s probably looking at you, Colleen.” Colleen was the prettiest of us all, with her tan skin and flowing brunette hair. My skin never tanned, just got pink. My sandy-blond hair didn’t compare to hers.

“No,” Colleen said, “It’s definitely you.”

The guy waved, then turned back to his friends. I blushed.

“Colleen,” Mary said, “give Anne the sunscreen, she’s getting burned.” Colleen and Mary laughed. I kicked sand onto Mary’s towel, and she yelled at me to stop.

“Hey,” Colleen said, “would you two stop fighting? He’s coming over here.” Sure enough, he was heading our way. He was tan from the sun and, I’m not going to lie, he was pretty cute.

“Hey,” he said when he reached us. “How’re you ladies doing?”

“Good,” Mary said. “How’re you?”

“Oh I’m great.” He smiled. “I’m George. That’s John and that’s Robert.” He pointed at his friends as he spoke. We introduced ourselves, and we offered George a beer. He took it and then launched into a short speech about how that particular brand of beer was better than others. He paused, floundering for words, and then told us about how he was a fireman. Okay, I thought, now he’s not cute, he’s hot. Then he asked us to come down and play water volleyball with them. As we walked down to the water, George matched his pace to mine.

April, 1998

The water from the shower was so hot that my skin was turning red. I liked it that way. The mirror was fogged up when I stepped out. I wiped it with my towel and started getting ready. We were in Hawaii, on our first trip together, and George and I had spent all day at the beach. We were getting ready to go out for supper.

When I had finished blow drying my hair and was starting to put on my makeup, George said through the bathroom door, “Hey honey? I have a question.”

I wasn’t really paying attention and said, “Shoot,” as I started on my eyeliner.

“If I asked you to marry me, what would you say?”

As I put on mascara, I said, “I’d say yes.”

I heard George walk away from the bathroom door. When I was finished with my makeup, I walked out of the bathroom.

George was standing in the middle of the room, all dressed up for our fancy dinner. He’d lit candles, and the room was dim and smelled of lavender. There were rose petals scattered all around the room.

He came forward, dropped to one knee, and pulled out a diamond ring from his pocket.

“So, will you marry me?” he asked.

“You’re such a dork,” I said, “but yes I will.”

Our fancy dinner became a celebratory dinner. When I asked him later why he’d asked me that question through the bathroom door, he said, “I just wanted to make sure you’d say yes.”

December, 1999

After the three minutes were up, I looked down. “Positive,” I read out loud. I felt the huge smile on my face. George would be home soon, so I pulled myself together and started supper. I acted like everything was completely normal when George walked through the door.

He kissed me and said, “Hey babe, how was your day?”

“Oh, it was good,” I said, “Everyone at the office brought food in and we had a little potluck for lunch.”

We talked about our days, ate supper, and then George did the dishes. It was the deal we’d made when we started living together; I cooked, and he did the dishes. George didn’t like doing the dishes, but he hated cooking more so it worked out fine.

“When will we get a dishwasher?” he asked as he scrubbed a plate.

“If we got one then we’d have to renegotiate our deal,” I said. I was sitting on a stool watching him.

“What do you mean?” he asked, setting the plate on the rack to dry.

“Well if we had a dishwasher then you wouldn’t have any dishes to do,” I said, “Then it wouldn’t be fair. I think the fair thing would be for you to cook half the meals.” I smiled.

He smiled over his shoulder at me and said, “Oh no, we don’t really need a dishwasher. They’re kind of expensive anyway.”

“I’m glad you think so,” I said, “because we’ll be needing money for something else.”

“What?” he asked. “Did they raise the sub fees again?” Since we lived in New York, we rode the subways everywhere. Parking a car was a hassle so we didn’t own one.

“No,” I said. “Let’s just say you’re going to have more dishes to do in about nine months.” I got up from the stool and walked away like it was no big deal.

I heard a slap as he dropped the towel into the dishwater. He followed me, spun me around, and said, “Wait. What? Are you?”

I smiled and nodded. “You’re going to be a dad,” I said. He smiled and let out a laugh. He reached for me and pulled me into him. We hugged for a long time, not even caring that his hands were getting soap and water all over my shirt.

February, 2000

George looked at me from across the table, tears were spilling down our faces. He reached for my hand, but I pulled it away.

“How could you?” I asked.

“It was a mistake,” he said. “I swear it won’t ever happen again.”

“I’m pregnant with your child. I’m your wife.”

“That’s why I had to tell you. I couldn’t keep it from you anymore, and the guilt was eating me alive. I love you, and I don’t want to lose you.”

A couple of months after we’d gotten engaged, George had kissed another woman after a few beers at a work party. He said he regretted it, and it had only happened once. A million

questions were swarming my head, and my heart felt like it had been ripped from my chest. My perfect world had been shattered by one unfaithful kiss. Why did he do it? Why did he wait so long to tell me? What happens now?

“I need time,” I said.

He nodded. “I know. Take as much time as you need.”

After a day of hardly speaking and a lot of crying, we sat down again.

“I don’t want to let one kiss ruin what we have,” I said, “but we have to rebuild that trust because now there is none.”

“I’ll do anything,” George said, “to prove myself to you.”

“What you did was definitely not okay.”

He took my hands in his as he said, “I swear I’ll never kiss another woman as long as I live.”

After that, we started to pick up the pieces.

August, 2000

Nathaniel was born healthy, seven pounds, three ounces.

While George’s betrayal still stung when I thought of it, I had started to trust him again, and we were happy. I felt like I had my perfect family again.

As I lay in the hospital bed, I watched George hold Nathaniel. There was so much joy and love in his eyes and in his smile. It filled me with so much happiness, I felt like sorrow could never take hold of my life again.

George looked at me and smiled even wider. “He’s got your nose,” he said, “my mother’s eyes.”

September, 2001

I was staring at my computer monitor. It was just past 8:30 on a Tuesday; most of the week was still ahead of me. I wished for Friday. The week was dragging for no particular reason. I just wanted the weekend.

“Wake up, Anne,” Jimmy said as he walked by on the way to his desk. He smiled and swatted my arm with the newspaper he carried, then continued on his way. I glanced at the picture of George and Nathaniel on my desk, smiled, then looked back at the screen.

“Oh my God!” Nancy shouted. When I looked up, she was standing by the window, holding her hand to her mouth. I looked over just in time to see a plane disappear behind the North Tower. No, it didn’t disappear. It flew right into the tower, flames exploding out behind it. My mouth dropped open in horror.

“What the hell just happened?” I asked. I looked around at my coworkers who were all standing and facing the window by now. Everyone was silent. We’d been standing there for I don’t know how long when someone came and told us that they were evacuating the North Tower and that we were to stay at our workstations. It was a terrible accident, but it had been confined to the North Tower, and we were supposed to go back to work. I couldn’t though. Most of my coworkers and I stood at the window, watching the drama unfolding in front of us.

All of a sudden, I was thrown to the floor, smashing my head against the wall. A deafening roar of tearing metal and breaking glass was followed by an ear shattering boom. I heard screaming. In a daze, I slowly sat up.

“Anne, Anne!” Someone was shouting in my face. It was Jimmy. “We have to go! We have to go!” As he grabbed my arm and lifted me up, I realized something terrible must have

happened, though I didn't know what. We ran to the elevators. Other people were already there, and they were yelling that the elevators weren't working.

I heard someone say over the noise, "Hell no! I'm not walking down sixty flights of stairs!" I looked at Jimmy. He nodded, and we headed to the stairs. Stopping in the doorway, we could see the stairwell quickly filling with people coming down. Echoing screams from above pleaded for help. I thought of my son and husband. My husband. He would be coming here! I was in a panic immediately. Jimmy read my mind, grabbed my arm, and pushed me into the stairwell in front of him.

"Go!" he shouted over the noise. I went.

People were yelling and crying and bumping into each other. When I reached about the 40th floor I realized Jimmy wasn't behind me anymore. I looked around for him and yelled his name. Someone behind me shoved me, and I kept moving. Down, down, down. I was getting tired, but I kept going.

Finally, I reached the lobby. Gathering what energy I had left, I sprinted toward the exit, pushing past the slower people along the way. When I got outside, I looked around until I saw firemen, then started in their direction. A loud pop made me stop. I looked over to see a woman crumpled up on the ground like a Raggedy Ann doll carelessly thrown aside by a child. There was red splattered across the pavement. Her name was Martha; she lived near me, and we rode the subway to work together. She worked on the 88th floor. I heard a loud scream, and it took me a second to realize the scream was coming from me. I turned and ran towards the firemen.

They were walking towards the South Tower and as they came past I weaved my way among them, shouting for George and looking in faces to find my husband.

“Anne!” I turned, and George was jogging towards me. I jumped into his arms and held on.

“Don’t go in there,” I said, “Don’t go in there!”

“Anne,” he said, “I have to.”

“I’m so scared,” I said.

“I am, too.” He pulled back from my death grip so he could look into my eyes. “But so are the people still in there. They’re scared, too. I’ve got to go do my job now, babe.”

I was crying, but I knew he was right. I nodded and said, “I love you.”

“I love you too, honey,” George said, “Go back to the apartment. You’ll be safe there. I’ll be home as soon as I can.” He turned and headed into the South Tower. I backed up slowly, then I turned and walked away, joining the mass of people flooding away from the buildings.

I had been walking for only a couple minutes when glass shattered and metal tore behind me. I turned to see the South Tower pancaking itself down, down, down. People screamed. So did I. I turned and ran as fast as I could away from the building. Within seconds, I was enveloped in darkness. Smoke and debris covered everything, suffocating me. I pulled my shirt up over my mouth to help me breathe. I didn’t know where I was running anymore. Falling metal pelted me all over. I found a van, almost ran right into it, and crouched down behind it to try to protect myself.

The tower hit the ground, shaking the earth and sounding like a thousand bombs exploding. I thought my eardrums would break. I stayed behind the van until the dust settled enough to see again. I slowly stood up and faced the emptiness where, minutes ago, the South Tower had stood.

“No!” I screamed, “George!” My knees gave out. Like the South Tower, I hit the ground, sobbing uncontrollably. My brain would not, could not believe what had just occurred.

A man came up to me and said, “Ma’am, you’ve got to get out of here!” I looked up. He was covered head to toe in white dust, and it took me a second to realize he was a policeman. He helped me back up and aimed me in the right direction. I walked. There was no running left in me.

Eventually, I reached a mob of people who were all standing around. I stopped and sat down. A woman came over and gave me a bottle of water. I didn’t know her, and I never saw her again. Realizing I was horribly thirsty and all I could taste was metal, I gulped the water down. I was still sitting there when the other tower fell.

September, 2016

“So tell me,” Dr. Roland said, “why did you wait so long before coming to a therapist? Why did you call me?”

I looked around the small room. It was dimly lit. Books lined the bookshelves, and on her desk in the corner was an open lunchbox with the leftovers from a hurried lunch spilling out. There was a brand new iPhone next to the lunchbox. Bet my session paid for that, I thought. I looked anywhere but in Dr. Roland’s eyes. I knew she meant well, but her pitying glance was destroying the confidence I’d walked in with.

I took a breath and said, “I guess it’s because I needed strength and didn’t know where else to go for it.”

“Explain that to me,” Dr. Roland said.

I told her that I'd taken Nathaniel and moved out of New York, to Rhode Island a couple months after George's remains were found.

"I couldn't stay there, not without him," I said. A tear rolled down my face to my chin.

Then I told her that Nathaniel was grown up now and had never been back to New York City. He knew what had happened to his father and wanted to see the place for himself. After years of begging, I'd finally caved in. We were going to New York, to Ground Zero. And we were going on the fifteenth anniversary.

"I just don't know how I can face it," I told Dr. Roland. "How can I go there, see his name carved in the stone? I should have stopped him. Made him come with me that day."

Dr. Roland interrupted me. "I see. This is about your regret. You regret not saving his life. But he had a job to do. You know that; he would have gone into that tower no matter what you'd said."

"I could have run after him."

"Then your name would have been next to his on the stone. And Nathaniel would have grown up without this strong mother I see before me."

I had no response to that.

When I left her office, something was different. I can't say what exactly but a small weight had been lifted from my heart. In just a few days, I would be at Ground Zero, on the anniversary, but now I felt like I could do it. I wouldn't have to run away this time.