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Climbing the Cerulean Butte

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Climbing the Cerulean Butte

By: Emma Knudson

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Bachelor of Arts in Creative Writing

Linfield College

May 21, 2018

Approved by: Signature redacted

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Table of Contents

What Did the Loss Mean to You?	
I. Accidental Video_____	3
II. To The Ranch: Ryegate_____	3
III. Grasshoppers, Pt. 1_____	12
IV. Car Fights_____	17
V. Zombie Deer_____	21
VI. The “F” Word_____	24
VII. The Accident_____	30
VIII. Saving_____	32
How Do You Experience Your Grief?	
I. What We Know_____	35
II. Haunted Road_____	36
III. Jeffrey’s Voice_____	39
IV. Morning Practice_____	40
What Kind of Strategies Do You Use to Cope?	
I. Slumdog Millionaire_____	44
II. The Ranch Again_____	48
III. Grasshoppers, Pt. 2_____	55
IV. Night Out_____	58
V. Dinner Together_____	61
What Kind of Guidance is Helpful?	
I. Routines, Pt. 1_____	63
II. Routines, Pt. 2_____	68
With Whom Do You Share Your Loss?	
I. Anniversary Pancakes_____	74
II. Climbing the Cerulean Butte_____	82
Afterward_____	89

What Did The Loss Mean to You?

I. Accidental Video

“Look at this video, Lou. I thought I was taking a picture, but it was a video. Watch.”

Lou’s father shifts close by her side, the flip phone open in his hand projecting a small clip of himself and Lou’s brother, Jeffrey, posing for a picture of themselves. The clip begins with her father adjusting the camera. He and Jeffrey are smiling, waiting; the clip trembles. They’re in the garage of the ranch house, still dressed in their thick, brown work clothes. Lou can smell the sitting dust and stale air in that room.

“Oh wait, I think I’m taking a video. Say something.”

“No.” the son says, smiling to his father.

The clip ends. Lou’s father presses play again, and again. They watch and listen together in silence. “*No— no— no...*”

II. To the Ranch: Ryegate

From Billings, the winding road rolled east from the gated communities on the cliffside to fenced wheat fields and slumped cattle scattering the plains. The land and the sky were equal in their infinitude, meeting at the horizon line, yet never fully collapsing into each other. A faint, blurred white line separates the land from the sky, so that they remained both intertwined and solitary. Like oil settled on standing water.

The highway narrowed from four lanes to two and increased in designated speed as the suburban developments thinned to a few houses. The white truck driving along the highway continued on until the landscape spread to nothing, in exception of fence line and a few decrepit shacks scattered in a random pattern over the miles of wispy grass. Along the road were a few dirt turnoffs that looked like they continued for many more miles than the main road, with no end in immediate sight. The girl in the backseat of the pickup squinted at the horizon, where the air swallows the dirt roads. Only a lone mailbox a few feet from the highway beside the unkempt turnoff indicated that a family was, or has once, inhabited that area. She imagined a family, after shopping in the city at Costco for perhaps hamburger buns or propane, slowing in their green Ford, thick with dust, to dip into the long driveway. The father at the drivers seat would roll to a stop at the mailbox, poking his hand missing his wedding ring (because he doesn't like to wear it as a rancher— it gets in the way of fencing) through the window and into the mailbox, only to receive the phone and utility bills. Upon this, she imagined him tossing the envelopes on his wife's lap, manually rolling up the window with the dirt-ruined crank, mumbling about why their mailbox might be dented (coyotes? A stray rock flung off of a semi truck?), and then driving down toward their hidden house, leaving nothing but a cloud of dust contorted by an unadulterated breeze.

The truck she was in with her parents and her brother, a year and a half her senior, quickly passed the long driveway. All she saw after that point were rolling buttes and rock-scattered plain. The lack of rain had sucked the moisture from the landscape into the oppressive summer heat, and the crispy grass trembled instead of swayed. She gazed along the white line marking the six-inch shoulder, then just above it, where an image of

a coyote projected against the scene in her mind. The wild, earthy animal ran alongside the car with ease. His shoulders curved and rounded with each forward motion before dipping, spilling down as he pulled his front paws behind him. Each careful liftoff flicked his narrow paws, and he heaved forward in keeping with the car's speed. The coyote never tired, but only squinted his dark eyes against the curt breeze slicing into anything traveling more than a neighborhood car speed. She imagined herself as the coyote, striding fierce and long, calf muscles contracting and relaxing with each stride. She breathed hard and turbulent as she ran along the narrow shoulder.

On those near-weekly car rides to her grandparent's ranch, Lou often allowed her imagination to take over while her brother, Jeffrey, played on his PS2 next to her. Her parents at the front of the truck spent their trip talking about work and listening to Fleetwood Mac or David Gray. Watching herself run alongside the coyotes kept her mind busy for hours. Was she the only one who imagined that? Probably. Convinced of her solitude in these thoughts, she'd withhold the image of the coyote from her mind in exchange for an image of herself, older, at the school dance, a boy at hand when a slow song began playing. But after long and anxious rumination and suppression, she didn't see why she'd be the only one to do that. There were, of course, billions of people occupying space on Earth, making it more likely that she was not alone in making herself run like a coyote. The thought comforted her.

While her brother brought his handheld game to hold his attention, Lou toted a blanket and a pillow through each trip. But, she'd leave her favorite stuffed animals at home. Her grandmother, Davi, an artist with a fierce passion for both life and land, would tell her about how the stuffed animals would miss her, and grow lonely. She'd lean across

the kitchen counter and Lou would mirror her lean over a plate of potato chips and a turkey sandwich, listening to how she'd greet the stuffed animals during the day. If she felt a stuffed animal was lonely, she would move them to the company of another. Lou didn't believe Davi when she said this, because her grandmother is an adult, and adults only do or say those certain things to kids to enlighten them of their kid-ness. But Lou still leaned into her stories.

The Montana land yawned gold and blue and green and textured waves; the car finally reached the center of nothing. Maybe a few sheds, an abandoned wheat silo, fencing belonging to whoever, or even a random house facing northeast-north simply because it could disappeared as fast as they appeared as they pressed on. Lou leaned her head against the pillow, watching herself run alongside the car, pumping her arms and dodging fragments of shredded tire and loose metal that occasionally accented the highway.

"How you doing back there, Lou?" her mother asked, straining her neck in the passenger seat to look behind at her daughter.

"Good," replied Lou, meeting her mother's gaze for a short second, then returning it to the passing landscape. Her mother continued to look. Then, she insisted, "Yeah?"

"Yep," Lou said. She forced a smile. She wanted to roll her eyes or refuse her gaze, but then her mother would poke her knee or tickle her foot resting on the center console to return her attention. Lou knew she had to be jovial, otherwise her mother would press about her perceived irritability or attitude. Her mother would be right about the irritability, however. She was interrupted of her daydreams. Through all of this, her mother, Cary, smiled kind and warm.

Averting her gaze to her son, Cary asked the same question, despite her son's headphones in his ears. Jeffrey looked up at their mother and said, "Good," just as Lou did, with a hint of enthusiasm. He also knew.

He returned to his game, which was typically a sports game, preferably football. He had a particular obsession with both football and basketball, though his gentle nature was disturbed at the thought of hitting someone too hard in a football game. This brought Cary to yelling during his games, "Come on! You gotta tackle them! Hit harder! Get up!" and so forth. She had an aversion to shyness from the task at hand, hard work, and an inability to deal with physical pain, so when Jeffrey got tackled hard and writhed on the lumpy grass field, she felt more frustration than concern. Many years prior, Jeffrey had stepped on a shard of glass while on a fishing trip. As their family were boating back to the car and bandaging his profusely bleeding wound, Cary was at first sympathetic, but then grew annoyed. "Stop it," she said, "Honestly Jeffrey? You need to stop this crying." He got twelve stitches in his foot later that evening. When she'd retell the story, she would laugh and admit her guilt. "I just didn't want him to grow up and not be able to handle pain," she'd say, "I wanted you guys to grow up tough. I was nervous for a little while, though. But I did feel bad about telling him to get over that cut in his foot."

He still had a hard time hitting people. As a 10-year-old growing into more intense practice sessions, he was beginning to understand that hitting in football wasn't synonymous with being a "bad person." That particular concern didn't stifle his passion, however, as he was constantly doodling football helmets and game scores and stats on his homework, re-enacting exact plays during the commercial break of the Sunday NFL game, and hanging up posters of his favorite football players. Playing football with him

in the backyard when he was younger wasn't as simple as catch. Re-enacting a specific play he had in mind, preferably one he just saw played out by professionals on TV, was the only way he'd participate. Do it wrong, and he'd request a re-do. Some people would laugh and shrug their shoulders at this, others would insist he loosen up. But "loosening up" for him was treasonous, not even within his capabilities. So they'd continue to play as he wished. He'd call out the plays, leaning over his narrow frame, ball in hand, waiting to snap. When a flag had been symbolically thrown, he'd step in as the referee, throwing up the signals for "holding" and "penalty" and "1st down." Interestingly enough, he rarely, if ever fouled; instead it was their father who bore the burden of multiple fouls.

Now, was becoming more relaxed. He'd also grown to be rather tall and slim, prompting questions about how he'd hold his own against larger opponents. Quarterback had been tossed around, but he preferred runningback. Because of his psychical stature, and his head full of thick, bright-blond hair, he'd earn the nickname "Q-tip" by the time he reached middle school. But that wouldn't happen for another two years. And he wouldn't be ready to hit his opponents for a while longer. In that moment, Jeffrey sat content on his game, his large blue eyes glassy against the flashing glare of Madden '04. Cary smiled at her son and turned to the road, mumbling something to Steve, her husband and the kids' father, about how their dog still needs a bath when they returned.

Lou didn't have any portable electronics except for her MP3 player, which quickly bored her. Her specific taste in music caused a monopoly in her music library: she had thirty songs, but only listened to two: "Clocks" by Coldplay and "Better Together" by Jack Johnson. She wished, sometimes, that she liked the songs her classmates liked, like "Pon De Replay," or even Mariah Carey's "We Belong Together." One of the more

likable girls in her class once told her the songs she listened to were “corny.” So Lou didn't talk much about music to her classmates anymore. She's tried to listen to other songs, but bringing herself to enjoy them consistently was a forced task. Yet when she'd go listen to her two favorite songs on repeat, she yearned for two new favorite songs. But the process of songs becoming her favorite had to be organic, so if she had already listened to a song multiple times and it still wasn't her favorite, it would never be. Because of that, car rides became increasingly insipid and mind-numbing. After thirty minutes of “Apologize,” then “Stop and Stare,” then back to “Apologize,” and over again, she'd decide to end her music cycle and watch the landscape pass in silence. Imagining herself stride down coulees and over rolling hills, with or without music, soothed her tedium. A sense of longing washed over her as she envisioned her determined runs.

Perhaps she longed because of her desire for importance. Or because she'd always been over-imaginative. Or because she liked the feeling of wind against her face, and needed her fix when the air grew stagnant. That explained why she liked to stand atop the Butte behind her grandparent's house: the prairie winds were strong up there, pushing her hair away from her face as she stood tall, walking stick in hand, looking out over the house, the ranch, and the hundreds of miles ahead of her.

A few years from then, Lou would traverse to the top of the Butte with her grandmothers' black gloves, her hair slicked back in a ponytail and holding her reclaimed walking stick, and someone would take a picture of her standing there, overlooking the camera-holder, and her grandmother would swear she was Mother Earth.

Lou returned her gaze to the window and imagined herself running with the coyotes, bending and reaching toward an infinite horizon, to which they know they'd never meet, but press on regardless.

They made the turn to the dirt road, just outside of the small town of Ryegate. The town barely had a few hundred people and covered a solid block of space: a school, a gas station, a convenience store, and a bar lined the main street, along with a some light housing and abandoned school buses. As they continued through the turnoff, Lou watched the derelict house pass by. It seemed to be dissolving with each passing, crumbled brown and earthy yet still managing to stand. To her left was the church, with a gravel parking lot and a pastel yellow door suggesting sunlight within the structure. What few trees that existed in this area of Montana seemed to congregate here, and they were large and green despite the ongoing drought. Maybe they, too, were religious. Maybe that's why they remained green.

It took fifteen minutes to reach the Erikson place, whom Lou didn't know very well. She only spoke to them when they're called upon to help herd her grandparent's cattle in some form. She was cordial with them, but guarded. They were friendly and eager, with the rancher's twang and cow-shit work boots to match. But their too-friendly demeanor always prompted Lou to retract. Their house matched their persona: a large, white, sprawling place, and the trees seemed to congregate there, as well. There was room not only for cattle, but also for a few horses, which the Erikson's elected not to have. Perhaps because they intended on moving out soon, to which Lou's grandfather would become the owner of the property, alongside the house they currently owned. She

wasn't sure how that was going to work, but didn't question it when discussed. She simply enjoyed the stray barn kittens that hid in the corners of the shed by the main house.

They passed the Erikson place and drive over the last few hills, each one seemingly larger than the last, until they reached the final plateau of their path. From there, they made a sharp descent down the dirt road revealing their grandparent's house at the bottom, standing alone in the middle of the eastern Montana plains, shadowed by buttes near and far. The tan structure and red-brown roof accented the colors flecked on the ancient sea-rocks, as the entire area was once under water, and it was not uncommon to find fossils of plants from that era. The house held itself high and unwavering against the rippling landscape, and Lou imagined herself standing as the house stood, hands on her hips with her chin tilted toward the west. They made their slow dive down the steep hill until it leveled out to the long driveway of the house, and Lou's grandma stood waiting on the copper colored porch, the wind whistling high and sharp between the cracks of the truck, stealing the sound from the life hidden in the coulees.

III. Grasshoppers Pt. 1

Lou liked her decorated mason jar with a rock, a stick short enough to lay at a 45 degree angle, and fresh grass packed down at the bottom of it. As always, she poked designs with a fork into the lid, so sunlight and air could seep through to the grasshopper she planned on catching that slow afternoon at the ranch.

Jeffrey liked his mason jar empty. Maybe a little grass, had he been stuck wondering what to do with the grasshopper he caught. As with each jar he used for insect capture, he stabbed the lid three times with a fork, taking care that none of the lines of holes were directly parallel.

Mason jars in hand, they stepped outside of the ranch house and into the searing August heat. Violent rays of sunlight burned the clouds away, forcing the siblings to hold their hands above their eyes as they walked, ignoring their grandmother's request of a hat or sunglasses and refusing defeat.

As they stepped off the rock path onto the dry prairie grass that crunched like a fistful of potato chips squeezed with each step, sporadic waves of insects leapt in either direction, forging their path barren. The bugs seemed innumerable as they swept in fear to either side of Lou and Jeffrey's monstrous traipsing. Their grandmother had told them that this plague of grasshoppers were eating not only the cattle's grass for grazing, but the hay their grandfather grew, thus encouraging the kids to catch them. Despite the fact that they barely caught enough to even be represented among the decimal-point continuum, she insisted they try. "They're absolutely destroying the fields," she had said, "Grandpa's gonna have to go out and buy hay, and that is so, so expensive. And they eat all my goddamn plants, too. It's, like, why do I even bother? They're devilish!"

Lou didn't like the idea of killing them. They required food just as people did, so of course they destroyed the fields. That's why she liked to fashion them a new home, away from the ranch land. It's a much nicer, albeit infinitely smaller, home from what they experience, when it came down to safety. As she imagined her grandmother's hands waving in frustration, she noticed that her agitated gestures at the insects mimicked the way they leapt forward in the hundreds with each step, like a tidal wave of flicks and bounds and scrappy flutters of wings dusted thick and brown. It quickened the siblings' anticipation to capture them, yet held them at bay with the eerie flow of spiny legs and antennae. It felt like a biblical plague.

Lou followed the smaller ones simply because of their smallness. Being small and young herself, not yet within double-digits of age, she liked the smaller ones better. She'd often find herself capturing a larger grasshopper, because they were easier to catch, and it made her skin crawl as she held their thick, seemingly muscular bodies. They utilized their mature strength to squirm their way out of her grasp, and she's never broken when they did so. She never held them tight enough anyways. Developing a kinship with the tinier, knob-eyed creatures was her secret goal. The babies, she called them. They wouldn't scramble much within her hand, perhaps because she held them with the utmost delicacy and stroked their oblong heads to reassure their safety. She often wondered about their mothers, if they cared about them, or if they had siblings they, too, followed.

After treading in either direction for a few minutes, they bore low to a crouch at the earth's level, leaving one hand open and pulled back like a bow and arrow. Scanning the ground for an unsuspecting grasshopper, they willed their bodies to stillness and silence. The dryness of the landscape disallowed muffled noises, and though there was

little echo, grasshoppers are keen and quick upon these sounds to leap high and far, away from its origin.

“I got one!” Jeffrey cried, holding up a clenched fist. Lou ran to him. He maneuvered his fingers to create an opening for looking, but not for escaping. The grasshopper pried his barbed legs forward and attempted to pull out of Jeffrey’s grasp, his narrow head bearing to the sky in desperation.

“What are you going to do with this one?” she asked.

He squeezed his fist tighter. “I kinda wanna burn it.”

A smile curled across his pale face, veering his gaze from Lou to the grasshopper. “Like strap him to a rock and put a lighter underneath. Fry him.”

She hit his clenched fist as hard as she could. “No! Don’t kill him,” she pleaded, reaching for his now lifted fist to smack it again. He struck an elbow at her sternum, giggling.

“Don’t kill him!” she cried again.

“Why not? Grandma said they're eating all the hay.”

“Just don’t!”

He ignored her and walked away in search of a small, flat rock. Remembering her empty jar, Lou turned to grab the first grasshopper she saw. As she spun around, one jumped carelessly in her direction, hitting her thigh. She grabbed it before it realized its fate, dumped it into the jar, and closed it before the grasshopper could escape. Despite her carelessness in choice, she assumed it was destiny. Before she could admire how green and bright it was, she turned to follow her brother.

She ran in the direction that Jeffrey went, but he was not in the dry side-garden relocating the poor insect as she'd secretly hoped. She made a quick turn on her heels and ran to the garage door and into the kitchen, keeping her eyes up to locate her brother and his unfortunate capture. The sweat trickled from her scalp to the nape of her neck as the temperate room shocked her body with easy, chilled air. Jeffrey was at the island, drawer open as he sifted through the Costco packs of cigarettes for a lighter. Though there were many small ones to choose from, he wanted the long one, for candles in deep holders.

Lou saw the grasshopper strapped onto the rock with a rubber band, lying still. Even his antennae ceased their incessant twitching. "Jeffrey, please don't," she begged.

"It's okay! It'll be funny," he returned.

Lifting the rock to his tall eye level, he clicked the lighter's switch and a lone flame flickered to life. Lou clutched her grasshopper jar. The hostage insect shifted at being raised up, yet at the heat of the lighter, he didn't budge.

"Ouch, dang it," Jeffrey set the rock down and shook his hand. "The lighter almost burned me."

He tried again, only to set the rock down and shake his hand with more vigor. He pursed his lips.

She watched the grasshopper for any signs of distress. "I don't think it will work."

He didn't reply. He grabbed the rock again and returned it to his eye level, leaving Lou craning to see the insect.

Jeffrey furrowed his brow, looking closer at his trap. "His leg is broken or something," he said as he poked a finger at the captive's leg. It rolled like some sick

clock hand. The grasshopper writhed at the touch. His antennae seize, panicking for an escape. The leg continued to roll.

Jeffrey retracted his finger. The fragile hostage trembled as he scraped his legs into the rock as if it were digging an escape hole. They cannot look away. As Lou felt her stomach rising, she noticed Jeffrey struggling to swallow.

“Just let him go,” she pleaded. She’s thankful the frying didn't work, but she was not yet relieved. He wasn't done with the grasshopper yet.

Jeffrey took hold of the barbed, injured leg, and the grasshopper strained to get it free. With a movement as gentle as brushing a hair away from one’s face, he pulled the leg off.

The grasshopper wriggled.

“Jeffrey!” she cried, staring at the severed leg.

He didn't reply. “Now he can’t survive! Grasshoppers need to jump to live and he can’t jump!”

“Grandma said to get rid of them.” His breathing began to slightly labor, as if realizing a mortal sin he committed. He refused to relent in spite of this. Finally, he looked at her with large, searching eyes.

Lou didn't say anything.

He took hold of the top band of the twice-twisted rubber band over the grasshopper, taut at the midsection. He yanked it upwards, tightening the bottom band. Without hesitation he released, sending a vicious *snap* down at the insect. It crackled like a handful of 4th of July bang snaps thrown down on the concrete. The legs seized up in a

Hail Mary splay, the antennae gently twitched into final submission. Liquid speckles accented the rock around the split. The captive was halved.

Jeffrey's teeth were clenched, and his eyebrows were raised. He looked at Lou.

IV. Car Fights

It was past 10 p.m, and the kids had school the next morning. Cary and Steve urged their children to get some sleep in the car while they drove home from the ranch, but Steve made a remark about how Cary's fathers' temper was something to get over. Cary, holding within her a temper of her own, a piece of her father's red energy, decided the remark couldn't pass over them. They'd been arguing since they left the ranch house, and the headlights illuminating the barren darkness only made Lou feel the weight of isolation late night prairie roads created. Lou turned up her music to drown out the yelling.

But she could hear her mother— “You always do this! You always take his side and never stand up for me! What kind of husband is that? I don't know any of my friends' husbands who does that—” All of it was familiar. Lou was used to hearing arguments from her room, and she couldn't help but stop and listen. Sometimes her parents would retreat to the garage to argue in privacy, which only irritated her. She wanted to know why they fought, who was in the wrong, and who to side with. Her mother's side is who she'd take in the beginning of the fight, but Cary's refusal to quit yelling earned her father her invisible hand in support. Steve's silence made Lou want to cry, yet Cary's frustration at her father's inability to be the necessary husband made her want to cry as well.

Lou closed her eyes and tried to focus on the music. Then her father shouted back at Cary. Usually, he'd let others' anger pass over him as inconsequentially as a pigeon on a bustling sidewalk. Transfixing on something beyond the shouts, his eyes would glaze over, motionless at the reprimands. Tonight, however, was different. Something Cary said prompted him to fight back, which lulled Cary into low, furious words spat through clenched teeth. Lou knew this because she opened her eyes to watch, just enough to see the details of her mother's pained face, illuminated by the reflected headlights of an oncoming truck passing by. Even angry, she was beautiful, with naturally tanned skin and bright blonde hair cut and curled under just above her shoulders. She'd always wear glasses, which Lou found as consistent on her face as she does a nose. But she'd always liked being able to see her mother's eyes, icy blue and rimmed with a darker, glaucous color. Neither Lou nor Jeffrey inherited these eyes, instead receiving a combination of their parents eyes: medium blue with flecks of both dark and light blue. Cerulean undertones blessed Jeffrey's eyes.

Their voices were louder now, and Cary pointed at him, sending blades through her fingertip. Lou stared at the back of the driver's seat, counting the moments. One: her mother paused for dramatic effect. No response from her father. Two: a nudge on her lower thigh. Jeffrey was looking at her. They exchange an exasperated glance at one another, except his look lingered on his younger sibling a bit longer. His face was illuminated by the faint blue light from his handheld video game. Gesturing his eyes at their parents, he referenced their fight to Lou, as if to say, "How much longer do you think this'll go on?" She pursed her lips and shrugged her shoulders. Unflinching in his gaze, his eyes widen blinking slow and methodical.

Nights like these at their house may be met with a knock at Lou's ear through the shared wall of her and Jeffrey's bedrooms. She'd always return with a knock of the same tempo. Sometimes, Jeffrey would slip into Lou's room and offer to play a game, or to pester her with questions about what she's doing and why. He'd either offer to play "Sorry!" or bust through the door singing songs from the movie "Madagascar." Regardless of Lou's reaction, no matter how violent or warm it was toward her older sibling, he'd pursue her attention until the yelling subsided. She does not understand why.

Jeffrey nudged Lou again and she swatted at his hand, furrowing her brow. He poked her again, his challenging smile curling his lips. Lou twisted toward him, lower in her seat, and kicked at his side. "Ouch," he mumbled, smile melting away. He shoved her sister with his own foot with more force. Lou's near-horizontal body was pressed and coiled against the door, and she yelped.

"Quit it!" she kicked his hip, then again on his stomach. Jeffrey leapt from his lounging position as he could underneath the seatbelt and punched Lou in the shoulder, looking at her dead in the eye, and then punching her again in her ribs. Lou cowered into a fetal position whilst swinging her small fists at his direction, missing his face with every attempt. She wailed to stop even louder, piercing the cramped space with a visceral squeal similar to a semi-truck with bad brakes. She kicked at his thighs, but Jeffrey didn't flinch. His fatal eye contact remained on his younger sibling, reminding Lou that he'd always win. That was, until the parents became involved, and Lou would cry just so.

"Hey, guys, stop it! What the hell are you doing back there?" Cary yelled, turning toward her kids. Her eyes were wide, and the kids can see the whites of them all around

her iris. Her brow is furrowed in a raging weight over her eyes. The frame of her mouth is parted as if ready to unhinge and swallow the ratty prey in the backseat.

“What is going on?”

“He started poking me and he wouldn't stop!”

Jeffrey didn't say anything.

“Jeffrey, leave you sister alone! Lou, leave your brother alone! Grow up,” Cary said. She looked at her kids for a few moments, but those moments froze in time, elongating for what felt like hours. The kids didn't know when life would resume at their mother's request. After staring them down until they submitted to slumping toward their respective windows with a sigh, she turned toward the road, illuminated by the lone headlights ahead of them, forging their known path home; to which Lou would pretend she was fast asleep, so her father would hoist her in his large arms and carry her up to bed, and Jeffrey would not let them know that she was actually awake. Instead, he'd retire to his room, climb into his twin bed, and wait until their father left Lou's room before knocking on the wall.

“What?” Lou whispered, unmoving.

“Goodnight,” Jeffrey said.

“Goodnight,” Lou replied. They both toss awake that night, unable to close their eyes, waiting for sleep to take them.

V. Zombie Deer

“Okay, you go hide,” Jeff said, holding his Nerf gun in one hand. He’d placed his camouflage hat on for good measure. Lou raced downstairs, falling to all-fours once she reached the main floor. She roamed around, pretending to be oblivious.

It was hard to run on her hands and knees, and Lou made a note of that. She knew Jeffrey would be upset if she ran on her two feet, so she practiced settling her toes into the ground, using her hands as stabilizers and her feet as propellers. This way, if he shot the Nerf gun at her, she’d be able to run away quicker than the last time.

She thought about the deer she’d try to lure at her grandparent’s cabin six hours from here, how one time a doe approached her and Katie on one of their nature walks without hesitation. Katie called her Miley, like “Smiley-Miley.” Lou thought that was dumb, but kept it to herself.

Deer weren't supposed to be friendly toward humans, leading Lou to the conclusion that the doe had been shot at some point since then, or attacked by a mountain lion. Lou wasn't about to channel Miley’s kind spirit today as she wandered around her house, awaiting her brother’s stealthy arrival. He wasn't too secretive about it. Playing along was expected, even though Lou was just around the corner of her double-digit years and she was aware of how much of a game it all was.

A few laps around the main level of the house and Lou turned a corner to see a plate of carrots sitting just so outside of the fridge. Knowing that he might be around the corner, she looked around, only to bend down and begin eating them directly off the napkin. They were cold, so they hadn't been sitting out long. He was nearby. Within the

iteration of a creak Lou looked up and saw Jeffrey pointing the Nerf gun around the corner of the stairwell, stilled in a hunter's anticipation.

They locked eyes. If she moved, Lou knew that he'd shoot, and he'd win. If she stayed still for too long, he'd find the perfect shot, right along the heart, and she wouldn't even be able to pretend to run away injured. Before she could make her decision, he pulled the trigger and out shot a foam Nerf dart that hit her square in the ribs, and she ran away in the other direction, bleating as she saw the deer did on the hunting shows Steve watched. She rounded the corner out of the kitchen, down the narrow butler's pantry and into the dining room, before collapsing in the main entryway of the house by the front door. Proud hunter Jeffrey came waltzing by and, in his best proud hunter impression, knelt down on one knee beside the injured deer, grabbed chunks of her hair in each hand (antlers), lifted her limp head up and said, "She's a beauty!"

But Lou didn't like to play by his rules. She twisted and let out a shrill growl, standing on her two legs, shouting, "It's a zombie deer!"

"Lou, stop!" Jeffrey called. Even though he was eleven, he still didn't like to avert from the "rules" of the game: to remain as close to reality as possible. There were no such thing as a zombie deer.

Lou ran away growling and laughing, turning to the frustrated hunter and taunting him. She then ran at him, baring her teeth and painted nails, and he shot her again with the Nerf gun.

"Zombie deer can't die!" she cried.

"Yes they can!" he replied before being tackled by his mutant trophy.

“Killer deer! Killer deer! You’ll never take me alive!” They rolled around on the carpet and he knocked her over.

“You can’t do that,” he said, exasperated. His bright blond hair stood on end after his hunting cap had been ripped off by the rabid deer. He smoothed it down, placed it on his head, and, after seeing her squirm to get up and run away, pushed her down again. She laughed.

“No! No! Let me get up!” she said, but at every attempt to get up, even slightly, he pushed her back down to the ground. He wouldn’t stop until she relaxed. But it only made her laugh harder.

Jeffrey didn’t say anything of the matter, instead watching Lou to see if she’d get up. At any movement, he pushed her down.

“Okay, let’s try that again. You’re the deer since you decided to go all crazy on me. Next time, be a real deer.”

“How about no?”

He pushed her down again, and she laughed.

“I’m not gonna keep playing with you if you keep pushing me down!”

“And I won’t keep playing with you if you keep turning into a zombie!”

“Yes, you will!” She pounced up and ran away and, rather than chasing her, he loaded his Nerf gun and pretended to be a hunter again, while Lou skipped throughout the house insisting she was still mutant.

“I’m going cra-a-a-zy!” she yelled. He didn’t reply. Hunters are always quiet. He trotted up the stairs to his bedroom, grabbing his deer antlers, remembering that deer

are attracted to the sound of rumbling antler against antler. She'll follow along eventually, perhaps he thought.

VI. The "F" Word

Jeffrey was tasked by their mother to remain with Lou at all times on their walks home from middle school. Lou was twelve, Jeffrey thirteen, and he towered over her, and often found himself raising his chin, striding with more strength and rhythm at an older male passerby Or when he saw one of his female classmates. That afternoon, Lou had to pull Jeffrey away from his friends that gathered by the basketball hoop in front of their small school building to begin their walk home. It was a popular hangout time with her classmates. But Lou didn't like to wait. She'd morphed from a "social butterfly," as her teachers characterized her in her report cards, to a severe introvert. She never hung out with friends after school or on weekends, preferring the comfort of her own home. It didn't matter even if she'd wanted to hang out with friends, because she was rarely invited. Perhaps because she was introverted, she often thought. But as soon as the final bell rings, she'll swipe her backpack from her locker, rush outside to find her brother, and motivate him toward the sidewalk outside of the schoolyard. The sooner she can get home, the better.

Jeffrey began this walk annoyed, as he didn't like to be pressed by his little sister in front of his friends. He never let that on to Lou. Instead, he huffed and turned to his friends to utter one last snarky comment, laughed a while longer, and finally turned to his sister, who'd been watching him that entire time, leading her away from his friends. But on that walk home, he wanted pop.

Not a can of pop that they had in the back of their refrigerator at home, but a Big Gulp from the Holiday gas station near their house. He had a severe thirst for pop, so much so that he attempts to abstain from it during the Lenten season. Easter Sunday ends in a dehydration headache and a sugary film over his teeth and tongue after consuming as much pop as he felt he'd been cheated within those 40 days. And as they began their routine walk home that day, he felt that same urge to binge on the sugary drink. Sometimes his friends would hang out around Holiday after school, as well as the high schoolers, whom Jeffrey liked to interact with, smooth and nonchalant. He hoped his height would offset the fact that he was a middle-schooler. But his bad acne, severe and cystic, would not help. He tried not to think about it. The doctor said that, besides accutane (which he would not take), there was nothing he could do about it. At least he was athletic, he might have thought.

They had reached the dilapidated two-story apartment building across the street with the old, obese man sitting on his couch outside of his apartment door. He was always there, and no matter the weather, he always wore a tank-top and gray sweatpants, which showed off his weather-burned red shoulders. The man always watched the siblings as they walked home, and the siblings always watched him back. Lou always found herself walking on the inside of the sidewalk, which comforted her at this stretch, as she walked next to the Presbyterian church, which was lined with bushes littered with Doritos bags, cigarette butts and a Coors Lite can. She then got to walk by the alley, which she always looked down with intent, wondering if anyone waited around the corner to jump the next passerby. They hadn't been caught yet.

“I want to go to Holiday to get pop,” Jeffrey said, “let's go get pop.”

“I don’t want to go.”

“Why not? Holiday is literally right by our house.”

“No it’s not. It’s far away from our house. I want to go home.”

“Lou, it’s literally two minutes away. Let’s go.”

“Jeffrey, we have pop at home. Why don’t you just have that?”

“Because I want the pop from Holiday. Please, can we go?”

Lou sighed. “No. You can go, though.”

“But I’m not supposed to leave you. So if you don’t come with me I can’t go at all.”

“Jeffrey, I really don’t want to go. I want to go home.”

They reached the busy intersection dividing the downtown area from the neighborhoods. Only a little over two blocks remained in their walk. Lou wondered if Jeffrey will leave her if she kept refusing, despite his insistence on his inability to do so.

“Please?”

“No, I just really want to go home.”

“Lou, why are you even saying no? It’s just right by our house, it will only take a second.”

“No!” Lou wouldn't budge. Even though she hated telling someone no, especially when she knew it would cause uproar. She got the people-pleaser gene from her mother, a gene she'll grow to fight as she becomes older. But the thought of seeing people she knew at Holiday was enough for her to disregard the gene. She knew that, if she went, she'd see her classmates gathered in a circle gossiping about how Becca and Chandler dated for only thirty minutes today because Becca changed her mind, and that Cheyenne

wore the weirded embroidered pants, and so on. And she'd have to pretend she didn't see them, and stand in the corner of the store waiting for her brother, who'd find his friends and start up where they left off in the schoolyard. She'd watch her classmates and wonder what that was like. To be within a circle, that circle, without a thought behind it, without an inquired entry or any lingering doubts about belonging. That is what terrified Lou. That is why she remains at home after school and on weekends.

The light had finally changed, and they crossed the street into the neighborhoods. Jeffrey drifted to the left, in the direction of Holiday, staring at his younger sister.

"C'mon, lets go," he said, "I really want pop."

"Jeffrey, we have pop at home. I'm not going."

Jeffrey slumped and strode to the sidewalk. "You're so annoying. I want to do one thing, one time, and you say no."

"Jeffrey, it doesn't matter, we have pop at home, you don't have to yell at—"

"Shut up! I don't want to hear it. I don't want to talk to you. You always get your way. It's always been that way. You're so obnoxious."

Lou stared at her brother, the red anger in his face contrasting with his platinum hair. She knew if she said something, she'd cry. But she wanted to convey anger, not sadness or dismay. So she pressed on, staring at her brother in the face, yet wishing in the small of her mind that she were more adventurous. She wished she could be more approachable. She wished she wasn't both afraid and fascinated with those people. She wished she was more like her brother.

"And you know what? You always tell on me. You're probably gonna tell mom on me. You always tell mom for every single *fucking* thing I do," he paused for dramatic

effect. Lou's mouth dropped open. He turned on his best, shrill mocking voice, "And now, now you're gonna be like, 'Oh! Jeffrey said 'fucking!' You should ground him Mom!'"

Lou looked down at her sneakers and her dirty khakis. She'd never heard him utter that word before, much less toward her. Lou strained her eyes to suck the tears back behind her eyes. Should she have acquiesced, and followed him to Holiday? Was her refusal worth her guilt, her hot tears threatening to swell her face? There was nothing she could do in that moment. Part of her wanted to apologize, but the other part wanted to give him the silent treatment until he begged for her forgiveness. But what overwhelmed her entirely was the part determined prove him wrong. She wouldn't ever tell her mother. And then Jeffrey couldn't make her feel petty and small again. She was decided. She took deep breaths, holding her head high.

Jeffrey had already made his way inside, and the front door was wide open. Because of her parents' (especially their mother's) concern at the recent string of burglaries that have plagued the neighborhood, they leave the front door locked at all times. Jeffrey was the one responsible for the key, and always unlocked it, before promptly locking it behind them as they made it inside. But he had left it open this time, instead of locking it behind him like Lou thought, and she strolled through.

She took off her shoes by the dining room wall to her left and walked upstairs to her room, shedding her coat and backpack on the floor beside her desk.

"Hi Lou," a voice said from beside her room. It was her mother, uncharacteristically home at this hour from work. Lou took a deep breath. She hadn't

prepared to face another person, especially her mother. She reminded herself of her promise, but felt emotion pinching her in her throat.

“Hi, Mom,” she replied, as nonchalantly as she could.

“What’s up?” her mother said, walking into her room. Lou wanted to repeat the word Jeffrey had pointed to her today. If she could not act normal in front of her mother, then her mother would press and insist that something was wrong and that she explain herself.

“Nothing,” Lou returned.

“What’s wrong, are you okay?”

Lou stared at her mother and forced happy thoughts into her brain. Chocolate, sour cream and onion Pringles, the Sims....

“I’m okay.”

“No you’re not, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Lou, just tell me what’s wrong. I can tell that something’s wrong.”

Lou was cornered. Her mother was eating at her strength. She wished she could make her believe that everything was okay.

“You look like you’re about to cry. What happened?”

Lou reasoned in her mind that, if she whispered what had happened, Jeffrey would never have to know. She’d explain the situation and it would all be okay.

Lou lowered her voice, now quivering through the tears streaming down her face.

“Jeffrey said the f-word to me.”

“He did?”

A voice called from downstairs, dejected: “Yes, I did.”

That night, after all of the harsh reprimands from their mother and the apologetic looks from his sister, Jeffrey still knocked their shared wall. Lou knocked back once, before turning to the window overlooking their street, watching the transients become illuminated by the golden streetlamps as they walked by, before falling asleep.

VII. The Accident

Lou and her mother had planned to go shopping for art supplies. A self-proclaimed “girls day,” taken on days the boys went to the ranch to help with the cows. Lou wanted art supplies. Jeffrey was budding as an artist, with an affinity for oil sticks and elk in the wilderness. His style mimicked their grandmothers’, with sweeping motions and blended, natural hues. It was unconventional of a popular eighth-grade boy. Lou felt inspiration burst from her chest (or, perhaps, it was jealousy) and wanted to paint on canvas. As she watched the snow fall before hopping in the shower to get ready, she thought about what to paint. Perhaps a snow scene.

She was in the shower when she heard yelling. Her mother had inherited her father’s temper, so she assumed Dad had probably called and upset Mom. Maybe he and Jeffrey wouldn’t be home in time for the dinner she had planned. Lou turned off the shower, still lathered, to listen. Silence. As she reached to turn the shower back on, the yelling resumed.

“You stupid fuck! How could he be dead?”

Lou waited. Who had died? It was someone important enough for her to bellow and scream into the phone. Maybe it was Grandpa. It was probably Grandpa.

“You stupid fuck!”

She knelt down in the shower. *Please, God, please, let it be no one important—* obviously, it was going to be someone important— *please, let it all be okay. Don't let it be dad, or Jeffrey, or grandpa. Please help....*

Perhaps the yelling persisted while she prayed. Or, perhaps her mother had hung up the phone and leaned against the kitchen counter. Perhaps she, too, had fallen to her knees to pray. But Lou didn't pay attention to this. She hoped that her prayer would reverse this death. She still didn't know who it was. It was probably grandpa.

Suddenly, the sound of low steps trudging up the staircase, muffled by the old carpet. Lou swung her robe on and stepped out of the bathroom, still covered in soapy lathers. Her mother there, standing in front of her, smaller than Lou knew her to be, shades of lifeless white and splotchy red across her face and her chest. She was still in her pajama pants. Lou smiled for the off-chance that it could be reversed. But the snow, suddenly, fell hard and loud outside.

“There was an accident at the ranch,” her mother began.

It was probably Grandpa.

“They think Jeffrey's dead.”

VIII. Saving

Lou's father once tried to save a dying man's life. He was in college and working as a server at a restaurant. The man was with his wife and children, and it was a day to celebrate for the family: his terminal condition was looking toward healing. The man must have excused himself from the festivities to go to the bathroom, and the wife and children left to occupy themselves elsewhere. When the family had returned to find their father and husband, they were met with an ambulance outside the restaurant, ready to wheel the now-dead man out of the men's restroom. He had collapsed, and Lou's father had found him in the bathroom and began to perform CPR. Recounting the story, he'd describe how the man was vomiting, but it didn't stop him from performing mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. "He was dying, I didn't care at that point," he said. But it didn't work. And the family had to realize that their small "see you later," their quick brush of their hands together and a half-smile, reassuring a swift return, became their goodbye. Lou wondered if the man crossed her father's mind when the same fate arrived for his son, when the truck flipped along the dirt ranch road and snatched the young boy's life away.

After knowing for an hour of her brother's accident, she was handed the phone to speak to her father. He insisted that yes, he was gone, but that it wasn't bad, in terms of physical injury or open wounds. She asked him if he had performed CPR on him, like the man he tried to save in the bathroom. It had to work for Jeffrey. He was theirs. Please, she insisted. Tell me you tried CPR. Her father said yes, he did perform CPR on his son, but that it wasn't working. Wasn't going to work. I'm so sorry. All through hyperventilated tears. Through these words muffled by static wind, Lou felt like the

pickup had flipped on top of her as well. She had swiftly handed the phone back to her mother, not without reminding her father that it was okay. She loved him. No goodbye.

Anne was the first friend to arrive after the accident was announced to close friends and family. Before that, Lou's mother suggested to her daughter that she change out of her pajama pants and skimpy camisole. There would be more people over. But Lou could tell that her mother immediately regretted this suggestion. Lou changed anyway, wondering if it really mattered.

When her mother opened the front door, Anne burst through and, without hesitation, clung to her friend. "Oh, my God, Cary, I'm so sorry," she said into her shoulder. They held each other for a while. Lou's mother remained stoic in her face, but withdrawn. As if her emotions spilled out of her ears onto the floor. Lou watched them from beside the closet door near the entryway. She was about to begin collecting Jeffrey's things into a box, but only his favorite things. They were hers, now.

Anne removed herself from Cary's arms and looked at Lou.

"Hey, Lou," she said, walking toward Lou to embrace her. Anne held her for a moment, before letting go and turning to Cary.

"I'm so sorry, you guys," she affirmed. She brushed her short, black hair out of her eye, still unbrushed. The last time Lou checked, it was 12:11 p.m. Now, it was 1:11.

Anne and Cary talked. Lou watched for a while before turning toward the front window in the living room. The snow continued to fall. More people should arrive soon. More people would stay for a while, bring trays of food, make calls to friends who should know, spread the word of the fate of a young boy who was just learning how to drive.

She wondered how long he and her grandparents waited for the ambulance to arrive at the scene, ninety minutes from town. She considered the distance and the snow affecting these conditions, if sirens blared the whole time, or if, since they knew he was gone, they simply drove along the highway, without a word or a sideways glance at anything except the road ahead. Perhaps the same routine was taken for the dead man in the bathroom: either the sirens screamed emergency, or drove along at a knowing pace. Why didn't they send a helicopter? All she could hear in her mind as her mother spoke to her father over the phone were the sirens screaming through falling snow. Rounding blares dissolving to a whimper as the snow swallowed the sound. If any of the other drivers heard them along the way. Or, if there was anyone at all driving that road, that day, to hear the sirens at all. How long did her grandmother have to hold Jeffrey's cold hand until help arrived to cart him away? How long did her father have to sit beside the truck, wondering how it could've gone different? And when the ambulance finally arrived, were they ready to let his body go?

At this thought, Lou ran upstairs to begin collecting Jeffrey's favorite things in a box, for what reason she did not know, except that it wasn't her who was moving her body toward these things. Resisting felt like being buried alongside his newly departed soul. So she collected before anyone else could arrive.

The snow kept falling.

How Do You Experience Your Grief?

I. What We Know

“You probably know more than we do. You two probably had so many secrets.”

“We had some, I think. I remember he was really upset about his skin one day after school.”

“Oh no... he did have it pretty bad. I remember taking him to the dermatologist and they said that only accutane would clear everything up, but accutane is a pretty harsh drug. I didn't want him to take that. He almost started to cry when we got in the car afterwards.”

“Yeah, that day on our walk home from school he said that he didn't think girls liked him because of his skin. He heard some of them saying, ‘Oh, do you like Jeffrey?’ and they'd laugh and say, ‘Oh my gosh, no!’ like it was some cruel joke or something. Like having a crush on Jeffrey was weird. And he thought it was about his skin.”

“That's awful.”

“It was so sad. I didn't know what to say. He was down all day after that. He told me not to tell anyone. So he'd probably kill me if he heard me now.”

“Well, he might've heard you.”

Lou didn't respond.

“Do you think he can hear us? Like he's looking down on us right now?”

No response.

II. Haunted Road

Rolling along those gravel roads felt haunted. The rocks shuddered with more intensity beneath the truck as they drove to the ranch house for a weekend visit, and it felt as though the truck moved with a disquieting reverence as it took careful turns around each bend. It had been a few months since the accident, so Lou was anxious to drive by the spot where it happened. Her cousin, Katie, was sitting beside her in the backseat, looking down at her video game. She'd never visited the ranch before, but because of what happened, she felt compelled to go. Jeffrey's death affected her more than their family anticipated, and she'd clung to the loss in a hopeless, concerning manner. Being a burgeoning adolescent with intense emotional responses, Lou felt responsible for pulling her up from the heartbreak, despite growing into her teenage years herself. So she tried laughing a lot, dancing, taking weird model photos on their camera and reliving childhood memories. On the surface, everything seemed fine. But Lou couldn't be sure, whenever Katie looked out the window along the ranch today, if her younger cousin was feeling particularly morbid, distraught, or lost inside. Lou watched her when it wasn't obvious.

Her father was at the wheel, and her mother kept her hand at his shoulder, mindfully rubbing it and smiling at him whenever his head tilted in her direction. He'd sometimes try to force a smile back. As they drew nearer to the spot, he returned a smile less, instead pretending he didn't see her.

The weather was sunny and the air rested calm that afternoon, which was odd for the gentle, rolling grassland at this time of year. Whistling wind was commonplace and even expected, causing the dust gather at the corner of any outsiders' eyes at a lifting

breeze. The seasonal drought had begun, which made the heat settle lower and heavier upon the plains. Weather aside, Lou noted how the space had changed since the accident. Nothing passed along the car windows the same; it all moved too slow. It reminded Lou of the walk up the church aisle, her brother's casket at her left side, watching the full congregation watch her as they went. She remembered how she felt obligated to smile back, and they'd only purse their lips in somber recognition of her gesture. She remembered how they watched her: close, wide-eyed, patient yet frantic in their minds. They never took their eyes off her family. So many eyes, towering and shocked, clustered tight to capacity in the church. They wouldn't stop watching until the newness of it all, a few months later, died down.

Yet here there were no eyes and she still felt that same uneasiness, the guilt she felt to remind everyone that she was okay. Everything moved in waiting as to what her family would do when they drove by the spot. The grass knew, the antelope prancing a few hundred yards away knew, the ancient sea rocks, dulled their orange glimmers, also knew.

There should be a rose there, Lou remembered. Her grandfather's new stepdaughter, who had been talking to Jeffrey for a few weeks before his death, had woefully placed a rose at the spot in the ditch. She wanted to roll her eyes at this, but she knew it was impolite.

They drew nearer to the spot, near the Erikson place, right where it had happened. Lou kept her head down, afraid to look obvious in her desire to see the spot, yet she remained attentive in her patience for the accident scene to arrive. Her cousin had moved

her head from her game to the window, watching the dry landscape pass by, perhaps also waiting to pass by the ditch.

The Erickson place was in sight, so Lou turned her attention to the window. She was on the left side of the truck, which was closest to where it happened. As they rode along she watched the long ditch pass by, anxious to see evidence of the accident. There was nothing. It looked the same as it always had: no debris, no flattened grass, no haunted cross with a football resting at its side. It looked like any other ditch they'd passed that day. Regardless, Lou's heart twisted in her chest, growing heavy the nearer they drew. She felt paralyzed against the seat, unable to move, breathe, or remove her eyes from the scene. It never was clear which spot was the exact spot. Still, she pictured the wreckage up ahead, imagining how they got Jeffrey out, how hard she shivered as they waited for the ambulance, their faces as they watched it drive down the road.

Without warning there was a cry from the front seat. It was deep and throaty, like the lump everyone feels when they're about to cry had finally popped. It was quick, silenced as soon as it was released, and squeaked with repression at its end. It gripped hard, desperate for a full-blown meltdown.

Lou looked forward and knew it came from her father. She couldn't see his face but she knew he wasn't looking at the road, nor was he looking at the ditch. His head was down, turned slightly away from the window, and she felt his eyes were shut tight. His hands looked like they'd tear at the knuckle, or snap the wheel of the truck, whichever would come first because he wouldn't stop. Lou could only see her mother's face, which was glued to her father's without any emotion other than concern furrowing her brow.

She frantically rubbed her father's shoulders, massaging away the guilt for being in the truck with his son the day he died.

He kept his head down as they passed the house. Katie had met her older cousins' eyes for an instant, regarding that passing moment, before turning her eyes to the window beside her.

Her parents began talking in a low mumble, inaudible to Lou, as if nothing happened— no air of concern or remembrance, no voices echoing remorse or grief.

She never heard a cry like that from her father again.

III. Jeffrey's Voice

“What else do you remember about him? Like, what other secrets did you guys have together that we don't know? I'm sure you know more than we do, he wouldn't want to tell his parents certain things.”

Slumping in her chair at the kitchen table, empty seat beside her, she looked toward the wallpaper painted ornate fruits and vines. They waited for a response, eager to know more about their son.

There was a lot she no longer remembered. She couldn't recall his smell, his certain looks he'd give to his father when they were joking around, the way he practiced crossing invisible opponents in both football and basketball along their backyard. She couldn't remember how she tried to embarrass him when he was showing his crush around the middle school, how she ran up to him, wrapping him in a fierce embrace while saying, “I love you, Jeffrey, I'll miss you,” before laughing and running away. He didn't hug back, instead he introduced his annoying sister to the new girl. She didn't remember

the note she'd written about him during the funeral week. Sometimes, late at night, she'd try to remember the fights they'd get in, but she'd end up remembering her father crying on his bed asking her daughter why this happened to them, or how her grandmother claimed her grandson was more like a son to her, and Lou's father exploded at her. She remembered how it was on Lou's sixteenth birthday, and her grandmother left telling her dad, "Fuck you." But she didn't remember his laugh, how he acted with his friends, or how he never let her have the downstairs television after school, because it was hard for him to watch ESPN on the small television upstairs.

When she pushed beyond the funeral service, her mother bent over his casket trembling as they lay a white cloth over it, and she pushed beyond the calls, texts, and flowers sent to her parents in the coming anniversaries, she'd remember that Thursday afternoon, walking home from school with him, looking up at his downcast face, asking her why he wasn't good enough for the girls he liked, why he had to have acne on his face, how he didn't want anyone to know. She could only remember how he looked, walked, strode forward with his only drive being away from their school, and how she didn't know what to say to him.

She still couldn't remember the sound of his voice.

IV. Morning Practice

Along the just-rained on track their shoes squeegeed with each step, walking toward the bleachers of the small football stadium. It was still dark outside and foggy outside; both Lou and her roommate, Kaelia, were rubbing the sleep from their eyes as they approached their waiting teammates. Today was a hard workout day, and Lou had

been mulling over the prescribed paces, the distance ahead, the difficulty at hand. Her drawstring bag bounced against her back and twisted as it hung low, heavy with racing flats, water bottles, extra clothes, and her recovery drink. The open door accessing the locker room beneath the stands was the only indication of wakefulness in the area as light poured through the opening. The weight of sleep still hung heavy over their heads as they kept their eyes down.

“I’m really curious to see how this workout is going to go today,” Kaelia said, her voice still raspy from sleep. Their workouts nowadays were always hard, a level of toughness Lou couldn’t comprehend as a high school cross country and track athlete. Workouts, then, were short in mileage and controlled entirely by the effort, in those moments, she desired to put forth. In collegiate running, submerging oneself in self-pity and buckling underneath the labor led to unpredicted slow times and the eventual conversation with the coaches as to why you’ve decided to quit. Lou learned that within the first few weeks of her first semester. At that moment, as a sophomore, it took no extra effort to show up. It became habitual to roll out of bed at six in the morning and power through a hard workout, and it reminded her of the coyotes she’d imagine outside of the window on long car rides. Mimicking that helped her press on when her muscles tied up.

“Me too,” Lou replied. Few words needed to be exchanged between them concerning the workout, as they’d already discussed the night before concerning how they felt about it, or if they were excited or nervous. Without another word they walked into the locker room where the small group of lean athletes sat, eyes distant and minds far away, waiting for the coach to break the tension with his monologue of the work ahead. A few female teammates peered up and muscled a half-smile toward the duo.

“Ready for the workout?” one unusually awake girl asked Kaelia, and she returned a pensive nod and replied, “are you?”

“Ugh. Ready as I’ll ever be, God,” she said, mustering a chuckle. Nothing new from her.

A few teammates lay on the floor tending to sore muscles with a foam or stick roller, and a few others stretched and thumbed their calves to loosen them for firing.

Lou sat on the bench and set her bag at her feet. The sound of tired mumbles and crumpling granola bar wrappers cracked the silence, yet no one seemed to care. People either wanted to get the workout over with, or were looking forward to tackling the challenge. Lou wasn't sure, in that moment, where she stood. She'd never disliked workouts, she was merely against the notion of waking up early to do them. Running lap after lap of race pace, faster than race pace, to threshold pace, down to resting pace, and back again would be easier with muscles warmed from a days movements. Instead, each workout traveled like a dream in her mind and through her body. Hitting prescribed paces wasn't an issue, rather there was an issue of awareness— often, after eating scrambled eggs, hash browns, pineapples, and two glasses of chocolate milk, she could only remember the workout she'd just completed as a hazy mix of burning ligaments, steaming breath, and a coach's affirmations through an icy, Oregon fog. It felt like a dream, though her muscles walking up and down the stairs that day knew it was real.

Lou leaned forward over her lap and waited for her coach to break the silence. Before he could do that, one of her teammates walked through the door, eyes down with thick rimmed glasses resting at the base of his nose, taking each step light and predominantly on his toes, like a bird. He was small-framed, as most male distance

runners are, and his black hair stood up with purpose. He was the same year as Lou, yet they rarely talked.

The other male teammates looked up at him. A few paused their roll-out sessions to smile at him.

“Jeff!”

“Hey Jeffrey!”

Lou winced within herself, never taking her eyes off the pole in front of her. He smiled and nodded at them.

“Sup, Jeffrey?” one of them said, making room for him along the cold, concrete locker room bench.

She wished they'd stop saying Jeffrey. But she couldn't explain to them why. Instead, she looked forward, rubbing her gloved hands together, imagining her brother walking through the locker room hallway. Her imagination wouldn't get him past the shadow within the hall, just outside of the door. He was walking forward, but he never made it.

“Okay guys, looks like we're all here. Today's workout are some one kilometer repeats for the distance crew...”

What Kind of Strategies Do You Use to Cope?

I. Slumdog Millionaire

It started as an accidental cut. She bent over to examine her wound, bleeding red and furious and urgent as it poured from her ankle. It didn't hurt. The water washed it away, swirling and diluted dark rust, down the shower drain. She was just shaving her legs because it was a warm summer evening and their close family friends were coming over in a few hours. She didn't mean to slice her ankle just right on the bone.

She wanted to do it again.

She wanted to slip away, inconsequentially, into the shower drain as the blood did. She wanted it to be quiet, only a few muffled gasps and maybe a shampoo bottle falling to the ground. The water would still be running. No, she'll shut it off, at the last minute, so that most of the blood can be washed away and that no one inside the house will grow suspicious at the length of her shower. She knew they would. And she wanted to simply slip away, "slip into the next room" like the poem hanging on the fridge that her mother cried at, like how she slinks away when her parent's friends come over for dinner and drinks. Quiet, like water tapping on the shower drain after a long, hot shower.

So she squeezed the wound. She cursed it for making her do this but thanked it for making her do this. The emergency of the spillage alarmed her; spastic and quick as it mixed with the water dripping down her leg. She reached for the razor. This wasn't enough. Ankle cuts don't end people. And she found disquieting solace in the likeness between the wound and herself. Because of this, she'd let it should flow free. She merely hoped that it would all be quiet.

Instead of thinking about the other side, or of rivers flowing to oceans flowing into each other, or of the easy breeze against ancient sea rocks atop a dry butte, she thought of one empty chair beside another. It was her kitchen table, tucked at the very end of the kitchen in a nook, with a red flower centerpiece and small salt and pepper shakers. Four chairs tucked around the table. Her mother and father sit on either end, eating dinner, chin down facing their meals without a word. The chairs on either side were empty. Silverware clinked against glassware here, and the sun was still setting. Neither of them look up. To her father's right are two plates sitting atop the kitchen counter, alongside two forks and two cups. There's no food on the plates or milk in the cups. Her mother still forgets, but doesn't have the heart to put them away once she's realized she made the same mistake. The silverware keeps clinking. And the sun finally sets. And her father is no longer hungry. And her mother can no longer decide which child's bed she should sleep in that night.

Lou's hands fell from the still-flowing wound to the shower floor. Kneeling, he rested her chin on her knee, the water still hitting her back and numbing her skin. The cut continued to burst and the swirls danced down the tub like the Northern Lights colored rust. She slammed the water valve shut, threw open the curtains, and reached for the towel. Pressure makes the blood stop, that's all she knew. So she pressed hard and constant and took deep breaths from her chest. She worried the blood may not clot. And people won't think that it started as an accident and ended as a regret. They'll think it's sad, they'll cringe and bear down to suffer and lose minutes to their life at the sight of her parents, and then they'll move on. But her parents will be left at an empty dinner table with too many hot leftovers and clean plates.

Her breathing grew rapid, which made the blood rush away from her head, which made her brain start to buzz and feel like crinkling static along the outsides. She removed the towel to examine the stain, then placed it back on the cut in a clean spot. The only sounds in the small bathroom were that of her breathing and the music playing from the kitchen as her mother cooked, preparing for guests to arrive in a few hours. She'll have to face guests. She knows to smile through it. They'll ask about how school's going and she'll know not to reply about how she lay scared and critical in her bathtub and how the hot water numbed her skin enough for the stinging to go away. She'll know to say that school's going well.

Remove, inspect, press, wait, repeat. That's how it went for the next ten minutes. The towel was ruined. It burned every time she removed it. But she dared not make a sound. As far as her family was concerned, she was taking a long bubble bath with lavender soap and a lit candle on the sink. Maybe even doing a hair mask. Remove, inspect, press, wait, repeat.

The bleeding subsided to what looked like a small, swollen node on her ankle, which wrinkled to look like a sun-dried tomato. She was still lightheaded. The towel looked as if it had been intended to look like a chic, perhaps morbid take on red colored dalmatian prints, so Lou decided she'd shove it in the back of her closet and find a quiet time to discreetly throw it away. She got up, got dressed in jeans and a nice shirt, combed her fingers through her wet hair, and put on some makeup. She kept it light by budding middle school girl's standards. But she found herself unresolved. She needed some form of closure against her evening, and she couldn't bring it to another person. She, perhaps, needed a reason to avoid milking another accidental cut in the future. Closure would give

her purpose, she thought. The movie trailer for *Slumdog Millionaire* ran through her mind, how she'd been trying to find the song for the past few months. All at once, she grew desperate, and threw herself at her computer. If nothing else at all, she'd find an answer to one thing, this being the name of a song she didn't know but couldn't stop thinking about. She'd even brought it up to a classmate who, out of some deep-seeded guilt and pity, sympathized with her that yes, it was probably tough to find a song that has no real discernible lyrics and was most likely produced specifically for the movie trailer, but it sounded beautiful. They weren't even on the topic of music. Lou blurted it out as they were waiting outside of the church basement for lunch that she had this song stuck in her head. "That sucks," the girl said. She was athletic. She didn't need makeup to be pretty.

"I'd sing it, but there are no lyrics! It's just all these violins and maybe some oohs by a singer. And these drums! Ugh. I wish I could just sing it right now."

"That sucks," the girl replied. Her curly, brown hair was in a braid. Her green eyes were wide but she forced her mouth into a half-smile, refusing to break the conversation until Lou did. The death was still fresh. Sensitivity was expected.

Lou began her search on YouTube, looking up the trailer in the search bar. She clicked on the first result and began scrolling through the comments. Pages and pages and pages of identified and anonymous internet users debating on whether the film was too corny in its romance and if the burning eye scene was too harsh. Nothing about the song. The emergency she felt in the shower returned. Her wound might reopen. The swirls on the bathtub floor churned in her gut as she began shaking her knees. Her eyes welled up. Still nothing. She didn't want to fight for the one thing that brought her solace during the

day. She was tired of fighting. Facing her peers and her family with her crucial grin was chipping away, steady and easy, at her willpower. She never wanted to be an exhibit. Yet there she was, walking through the doors of her middle school building as students stepped around her, careful, watching her. They didn't want to miss the spectacle of a breakdown, only to hear about it from a friend who could only see the school counselor carting her away from afar. Lou wouldn't let that happen. But without something as simple as the knowledge of a song she liked, without a reason as small as looking forward to going home and collapsing in her bed to the sound of one silly song she'd only heard a snippet of, she didn't see a reason against swirling down into that final shower drain.

But she couldn't do that to her parents. Especially one month after her brother's accident.

Thirty minutes of searching produced a hit. Urgent, she downloaded the song, took care to click the repeat icon, and sat in the space between her bed and the radiator with the lights off as the song played. She thought of stargazers blooming from a clay soil, of three chairs filled and loud, and of walking home from school light on her toes, eager for the coming moment.

II. The Ranch Again

A little more than a year after Jeffrey's accident, Lou's parents took her out to her favorite restaurant, so she could order the delicious pasta with white wine cream sauce and morel mushrooms. There, they told her Grandma and Grandpa Nelson were getting a divorce. Grandma would be moving to Billings, and Grandpa would be staying at the

ranch, tending to the cattle and the hay on his own. Her parents found out few weeks before that evening, prior to their family Easter break trip to Mexico. Cary and Steve just wanted to wait for the right time to tell her, and Lou, unsure of another, perhaps better option, agreed on their decision to wait. It shouldn't be too big of a blow to the family ties. They were grandparents, not her own parents. Cary, with her brow flipped up in concern, leaned over her still-full plate of pasta and asked, "What do you think?"

Lou didn't know what to ask. Could she know why, aside from the reliable 'they've simply fallen out of love' explanation? It a family matter, but she wanted to avoid too-personal questions. She was only thirteen and probably not entitled to the answer. Even if she did ask, her parents would bend and swerve around the truth. She'd grown accustomed to this pattern, yet never protested. Her youth and newfound single-child situation made her fragile in others' eyes. So she smiled larger. It was okay, it would be nice to have grandma close by.

"What about the ranch?" Lou asked. "Will we still go?" Her parents returned an apologetic shrug, but she knew the answer deep down. As they decided that dessert would be Dairy Queen ice cream, she felt a steady wave of realization sweep from her toes to her temples: that the ranch would no longer be a part of their lives. The weight of both the accident and now the divorce would crush the spirit of the land in their eyes. Lou already couldn't imagine how she could return and feel lifted and easy through the loose, golden rolls of the ranch again.

But it was already lost, after the accident. The unencumbered country air sat differently after the wreck was recovered, and the grass tilted in a heavier direction. It was as if the landscape watched the family when they drove through, the way the vigil

and funeral attendees watched the family as they listened through stories and sermons surrounding their boy, or how tentative co-workers watched and shuffled too far to one side where either Cary or Steve walked by, or how anxious classmates stared at Lou whenever she'd shift or snuffle during class. Like them, the Montana prairie was unsure how to grieve this loss. Like them, it seemed to grow silent, hoping the subject would change.

When Lou's grandmother moved to a house right against the base of the Rims in Billings, she grieved for her horizon line from which she drew inspiration. It was a quiet house, a self-proclaimed "tree-house" with bright red carpet in the dining area and a tall skylight. Within weeks, it grew to looking like an artist's house, which was, in essence, like an art gallery. Each piece, however small, was an original, which she insisted was necessary. Her painting studio was in the guest house right above the garage, the easel angled just so that she had access to the best natural light. But she lost inspiration to paint, and she cried to her daughter and granddaughter about it. Her anxiety from losing her grandson and her near-50-year marriage had halted her routines, and her subsequent lung cancer and eventual lobectomy allowed no further progress. She'd left the ranch, became single, grieved, quit smoking after 50 years of doing so, grieved harder, and then became a docent at the Yellowstone Art Museum. All the while, Lou watched her grandmother dissolve and evolve, attempt to adapt from miles of acreage to a treehouse, and listened when she ranted about it all. Nights having dinner with her grew long, but she was lonely, so Lou listened.

Lou's grandfather began courting a younger woman, someone Lou had met before, names Carole. She had worked for Lou's grandfather in the passed, and they'd

make small talk about school during job functions held in Billings. She wasn't particularly tall or beautiful; she had a wide smile that narrowed her eyes to a sharp line of mascara and eyeliner. Her auburn hair was always tousled, and she was thin, but not the kind of thin that people commented on. In spite of her plainness, her voice was unmatched in a group. She'd laugh and make comments about whatever and people couldn't avoid the noise coming from her mouth. There, she was noticeable. Beyond that, Lou didn't understand what attracted Grandpa to Carole, other than her young age, which promised more help around the ranch.

Until close to his death, Carole's daughter, Tori, had actually been texting with Jeffrey. Many people blew this relationship out of proportion after the accident, talking about how cute they would have been together. Lou would roll her eyes at this. She and her parents knew otherwise. Jeffrey had lost interest in the girl, perhaps because it was encouraged by either side of the families that they talk. He'd dug his own hole into the situation deeper because he sent her a picture of a heart-shaped tree stump that he and his sister would pass by on their walks home from school on Valentines Day. But he didn't know that he'd be involved in an accident that would turn his nice deeds into the acts of a doomed saint. According to Grandpa, the girl was taking his death very hard. She cried a shocking amount at the funeral, alongside Carole. Lou was skeptical at their outright emotions but didn't think it was appropriate to dismiss another person's grief.

Sometime after Grandpa and Carole got together, and before their quiet courthouse marriage ceremony, Carole went to speak with a medium for reasons unbeknownst to Lou. After her seance, she proclaimed through tears to Grandpa that she'd had a spirit-world conversation with Jeffrey. An entire conversation with a boy she

barely knew, her new husband's grandchild. When Lou was told of this instance, she decided everything from Carole was all bullshit. From then on, Lou had no problem vocalizing her distaste for the new wife, calling her a "snake" whenever she could. And no one else who heard that story thought she was redeemable.

This was Carole's fourth marriage, and she wed her second husband for his health insurance. Grandpa admitted that without him, Carole would have been screwed financially. She was so far in debt that only a marriage to a wealthy man could save her, and Grandpa, wounded from his grandson's death on his property, was her best bet. He figured he had a ranch hand in her, since Grandma had focused too much on her artwork or on keeping the household, in his eyes. He didn't figure that Carole would contract Lyme's disease, spend tens of thousands of dollars on treatment whilst maintaining a balanced diet of a daily pack of cigarettes, pop-tarts she hid under her bed, and avoiding the doctor's suggestions of exercise. He didn't figure that, after hiring a female ranch hand to help since Carole was laid up, she'd insist he fire her. He didn't figure that, after years of pursuing his dream to build the ranch and successfully produce a high-quality herd, a new wife whose main concern was financial would trickle down into the ultimate decision to sell first the cows, then the ranch. It made Lou's stomach flip and roll up to her throat when she scrolled through Facebook and read a lengthy post by Carole, about how devastated she was at losing the cows and the ranch she had grown to hopelessly love. This didn't happen until eight years after Jeffrey's passing, which through it all, made the family wonder who would've inherited the land had the accident never happened.

The messiness of the divorce and the new wife carried beyond the finalized signatures, as Grandpa was frustrated at her daughter's refusal to visit him at the ranch. Angry texts, emails, and phone calls bounced back and forth, and Cary's brother became involved when Grandpa started blaming him for being unaccepting of the situation as well. Cary felt the weight of the divorce too heavily against her and her mother's shoulders, and was strongly against how insistent he was that she get over it. "He's just so... narcissistic," she'd say after a long family dinner, "and I don't think he'll ever get it. I have to love him, because he's my dad, but it's so difficult when he just will never understand anyone else side but his own." Their back-and-forth quickly bubbled from an irritated "he-said-she-said" to Grandpa telling Steve over an awkward dinner, "If Cary or her brother don't want to accept my new wife, then they can go fuck themselves." One evening, when Grandpa was in Billings running errands, he texted Cary about coming over for a drink to talk to her about whatever, perhaps coming back to the ranch, perhaps the fact that she didn't want to speak with him. She'd been refusing to meet with him all week, because his persistence on her acceptance of Carole was frustrating her, and thought it was best that they didn't talk until he let it go. But he wouldn't let it go that day. "Tonight's not a good night," she replied via text, "we should try to schedule for some time next week." So he showed up to the house. "I want to see Cary, Stephen. I know she's here. Is she really going to be that fucking ridiculous and not see her father?" He yelled. Steve tried to call I'm down and assure she wasn't available, even though he didn't agree with her refusal to meet with him. Cary waited in the upstairs bathroom, motionless when he barged from the backyard to the mudroom. "You can tell her that she's dead to me," Grandpa said. Lou was standing outside of her room, afraid to creak the floorboards

underneath her feet. Even though there was no violence, no real fear for physical safety that evening, Lou was still scared for her mother that night. Beyond that, her grandfather and mother exchanged words both long and harsh, forgiving and cordial and back to curt and spiteful again into the unforeseen future.

On slow evenings when Cary would vent about Grandpa's backwards and often vain text messages about birthday meet-ups, Lou would agree with her complaints and often take her side. She didn't think anything of it beyond the fact that they thought alike about the situation. Lou figured, on certain nights, that perhaps her mother should try to visit the ranch. But Cary would insist she was under no obligation to. After all, they couldn't forget his narcissism.

Lou thought about the cow account, the savings account which was the accumulation of each calf sold that her own heifer at then ranch would birth, and how she didn't want to seem ungrateful. When he handed the account down to her, which was enough money for her to plan to take a year to travel outside of the U.S., she wasn't sure if she was allowed to feel angry toward him. He'd missed every one of her collegiate cross country or track meets he'd flown out to Oregon to watch, dishing out a last-minute excuse about Carole or his step-daughter. He had also grown distant, as he did from his other grandkids, and ensured he was being ignored. She'd be extra nice to him when they'd visit. She didn't always want to, though, but she figured kindness was her best option, until he presented the opportunity for her to voice her upset against him, which never happened. That was the problem with him. His egoism was slight and often underhanded around certain people, one of them being Lou. Perhaps he knew not to give her an outright reason for her to be openly disgusted with him. Perhaps he knew she

inherited her mother's guilt gene. Or perhaps he didn't care. But Lou knew this, how he pulled people to be on his side regardless of the consequences to his blood family.

But Grandpa also knew he had made a mistake marrying Carole. And she knew that he'd never admit that. So she let him carry on with his new family, who loved his pocketbook and his valuable land, let him live out as he chose and experience the results and consequences in silence. After all, she wasn't allowed to be upset at him, because she was young and never truly wronged by him, right?

But she had a hard time forgiving him for tainting the ranch land and ranch house with this new attitude and wife. She had trouble being merciful toward his decision to sell the ranch, a land she thought would remain in the family, a place she thought she could take her children to and explore the coulees and caves with. Lenience was difficult to come by when her childhood home felt cheapened. The fact that the accident happened on a road through the ranch land was difficult enough, but they could press on beyond the grief of the physical sight, because it was still a meaningful place. But it slowly devolved into a place that was no longer hers, or her parent's, or her grandmother's or ever her grandfather's. It was a space that also seemed to die, and revisiting it felt like stopping at a loved one's grave. She'd never let him know, instead holding it close to her, and it would move through her mind like alcohol every time he visited, or she saw a post by Carole on Facebook about how much she loved *her* cows and *her* ranch land.

III. Grasshoppers, Pt. 2

Lou knelt at the foot of the old play set behind her home where, under the ladder, weeds sprouted in careless multitudes. There were a few dead patches. The wind nudged

the weeds to a tremble and blew in dark grey clouds overhead. She'd been circumambulating her backyard after swinging on the swing-set for a while. Just before, she was lingering at the rock in the garden that had a large "J" on it, made for them by a family friend. Lou recalled when her mother looked at the gift and her lips pursed into a smile, her eyes gazing dead and empty, feeling stormed from within. The friend hugged her. She planted roses at the stone's permanent place in the garden. It had yet to be overgrown. Lou had seen her mother gently rinsing the rock as she watered the garden, pausing there longer than at any other living thing.

Many years ago, Lou would place the grasshoppers she captured from the ranch under the ladder to the top of the playset, because the foundation created the illusion of a barrier (though they could easily leap over it), and there was an abundance of grass and weeds for them to eat. She could let them roam outside of their jar while keeping a close eye on them. But it had been a while since she'd been at the ranch. And so she sat at the foot of the play-set, wondering where the grasshoppers may have gone.

A storm was spilling over from the west. The sky directly above her was blue, yet the black clouds continued to roll in their direction. Increasingly erratic winds caused the wind chimes to lose their echo in their rhythmic clinks. Lou wonders if the animals knew about the approaching storm.

She stood to stretch her legs. Her MP3 fell to the ground, dangling by the earphones caught in her pocket. She grabbed it and return it to her pocket, holding her gaze on where it fell. As she mindlessly scanned the grass, something grabbed her attention, something she hadn't seen in their yard before. There, just a few inches from her feet, was a grasshopper. It lied still, its antennae waving and surveying. Lou returned

to a crouch. This one didn't come from the ranch. It's vibrant, city colors weren't like that of the prairie-hoppers', which were stained dust from windy droughts. It didn't budge at her looming presence.

Lou went to pick it up, with soft hands, hoping to convey well intentions to the insect. She doubted it would ever know, but she still held hope for their understanding. Without a flinch or an attempt to escape, she held it between her thumb and forefinger. The black and dark blue and sulphuric hues shone even in the shrouded sunlight.

As she flipped it in her hand, its head turned as if it were craning. Not in the way of escape, or in the way of surveying. Rather, it droops: limp, like a newborn baby's. She continued to turn it. As she does, she noticed that its neck is maimed open on its left side. The interior structures and organs splayed outwards, with wet pus and what Lou imagined to be insect cartilage exposed. Its box-like mouth drooped open, yet his antennae sparked a struggle for life.

Its leg began to roll. Just as Jeffreys' grasshopper's did. Discharge spilled around the break, and a puncture wound leaked at its top midsection. Its front legs began to twitch in desperation, kicking out toward something yet reaching nothing.

Flushed with her stomach curling to her throat, she grabbed a leaf from the tree. She felt the first droplet of the storm upon her head. The winds began to pick up, rolling the insects head and legs like a demonically possessed human's would. Its mouth bears open, legs outstretching further. She began to tremble, and scrambling to seek refuge for the grasshopper.

She placed it on the leaf and then transferred the makeshift gurney upon a pocket of dry soil within the thicket of the weeds. The covering of the play-set would protect the little guy from the storm. Yet he continued to roll, exasperating his last efforts at life.

“Please, stop,” Lou begged through clenched teeth. Her hands wavered desperately as she attempted to set his leg and head straight. “Please, stop that.”

The insect contorted its leg and head again after she fixed them, antennae drooping.

“Please,” she implored. It continued, slowing down.

She couldn't help but see Jeffrey. She couldn't help but see what the accident might have looked like. She couldn't help but imagine that was it.

The hail came. She stepped out from the cover. She turned to go inside. Her hands grabbed her temples, white-knuckled and pulling her eyes back, holding back tears.

Hail collected within the carvings of the “J.”

IV. Night Out

Dial it. Dial the number. Or you'll do it.

But I didn't want it to come to this. I never meant to be here. I wasn't supposed to be here.

That's why you should dial the number. Because you shouldn't be here. Not here, alone in your dorm bed, but here. If these people can't help you, then no one can. You'll have to get in your car.

I don't want to get in my car. But I do want to. Where's the nearest—

You're weak for help. Always have been. Can't even tell your closest friends. Do you know how dumb it looked for you to even try?

I know the final song. Need to make sure that's playing—

Don't do it here, in your dorm. Get in your car, or dial the number.

I'd rather text—

Get over it.

How was it meant to be like this. How can they do somersaults down the halls and I'm stuck in here. How can everyone want to leave a room as soon as it's just me.

This will never be fixed. You'll always wonder.

It wasn't like this two weeks ago. I was okay.

Obviously not. These things come up. And never leave. That's why you had to drive around for a while the other day, and the day before that, and that. You've thought about this for years. You waited less time for a tattoo idea.

I just don't understand how heavy it all is.

It's your only option. Dial it. Because you know you need it. Either way, you might do it.

My parents, my running, it's going so well, what if it get's better. It's supposed to.

Remember the bathroom and the sheets and the pictures and all of their siblings. Remember watching your friends with their sisters. Remember that. Remember how much worse it gets. Remember walking home alone. Remember how most people don't remember.

Should I be here— should I be here— what's the best way to go about this.

What's the best way.

Dial it—

No. Go quietly. Tell no one. Not your dorm neighbors or your roommate or your coach or your weird classmate.

You won't. You're too self-pitying. How could you stand to not exist without a poor me?

Do something.

Get me out of—

Lou's phone buzzed. She huffed a concealed breath and looked. It was a text, from one of her friends, perhaps the past expected person, inviting her to hang out. It was late.

She replied, and took a moment to breathe. Sweat sprinkled her shoulders, and her head rung low and steady tunes behind her eyes. Her muscles released. Before she could dwell any longer, she ran her fingers through her blonde hair, threw on a sweatshirt and slide-on shoes, and ran out the door.

As she walked through campus to meet her friend, she debated on telling her what had happened.

She ended up doing so, confessing where her mind strayed that night. Her friend told her that their visiting, that night, was meant to be. She perhaps felt responsible for saving Lou. But what they didn't feel was that in a few years Lou would no longer know her, and no other friend would know what happened. It would be between them, a silent pact only remembered when the breeze moved just right, or when their food was too cold, or when they put on those same cheap slides in fevered nights.

V. Dinner Together

She didn't understand how they arrived at this topic, on this night, when it was meant to be a casual dinner out with her boyfriend. She didn't know that their mundane conversation, going through the motions of discussing their days would morph into this. She sat across from him, holding back tears as she confessed how hard it was to see others enjoy their time with their siblings, how desperate she was for that relationship back. All he did was stare back at her, without a word.

She'd been used to forcing herself to disclose her pain to her boyfriend because she thought she had to, as if romantic companionship dictated expressing raw emotions regardless of either their unwillingness to disclose said emotions or to accept and coddle them. So for these tightly-bound feelings to pour forth tonight, on a regular evening over hamburgers and french fries, after encouraging him to order a unique beer because why not, seemed odd. The awkwardness of the sudden mood shift was self-evident as they shifted in their seats, afraid to both avoid and make too much eye contact. She noticed it, so she stopped talking about it. He, too, noticed it, so he decided to press.

“Okay, I know this might sound bad, but I don't mean it to sound bad. One of my old friends, or it was something I heard, I can't remember, but I heard someone say that when you die young, you don't have to experience the hard things in life, like responsibilities. You just get to enjoy being young. So, maybe, it was better that he died young.”

Lou stared at him. Hot tears welled from the lump in her throat to the corner of her eyes, but she didn't make it known. Pursing her lips, she tried to collect a sound rebuttal. He didn't understand. But she didn't know to this extent.

“He didn't get to live life,” she said, forcing a smile. She gripped the base of the seat hard. He looked blankly at her.

“We'll never know the college he'd go to, the job he'd get, or the girl he'd marry. We'll never know these things.”

He nodded, thoughtful, unmoving in his gaze toward her. She put her head down, desperate to escape. The other restaurant patrons talked fervently about the basketball game playing on the TV screens, about celebrating a new job promotion, about how their root canal went a few weeks ago. They laughed and adjusted their glasses and showed pictures of their new dog to friends and ate too many onion rings to be able to finish their ribeye. They sampled hard ciders and saved a seat for their late companion. A lady held her only child, a toddler, on her lap, and the grandmother cooed over him. Lou felt the weight of the old couple across from them, having said little more than, “Do you like your lamb chop?” throughout their entire dinner. She noticed how they looked around, smiling at toddlers squirming in their booster seats and at young couples. The wife had smiled at Lou, fond and lingering, like a grandmother would.

He had yet to say anything. Lou didn't want to have to break the silence again. But neither did he.

“Maybe it was better.”

The restaurant goes in an instant uproared at the basketball game on the television.

What Kind of Guidance is Helpful?

I. Routines, Pt. 1

Their old, nightly routine was held as usual that evening, with Lou back at home for the summer before beginning her junior year of college. She lay across the couch with her legs in her mother's lap and *Chopped*, a cooking show, playing on the television. Cary scratched her daughter's bare legs, newly lean after dipping in the thick of cross-country training post-week-long-eating-fast-food break. Lou had always felt out of shape after these breaks in the past, except then, heading into her third year of competitive running in college, she didn't feel that same guilt for losing her tone. Her mother made sure to compliment her skinniness whenever she wore shorts.

Their unofficial routine, however, had been interrupted by an unexpected neighborly visit, and Cary apologized for how late the evening grew because of it.

"You just need to learn how to say no," Lou said.

"I know, I do, I'm just not good at that. I feel bad for not offering a drink."

"Right, and you should, but you don't need to offer them a drink over and over again after they've said no. When you do that, it makes them feel like you want them there, then later you're all like 'Ugh, I didn't want them to stay.' Just offer once and if they say no, then that's fine."

"But what if they actually want a drink?"

"Then that's their problem for saying no."

Cary gave Lou a look of uncertainty, as if she were stuck in a mud pit. She grunted in acknowledgement, but not concession.

“Mom, you always get so frustrated when this happens, but you make it happen by offering them drinks until they say yes, then offering them to stay for dinner, then you complain about how they’ve stayed for drinks and dinner and then they’re drunk and stay longer... just seems a little fake to me.”

Lou gave a playful smirk so that her mother wouldn't get angry. Cary shrugged. “I just want to be nice, I feel like it’s rude to not offer them drinks,” Cary said.

“It’s rude when you don't mean it,” Lou replied. People had a tendency to take advantage of her mother’s kindness. Lou wanted to nail it home to Cary the importance of honesty over other’s superficial feelings.

“Yeah, well, I’ll work on it,” Cary replied.

They both turned to the television and watched *Chopped*. One of the contestants announced that he was making a risotto for his dish, causing both Cary and Lou to groan.

“Really? You’re gonna make a risotto for the main course in 30 minutes? Are you asking to fail?” Lou said.

“I know, right? Come on, dude. He’s gonna get chopped!” Cary replied.

“Is he even a chef? Has he even seen this show? No one has ever made a decent risotto on this show.” They both laughed.

Steve stomped up the steps from the basement, where his “man cave” was with his favorite chair, TV, gun safe, and mounted deer heads all proudly displayed for his buddies to compliment. His hard steps continued into the living room, where his wife and daughter were lying, and he stopped mid-tracks to smile.

“You two,” he said, chuckling, “you two and your leg scratches and your *Chopped*. Y’all are crazy.”

“You’re so weird,” Cary said as he moved to her.

“Mmmm, I know,” he said in a high-pitched, childish voice.

Lou laughed, which made Steve laugh in turn. He gave her a hug and a kiss on the cheek, his now-graying goatee scratching his daughter’s jaw. When they hugged, Lou noticed how warm he was, too warm for their hug to be anything longer than a second.

When he’d lifted himself from his goodnights and had gone to bed, Lou asked, “Is he drunk?”

“Probably. He and his buddy had a lot to drink tonight.”

“Sometimes it’s hard to tell if he’s had too much to drink or if he’s just acting silly.”

“Well, I’ve been worrying about him lately,” Cary said, “it’s not good for him.”

“Why do you think he’s doing that?” Lou asked. It was a problem, but it had been a problem for longer than ‘lately.’ Ever since she had gone to college, she noticed her peers’ descriptions of their parents were different from her own parents. In addition, she noticed how each funny story about him involved him drinking or being tipsy in some form, so she’d felt it was perhaps abnormal how much he drank. He did fine in his job, but Cary insisted he could do better. He’d grown more withdrawn since Jeffrey’s accident, and it was only getting worse. Nearly every day, he would walk through the front door after work and be chastised by Cary, either because he was out at the bars with his friends without having discussed his plans, or because he made plans for the family without asking Cary. At least, that was according to Cary on distressed evenings confiding in Lou what an asshole he could be. Lou liked to suspend her perceptions on who was wrong or right, as she’d done since she was a child. But she couldn't help but

wonder if her father had fallen out of reach. Like he'd fallen through a bottleneck without acknowledging the rope above him. Or that he was speaking through a tin can with a string, only to have cut his own string.

“Well, Lou, I think he's still hurting from the accident. He's never dealt with it. He feels a lot of survivors guilt and he just... doesn't want to deal with it.”

Lou pictured him up late at night, alone and laying in bed, light from the streetlamps crawling through the slats in the blinds, thinking about leading his son through the ranch pastures. She kept her eyes on the television, though her mother looked directly into her eyes.

“I wish he'd go see someone. He really needs to,” Cary said.

“Does he blame himself for what happened?” Lou replied.

Cary sighed and looked off, out the front window of the living room. “He does. Absolutely. And he shouldn't, because there was nothing he could have done. Nothing any of us could have done. That's just what happened. And it sucks— it more than sucks. You lost your best friend,” Cary gave a meaningful look to Lou, an unfortunate half-grin and thoughtful eyes, “and you've been, just, amazing. You've done better than anyone imagined. You could've just shut down and acted out, and you didn't.”

Lou cringed inside, thinking about how she hadn't done as well as her mother praised. She did shut down, it was just reserved, and she resorted to projecting in the years following. On what would have been his fifteenth birthday, his first birthday as a deceased boy, Lou knew it would be a tough day for her parents. They'd already discussed how hard it was going to be. So Lou made cupcakes, decorated them especially for him, lit a few candles, and brought them out to the living room to have a quiet

celebration for him. They cried as they sang 'Happy Birthday.' Lou smiled the whole time, concealing how fervently she wished to rush to her room and somehow be inverted in time, never having existed and possessing no capabilities of existing any further. They later laughed at the funny stories Lou brought up. On the surface, it was a meaningful evening. To Lou, it deepened her descent into projecting contentment beyond her control.

'Nothing any of us could have done.' Lou thought about that phrase for a moment. 'Nothing' felt like a looped recording, a scratch in their unfortunate record that lost its meaning. But at the core of that 'nothing' was the question of what actually happened that day.

A few hours after the accident, after being on and off the phone again, Cary had insisted that she see Jeffrey. Lou overheard this, rushed to her side and said, "Me too. I want to see him, too." Jeffrey and his father had left early that morning, before either of the girls were awake, so neither of them were allowed the chance to say goodbye. They didn't want it to be purely through hapless airwaves. Pleading over the phone as though they were begging for their own lives to be saved, Steve never acquiesced. To his grieving wife and child, he insisted that they shouldn't, they wouldn't want to see him. They implored otherwise, that they needed to see him. Steve wouldn't budge. But he insisted that it wasn't bad. It was "instant" and he was intact. Lou accepted this at the time, because tensions were rising between the two of them and she didn't want them to be angry at her for refusing their answers. Now, years later, she was no longer accepting of that answer, but her fear of asking often had overcome her. She was afraid rehashing the accident would be reliving it for him, and she was unsure if he could handle it. But she wasn't sure if she cared about that anymore. She wanted to know.

“What actually did happen?” Lou asked.

II. Routines, Pt. 2

“You mean the accident?”

“Yeah. Well, I know that the truck fishtailed into a ditch, but I don’t know what exactly happened. No one told me.”

Cary sighed and shifted into the couch, looking away from Lou.

“The truck started fishtailing, and your dad started instructing him on how to correct it, but Jeffrey overcorrected. So the truck, it flipped into the ditch. And what happened is that his head went through the windshield,” she took a deep breath, “and the truck landed on him. On top of his head.”

Lou looked into Cary’s eyes. The world reversed through them. Just as each anniversary becomes a reliving, the memories fired bright and furious through her synapses. The television blurred. The window to her right began twirling. It was as though she was nearly 13 again, sitting alone on the same living room couch, her mother crying on the phone, the snow falling, begging for his revival. Her brain evaporated through her temples. A memory of her mother, bent over his casket, came through her emptied skull like a hollow breeze. Lou was standing between her mother and somebody else, she couldn’t remember, and the entire congregation who gathered to mourn the loss stood and faced them. It was because they were gathered around his casket, decorated with well-wishes and fond memories written in silver sharpie across the polished wood. His body, closeted, was located by the holy water station, right behind where the first row of pews began. Aside from the priest’s speech, the only sounds were people shifting in

their shoes and sniffing. Lou'd never seen so many flowers in a space before that day, nor had she experienced so many people seeking to interact with her, or simply looking at her. Their gaze was heavy. But she kept looking at the casket.

The priest, a kind Irish man who wept whenever discussing Jeffrey's death to her parents, gave ceremonial instruction while everybody watched. "Now we are going put the white cloth over the casket, for heavenly sleep, to tuck him in to bed, one last time."

They did so.

They all pressed their hands against the newly laid cloth, and the priest instructed everyone to raise their hands and bless not only the lost boy, but the grieving family.

Lou looked through the corner of her eye to see her mother. She could not see her face. But what she did see was her head bent low, hands pressed hard against the cloth. She was trembling. Nearly seizing. Perhaps her face was contorted to withhold a cry. Her body quaked with force, each movement miserable, deliberate yet uncontrolled. After a short prayer, the priest instructed the congregation sing "On Eagles Wings," to which Lou and the family began walking the casket to the front of the church. As they made their way up the row, Lou felt obligated to smile at each person she passed. They'd all return the unfortunate half-grin, singing, 'make you to shine like the sun, and hold you in the palm of His hand.' She imagined her mother keeping her head down the entire time, refusing to meet anyones eyes. If the casket was not an indicator of the reality of his death, watching her mother break over his covered body draped in a white cloth and walking him past the shocked congregation was.

Lou knew, now, why Steve refused to let her or her mother see Jeffrey that day, why it was a closed casket, why the close adults around her told her that his death was

instant, insisting all the same that it wasn't bad. 'He never felt anything,' a parent or grandparent would promise. 'It wasn't bad.' Bad as in gore-y. But she knew, now, 'bad' wasn't the case. It was bad.

"I never knew that," Lou replied.

"Yeah," Cary nodded.

What reaction was appropriate? Throughout the years, there were days when Lou would meet someone new who would ask her about how many siblings she had. At first, she was shaky and awkward with her response, gambling in her mind whether or not to say 'yes, I have a brother,' 'yes, I had a brother,' or 'no, I'm an only child.' Time brought more confidence in her judgment, and would only say 'yes' if she felt they'd speak again. 'Had' was no longer an option to her. However, when certain people were given the answer 'yes,' and they'd press about his current accomplishments and doings to which Lou would say in exact, 'he actually passed away (x) years ago,' they would gasp, apologize, and admit about their incompetence to react 'appropriately.' Lou would reassure with a smile that it was okay. There was no such thing as the right reaction. Any reaction was acceptable. Now, confronted with the news of his death as if she'd just stumbled out of the shower as she had seven years ago. She was the anxious stranger now, struggling for words.

"Wow. I never knew that," she repeated, staring at the space between her mother and the television. She tried to envision her brother alive, hiding behind the television stand, waiting for their dog to sniff out his location. His near-white hair beamed in the lamp light. She could hear in this memory her mother laughing at how silly it all was.

“Well, I think in the beginning we just didn't know if we should tell you that or not. I mean, I know now that you should've known, but you were young, Lou. And you were hurting. We were all hurting. We just didn't want you to have to deal with that part.”

“But it never made sense to me. The whole accident just never made sense. I thought he just hit his head so hard that he died, in just the right spot. That's what I thought this whole time. I genuinely thought he could've been saved, but now hearing that—”

“There was nothing that could've been done in that moment. And I'm so sorry that you didn't know. You deserved to know. You were his best friend, you knew more about him than I think any of us did. And like I said, you were so amazing in those times, you still are. Your strength— God, you practically had to take care of us.”

Lou nodded, looking just beyond her mother's eyes. The *Chopped* contestants were describing their dishes to the judges. The person who attempted the risotto didn't do well, but at least their spinach sauce tied all of the elements in to one cohesive dish.

“It's just weird to hear it now,” Lou said. Before Cary could press her on, she said, “So dad feels responsible for it.”

Cary nodded slow, each bob punctuating the severity of the guilt. She'd stopped rubbing her daughter's legs. Cary's hair was pulled up in a clip and curled bangs teased to the side, Lou could better see her mother's slight flicks and tweaks of emotion. In that moment, Cary was contemplative, as if some nodding angel of grief were behind her, pointing and nudging her through to each proper movement against the response to the tragedy.

“He does. And he shouldn’t. This is where one of my biggest regrets comes in—you know, I cussed him out pretty bad when he called me about what had happened that day. I wish I could take that back. Because there wasn’t anything any of us could have done differently, you know? He just has this survivor’s guilt—”

“Yeah, you were saying that earlier, about the survivor’s guilt.”

“Yeah... I don’t know, Lou, I don’t know what he needs. Well, I do actually, he needs to see a counselor, but he won’t.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well, he went to see a counselor after it happened on his own, outside of the counselor we were seeing together, and he didn’t like his counselor. He liked our counselor, though, so I tried to tell him to go see her, but he just doesn’t want to. Won’t make an appointment. I honestly think it’s because he’s afraid.”

“Like he’s afraid of dealing with it, that’s why the drinks.”

“Right,” Cary replied. Lou nodded, understanding what she’d already felt was going on with her dad. She’d seen his temper flare more often over the past two months than he ever had in her memory before the accident. Many of these outbursts seemed menial, so when Cary or Lou would call him out for his uncharacteristic flare-up, he’d go on the defensive, then retreat to his man cave in the basement. His face would get red and his eyes vacant, he’d chuckle about something off-topic and refuse to quit drowning Cary’s voice out with words of empty resentment until he was out of earshot. Conversations grew stiff, and arguments were becoming the norm. He adapted to engaging in an argument nearly every day.

“I’m really worried about him, too,” Lou said.

“Me too.”

This was the first moment Lou sensed the fragility of her father’s life, and felt the urge to rush up the stairs to where he slept and lock him in an embrace to remind him of how loved he was. She felt he needed to know in that instant, otherwise he’d continue down the bottleneck until the string to the tin can was cut from the stretching, and he’s be alone down there, searching for his way out. She wanted him to know that her and her mother’s near-daily irritation toward him wasn't real, that they’d always loved him with his whole heart. Instead, she sat with her mother, talking about moving forward from the accident. Through the chatter with Cary, in her mind, Lou considered how her father got out of the truck the day of the accident, if he actually attempted CPR like he told her, how sick he felt dialing the phone to tell his wife and daughter the news. She considered the drive home from the ranch, if they followed the ambulance that carted Jeffrey away, if it was silent as they drove along, what he was thinking, if he was at all. And she thought about how confused she was, for years after the accident, about how a bump on the head could've been that fatal.

With Whom Do You Share Your Loss?

I. Anniversary Pancakes

She decided to dress nice that day, even though she had emailed her professors and reached out to her co-workers that she would be unable to come into class or work that day, and that she needed someone to fill her shift, because of a ‘family emergency.’ There was no more emergency. If it ever felt like an emergency, it was like the moment a person had succumbed to the waves; the moment the drowner realized their fate was final and that panic breath had been sucked and flooded water into their lungs: sharp and thick, sitting at the pit like dead weight. Or she said it was for personal matters, an excuse she reserved for the more understanding, or for perhaps the ones who knew. Sometimes, in anniversaries past, she gave no reason, ending each email with an insistence that she’ll get the day’s information from a peer. Regardless, she donned a shoulder-baring green sweater and her one of two pairs of jeans she owned. She had awoken early in the morning with that same pit in her lungs and decided to spend more time with her makeup, ensuring it was clean and smooth, even though she wouldn’t be seeing many people that day.

Lou was at the wheel of her car while she drove her and Kaelia to IHOP for breakfast that morning. Kaelia decided to skip class to spend time with Lou that morning, though she couldn’t miss work, so breakfast would do. It was raining, and all Lou could think about was how the rain fell thick like this very morning nine years ago. Except today the rain fell with a breeze that incited urgency, and nine years ago the snow fell as if it had nowhere to go; wayfaring flurries without a purpose or destination. Everyone

drove with the same expression, and Lou couldn't help but notice them, especially the passengers. They drove with the same purpose as the snow fell that morning despite the rain or their obligations. Lou felt displaced amongst this separated crowd, though none of them knew who she was or why.

She looked at the clock. It was almost 10 a.m., making it nearly 11 a.m. in Montana. Erosion would occur in about an hour, nine years ago. She was about to start getting ready for the day then. Now, it will pass while she's eating pancakes with her friend. Lou concealed the plunge her gut took in that moment.

There wasn't much to say because the obvious stared at them in the face and sunk into the cupholders next to them and splashed at the sides of the car with every swipe of the windshield wipers. White-knuckled at the wheel, Lou forced her eyes forward. Even if Kaelia knew how anxious and low Lou felt, Lou wouldn't make it obvious. She couldn't risk blurting in any moment, no matter how inspiring or enlightened, that it wasn't long ago she had felt like dying in her car without a word. Nor could she risk merely saying how sad she was without being asked. But nobody wants to ask if another is so low the underwater pressure would implode them. So she'd keep it to herself, and comment on how hard the rain fell this morning, and how she hoped it would clear for their workout in the afternoon.

They turned into the near-empty parking lot, parked, and ran out of the car laughing as they tried to doge the rain. A hostess sat them in a booth beside a window. The few people who were there ate quietly and with their heads down, speaking in hushed tones so as not to disturb the empty space of voided tables and bright pancake signs. A waitress approached the roommates within seconds of them settling in their

seats requesting their beverage choice. Water for both. With that, the waitress left and the two looked down at their menus. The silence made Lou knock her knees together under the table and scratch her thighs.

“Ooh, those crepes look good,” Kaelia said, pointing toward the picture of the strawberry crepes on the menu.

“Ooh,” Lou replied, smiling. She would get the double chocolate pancakes this morning. She probably wouldn't eat much later in the day, anyways.

They made small talk about the menu options, how Lou liked salt and sweet flavors on her breakfast plate (but only at restaurants), how Kaelia wanted a cream in her crepes that was only offered in a different crepe option. When it came to ordering, this request confused the waitress, and it made the duo laugh. Each silence Lou worked to avoid, yet was drawn to the downpour outside of the window, and how it made the bushes tremble and the water splash and part with each passing car. She kept her hands under her legs to stop fidgeting. She tried to keep her mind close by.

“So, how do you feel today?”

In a second Lou decided that between transparency and forbearing that she would make a slight lean toward the former.

“It feels the same as last year. More like every year in the past, actually. Except for the first and second year, it's been the same ever since. It's like my mind kind of replays each moment when it happened then, so I'm pretty transfixed on the time, kind of like I was on that day. Right now...” Lou looked down at her phone to read the clock. What it read made her cringe, but she kept it terse, “I was in the shower at this point. I'd probably start hearing my mom soon.”

Kaelia nodded. She never removed her gaze from Lou's eyes when it came to Jeffrey's death. Lou recognized her gesture, and she wasn't sure if it made her comfortable because she knew she was trying, or if it incited Lou to withhold her transparency because she knew she was trying.

"It's just a really weird feeling, going through this day, especially since I'm not at home or with my family." Don't say how lonely it is.

"What are you going to do today, do you think?"

"Besides calling my parents, I'll probably just hang out at home. I'm not really sure what to do. There isn't much I can do, really, except maybe read some of the letters people wrote to us about him."

"Yeah, I saw that you were reading those last night. I didn't know you had those."

"They're kind of cool. All of his classmates wrote a letter to my parents about what they remembered most about Jeffrey. It's funny because they're things that, now, no-one would really remember. Like how he wore his Obama shirt on election day and everyone else was wearing their John McCain shirts."

They both laughed, and Lou only glanced out the window for a moment.

"I think it was because my mom was going for Obama. He just followed whatever she did."

"Yeah, I can see that, that's funny." Kaelia smiled.

"I remember he was pretty excited to go to this election party with my mom and I. That was actually one of the last pictures we got together, us in front of the fire place, ready to leave."

“Dang, really.” Kaelia became grave. Lou peeked out the window again. Still raining. That moment was probably happening now, in some turbulent, alternative chasm where the past reoccurs within the current seconds. Now, the truck was in the ditch. And Lou was waiting for her pancakes.

“I was so upset about taking the picture so I look super weird. Like forced smile and everything. I’d just started, like *started* started my period for the first time the month before, so I was pretty pissed about having to deal with it that night. I was not having it.”

They laughed again.

The conversation steered toward her brother again, but when their food was set in front of them, the sound of his memory dissolved and ran down the outside window pane, catching other forgotten raindrops in its path before hitting and sinking into the ground. She was now devouring chocolate pancakes, eggs, and bacon with her closest friend across from her, while nine-years-ago Lou was sitting on the couch at home, watching the snow fall thick and listless outside of the window, her mother crying on the phone in the other room.

She didn't forget that.

After dropping Kaelia off at work, Lou drove home, unsure about how to spend her day. The rain and clouds had cleared, leaving behind wind gusts that tossed raindrops from the trees and bushes into people’s hair. Walking through the door she was met by her other roommate who, after making small talk about breakfast, handed her a handwritten card.

“I’m so sorry,” Jaime said, wrapping firm her arms around Lou.

“It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not okay,” Jaime replied, half-smiling toward her once they let go after a few short moments.

“I know,” Lou chuckled, reassuring Jaime that it was okay to not be okay, but that she was, somehow, okay. She knew the card would be nice. She knew it’d praise her strength and admire her will toward continuance, though she didn’t know about Lou’s ‘instances.’ She knew it’d say that she loved me and that she was always here for me. All true. She’d save the letter for later, which Jaime appreciated.

When they made their small talk, Lou noticed as well that Jaime did not break eye contact, especially when it came to Lou speaking. At this, Lou’s instincts sent her eyes to the sliding glass doors, through the curtains that peeked a sliver of their green backyard. The grass shone dewey and troubled as the breeze roughed through their blades. But it would only be a glance. She was over the unrestrained stares in different directions, at least when it came to direct dialogue.

Once Jaime left, Lou decided to clean her room. She smoothed her bed made and cleared the side table of a muffin wrapper and a plate with remnants of egg left over, put her mascara and powders away in her makeup bag, forced her stuffed dresser drawers closed after tossing her clean laundry away, and carelessly pitched her shoes in her closet. Before she could get into deep cleaning, she thought about how the sun beamed in that moment, brighter than any other day in the past few weeks, warming the wet ground through the neurotic wind. She was alone, and allowed to sit in silence outside of her room for a while.

Years had passed since she openly grieved in daylight hours, the last being a sneak visit to his grave. The loss only overcame her at night, when sleep dangled just above her head yet never reaching until she addressed his memory. Frantic, she would get up, turn on her computer, and watch a movie until it subsided. It wasn't until ideations of devastating cliff-sides chipped away at her spirit until all that was left was a reckoning body remembering that four-chaired table half-filled that sleep would overcome her. On this day, she remembered that, figuring that it'd be best to sit outside and face it than to wait until everyone had gone to sleep. After mulling over her options, she grabbed a towel and the quilt of Jeffrey's t-shirts, unlocked the back door, and sat on her back porch.

Nine years later and the wind still blew through fence vines sprinkled with rain, cats still slunk under shed holes and old decks, the wind chimes still clinked and rung hollow. Everything moved and clicked as it should, the dogs barked at the neighbors as they did yesterday. The clouds moved along faster than they had the other day, and Lou was reminded of how, in the months after Jeffrey died, her mother was insistent that he poured signs of his rested spirit from Heaven to Earth. Lou was also reminded of how she abhorred the notion of signs from the dead. Their spirit was gone, not at their grave or along a sidewalk or within a peculiar cloud. They didn't linger at a drinking fountain to set a pencil with their initial scratched on the wood just so a familiar drinker's eyes would meet it, nor did they manifest as yellow monarchs fluttering in spastic and drunken directions around their summer yard. They rest wherever they rest, and stayed. Lou, on that day nine years later, remembering nine-years-ago Lou in her green camisole awaiting her father's return without his son, prayed for a sign.

Just today, she thought. I'm here. I'm open. Let me know you are too.

The breeze sifted through her hair and across her made-up face, unable to make it through the thick quilt adorned with his favorite t-shirts and jerseys, one of which was a Little League Football Dolphins jersey, and a t-shirt reading in a large, bright graphic font: "The Dog Ate My Homework." It never changed pace or direction, nor softened its post-rain edge. The leaves clung tight to their stems through it all. The rotation continued.

A sign wouldn't appear, and Lou knew it drop it. Perhaps the act of sitting outside, wrapped in his daily use made art, watching the neighbor's imported palm trees mingle with the breeze was enough. So she stayed an hour longer than she anticipated, without moving her positions or growing anxious at either the elapsed time or the possibility of being seen by one of her roommates. She thought of playing hunter and hunted with him in the living room. She thought of seeing him in the hallways at school and only exchanging nods, only to hear that, in elementary school, he'd ask her teachers how she was doing throughout a certain day. She thought about how he pushed a boy in a push for spreading a rumor that he kissed her, and how she told that story to a group of middle schoolers, eager to hear who in their class had won an award renamed in his memory, and how parents were concerned at first that she'd condoned bullying. She thought of how she told Kaelia about the funeral in the colleges cafeteria one night, and how it'd made her cry, and how she was the first person to have only known Jeffrey in death and had cried about it. She thought about how her parents looked at him, and how they look at her.

She thought about how it took nine years and an hour of sitting against a cold wind in her rental houses' backyard to appreciate how good a breeze felt against her skin.

II. Climbing the Cerulean Butte

“This was our kitchen, all of our little rock plates are still here,” Lou said. He smiled, a few steps behind her, in the deepest part of the coulee. His hands were in his pockets, and he kept relatively quiet. Everything was still brown and melting at the ranch, and their shoes suctioned to the ground with each step from the recent spring snowmelt. The coulee was moulded by cavernous rock indentations along the sides, which became Lou’s, her brothers, and her cousin’s choice spot for makeshift “rooms.” Some indents had jutting flat-top rocks budding from the side, imitating a table, or cavernous holes mimicking sleeping pods for their “bedrooms.” The landscape, then, became their house, spread out along a deep coulee resting just beneath the butte, which was their lookout. Each time they passed their house, the cousins would scatter and check on the rooms, perhaps add rocks plates to the designated, kitchen, or dust up the living room and “pay the trolls” as their grandmother insisted. Of course, in a backyard hardly touched by scattered coyotes or antelope, nothing had changed. But they enjoyed the intrigue, and felt the land had formed this way specifically for them. No one else knew the curves of the singular, murky pond toward the end of the coulee, and not even the deer could reach the crevices yearning to be a hiding place for a map or a cheap token. Now, after years of being away and a few weeks after the seventh anniversary of Jeffrey’s death, after walking through the ranch house now decorated with crochet blankets and “Precious Moments” statues from her grandfather’s new wife, she showed her boyfriend her ranch. Each familiar rock she pointed toward, and every forged path she led him down lined with wildflower and cacti she did so with energy. She was loud, smiling, gesturing wide

and refusing to miss a single detail of her long-guarded soil. He followed, watched, listened, smiled when she smiled, nodded when she pointed out a familiar dip in the earth, and laughed when she grew lighthearted about the snake holes in the ground.

“And if we go this way, we’ll pass the Thinking Rock. My grandma always called it the Thinking Rock, and we’d always have to stop and sit on the tree and just think for a bit before we went on to the butte,” Lou said. He laughed. “What do you think?”

“I like it. It’s cool,” he said, pursing his lips as he pursued her trail.

“Yeah, I know it’s not, like, super interesting, but I had a lot of fun here.”

“Yeah,” he replied. She decided to change the subject as they forged on. Looking at her feet, she noticed a small cactus, and remembered how, on certain walks, she’d step on one with her grandmother’s thick work boots, testing their piercing abilities.

“I can’t believe that house, right now. It’s so different from what it used to be,” Lou said.

“Really?”

“Yeah,” she replied, stepping over a puddle and a branch as they traversed through the dense, jagged earth in the coulee. The sharp, spring winds couldn’t reach them in the dip, so their marching steps lingered longer than they had on the way toward the butte. “I don’t like it. My grandma would lose her collective shit if she saw it.”

He laughed again, his smile scrunching the corners of his eyes, making each slight flip of a mood feel genuine. She’d always liked his smile. But it made it difficult for her to read if he was happy to be there. He’d never seemed against visiting the ranch, yet he never declared his eagerness for trip until she’d ask, as if caught by some fevered delight, “Are you excited to go see the ranch?” It was neither here nor there with him. So she

continued with the tour, leaving no gaps in conversation or room for negative thoughts to creep into his mind before she could either dispel them when the landscape wasn't looking as beautiful as ever, or announce the potential for a less-exciting aspect to the backyard prairie so that he couldn't come to the assumption on his own. She'd defend her land, but she'd excuse its faults others would see.

He might have answered, either with a question or a comment, or a reassurance that he was merely listening to her grievances. He might have looked at the curves of the rocks, the way the water settles within the nooks and grooves of the earth disturbed by curious deer, or admired the nature of a sharp coulee, how it's like a sudden crack without explanation in the land, yet within the crack, the purpose of the land is revealed: to conceal its history with graceful privacy like a monk, except along the hidden crevices reveal the twisted, staggered grit of the countryside. The surface was soft and rolling, but the coulees were a history. The question of whether he took notice of this would never be addressed, but when Lou felt anxious to keep the excitement ball rolling in a land that demands patience, she knew the answer.

They stopped at the thinking rock and he did not stop to sit despite Lou's strict adherence to old, made-up rules. It was a large rock adjacent to a lone pice tree, one of the few trees within the area, curved like a chair and sitting along the inside edge of the coulee. She didn't sit long, deciding that it was in his best interest if they continued on to the butte. But for those brief moments sitting atop her sacred rock, where she once thought about where the rattlesnakes might hide and which path to take to the Butte that day, she felt her younger selves sitting where she sat. Time passed rhythmically, with a

repetition that sparked each memory. It was as though her younger selves and current self were existing in the same space for those small seconds she sat.

Taking him along beyond the coulee to the base of the Butte, she thought about how he'd like the cave. Coyotes used to live there, as old scat had been gathered in the corner of the cave's elusive entrance. It was within the cracks of the cave that, ironically, Jeffrey and their cousin had hid a map to said cave. They reassured the laughing adults when they reported what they'd done that it was important, that the finder could then relocate the cave, but they smiled through it. Lou remembered how Jeffrey used to bend low when he grew too tall for the entrance, and actually decided to find a new entryway. They climbed through the narrow entry and crawled on their hands and knees when the ceiling bent low overhead. As they looked around, Lou saw a glint of enthusiasm spread across his face as he squeezed through the tight space and peered down the steep drop-off a few feet from the entrance. As they looked around, she could tell he wanted to find the box with the map. Lou knew it was long gone, but she entertained the idea for a while. He wanted to share a special moment with her, something that would intertwine himself with Jeffrey's legacy after the day's close. The following memories of their special trip to the ranch would be about the found box, perhaps, how he had insisted on looking, how it was important to him that he find it. She could already hear the listener's affirmations when they heard the story, and she could tell how excited the thought made him. They never found the box.

A roundabout walk through the steep rocks brought them to where Lou tried to find the rock staircase she found toward the end of her regular visits to the ranch. Perhaps it disappeared. She wouldn't have been surprised, she thought. Despite the overwhelming

familiarity of the space, it still weighed heavy with change. It seemed too “normal” to have been dumped with tragedy, like it was all staged. It made Lou want to jump in her grandfather’s pickup and drive away, but it also made her want to find a comfortable spot to sit until the sun tucked under the horizon. Through these thoughts she brought them to the top of the butte, overlooking the minute ranch house and highlighting the miles-wide horizon line. The gray sky settled over the brown, trembling prairie, and Lou wished it were bluer and greener for her visitor, who pulled his arms close to him as they stood watching through the biting wind.

Don’t say a word, let him say something about it, Lou thought. But after a few anxious minutes of the wind howling in their ears and their eyes scanning the land for a viewing point, not a word was uttered between them.

“It’s kind of brown,” Lou said.

“Yeah,” he replied.

She loved the brown. Hazels, beiges, olives, golds and tawnies, caramels, burnt oranges, taupes and undertones of cerulean all collected and scattered throughout the dead countryside. Curt and rumbling textures plucked each rise and fall of the ancient soil. While the ranch seemed endless, Lou figured she could run to the horizon line in a half hour, yet she knew there was no end to a horizon. Spring death wasn't traditionally pretty, rather its beauty was patient and beaming from underneath.

Hesitant to leave, she asked him if he was ready. He probably replied “whenever,” but she knew it was time and the pair began their descent. The walk back to the truck was quick. Lou didn't want to look back.

There might have been conversation between them, though it was probably light and surfaced like the intentions behind the figurines lining the shelves in the newly redecorated ranch house that made Lou queasy. Silence might have settled between them, however it made her grip her knees as they climbed into her grandfather's pickup truck as they drove away. Or maybe she felt that obligatory twist in her gut to make conversation with her grandfather and conceal her disappointment at the changes to the house. But there was nothing she could do about that. It was no longer hers to visit, only to reminisce; those Saturday mornings laying on the floor with cereal and Looney Toons, the grasshoppers leaping into the window panes, sunlight pouring on to the beige carpet, mom downstairs blow-drying her hair, brother right by her side. The space, the acreage, the fence line they mastered to crawl underneath and the coyotes singing into purple midnights were no longer hers. With the way her grandfather trudged through the house as if he were in a gas station, gazing along the decor that wasn't his, she wasn't sure if even it belonged to him anymore. Not even in death could it remain her brother's.

As they drove away, he and her grandfather turned forward with conviction. Lou looked in the rearview mirror as the butte faded behind the hillside. Before distance could claim it, she pictured herself walking along the butte, the sunlight leaning through the dark blue thunderstorm clouds, forming miles away, allowing the sun to cast sharp golden rays on the landscape before it could be overcome by the storm. There, Jeffrey stood by her side, determined to catch her if she fell.

Count the seconds of each passing moment.

One. She's running in one direction along the crest. He's yet to chase her.

Two. He chases after her, the golden sunset warming their skin.

Three. She grabs her walking stick. Jeffrey wants one but he doesn't take Lou's. Instead, he passes her, scanning the ground for grasshoppers.

Four. They've disappeared. The billowed dust from the road and the crested hill swallowed them whole.

As everyone continues to look forward, she'll peer over her shoulder, ready for a glimpse of them smiling atop the cerulean butte, the wind swirling her hair in her eyes, Jeffrey leaping down to the next rock.

Afterward

It's hard to pinpoint what influenced this work. The topic was something that always bothered me, in that every time I sat down to write, all I could think about was my brother and the accident. I wrote about him a lot, gravitating toward texts that discussed the complex nature of grief, trying to come to my own terms with the death. One work that did have a more palpable influence was Jesmyn Ward's "Men We Reaped." The way she wrote about death and mourning, both distant and emotionally effective, resonated with me when we read it in Joe Wilkin's class. That carried through to this text, both actively and inactively. I wanted to retain the distance she did, not allowing for the emotional weight of the subject to take control of the piece, which is easy to do regarding the subject matter. The only time I broke away from said distance was in the sections "Night Out" and "Slumdog Millionaire," because I felt those sections demanded more emotional headspace. That aside, it's difficult to say exactly who directly and indirectly influenced this work. I wanted it to retain that sense of rumination and re-rumination, that sense of personal storytelling whilst keeping distance from the subject, which is why I told it from the third person perspective.

"Lou" was difficult to write, despite the fact that she is me. Her thoughts at the time were complicated and fraught, and characterizing her had to come naturally at first, followed by careful revising and asking myself, "Am I conveying what she felt at the time? Am I doing her, her brother, and the whole situation justice?" She experienced a wave of emotions and watched everything unfold as though it was all on a screen, so that reinforced my desire for distance. Because of how she experienced it, I felt it right to tell the story in third person, which allowed for even more emotional separation and

examination, for my own benefit. This also allowed for the experiences speak for themselves, which I felt was to the readers benefit. As I discussed above, the emotional weight of the subject matter needed to be controlled, and distance was the control. This is a common technique, however; a technique I hadn't personally seen used prior to writing this was memoir in the third person. Though I'm sure they exist, and I intend on reading more of those as I go on, it was an idea that I felt fit the nature of the piece.

Throughout revision, I experienced difficulties in writing a memoir in the third person. I found myself inserting Lou's mind in ways that delineated from the narration, so cutting was a common revision theme. In pursuit of emotional distance, I often came too close to the subject and the meaning of the work. Editing these moments, however difficult they were to spot, involved a simple cut, instantly giving said section a facelift. The process was to mind-dump, let it cool, then revise. However, the mind-dumping wasn't as easy as I initially thought it would be.

After discussing what I was going to do for my thesis, I felt a surge of excitement and a newfound inspiration. The subject that I'd always gravitated toward was mine to excavate analyze, to delve deep into it as I'd always wanted. When I returned home, I sat down and drew blank. Each time I sat down thereafter, unless I was particularly distraught or tired silly, the words that used to so easily come to me had stopped. Every sentence became a mind-numbing effort, and I couldn't understand why. And I never did find out why it stopped. Perhaps because the ability to finally speak had brought forth my own tendency toward strict privacy. It was as though I'd been dying for air and, when I was finally allowed to breathe, I choked. It's reminiscent of Lou's observant sensibilities,

something she fought so hard against as she grew older, such as in the sections where she discussed trying to open up to friends or her boyfriend. The process reflected the theme.

There's art that heavily influenced how I wanted this piece to read: my grandmother's. I mention that she's a landscape artist, and she drew her inspiration from the ranch she lived on, even beyond her eventual departure from the land. As I wrote about the land, images of the ranch itself and her paintings would swirl together like a painting in motion, or the landscape at my feet detailed in oil paint. I wanted the piece to capture the spirit of the land that my grandmother captured, at least in the sections regarding the ranch land. Slow and deliberate movement was the aim, and I made sure to keep her work in mind as I explored Jeffrey's death on paper.

I didn't expect to learn that choking didn't equate to failure when it came to writing. I'd always assumed that the best writing was born from a bountiful stream of words, where the writer is so enthusiastic with their pen that they can barely keep up with the thoughts in their head. While it's hard to call this work (or any work, past, present, or future) my best, I didn't realize I could still scrape something from my frozen brain and call it enough to finish an entire thesis. And I didn't realize that, though this is a long narrative, I tend to gravitate toward shorter, independent sections. Perhaps because grief rarely functions on a chronological continuum, especially in remembering grief.

Beyond this piece, I see myself continuing to write and run, write and run, travel a little bit, then back to writing and running until I can't take it anymore. I feel very lucky to have two passions that inform each other, and I hope that I can one day write a novel surrounding the topic of running. I've learned over the years that they're patient acts, driven by one's own self-will, and exemplifying of the exact work one puts forth. I'll

continue to read texts that inspire me to sit down and write, and hopefully I'll follow a career path that aligns my passion for writing and running (I'll settle for any physical activity, however). Reading texts may include re-reading some old favorites, such as "The Big Rock Candy Mountain" or anything by Junot Diaz. I intend to be my own odd participant of the literary world, existing within as many passionate spaces as I can, keeping busy with patient things and being patient with the difficult stuff. As for the topic of my brother, perhaps I'll set that aside. While there is so much more about it that I could write, distance is perhaps what I need to let the emotional weight breathe, and to let myself finally breathe. I've allowed this space, my own personal grief and the grief of my family's, to exist; now I intend on letting it exist on its own, as writers have to do when they release something into the world.