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Phosphenes

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ABSTRACT

This portfolio is a collection of my favorite original pieces of fiction and creative nonfiction I wrote during my time as an undergraduate student at Cedarville University. One nonfiction piece I wrote, "Ice Cream Identity," was published in the Summer/Fall 2013 edition of SNReview. All of my pieces reflect me trying to make sense of different areas of my life, moments I have been through or seen happen to others. My pieces do not have one underlying theme, nor do they connect perfectly together. Rather, it is a collection of instants, a collection of times I have seen moments and now need to experience them with different perspectives to come to the truest observation I can.

PHOSPHENES

by

Mackenzie Brown

A Collection of Creative Writing Submitted to the Faculty of the Department of English,
Literature, and Modern Languages at Cedarville University in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Creative Writing Minor

Cedarville, Ohio

2014

Approved by

INTRODUCTION

The title of my collection is from the final piece of my portfolio, "Interruptions." Originally I titled this piece "When I Think of Sin" based on a prompt in Creative Nonfiction about describing with my five senses what I thought of when I thought about sin. Phosphenes is what I saw when I visualized sin. Phosphenes is the stars and colors you see when you press hard against your eyes. When we would have our bedtime prayers, I would press my thumbs into my eyelids until it hurt, and then I would open them and see phosphenes. Of course, I didn't know there was a name for it, I just liked that for a moment everything was fuzzy and colorful and I couldn't see anything. But then I would have that moment of panic where I thought my eyes would be stuck that way and I would never see the world again.

I want to see the world clearly—I don't want to lose focus of it and the things that happen to me. Sometimes I have moments of panic when I don't think I will see the world clearly, or I worry I won't see the world as it truly is. So, I write. Writing is one of the main ways I can combat the feeling that life is chaotic and meaningless. Writing helps me make sense of firsthand experiences or different things I hear about in the world.

My fiction stories are first in the portfolio. The first three stem from my life in Minnesota, although they can relate to anyone anywhere. "Dreams in Leech Lake" is the piece I have been working on the longest. It is based on my small hometown where I have seen people get trapped and never leave, never experience all the world has to

offer. This was my attempt to show how it affects people differently, and how I wish more people would break out of that cycle. In the summer of 2013, there was an accident in a town close to mine where a man in a large truck hit and killed a girl who was going to be a senior. I knew different people who were close friends of both people involved in the accident. I wanted to write about this day that was supposed to be a normal one for both of them, but ended up completely horrible. This is what “Waiting for the Future” came from. “Things Not Heard” is about those relationships people wish they could go back to before the other person changed. The setting of the story is another story based on my town where many people on the lakes around me have fireworks they set off.

The last fiction story is “Burnt Out” which is based on “Hills Like White Elephants” by Ernest Hemingway. The point of the story is to imply something within the dialogue without ever explicitly stating it in the story. I’ve witnessed those instances where the girl likes the guy, but the guy is totally not into the girl, and watching their exchanges is always amusing in a sad way. For some reason, the girl always seems to be clueless that the guy has no feelings for her.

I never thought I would like writing nonfiction as much as I do now. I realized how enjoyable it is to write about my own life in ways that help me process things better while also creating beautiful pieces. A couple of my pieces are about losses I have experienced, deaths and other types of loss. “One More Time” is about my grandfather and memories I have had with him up until the last time I saw him. “Moving Forward” is about the day I had to put my first horse down. “Ice Cream

Identity” is an essay I wrote about the loss of my family’s legacy and the impact it had on me.

I also have a few pieces based on stories from my hometown, stories about lakes, and a story about lakes in my hometown. “7732 Pilger Ave NW” began as a reflection of moving houses, but it also turned into an explanation of why I write so I don’t forget about my experiences. “Hummingbird Lake” is about my best friend’s lake that is shaped like a Hummingbird. I’m always driving around and past the lake because it is between my house and my town. “Sailing” came from this past fall when I slightly fractured a rib after falling on a dock.

As I mentioned earlier, the final piece of the collection is where the title of my portfolio comes from. For me, phosphenes describes the moments for me that are unclear, and my desperate hope to always make life clearer. Throughout my collection I hope readers can feel the moments and see me attempting to explain them in the best possible ways so others and I can make sense of them.

My classes at Cedarville University greatly influenced my writing and have helped me become a better and more serious writer. I’ve learned writing is something I need to always practice if I want to get better. Many different elements go into creating a story, whether it is fiction or nonfiction, and my classes taught me how to better use these elements to create diverse writing that is also pleasurable to read. Good writers also need to be good readers; as an English major, I have learned about texts in history and how writers before my time have created great literature. It is important to know what other authors have created so I can emulate and learn from them and their

writing. This portfolio is a sampling of what I have learned so far in my journey as a writer, and is just a preview of the type of writing I hope to accomplish throughout the rest of my life.

FOREWORD

Perhaps the greatest thing I have learned in the past few years is how to be a writer who is also a Christian. Previously, I thought the only way I could be a Christian writer was if I only wrote Christian literature where I talked explicitly about God in all of my texts. I have now come to realize that because I am a follower of Christ I can influence my writing to make it different than secular authors. My Christian influence can either be hidden in the background supporting what I write, or I can choose to have it more out in the open (Engler 262). I'm glad I finally realized there is a way I can offer my own viewpoints on different things without overwhelming my audience with Christian language.

Being a Christian who is also a writer is the way I can have the largest impact on my culture. Russel Kirk says, "The better the artist, one almost may say, the more subtle the preacher" (Terrell 252). Francis Schaeffer shows how this happens because he says "the artist makes a body of work and this body of work shows his worldview" (Schaeffer 36). My worldview shapes what I write and will hopefully lead people to examine other areas of their life and look for the truth in it. Furthermore, because I know what truth is and the ultimate truth we can believe in, I can show this to others through my writing.

Even though I want my Christian background to influence my writing, I also want to embrace culture and create good art that society sees as aesthetically pleasing. I agree with Robert Engler when he says writers today "must strike the right balance between the body and the spirit" (262). He says that Christian poets must have the

right balance between the body and the spirit in their work; it should live up to a standard of beauty and excellence while engaging life and the world. There is no reason that I should write Christian literature while compromising the standard of excellent writing. I can include Christian aspects while also striving to create art the rest of the world sees as good, even if they do not agree with the Christian side of it. Similarly, as Christians, “we are free to approve a part of a work without endorsing all of it, and conversely can disagree with part of it without devaluing it entirely” (Ryken 30-31). It goes both ways; we simply must be aware of ourselves as creators and responders.

What I love about being a Christian and a writer is that I can affect how my readers see the world. Bret Lott believes that literature “confronts us with who we are and makes us look deeply at the human condition” (14). I want to confront my readers in a way that causes them to seek truth for themselves. Leland Ryken also states, “Literature can persuade readers toward an acceptance of either truth or falsehood, and can be a prompter to either good or bad behavior” (Ryken 29). Literature is powerful, and I can use that to my advantage to help people find the beauty in it, and ultimately find God.

I write because God gave me the ability to create art with words. As Richard Terrell states, “In writing and telling stories, we imitate our Creator and implicitly celebrate our origins” (Terrell 240). God is a Creator, and He made us to be creators. As a Russian proverb states, “One word of truth outweighs the world” (Taylor 424). If I can expose truth in every sentence I write, all I can hope is that my readers will

understand and try to think about life in a different way, a way that will eventually lead them to Christ. It is important for me and other Christian artists to remember we cannot accomplish all of this in only one work of art, but a lifetime of works. I want my work to “live up to a standard of beauty and excellence, and on the other hand, engage life and the world” (Engler 264). Above it all, I must constantly remind myself that He is God and I am not. Only He has the power to change people through my writing; it is up to me to simply write pieces of art that make them see the world differently.

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DREAMS IN LEECH LAKE

Nothing has changed, Emmy thought as she drove into her childhood hometown for the first time in fifteen years. The hazy blue and orange dusk blanketed the sky, a picture-perfect backdrop to the rolling fields covered in powdery snow, ridged with interweaving snowmobile tracks, frozen clumps of black dirt popping up amidst the white. Barns and silos dotted the scenery, scattered in every direction, and cows and horses meandered within their pastures in the distance. Somewhere a coyote howled and another answered it back.

Emmy had left Leech Lake just two weeks after her high school graduation, and she never looked back, never came back, her life would be full of nothing but travel and adventure from there on out. Her parents couldn't understand why she left, and they didn't try to keep in contact when she went away. They had never had a good relationship with her anyway. Just like always, they didn't put in enough effort to understand where she was coming from. They just pushed everything under the rug, like when she told them what Granddad had done to her. It was easy for them to pretend like everything was okay. She escaped before she got trapped in the cycle like everyone else in this town, but Leech Lake was still home to her after all this time.

Emmy turned right and coasted through Main Street which was illuminated with multi-colored Christmas lights hanging lopsided and asymmetrical on the fronts of

every shop. She passed the same post office, city hall, Candie's Drugstore, and Retter State Bank that had been there since before her parents were born. Wreaths and leftover decorations from Christmas still speckled the shops and streetlights in the middle of February. Dirty snow clumps barricaded the road from the sidewalks and thick icicles hung in groups along the overhang of the shops. Foster's Meat Shoppe, owned and run by her father's family for eighty-seven years, and her father for thirty-five years, was still the last shop on the right, now managed by her younger cousin – another Foster who would unthinkingly waste away his life in Leech Lake.

Emmy took another right and passed by her old high school, the one building in town that had a few updates done to it since she had last seen it. Someone had finally fixed the potholes in the parking lot; the same parking lot where she had her first kiss, the same parking lot where she ran into a light-post with her first car in an attempt to outrun the cops after their senior prank had failed. The parking lights wavered on as Emmy flicked her high beams on.

Ten minutes later Emmy pulled into the driveway of her childhood home, the chipping white barn house watched her as she turned off the car for the first time in four hours and silence flooded her ears. The decaying unattached garage was wide open, a black whole containing old pieces of farm equipment and homes for a number of different wild animals. Bats flew out of an opening near the roof as she made her way to the house. Emmy creaked open the front door with the key the lawyer had given her and flipped on the foyer lights.

Emmy was immediately greeted by the familiar beige paint that coated all the walls in the home, and a stale, musty smell clinging to every surface. She stood still and listened to the sounds of her former home; everything was different without her parents there, knowing they were never going to be back. She had been overseas when the car accident happened and her cousins had the funeral a few days before she arrived in town. They must not have thought she deserved to be a part of her own parents' funeral since she hadn't been in contact with anyone from Leech Lake for years. The lawyer said her parents wrote in their will that they wanted her to have their house.

Something warm and soft weaved between her feet and made her jump. An orange tabby cat peered up at her curiously, flicking his tail back and forth, happy to see a visitor. She forgot the lawyer had mentioned a neighbor had been taking care of her parents' cat until she arrived. She wondered why her parents had finally gotten a cat after she left when for years she had begged for one and they always said no.

Emmy scooped the cat into her arms and used him as a shield between her and the house while she cautiously peered in every unchanged room. The eclectic style of her parents' home still contained the odd mixture of greens, reds, and browns, and the adjoining kitchen had the theme of barnyard animals. Her parents' bed was unmade from the last night they had slept in it, a glass of water on each of their side tables. She stared at their family portrait on the wall, the photo-shoot her mother had wanted to do when their only daughter was eleven. Even then their relationships were strained and you could see it in their rigid poses and forced smiles, her parents' hands on her

shoulders like they could control her. Her mother always said it was her favorite picture.

She made her way down the hall into her own room, still cradling the cat like a small child. Her room looked exactly the same as the day she left it: rose-colored paint coated the walls, her bed had a white lace duvet, and the walls were covered in clumps of pictures taken in high school. She studied the pictures of her with her two best friends at a rodeo, in their basketball uniforms, and at their first rock concert. Most of the pictures on the wall were of her and her high school boyfriend, Tate. He was the only regret she had after leaving. She still missed the 6'4" hockey player she left when she ran away from her planned future. Tate's father owned the best construction business in the area and Tate was set to take over it a few years after they graduated from high school. Tate knew when he wanted to propose to Emmy right after they graduated, but she told him he had to wait. Emmy didn't want to make any decision she would regret, and she didn't know if Leech Lake could be her home forever, even if it was where Tate wanted to be.

She called him once, a couple years after she left, begging him to join her, or at least move out and make something different of himself. *Everything's good*, he had said, *I don't know why you always complained so much. Pops gave me the keys to his place so he could move to a smaller place in town and I'm the number one carpenter in town.* Emmy never called again. She could only get turned away one too many times.

Emmy wondered what he would do if she showed up at his house almost ten years after they had last seen each other. She didn't even know if he was still living

alone or not. It seemed like the most normal thing to do, driving to Tate's house at 9:00 at night. He would still be up, probably watching TV. *I'll just drive by, nothing more, just to see if he's still living here by himself.*

Emmy stared at the house of her first boyfriend. The porch lights were on and the same truck Tate had in high school was parked in the driveway. The front left corner was dented in a little, but otherwise everything looked like it hadn't changed. She was sixteen again, driving to his house by herself for the first time, parking left of his truck, walking up the rickety porch steps, rapping her knuckles three times on the door, and waiting for the sound of approaching steps. —

Tate swung the door open. Emmy jumped and Tate fell backwards, holding onto the door for support. Tate had a few days of scruff left on his face, his eyes were rimmed red, and his hair was shorter than he had ever had in high school, but it was still dark brown, and broad muscles had replaced the skin and bones frame he used to have. "Emmy?" He finally managed to push out.

"Hi." Emmy pushed her hair behind her ears, a nervous habit Tate had first pointed out in high school. She smiled up at him. She wanted him to wrap his arms around her and say they could start over again, how much he missed her, he still loved her and would follow her anywhere, but he just stared at her, an unreadable expression on his face. She wanted to tell him that he was the only thing that had made Leech Lake bearable, he was the only thing she missed. "I'm back for a couple days," she pointed behind her, "cleaning out the house to put it up for sale."

Tate nodded. "I'm sorry to hear about your parents."

Emmy thumbed her front pockets and looked at her feet, "Thanks. They think it was a drunk driver, but he drove away before anyone got there."

Tate was still staring at her. "Do you want to come in?"

Emmy followed Tate to his living room where the TV had been muted. Beer cans and bottles rested on the coffee table and a few were knocked over on the ground, bags of chips were opened and resting on the couch.

"You can just push some of that over," he said as he grabbed a few cans and brought them to the kitchen. "Do you want anything? Beer? Water?"

"No, thanks." Emmy wrinkled her nose as she cleared a space for her on the couch, smoothing it before she sat down and trying to avoid the bigger stains.

Tate grabbed two bottles of beer for himself and joined her in the living room, sitting on a chair opposite the couch. He eyed her as he took a swig from his bottle.

"So," Emmy shifted, "how are things?"

Tate shrugged. "Things are fine. Not a lot of business right now, but I can't do anything about that. Winter doesn't help."

Emmy murmured her acknowledgment and pushed her hair behind her ears again. Tate slouched in the chair, eyes resting on the couch she was sitting on. She remembered all the times she had laid on this same couch, her head in Tate's lap and his fingers in her hair. He had always listened to everything she had to say.

"Don't you ever want to move South? I'm sure there are other places that could use a carpenter like you."

“Where would I go? All I’ve ever known is right here.” Tate stared at the TV, a look of defeat on his face.

A wave of anger spread through Emmy; she wanted her happy-go-lucky boyfriend from high school again. “You have a choice, Tate. You don’t have to stay here. How many times have I told you that?”

“You don’t understand. My dad always planned for me to take over the business. You didn’t have anything to live up to.”

“That’s not true. My parents wanted me to stay. You wanted me to stay.”

“But that wasn’t a good enough reason, apparently.” Tate finished his first bottle and went on to the second. “Everything went downhill after you left, Em.” He pushed out his lower lip, trying unsuccessfully to gain sympathy. “Oh, God, things will never be the same, will they?”

“No, I guess not. But sometimes that’s a good thing.”

“Not when you’re getting old and all you do is work. I don’t have anything to show for my life.”

“You just need to get out of this town and live a little, Tate. Take some chances.”

“Take chances? Is that what you call it? Like that time you just had to shorten your skirt two inches? I saw right through you the whole time, you were never satisfied with me, always looking for something better. You saw the stares all the guys gave you. Well, so did I.”

“That isn’t true,” Emmy said softly, wondering how those two thoughts of his connected. She didn’t like this new Tate. She remembered the skirt he was talking

about though. She had spilled butter above the hemline the first time she wore it so she shortened it to cover the stain, and it wasn't even the shortest skirt she owned. He had laughed about it then, calling her a klutz and telling her she needed to cover herself in plastic wrap so she would stop ruining all of her clothes.

He snorted in disbelief. "You're a woman, Emmy. You know how to get a guy's attention. Hell, you knew how to get my attention."

"Why didn't you say anything about it then?"

"Why didn't you tell me you weren't happy with me?" Tate slouched in his chair, his lower lip stuck out again, his eyes wavered slowly in time with his head, unable to stay steady.

"I was happy with you, Tate." Emmy insisted.

"We used to be in love, Emmy. I used to have a future."

"You still have a future." Emmy scrambled for words that might make him feel better, but she was running out of things to encourage him.

He smiled through her. "I didn't get homecoming King our senior year. But you were the Queen, of course. With Jack – you had a thing with him didn't you?"

"No, Jack was just a friend," Emmy said, trying to keep up with his thoughts and where they were going, where they were even coming from. She had barely even talked to Jack.

Tate just shook his head, defiant.

Emmy stood and grabbed her purse, making her way to the front door. She couldn't make him the way he used to be and he wasn't even trying to be better. "I should be getting back. It's late and I have a lot of work to do."

"Em, I—," Tate heaved himself to stand.

"What?" Emmy turned around at the door.

"I killed your parents, Emmy," he said, blankly staring at the wall next to her.

"It was late, I was coming back from the bar, I didn't see —"

"Stop." Emmy steadied herself against the doorframe, the door open and the frigid air pinching her face. Her eyes blurred over with tears and she wiped them away quickly. Tate shuffled forward towards her, but she put out her hand.

"I'm sorry," Tate's unfocused and bleary eyes tried to find hers, his head bobbing slowly.

Emmy stared sadly at the person Tate had become. She was the one who felt sorry for him, for his regrets and his inability to move on. She closed the door behind her as she left.

Emmy swung by the house to pick up the cat before she drove away from every memory she had ever made in Leech Lake. Whoever bought the house could have everything that was left in it. She was actually moving on this time. Everything had changed without her.

WAITING FOR THE FUTURE

Joe's alarm clock erupted, high-pitched beeps piercing the darkness of his room. He slammed his hand on the black box while he was still halfway sleeping. The beeps started on double-time ten minutes later; he had pushed the snooze button twice already and his alarm clock was frantic for him to wake up. He let out a low, long groan and prepared his aching body for another long day of sitting in a jolting truck while he hauled gravel. His 57-year-old body couldn't handle the 12 hour work days anymore. He stretched out of bed and reminded himself he was going to retire in three weeks.

Joe had picked the best time to retire because in three weeks it would be the end of August and he would get to spend his favorite season entirely at home. He could go hunting as much as he wanted without being worried about getting enough sleep to stay awake during the long day shifts. The long days sitting in his deer stand doing nothing but listening for the sound of a deer's footfalls was enough to push him through the last few weeks. He would finally have the chance to sleep in too, and he could do nothing all day, if he wanted to, without feeling guilty for it.

He hoped no one would throw him a surprise retirement party, not that any of his work buddies would put the effort into doing that. He didn't want a huge celebration; just a quiet night out with close friends would be nice. Maybe if he had

ever married he would have wanted to have a weekend away with his wife to Las Vegas or the Bahamas. He could go on that cruise in Alaska he had always dreamed about. Maybe he would book that for next summer if he hadn't found a new hobby by then. All he wanted to do once he retired was golf, cook, hunt, and finally spend some weekdays at home. I'll get a dog, he thought, a black lab and I'll teach her how to hunt.

He paused while eating his cereal as a new, unexpected thought popped into his mind. Maybe he would look in to online dating since he had so much free time. His nephew had found his wife on one of those match-making sites – it wouldn't hurt to at least keep his options open. You're such a catch, people would often tell him, why haven't you settled down yet? He'd just chuckle and say life was easier this way. But he was beginning to change his mind; he needed a change of pace after working for the same company since he graduated high school and having the same daily routine for as long as he could remember. Change is good, he told himself.

The sun was just peeking up at the end of the road as Joe drove to work, casting the sky in an orange glow. He got to the main work site, punched into the time clock, and climbed into his faithful companion: the same dump truck he had been hauling sand and gravel in for years. The years showed in scratches and peeling paint, but it still ran perfectly, and he thought it had character. He might actually miss driving this truck – pretty soon it would be someone else's. Three more weeks, he reminded himself as he heaved himself in the driver's seat and prepared for the long day of driving.

* * * * *

Carly slid out of bed before her alarm even went off, too excited to keep sleeping. Today was the day she was getting her senior pictures taken. All that was standing between her and her senior portraits was a short day of baby-sitting. She loved looking at the senior photographs of her older friends over the years, and now it was finally her turn. Carly couldn't wait until the pictures were developed and she got to flip through the hundreds of samples to find her favorites. She had spent all summer thinking about what she was going to look like during her photo-shoot: should she wear a dress? Cowboy boots, sandals, sneakers? Should she leave her hair straight or curl it?

It was less than one month from today when she would be starting her senior year of high school, and she could hardly believe it was here already. Her whole life had been gearing up for this year and she wanted to make sure she made the most of it. She was going to be involved in as many sports, events and groups as possible: cross country, dance, softball, homecoming dance (hopefully she'd at least be a part of the homecoming court), the winter formal, prom, photography club, yearbook club, and whatever else looked interesting throughout the year. There were no second chances for her last year in high school, so it had to be perfect.

Carly got ready for the day and hopped in her white Toyota. She was running behind schedule, but luckily it only took less than fifteen minutes to get there and she arrived just before 9:00 a.m.

The girls wanted to play dress-up and she was reminded that some things never changed – what girl didn't love to get dressed up and get pictures taken of her? She snapped photos of the girls and thought in only a few hours someone would be taking

pictures of her instead. Carly absent-mindedly cooked lunch for the two girls she nannied for and thought of everything she needed to do as soon as she got home to prepare for that night: her clothes should probably be ironed, she needed to take a shower, and maybe she should ask her mom about running to the mall quick and getting the pair of sandals she had been wanting all summer. She would be glad when her day of watching the girls was over so she could start getting ready.

* * * * *

Joe wiped the sweat off of his red forehead with a dirty, sweat-stained brown handkerchief and started up his truck again for another trip of the day. He was on his seventh load of gravel that day, and he was bringing it to the same site twenty-five minutes away from the gravel base.

For what seemed like the hundredth time that day and the thousandth time that summer, he wished his truck had air-conditioning. The windows were down, and his left arm rested on the window trying to stay cool from the breeze as he sped down the road, but the air was thick and wet, and it felt like heat was blowing through his air vents. He thought to himself that he should have retired in the spring so he wouldn't have had to deal with the miserable heat in a truck with no air.

Joe turned onto the county road he had driven on tens of thousands of times since moving to Ridgley. It was the main road that led to the city forty minutes away, and branched off to any small towns he would want to go to along the way.

The truck in front of him was going 45 mph in a 55 mph zone and was making Joe later than he had to be, not that he had to get to the gravel site at a specific time, but

he didn't like feeling like he was wasting time. Joe turned the dial on the fuzzy station until he found a clear country station to tune in. I may as well try to enjoy the leisurely drive since the old guy in front of me clearly is, Joe thought. Another thought surprised him: I might be that old guy slowing down traffic someday. Finally, the truck slowly glided into the right turn lane and Joe pushed his gas pedal down farther, ready to sail past him and finally go the speed limit.

* * * * *

Carly was excited to head home early from baby-sitting; it was rare that the girls' mom ever got home before 3:00 p.m. Their mom must have remembered today were Carly's pictures and she wanted to get home so she could get ready. Carly flew down the gravel road scattering a brown dust cloud behind her car, and headed toward to the main road that would take her home. She made a mental list of everything she needed to do quickly once she got home: shower, dry hair, put her first outfit on, do her makeup, and put the two outfit changes in a garment bag to bring with.

She stopped at the stop sign before the main road and saw the long line of cars approaching to her left. They looked like they were going slowly and she needed to get home quickly. She saw the truck in front turn his right blinker on and thought this was her chance to pull out before she had to wait for all of the vehicles after the truck to go past her. She pulled out in front of the cars and began to turn left.

* * * * *

Joe saw the other car before the driver of the white Toyota did. As Joe watched the Toyota pull out just in front of him, a van from across the intersection the Toyota

had just been at, turned at the same time, moving in the same direction. He could only stare as he watched the scene in front of him unfold in slow motion. The van startled the driver of the Toyota, and she swerved to avoid getting hit on her right side. But she had chosen the wrong time to swerve in to the opposite lane because Joe and the long line of cars behind him were approaching quickly.

Joe tries to slam on his breaks, but he can't slow down the momentum of his heavy truck weighed down by the load of gravel. He didn't have time to swerve to the right, and even if he did, he would have just hit the old man in the truck that was turning. Joe wanted to close his eyes.

* * * * *

As Carly turned she saw something out of the corner of her right eye: another vehicle was starting to pull out right where she was. On impulse she twisted the steering wheel to the left to avoid getting hit by the van to her right. She realized too late that was the wrong choice, and she turned her attention away from the van that was honking at her, and paid attention to the wrong lane of traffic she had pulled into. She didn't have time to react as a large gravel truck was just inches away from her car.

* * * * *

Joe's eyes locked on the girl's eyes in front of him. She looked up and saw what was headed for her, her eyes frozen in wide circles. Joe's eyes mirrored hers, his face twisted up as he braced himself. The front of Joe's truck slammed into the front left side of the Toyota. He watched in horror as the impact from his truck pushed the Toyota back into the other lane and then into the ditch on the other side.

* * * * *

Carly is pounded into blackness. She doesn't feel or see or hear anything as her car comes to a halt.

* * * * *

The cars behind him stopped as they watched the scene in front of them. Joe jumped out of his truck and ran to the Toyota crunched in the ditch. The car is curled up like a melted pop can, and he can't see the girl who should be in the front seat. Joe fell to his knees and wished he had retired three weeks ago. He sobbed and only one thought stayed in his mind. It was that he was alive and someone else wasn't.

THINGS NOT HEARD

Sometimes when I hear waves slapping and sliding on a shore, and I listen to the sounds of the distant booms and crackles of fireworks, I can still hear her laughing next to me like she did on that Fourth of July years ago. We were a carefree eight-year-old and eleven-year-old then as we laid on our favorite red, gray, and blue afghan on the hill in our grandparents' backyard, watching the different firework shows explode in various spots above the lake, coming from the homes of wealthy summer people.

Look, she'd point and I would whip my head in the direction she was pointing, as she showed me the ones she liked the most. Her favorite were the white ones that exploded like a bursting flower, glittering and curving down like drooping petals, snapping and sizzling as they fell down from the black of the sky. Wouldn't it be fun, she'd say, to watch fireworks from an airplane? Imagine how many more you'd see.

I would always agree, even though there was nowhere else I'd rather watch fireworks than next to a lake, curled up to my older sister, both of us drinking root beer floats, watching the fireflies signal each other and listening to the quiet voices of my Grandma and Grandpa from the porch.

* * * * *

Six summers later I watch the fireworks by myself, wishing my sister was here, but wishing she wasn't. Every time her favorite firework pops up over the lake, I

wonder if she is watching fireworks somewhere tonight, and if she is, I wonder if she is missing me.

I haven't heard Cassie laugh in a few months. All she does is spend time with her boyfriend she met over Christmas break last year. He is the quiet type, like me and unlike Cassie, but it's the type of quiet you can't break through, unlike me. He doesn't smile, and I've noticed he always watches Cassie when they're together, almost like he is controlling her with his eyes. I think she feels this too, but she doesn't do anything about it. He has hushed the talkative and excited side of Cassie, and she has retreated under a shell I didn't know she had, didn't know she could ever have. I don't like him, and I have told her that. Then don't date him, she always shoots back.

In the aftermath of their first fight, I held her and watched the tears drip from her chin onto my lap as she sniffled into my shoulder. What happened? I would ask. He hurt you, didn't he? She pretended there wasn't a cut above her eye, even though we both knew who it came from. I don't want to talk about it, Caroline, my sister would say sadly as she wiped away the last tear for now and stood up to go back to her room.

She always thanked me for being there for her, but I wanted to do more to help my older sister. There's nothing you can do, she'd brave a smile for me and press her wet lips to my forehead.

* * * * *

I don't know it yet, but someday I will watch fireworks from an airplane. I will be flying home to go to my grandpa's funeral, and I will wonder where Cassie has been for the past four years and if she has gotten any of the e-mails I sent her. I will wonder

if she is still with the same boyfriend and if they had moved to Oregon like he wanted to. I will hope she isn't with him, and hope she will try to find me again. I will picture the last time I saw her telling me goodbye six years ago, as she closed my bedroom door behind her and I didn't run after her because I didn't think she would actually leave.

When I am watching the fireworks from in an airplane, I will remember when she told me she wished she could experience that. I will hear the muffled booms and crackling from below me as the fireworks stretch to the sky. I will think of how the fireworks have more power when they are above you. Someday I will tell her it's not as great as either of us thought it would be.

BURNT OUT

It was dark outside with only a few lights illuminating the side street the diner was on, just off the main road. Tracy and Kyle sat in a booth with a window that faced the street, and Tracy could see the occasional car pass on the deserted main street. Tracy's car was parked just across the street from their window in the diner, and Kyle's truck was parked just around the corner, out of sight. After four months of dating, this was only Kyle and Tracy's third date, and they had only seen each other a few times more than that. The two had met during summer while they both stayed in the same place for vacation, but during the rest of the year they lived three hours away from each other.

"Does anything look good to you?" Tracy asked.

"I'm not sure yet," Kyle said. "I'm not too much of a hamburger type of guy."

"I thought all guys liked hamburgers."

Kyle shrugged. "Some don't."

"Well, you'd like these. They're the best I've ever had."

"I'm going to get steak. That's always a good choice."

"Not if you have the option of the world's best hamburger."

"That's debatable."

"You'll be missing out."

“I think I’ll survive.”

After their waitress came and took their orders, Kyle and Tracy sipped on their drinks while staring out the window, occasionally murmuring about the weird weather outside that couldn’t decide if it wanted to rain or snow or do a mixture both.

“I have to make sure I leave soon after dinner,” Kyle said. “I don’t want to get trapped by bad weather.”

“You can always stay at my place. You know that, right?”

“Yeah. I just have plans I made for tomorrow and I don’t want to miss them. Guy stuff, you know?”

“Sure.”

They rotated between staring at the few guests that were in the diner, staring at their iPhones that didn’t have service, staring at the red cowboy boot lamp suspended above their table, and staring at the cowboy memorabilia decorating the diner’s walls: vintage Western movie posters, spurs, chaps, handguns, wanted posters, lassos, pictures of horses, handkerchiefs, and bridles.

“Isn’t it such a fun atmosphere in here?” Tracy broke the silence after their food arrived.

“I guess. I’ve never actually cared for horses.”

“How can you not like horses? They’re amazing.”

“I haven’t been around one long enough to know if I like them or not.”

“You should come to my friend’s barn with me, and I could teach you how to ride. You can meet the horse I rode in shows when I was younger.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

“You would love him.”

The boot lamp above them sparked and snapped off, immediately casting a shadow over their table.

“Oh!” Tracy gasped.

“It’s fine,” Kyle said.

The waitress made her way over to their table from across the room. “I’m sorry about that. I’ll go grab another light bulb right away.”

“That’s fine. We’re just about done eating anyways.”

“I’ll go grab your check.”

“You don’t want dessert or anything?” Tracy asked, as they watched the waitress walk away.

“No,” Kyle said, “I think I’ve had enough.”

7732 PILGER AVE NW

My father, brother, and I follow the realtor across the gravel road to a plot of land marked with a red For Sale sign. We climb over a low line of rusty barbed wire and meander up a small hill full of grassy weeds that come up past my shins. My brother and I head for the edge of the woods behind the open clearing where there are few trees, while my father talks with the realtor about this four and a half acre plot of land that has lake access just down the road.

We explore the couple acres of woods and find a couple of rusty tin milk cans, a tarnished piece of farm equipment with corroded cast iron wheels and a small tree growing through the middle of it, and two old tires. We also find the perfect tree for a treehouse: the tree looks like it has five trunks growing out of the middle, each trunk evenly spaced around the center and growing away from each other to create a large space in the middle. We tell our father we want to move here so we can have a treehouse.

We will come back to this land that same night to show my mother, and she will eventually agree to move out here. My dad will smile for days, and all he will talk about is how we will have lots of land now, and we won't be right next door to another family. It's what he has always wanted.

In the coming months I will visit the house with my family many times to check on the progress of our new home. We will walk around the roofless, wall-less frame of what will one day be our home. I will cry because my room looks smaller than I thought it would be, but my dad will reassure me that it just looks small because there aren't walls yet. I will eventually realize he was right. I will be wearing a winter coat while I eat a picnic dinner on a foldout table in my parents' room before we have electricity and carpet, just for fun, before we are even living there. The day before the carpet is laid, I will use a black sharpie marker to write my name and favorite Bible verses on the cement ground in my bedroom. My family and I will walk around our home with a friend from church, asking God to bless our family in our new home.

My parents will argue with our builder who charged us fifty grand more than he said he would. My parents will tell me to always get everything in writing when I am older. My father will lose his job, bounce around numerous jobs, the economy will plummet, and our house will be on and off the housing market for four years because no one wants to pay as much as we are asking and we can't afford to lower the price.

When I'm twenty years old I still won't have the treehouse I always wanted, and I will realize I haven't sat in my favorite tree since high school. When I'm twenty years old I will have wished for a long time that we had never moved here.

ONE MORE TIME

I can't remember how many times I played my grandfather's game of marbles with him, but I always made sure I sat next to him so I could snap his navy suspenders and ruffle his hair if he started to win. "Oh, you," he would say, chuckling, as he guided his white hair back into its comb-over position, squinting at me and slapping my hand away, pretending to be angry.

I can't remember the greasy smell of fish deep-frying, but I remember my grandfather would spend all afternoon perfecting his favorite meal of walleye and potatoes, his face sweating next to the hot pan. He would sit on a stool, hunched over a garbage can, peeling the potatoes while the rest of my family and I sat at the kitchen table. He would make me eat a piece of fish every time, convinced this time I would like it. I never did.

I can't remember why I chose to sit in my room and read when my grandparents visited from their home three hours away. Even with my door shut I could hear the deep rumble of his voice reverberating from upstairs, and my mom calling me up to spend time with them.

I can't remember what I said the last time I saw him, except that I loved him, and I would see him over fall break. I glanced behind me as my tired grandfather echoed he loved me too, and saw him grip the kitchen table as he cautiously lowered himself into

a chair, staring at the Styrofoam cup of coffee I had brought him. Then I closed the door.

I wish I would have turned around, ran back in and squeezed him tighter than I had ever hugged anyone. I wish I would have held his age-spotted hands in mine, looked into his eyes and thanked him for loving me despite the times I woke him up from his afternoon nap, beat him when we played board games, ruined his hair, or snapped his suspenders. But I think he knew. I hope he always knew.

MOVING FORWARD

I'm gripping Flame's orange lead rope tightly in my left hand, and my right hand shakes as I ruffle his chestnut-colored forelock then slide my hand down the white blaze in the center of his face, feeling the coarse cowlick on his forehead, the circular indentation between his eyes, the angled dish of his face that's particular to the Arabian breed, the soft velvet of his muzzle, his wiry whiskers poking me.

We're standing in front of the barn, in between two empty pastures. The rest of the horses are in a field somewhere in the distance – we can't hear them or see them. I'm ignoring the small group of eight people around me: three of my best friends, one of their dads, my dad, the barn owner, another friend from the barn, and the vet who is there to euthanize my horse.

Flame and I are watching each other, mirroring dark brown eyes. I want to be mad at him for bolting into the two-by-four pole that broke his shoulder and sentenced him to death, all because he spooked and instinct told him to run. I wish I could tell him this shouldn't have happened.

I rest my forehead on his face and inhale dust and dirt. I reach my arm behind his head so I can run my hand along his neck, his mane tickling the back of my hand. Such a good boy, I whisper to him as I scratch his favorite spot between his ears.

I think the vet asks me if I'm ready, and I have to nod. The vet is crying even though this isn't the first time she has put down a horse. Everyone around me is crying because none of them has ever had to put a horse down before. I'm crying because this wasn't in the plan; he should have lived for at least another ten years

I unhook his halter, press my lips to his face for the last time, and take a step back. He keeps watching me; I wipe my eyes and tell him it's going to be okay, that I love him and he's so very brave. Flame shifts his eyes away from me, turning his head as the vet approaches his left side and watching her as she inserts a large needle and empties the sedative into his neck. His eyes droop and lose focus as he feels the effects immediately, swaying unsteadily. The vet quickly switches to the second needle and releases the barbiturates to euthanize him, and he leans to the left, then to the right, his legs quivering.

I squeeze my eyes shut so I don't have to see him fall to the dirt ground, his body collapsing on his right side, legs straight out, eyes halfway closed. I don't remember what the thud sounded like when his heavy body hit the ground. I sink to my knees next to his nose, my arms cradling his heavy head, my hands separating his right cheek from the ground, pressing my face against the warmth of his face, drying my cheeks.

I remember the first day I saw him, his ribs and hip bones protruding sharply through his hair and the whites of his eyes showing when a person reached out to him. I remember him dancing around me in tight circles as I held his lead-line and tried to bring the saddle-pad closer to his back. I remember a few months later calling his name, and he would trot to wherever I was, ears pricked forward to listen for me, head

bowing low so I could easily slip a halter on. I remember feeling his warm body beneath me when I first rode him bareback, trusting him to not let me fall off. I remember stroking his face sticking out of the stall while the vet showed me the x-ray of his broken shoulder. I remember telling him there was no other choice, wishing he could understand me. I remember leading him out of the barn, him leaning on his hind legs and hopping forward, landing on his left leg and dragging his immobile right leg behind him. I remember I'm holding his head for the last time. I don't think I can move.

HUMMINGBIRD LAKE

Amidst the other amoeba-shaped lakes in Minnesota, there is a lake in the small town of Annandale that is shaped like a hummingbird. The bird's beak runs parallel to Highway 55, the main road that will take you northwest from Minneapolis through all of five minutes and the one stoplight of my hometown, and eventually all the way to the North Dakota border. The hummingbird faces west, slightly angled upwards as if it intends to follow Highway 55 until it finds a new home somewhere else, maybe in British Columbia.

My family and I live three miles west of the hummingbird's chin, nestled in between two lakes. But whenever I drive anywhere, I generally have to go past some part of the hummingbird, usually paralleling the beak and the head.

My best friend lives on the rump of the hummingbird, below the flank and above the tail feathers. The first time I ever saw a shooting star, I was sitting on her dock that extends into the undertail coverts of the hummingbird.

Going to and from her home I go on gravel roads that trace the hummingbird, traveling down one side on the way there, and completing the outline on my way home. I drive parallel to the beak until I take a right down to the crown of the bird on a gravel road, circling the head and driving within ten feet of the spine until I get to her house.

On my way home from her house, I will trace the tip of the tail, following the curve until I have to take a sharp left then a right and I drive parallel to its belly flanks and chest, but I don't see the lake anymore. On this gravel road there are two sharp turns. I'm careful not to take them too quickly. One of my friends slid into the ditch after having her license for less than a month. The other turn you can never see if there is a car around the corner. I go slowly for fear the other car might be going fast. I've only encountered another car on the road a handful of times in the hundreds of times I've driven on it. Once, I turned and the boat policemen were coming to the public landing at the tail of the hummingbird.

Multiple summer days she and I have spent canoeing from the undertail coverts to where the feet of a hummingbird would be. My best friend and I jump in for a swim when the heat becomes unbearable, treading water in the flank of the bird. Sometimes we talk, sometimes we canoe in peace, listening to birds make plans with each other and dragonflies coming close to investigate us. This is the place where we can share anything with each other, our future hopes and plans.

And in the center from my life in a small town rests a hummingbird poised to follow the path forward or backward to a new destination.

SAILING

Job: stop boat when we dock.

First mistake: balancing on the bow.

I prepare, but the wind surprises.

Grasp the wheel, wind twists me.

Ribs crunch dock's edge; I'm wet.

Can't breathe, can't speak, can't move.

ICE CREAM IDENTITY

I should be a fifth-generation ice cream maker. Not just any ice cream maker though. Not for Kemp's, Blue Bunny, Häagen-Dazs, Ben & Jerry's, Cold Stone, or Edy's, but for Brown's Velvet Ice Cream, the homegrown label and legacy my great-great-grandfather Carl Brown began in 1916. Now the abandoned creamery stands in silence, alone, rejected and reminiscing mournfully on its glory days, when it had been a welcome symbol in our town. The large brick building is eggshell white, the attached side office is your average brick color, and the roof is a dark shade of red I picked out from a swatch of colors my father brought home. "An eye sore," my mother calls it whenever we drive by.

My great-great-grandfather purchased the creamery in 1906 in my small hometown of Annandale, Minnesota. He began by making butter, but by 1916 he focused solely on making ice cream. His ice cream business began when he sculpted large ice blocks out of French Lake and stored them in chilled tree shacks. These ice blocks combined with fresh buttermilk and wild berries became the ultimate ingredient in his velvety ice cream. Ownership of the business moved down the line to the sons of each family: Carl, Oscar, Floyd, and finally to my father.

From the time Carl moved from Sweden and established himself in Annandale in the late 1800's, the Brown's were esteemed in the community. When my father was a

child, the weekly newspaper in my town would call all of the well-known families in Annandale every Monday morning to see if they had done anything interesting over the weekend. That information would then be printed in that week's edition: "Floyd Brown family of eight visited Maxine Holmquist Brown's family in Buffalo — ." My grandmother secretly called it the gossip column. I think some of the older people in my town know more about my family history than I do. My small town even has a street named after my family, Brown Avenue, that my parents lived on for a few years after they married. I was born into this special legacy without ever doing anything to deserve this status.

Some of my teachers in school had also taught my father and his siblings; they all knew me as "Kevin's daughter." Members of my church loved hearing my grandfather sing, and told me so often, even after he had passed away. Older gentlemen in our town have commented on how I look like a Brown, or how much they loved my grandfather and father's ice cream, or how much they loved listening to my grandfather sing, or any other story they can associate with the Brown family. I found my identity in being a Brown and I didn't know anything different.

I frequented the creamery as a child. It was the family business after all. My younger brother and I spent countless hours playing with our stuffed bears and Hot Wheels cars in the damp side rooms of the creamery, our own little sanctuary. There, the forty pound paper sacks of flour and sugar were stacked on pallets, stacks taller than my three-foot frame and perfect for pretend rooms while playing 'house.' I only passed through the eight-foot plastic flaps into the freezer when I attached myself safely

to my father's side for fear I would get trapped inside and freeze to death. I finished my homework in the exceedingly heated back office, and my father would reward me with a kid-sized strawberry cup of ice cream. I watched my father inspect the ice cream with his hairnet securely wrapped around his head as he leaned over the pasteurizer where the first stage of ice cream churned. I observed my father to learn for myself what I would be doing at my first job when I became a teenager. I never questioned if my life would consist of anything different. I never questioned my future of being another Brown who resided in Annandale for her whole life.

My future shifted in middle school. As a sixth-grader I thought I was too old to be treated like a child, but I was still too young to comprehend all the ways of the adult world. I didn't know the course of my life took an abrupt detour when the shaft on an ammonia compressor snapped because of its age. The vital half-a-million dollar piece of equipment that created refrigeration by removing heat had exhausted its life, and ultimately placed the creamery into retirement.

I think I was sad when the creamery officially closed, but I wasn't devastated, no one in my family that I can remember was completely heartbroken. Maybe they all had expected something to give sooner or later because adults knew things like that. Or maybe all of my father's siblings just didn't care anymore; after all, everyone except for my father moved away from Annandale as soon as they could. Maybe that's why my father alone bared the brunt of the failure and turned to alcohol to drown his sorrows or why his family doesn't mention Brown's Ice Cream very often. I can remember visiting the creamery for the last time, the strong musty odor of mold lingering in my nose long

after I walked out the door, the smell that I used to associate with safety. I remember the ceiling in the freezer collapsing when my father turned off the freezer for the first time in over ninety-nine years.

I remember the gradual change from feeling important in my community to realizing my generation didn't really care anymore; that part of Annandale's history had finished. The familiarity and comfort I had once found in Brown's Velvet Ice Cream had ended and what I had once found my identity in no longer existed. The older generation in our town still remembers Brown's Velvet Ice Cream, but as soon as they pass away, it will just be another abandoned building to everyone else.

The creamery overrun by weeds doesn't affect me when I drive by. I never even think about all of the memories and premonitions that took root there. To me it's just an old building in the scenery of Annandale and it isn't until I begin to dwell on the past that I am reminded of what I am missing out on. But maybe I'm not really missing out on anything if I don't miss it until I actually force myself to think about it. I have accepted this change in my life without a fight and I wonder why. When did I make the subconscious decision that this change was not a bad thing?

I grew up thinking my future would be in Annandale. Even if I wasn't running the family business and Hunter owned it instead, I still wanted to be a part of it. I planned on raising my kids in an environment surrounded by family and family history. But now I am not tied down to always living in Annandale because my family probably won't be there either. I can move to Montana and live on a horse ranch, or I can travel all around the world without ever settling down. I will never get to say I

make ice cream for a living, but I still get to say that my family used to own an ice cream business. Someday I would like to open up an ice cream parlor of my own. It won't be exactly the same as Brown's Velvet Ice Cream, but I can still tie in the history behind it. I have the freedom to establish my business wherever I want to, Minnesota or somewhere else. Ironically, I don't really even like ice cream, maybe I had too much of it when I was younger, but for some reason I still like the idea of being an ice cream maker. Maybe I find comfort in the familiarity of having an ice cream business in the family. Maybe I like change, and maybe I don't. I'll probably never know which future would have been the better option because I never got the chance to choose. Perhaps no matter what happens in life there's a part of me that will always long for the creamy taste of vanilla ice cream that could only come from my great-great-grandfather's recipe.

INTERRUPTIONS

I hear the sudden earsplitting scream of the train alerting its arrival to the next town. I jump and clamp my hands over my ears to muffle the sound even if I am prepared for the train to pierce the silence. After the whistle I still struggle to hear my own thoughts above the grinding thumps of the wheels grating the rusty rails; I wait for the relief of the train fading into the distance, the shrill whistling signals and whacks of the wheels becoming only a memory again until next time.

I smell the air after the first warm rainfall in spring. The earth releases odors that have been frozen deep down all winter: the sweet dirt smell of worms mixing with the stale air smell of manure and cows won't leave my nose.

I taste plastic and sour milk mixed with a hint of chicken and bacon grease; the rubbery strips of dog treats leave a layer of film in my mouth even after I chew the soft, grainy pieces that deceived me and force myself to swallow the dry lumps. I forget that things don't always taste as good as they smell.

I feel my brother's warm neck between my gripping fingers as I squeeze a little tighter, constricting his airway enough so he feels uncomfortable, but not enough to turn his face purple. I slide my hands up so my thumbs rest just under his chin, proving to him that I am stronger and will lift him up by the head if he says one more word. My brain tells me to let go, but my hands are stronger.

I see phosphenes, that twinkling obscurity created from pressing my thumbs firmly into my eyelids, squishing my eyes back as far as they will go. I keep pushing until I feel a sharp throbbing behind my right eyebrow that lets me know I've held it long enough, or maybe too long. I release and open my eyes; I can't see. The world is dark brown, almost black, and fuzzy – it looks like the night sky in upstate New York, except the stars are pink, orange, yellow, red, and green, swirling and mocking me because I can't trace their movement. I'm mesmerized for a second before I start blinking rapidly, afraid I'll never see again. But the darkness disintegrates in a few blinks and I'm left staring at my clasped hands in front of me; I hear my father say amen and I realize I wasn't listening.