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# On Navigating Life as a Deceased Lutheran Pastor's Daughter

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## ABSTRACT

This portfolio is a collection of my favorite original pieces of creative nonfiction and poetry which I wrote during my undergraduate studies at Cedarville University. “My Uncle: Handyman Who Never Left” was published in the June 2014 edition of *Spittoon*, and “Hiking the Grand Tetons. Milking a Cow by Hand.” has been accepted for publication in *Creative Nonfiction*. This collection expresses pain from my dad’s death and circumstances that followed it, instances of healing, and aspects of life both before and since. I present to you *On Navigating Life as a Deceased Lutheran Pastor’s Daughter*.

**ON NAVIGATING LIFE AS A DECEASED LUTHERAN PASTOR'S DAUGHTER**

**By**

**Kathy Roberts**

**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**

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For my dad, Pastor Tom Roberts

## INTRODUCTION

My soul exhales into ecstatic rest in the presence of beauty. A perfect description possesses the power to produce the wavelengths which resonate the chords in my soul that produce a double or triple overtone. In those instances, I can catch a scent of eternity. I love to craft beauty - chisel descriptions word by word – then relish in the tide of creation. The act of creation is simultaneously an act of worship. Through writing, I flex my *imageo dei*. When I sit to write, I often feel like a child fisting a chubby crayon and drawing off-set ovals in attempt to imitate her mother's tulip beds. Yet my waxy tulips have gradually developed to possess more precise details over the years. And, graciously, my heavenly Father still smiles at my effort and magnets them to the fridge. Though my creations are mere Play-Doh globs compared to God's ivory sculptures, I find joy in being able to take up my Father's craft.

Much of my writing is born from a desire to deftly describe. Some events, situations, characters, objects, or settings are just too literary to ignore. Some things stun open a certain window blind in my soul which captures the image onto film which I then itch to expose for the world. For example, my poem "Pie a Male Nurse" was born from one such window-blind moment during Homecoming Weekend at my university. I walked through the Fieldhouse enroute to the elliptical which meant that I passed through the student org fair for alums. All the student volunteers were sedate with glazed eyes behind tables of bagged baked goods. Until, in a corner back from the oval of tables, lay a blue tarp. On the tarp were college guys wearing scrubs and shaving cream all over their faces, laughing. Beside the tarp stood a dowel rod with a computer paper sign which read "Pie a Male Nurse". The situation begged to be written about.

In writing, I aim to evoke all the senses. Reading should be an experience, so I want to provide a holistic experience for my readers to live (and for myself to relive). I want my readers to smell the soggy earth, internalize the rhythm of the dance, nearly burn their tongue on

steaming oregano and rosemary, and see the grains in satin. Not all of my pieces evoke all five senses, but some do. Examples of pieces in this collection which intentionally appeal to all the senses are “Lust”, “My Uncle: Handyman Who Never Left”, “The Truth”, and “On Dancing the Blues in Lower Alexander with a Man I Didn’t Know”. I invite you to holistically experience this portfolio.

I write for a variety of reasons, most of them selfish. I write on a variety of topics ranging from nature at Lutheran Hills in “Remnants,” to pieces inspired by other art such as “College Bluegrass Band Playing at a Church Silent Auction,” to praise such as “Psalm of an Apple Eater,” to pieces that simply imitate works by great writers such as “Sturdy Brick,” to humorous pieces such as “Alf: Miniature King of Briar Bush Farm”. However, the smorgasbord of fun topics is the minority of my subjects. I mostly write to process occurrences in my life, cope with brokenness, and create so that I can understand and move forward. Thus nearly all my writing is creative nonfiction. This collection has essays, creative nonfiction shorts, poems that are format vehicles for creative nonfiction, a handful of other poems, and zero fiction. Even my fiction (outside of this collection) is heavily based on nonfiction. Real life is so interesting and confusing that I see no reason to look elsewhere for inspiration. And, as Dr. Heath says, my life offers plenty of writing material.

The title of this portfolio is appropriately entitled *On Navigating Life as a Deceased Lutheran Pastor’s Daughter*. The first part of my life was absolutely ideal. My dad was a Lutheran pastor in a rural congregation in southern Indiana, and my mom was a stay-at-home-mom. My life consisted of ‘pastoral’ scenes such as my mother calling across the cemetery for my sister and me to come in for dinner from the edge of the field where we stirred leaf soup and whittled stick arrows. Fast forward to eighth grade in small-town northwestern Ohio. Dad’s brain cancer returns, and he succumbs sixth months later. I entered high school fatherless and with a mother who struggled to re-enter the job market after nearly a decade and a half of caring for her children. My dad’s death is by far the most impactful event of my life. It changed the

characters of my family, solidified his example for me, strained relationships, created emotional and financial difficulty, and formed the bedrock of who I am, to name a few. My dad, as you will see, was wonderful; his life greatly informs mine. However, navigating life without a father has not been rose-colored. It has been lily-scented – the all too familiar perfume of funeral homes. Since I write to process, cope, and progress, much of my writing deals with my dad and the occurrences that have arisen in that aftermath. There are pieces in this collection which seem to not directly address my dad, and, you're right, they don't. However, my identity and all of my experiences are colored by my dad, even if it is only in a small degree such as me wanting to tell him about my day. Those pieces fall under the "On Navigating Life" portion of the title. This portfolio contains a wide variety of pieces from life as I have known it.

I have made no effort to censor pain from my writing. What you will see in the following pages is the unedited Kathy Roberts. I used to be scared to share my stories with other people because of the vulnerability of confessing that I am a mess. However, one thing I have learned since arriving at college is that this life is not my own; it is God's, and He is letting me live it. I have no right to conceal it from others, and even if I do, that stifles any good which could come from sharing experiences. Since my dad's death, God has been gradually healing me, and as the recipient of that blessing, I need to share those narratives with others. However, in order to convey the gravity of the healing, I must show people the pain. This collection does not yet contain many healing pieces. That is both because the majority of this writing comes from earlier years and because God is still healing me.

With all of this in mind, I invite you into *On Navigating Life as a Deceased Lutheran Pastor's Daughter*.

## FOREWORD

As Christians, we are called to be a light to the world and the salt of the Earth. We are called to be witnesses to the truth of the Gospel. We are called to be in the world but not of it. We are called to have our hearts conformed to Christ's, our minds renewed, and our lives transformed. We are called to surrender our lives so that we may gain them. We are called to live differently.

Our faith should saturate our lives so thoroughly that it bleeds through our pores into every facet of our lives. People should observe there is something different about us without us explicitly saying, "I am a Christian." This is particularly true of Christians who write creative nonfiction. A Christian creative nonfiction writer's faith should affect her work ethic, subject matter, and fact honesty.

It is first important to realize that writing is very much a Christian activity because God communicates with us creatively. One only has to flip through the Bible to deduce that God often chooses to communicate through narrative. Leland Ryken supports this by writing, "Christianity . . . is a revealed religion whose authoritative truths are written in a book" (*Thinking Christianly About Literature* 24). Creative writer Bret Lott delves deeper into the narrative in that book by arguing that Christ's incarnation was actually the beginning of creative nonfiction when he says that, "Christ's insertion into history combined once and for all story and logic, imagination and reason" (Lott 27). Lott points out that many people past and present believed that those elements were separate and could not apply to the Christian life simultaneously. However, Christ himself combined story and logic in the form of parables. Leland Ryken further supports that creativity is a Christian activity by saying that beauty is inherently good because God created the world with beauty. Ryken writes, "God did not create a purely functional world. Instead he planted a garden in which the trees were "pleasant to the sight" as well as "good for food" (Genesis 2:9, RSV). The writer of Psalm 19 valued nature, not because it was useful to him, but because it gave him the opportunity to contemplate the beauty

and handiwork of God” (Words of Delight 136). God seems to ordain beauty, creation, and the act of creating as good, which gives Christian creative nonfiction writers a precedent for their art.

Christian creative nonfiction writers are made in the image of God which includes that we are naturally creative and should be good stewards of that gift. In another essay, Ryken quotes Christian poet Chad Walsh as saying “that writers can see themselves ‘as a kind of earthly assistant to God . . . carrying on the delegated work of creation, making fullness of creation fuller’” (Thinking Christianly About Literature 26). In that view, Christian writers are not only being good stewards of their literary gifts, but also creating art to enhance creation and for the enjoyment of others. Ryken quotes Abraham Kuyper from *Lectures on Calvinism* as writing to similar effect, “As image-bearers of God, man possesses the possibility both to create something beautiful, and to delight in it” (26). Many Christians are hesitant to delight in the beauty of art and literature, however, the Bible tells us that God intends for us to take pleasure from beauty. Ryken asserts, “Beauty is in itself nonutilitarian and therefore appreciated and valued as self-rewarding” (Words of Delight 145). This is the aesthetic pleasure of art, however, literature supplies many other pleasures including emotional, verbal, imagination, and intellectual.

The intellectual pleasure of literature includes that readers realize that art is presenting truth which is one of the highest goals of the Christian nonfiction writer. Ryken writes that literature is affective, meaning that “literature can persuade readers toward an acceptance of either truth or falsehood, and can be a prompter to either good or bad behavior” (Thinking Christianly About Literature 29). This gives Christian nonfiction writers a large responsibility because we need to accurately convey Christ who is the Way, the Truth, the Life; the only means of eternal life.

In pursuing truth in their writing, Christian writers should avoid writing kitsch or didactic works. Many Christian writers tend to this way to maintain ‘purity’ in language and content or use the medium of literature to indoctrinate readers at the expense of artistic

excellence. Writer Richard Terrell observes that this problem is not limited to the Christian sphere, but is pervading the entire cultural arena which he says is suffering from an “atmosphere of ‘multicultural’ parochialism, declining craftsmanship in the arts, and the dictates of ‘market forces’” (Terrell 242). Terrell defines parochialism as “a spirit that demands that we create only for the safely defined boundaries of our ethnic, ideological, or spiritual community” (243). For many Christian writers, this fear of writing something that is not safe for Christians has sterilized their art to the point that the secular world looks down on our work and declares that our faith hinders our art. This should certainly not be the case for numerous reasons. First, good art is more effective at conveying a message or worldview to readers than a noticeably didactic work; a reader will meditate on quality art and is likely to discard a piece that he perceives is instructing him. In his essay, Terrell quotes Russell Kirk as advising writers of any worldview, “The better the artist, one almost may say, the more subtle the preacher. Inventive persuasion, not blunt exhortation, commonly is the method of the literary champion of norms” (252). In addition to being ineffective, writing within a safe arena to a single audience of believers denies “the biblical truth of humanity’s universal relatedness to God’s purpose and creation” (243). Writing within that narrow frame limits ourselves in ways that God did not intend for us to be limited because He created life with a range of experiences we are ignoring.

God created a wide variety of experiences which frees Christian nonfiction writers to write about a variety of subjects. Terrell establishes a Christian literary style that he says should be marked by three principles: “First, we recognize and acknowledge the subtle elements of reality. Secondly, we recognize that not all things in the order of creation are religious. Third, we recognize a substantial lavishness in God’s design” (Terrell 251). The first and third principles apply to Christian nonfiction writers in that our writing should include ample details to convey life as accurately and exactly as possible. This also implies that we should include evocative scenes and language when appropriate and true-to-life rather than skip over them because we regard that area of life as unclean. Frances Shaffer supports this by saying,

“Christian art is the expression of the whole life of the whole person who is a Christian. What a Christian portrays in his art is the totality of life” (Shaffer 46). The totality of life includes much that is not pure. This goes into the second point of not all created things being religious. Christian writers have all of creation as potential subject matter, not just that which is obviously religious. However, a Christian can and should write about non-religious matter in a way that does evidence her faith. One of the greatest differences between Christians and the rest of the world is that we have hope, so our writing should convey that hope. However, this does not mean that all of our writing must be hopeful or follow the redemption story; fallenness is also part of the universal human experience, so we can write openly about the agonies of depravity. Poetry editor Robert Klein Engler states the responsibility of the Christian writer in this way, “The Christian poet of our time, immersed in a culture that is materialistic, must simply be a witness to the hope of life everlasting” (Engler 274). Christians should write about the gamut of experiences because our perspective offers hope to the world.

In addition to striving to create artistic and true works, Christian nonfiction writers should stand out from secular writers because they view their work as worship to God. Leland Ryken writes that literature gives countless gifts to humanity and at its best is an “expression of truth and beauty that can become worship to God” (Thinking Christianly About Literature 32). If Christian writers see their art an act of worship, then they will approach it differently than secular writers. They should pour their best efforts into it to produce the most glorifying and artistically excellent piece possible. To this effect, pianist Dr. Charles Clevenger advises his music students to pray before they begin practicing so that they may dedicate their work to God and keep their gifts in perspective of their purposes (Clevenger). Writers may use that same advice and pray to dedicate their work before writing. Approaching art as worship also means that Christian writers should do their research to become as knowledgeable about their field as possible. Richard Terrell writes that “Much of that [literary] heritage is itself the direct product of, or is heavily informed by, the action and presence of Christ in the world and the foundation

that is the eternal Word. To consider and take hold of that heritage is to do one's work 'as unto the Lord,' and may constitute not only a creative process but an artist's obedience as well" (Terrell 258). Not only is writing an offering to God, but studying literature is also a form of worship because it studies what God has revealed to people and enjoying some of God's creation.

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## ON DANCING THE BLUES IN LOWER ALEXANDER WITH A MAN I DIDN'T KNOW

Once on the edge of the dimly lit floor, he tugs gently with a slight flick of the wrist, graceful as casting a fishing pole. We fold together, our bodies naturally interlacing. My left hand lays in a hollow on his softly rippled arm, eyes gazing over his shoulder at the chairs spaced like teeth around the dance floor, occupied by college girls tilting their necks suggestively for the next dance. His right hand rests on the small of my back, forearm guiding from its touch on the side of my ribcage. My weight is shifted on the balls of my feet, but if I relax my calves I would be sitting on his right thigh. His chest is comfortable; I press into him and feel infinity. I inhale his honeysuckle cologne, head slightly bowing then straightening, lashes brushing his shirt.

The song is “Natural Woman” sung by someone other than Aretha Franklin. We start with a rock from the right to the left. From there we ebb and flow throughout the rotunda. When in close hold, our four feet turn to two and we move like a graphing compass, weight pivoting on one leg as we swing the other, traversing the floor in double time half-moons. Abrupt stop. He releases my right hand. Still connected with our left hinge, we bend our knees and lean into the music. The slow throb of the bass starts in our pelvises and travels up our spines in a wave releasing through the tops of our heads and outstretched fingertips, hands poised as elegant Grecian statues.

He spins me. Lifts his left hand then cups it, my right index and middle fingers the ball in the socket. He presses forward and I glide backward, always equidistant. To transition out he lowers his arm and gives me a gentle flick to pull me back into him, or, he sometimes lowers his arm with no tension. Then I am my own separate entity, still connected, but free to perform my

own artistry. The lyrical lines flow through my hips, this side then that side, pause, sway, extend, scoop, dip. I gradually swim my way back to him, teasing with retreat or coyly twining, not yielding until he grins competitively and tugs me back to him, our bodies again pressed, his lips at my ear, soft smile.

“You’re a natural.”

“This is just my second time.”

After an open hold, he lifts my right hand to his right shoulder. Disappearing behind him, I trace with the sides of my first two fingers up the slope of his shoulder across his neck, down the other slope, slide down his bicep, hand jumps, fingers catch fingers, mutual tension, I whirl in, my wrists cross in front me, his arms outside cradling mine, head drapes over my shoulder, we sway with the music.

The slowing cadence signals. He extends, pulls me in, dips me. He leans over me as my back curves, head bends, hair falls, eyes close, leg lifts, toe points. Static artistry. He raises me; we both smile as if out of breath. He offers his elbow and escorts me back to my chair.

## PREPARATION FOR ENCOUNTERING THE PATH LESS TAKEN

I first saw Zoe at the chicken barbeque before campers were supposed to arrive. Erin, our Program Director, came over to me under the tent, whispered, "There's Zoe," and nodded in the direction of a kid with milky hot chocolate colored hair about the length of a three-month-old crew cut sticking up in places, a navy bandana tied outlaw-style around her neck, boys cargo shorts, a plain navy t-shirt, navy crocs, one stud earring, slight buck teeth that made the mouth look slightly rabbitish, and bow-legged. I would have never guessed this kid was a girl had Erin not told me.

Standing beside Zoe were two women that looked out of place in nature and amongst a group of people that mostly knew each other. The one on the left must have been Erin's aunt because she looked similar to Erin's dad. She was short with hair about the color and length of Zoe's, rectangular glasses with thick frames, and seemed to be the one in charge looking for the place to go. The other woman was heavy-set with perhaps two chins, thin brown hair slightly past her shoulders, the kind of slip-on gray leather sandals with two wide straps and non-functional buckles, and a commanding presence and facial expression that conveyed she would not be fooled.

At camper registration, the women were so nervous it was almost cute. They whispered back and forth, holding up paperwork and checklists as they looked around to make sure they had everything before they walked up to me to ask where to register.

The nerves amplified in moving Zoe into my cabin. The heavy-set woman wouldn't come in, but Erin's aunt was bustling around her bunk smoothing the sheets, counting and mentally recounting cargo, opening bags to show Zoe where everything was, and explaining to me the ADHD med routine. Zoe just stood between the door and her bunk leaning on the polished

walking stick they just bought her from the camp store, staring into space, breathing through her mouth, processing.

Toward the end of the move-in time, two girls approached me and innocently asked, “We only have girls in this cabin, right?” I knew exactly what they meant but responded with an equally innocent, “Oh, yes,” then made some comment about how well we girls were going to bond this week.

\*

The next day, Zoe asked me, “I don’t see why they split up boys and girls in the cabins. I mean, we can learn a lot from boys.” This question startled me, but I nonchalantly answered, “Yes, we can, and that’s why we do camp-wide stuff with the boys, but it’s good to have girl time too, so we have a cabin of just girls for better bonding time.”

“Oh, I guess you’re right.”

\*

Even by the end of the week, some campers still didn’t know if Zoe was a boy or girl and were surprised to see her with my cabin. Her swimsuit didn’t help: blue swim trunks with green Hawaiian flowers, grey surf shirt, and black gloves that gave her webbed fingers so she could swim better, supposedly.

All week my girls would mess up their pronouns and call Zoe a “he.” After they noticed, they would shake their heads as if they got back a division test and saw they made a silly mistake like forgetting to bring up the remainder with the answer.

One night in the middle of the week, I trod back to our cabin from the bathhouse in the rain, mud, and lightening to find everyone huddled around Zoe’s bottom bunk like mice engulfing a crumb of cheese. Zoe was the morsel with her back against the wall, knees drawn, arms pulling her legs into torso, face cocked upright, red and blotchy with blue eyes brilliant and red-rimmed from recent irrigation. My girls cuddled, rubbing her back, reading her Bible

verses, comforting her with their mothers' advice, and telling her tips of how they overcame their fear of storms.

\*

Zoe really liked birds. On our way to the first dinner, she asked me what kinds of birds we had in the area. She was usually looking up to see one or down to find a feather. Her walking stick had a leather string through the top to which she tied various black or striped feathers she found. My other girls knew how much she liked them and looked for new feathers to give her when they went down to the lake.

Zoe also really liked Minecraft. She brought a whole paper bag filled with computer printed spreads of characters, furniture, scenes, and accessories to cut and fold into cube-ish images. During free time, if not folding Minecraft she would be sketching cats in the notebook she brought. The girls "Oooed" at her talent and watched over her shoulder praising the exactness of the ears and telling her what to draw or fold next.

\*

At the end of our Friday staff meeting the previous week, we counselors were handed our camper list for the next week, in blue and red ink because our head director, Mark, still hadn't brought us more cartridges for the camp printer. I had only eight names, none of whom I recognized from the previous summer. The staff began leaving the crowded living room to start their weekend, so I got up too; as I passed the thrift-store dining room table, Erin brushed my elbow.

"Hey, Kathy, I just wanted to let you know that one of your girls this week is my cousin Zoe. She's really bright and a tomboy, so she probably won't fit in well and the other kids may pick on her. Also, she was adopted by Lesbian mothers, and though my aunt is a Christian, her partner is pretty hostile toward Christianity and Zoe is picking up those feelings. We've been trying to convince the family for years to send her to camp. I knew you could handle it and thought you'd do the best job, so I gave her to you."

\*

Of all the college kids on staff, I remained silent while others affirmed Mike's decision when he came out of the closet at our reunion, I didn't joke about tricking my friend into a gay bar for her birthday, my first time seeing a cross-dresser would be later that summer, I attend a school that recently stopped temporarily kicking students out when they confess they are homosexual as opposed to my friends' schools that have whole dorms dedicated to bi, trans, or homosexual students.

\*

My first encounter with a cross-dresser was few weekends later: A handful of our staff drove to Bloomington, college town of IU, to see Brad who was on staff last summer but currently working his way up in Nashville, play at Rachel's Café. Its tiny hand-painted sign was on the side rather than facing the street; I would have missed it driving. Ferns, Christmas cacti, and other various potted plants lined the once window seats facing the busy street; moons and planets painted the ceiling; four solid, wooden, round, eight-seater tables commanded the space with some universal religion symbol in the center with symbols like  $\Omega$ ,  $\varphi$ ,  $\sigma$ ,  $\heartsuit$ ,  $\odot$ ,  $\Sigma$  equally spaced around the circumference. Vegan brownies, vegetarian lasagna, and chocolate chip cookies occupied the glass refrigerator case next to the cash register. Before the fern wall were low bookcases containing navy-threaded, dust-covered works of Ulysses S. Grant along with various encyclopedias and dictionaries; on top sat an assortment of board games like Taboo, Scattergories, and some themed version of Risk that I thought cool at the time but can't remember now. The upright piano in the corner that served as the stage was pushed to the side for Brad's mic and amp.

About halfway through Brad's concert of love and break-up songs, in walked the most wretchedly ungraceful woman I had ever seen. Her walking reminded me of the critique our city choreographer, Brian, made to the girls in our rural showchoir the first night we danced in three inch heels, "Straighten up and walk with pride; you look like you're taking a dump!"

After the voice in my head observed, “I’ve never seen a woman with such long, dark back hair,” I realized that maybe this wasn’t a woman. No, a woman would be much more graceful even in the painful restrictions of beauty. I looked closer: pink velvet platform heels, pink spaghetti strap dress with heart impressions and a poufy mini-skirt, push-up inserts that were sliding out the bra as noticeable from the front and sides, bleach blonde atop thick brown eyebrows, large pink bow cocked on the left side of the ironed locks, bright red lipstick . . . it must have been a long night. As she sat at a table by herself she twirled her hair and made a point to cross her knees and swirl her foot in a way to flex her calves. The action combination reminded me of a high school acting class where our teacher described what body language I would use to flirt Treavor. I did my best not to stare. I wasn’t staring to be judgmental, scrutinize, analyze; no, I was just curious. I wanted to *know*. What does this man think an ideal woman is? What was his past like that brought him to this point?

A couple weekends later we returned to that café for WiFi. I noticed that the barista was transgender. The outfit was better matched than mine, make-up better blended than most girls’, and chocolate-caramel curls pinned nicely. However, no woman has such thickly defined facial features or leg muscles.

\*

That night when Erin told me about Zoe, a swirl of emotions – few optimistic – churned my thoughts. I always pray for my girls the weekend before they come, but this night I prayed out of fear. Fear that I wouldn’t know what to say, fear that she would stick out, fear that the other girls would find out and exclude her, fear that Christ wouldn’t shine through because of my cultural-instilled subconscious prejudice.

\*

Zoe’s last name in red ink on my cabin list was Baker-Lewis. I always wondered why some people had hyphenated names, now I knew one of the reasons. My gut queased as I thought about all the other names like that I had seen before I knew this. I might have felt like

the British citizens who thought it odd that some people muttered “Muggles” under their breath as they walked down the street.

\*

At the chicken barbeque when I saw Zoe’s mothers for the first time, I felt the same sensation as when I stepped off the plane in Haiti. Not the brick-like humidity, no – the feeling when I stepped into the aluminum sheet airport and realized I was a minority. Everyone but our group was black. I signed up for the mission trip knowing Haitians were black, but my skin still crawled slightly and my consciousness retreated inward a little and I wasn’t sure if it rude to look people in the eyes or avoid eye contact. I mentally decided not to be prejudiced or scared, but, apparently my subconscious didn’t receive that telegram. After a week among the Haitians, I realized that *they* were the normal, native ones and *I* was the odd imposter.

My mother tells me that when I saw a black person for the first time in a grocery store, I pointed and said, “Mommy, her skin is like chocolate!”

Before I went to Haiti, I attended a National Youth Gathering in New Orleans. Again, I knew the South had more black people than up north, I mentally told myself this, and even made a goal of talking to strangers, but when an older black lady in an ornate Sunday hat sat down next to me in the street car and started talking about the church meeting she was going to, I couldn’t say anything and probably just stared. After a few minutes, the woman asked, “What’s da matta child? Cain’t ya speak?”

\*

Those feelings of uncleanliness crept unbeckoned when I saw Zoe’s mothers, the cross dressers in Rachel’s Café, or Zoe tell the girls, “My mom . . .” and I wondered if they knew there were two people she could be referring to.

\*

*Jesus loves the little children*

*All the children of the world*

*Red & yellow, black & white*  
*They are precious in his sight*  
*Jesus loves the little children of the world*

Those lyrics were the words of a small, chunky, cardboard-paged children's book my mom read to me pre-preschool. The pictures were drawings of chubby, round-faced children all dressed in their nation's traditional clothing. The only picture I remember vividly was an endless line of these children trailing around hills gradually getting closer to the reader until they seemed to march out of the page; closest was an Eskimo boy holding a salmon on fishing line and behind him a girl in an orange Spanish dress. I thought it funny and odd that people could be yellow.

\*

Now, I room with a girl whose father is Bangladeshi and mother is Pakistani. Last Saturday we went to a Malaysian wedding where I danced the Macarena next to a Saudi dressed in ceremonial white robe and red headdress. Most Friday nights I spend with International Friendships organization eating, studying, praying, talking, and worshiping with international non-Christian students. My Californian friend, Emma, and I dream of teaching English in Korea after we graduate.

Now, outwardly I seem to embrace many cultures, right? I do, but it's intentional; I'm compelling myself, I want to learn, I'm interested. But somehow I can't escape the involuntary shudder when I step into the van to go to the Korean church and realize I will be the only non-Asian were it not for Emma, or the settling breath I take before I enter the IFI house, or the extra chair I leave between me and the person I don't know. Zoe was good for me. She didn't know she was different. Why should I have?

## THE TRUTH

“I just don’t know if Christianity is the Truth.”

Darn. I have been praying since the last time we saw each other until this phone call. All summer. *Continuously*. To use the word from 1 Thessalonians.

In the car at the end of last semester, we outlined our summer goals. One of his was to know and understand the Bible more and figure out where he stands with Christianity. A goal of his own without me weaseling in a suggestion. I was so Proud. Pleased. Prayerful. My spirit geysered inside, but I calmly, measuredly, only allowed a misting of external pleasure and support to water his goal.

All summer, separated by six states and my technology fast while working at camp, we only communicated once in the middle of the summer via letter. They were long letters, quite long, five pages in small scribbles. His mainly a philosophical inquiry on selfishness and artful descriptions of his surroundings. Mine answers to his questions and snippets of my life at camp. I interpreted the inquiry on selfishness as positive potential and kept praying.

I confess that I’m not evangelistic. The joke is that Lutherans evangelize by having babies. We’re saved by Grace through Faith; apparently, the process is so easy we forget to promote it.

Our new university president is pushing evangelism so much that, honestly, it scares me: “The Barber of the ‘Ville should call me up saying, ‘I’m tired of cutting your students’ hair because every time I do, they ask me if I’m saved!’”

“No person in the region of Cedarville should die not having heard the Gospel!”

But, Dr. White, that's not who I am. I have a hard enough time initiating a conversation with friends, let alone strangers. You slap strangers with the Gospel wide and shallow, and I'll hunker down in my nest right here to work on my friends.

I didn't originally befriend this guy in an effort to evangelize. No, it was more selfish. We had numerous classes together, he was so talented in so many ways to the point that he appreciated my practicality and grounding that came from exerting effort to supplement my lack of talent. And he was willing to learn to dance with me. We studied together, proofread together, danced together, walked together, lamented over lack of sleep together.

Someone told me she thought he was agnostic; I didn't want to believe it. How could someone so talented and intelligent be so confused? I finally mustered the courage to inquire: It was true.

Growing up in a Christian community, I had never knowingly met someone who admitted not knowing if God, Jesus, and the Bible were true. It wasn't that he hadn't heard; he knew Christian doctrine better than most churchgoers. The issue here was: Is it **True**?

\*

Philosophical Truth wasn't even on my radar before college. Yes, my high school education was lacking. And also my Christian education, apparently.

However, post-revelation of critical thinking, I still hold to Christianity. My digging only upturns richer soil. After learning the word "Metanarrative" in my Making of the Modern Mind class, I learned that the Bible can be a metanarrative. All those specific rules requiring a blemish-less lamb for sacrifice in a ceremony that seems nearly humanly impossible to perfectly perform? Yeah, it was all pointing to something. Each New Testament codon has a corresponding Old Testament anti-codon. Brilliant.

Then there's chiastic structure. Man, did that rock my world when lanky, goateed Dr. Johnson wrote CHIASTIC on the board in black dry erase marker with the stick-figure equivalent of a menorah underneath during our 8:30 TR Spiritual Formation class. Perfect

parallelism rippling forth from the all-important focal point. An unfolding of Truth like the waves of a seismograph systematically emanating from the epicenter. Judah & Tamar – Joseph & Potiphar's Wife, Genesis 1 & 2. All those years, I read over it unaware of the riches underneath; like wooly bison munching field grass above the terra surface concealing three levels of Wind Cave, or vacationers dancing on cruise liners that float above the rusting walls of the once magnificent Titanic as it deteriorates particle by particle. I had no idea. Christianity is so rich.

\*

But, a complex, inerrant theology doesn't make a deity alive any more than a pretty design makes an uncooked macaroni noodle tasty.

However, God doesn't leave the macaroni boxed on the counter for us to look at while we eat instant Ramen. No, God invites us to hear the pasta cooking in the gurgling tomato sauce, smell the Italian seasonings waft through the kitchen, roll the warm noodles around our mouths test the texture, taste the balanced blend enhance the noodles.

God invites us to taste, and see that He is Good.

I cannot walk anywhere in the house to cease smelling the pasta in the kitchen, the tantalizing waves of rosemary, basil, and oregano tickle my nose, summon my mouth to salivate, latch onto a carnal need in my being. I am hungry, and I know it.

\*

There is no way I could truthfully deny God's existence. He lives around me and in me a presence like blood: constant, nourishing, throughout, necessary, most noticed during difficulties.

\*

I flip headfirst over my handlebars after trying to kick a dirt clod off the metal bar holding the front wheel while rounding a curve I would later name Dead Man's Pass. Instantly: Warmth. Sand under bare feet. Yellows, Whites, Light Oranges—especially the man beside me.

He is so bright I can't even see his face. We are walking together, talking. For the life of me, I can't remember what he was saying to me. But I remember it made me glow from my core, so it must have been encouraging. I wanted to stay there forever. As much as I willed, I couldn't stay. The suction cups of my soul peeled off one by one until my consciousness surfaced; I opened my eyes to see my younger sister's concerned face waiting a couple feet above mine. My body ached, limbs askew, bones throbbing from the abrupt collision, blacktop pebbles pressing into skin. My soul much preferred the warm, painless beach to this aching, throbbing flesh encasement.

\*

I know Him through my dad: five months since his brain cancer returned and spread down his spine, my dad is now unable to get out of bed or talk coherently. He communicates constantly but usually not to us. No, we can't always tell when he responds to our presence. He talks, powdery jaw opening and closing, lips a thin line, white saliva following the corners of his mouth, skin yellowed, all a saggy, weak, frail resemblance. The talks are gurgles, the reservoir of saliva blocking the throat, speech muscles no longer able to expand and contract. Head rolls side to side in conversation. We know he is praying because of his expressions: pained, eyes squinting, facial muscles tense, "Why?!" The next instant - stillness, muscles at ease, eyes shut, brows raised, listening. After the response, he questions back, head moving again, eyebrows together causing a slight squinting of the lids, lips moving forming the gurgled question; it was not angry this time, just seeking.

A week before we sing him to Heaven with our church in our front yard, my dad was completely reassured by his Father.

\*

Doctrinally, I see nothing conflictive. Experientially, I and others can attest to it.

\*

I think my friend's problem is that he has never suffered. Sure, there's been a broken bone here or there, but never *suffered*. Never experienced brokenness so wretched that he didn't even know where to begin to piece shards back together. Never ripped raw of everything he trusted to see only one thing remaining. Never tried to lift a weight that crushed him.

Maybe we have to get over ourselves to accept God. Maybe the mirror has to crack so the spell can be broken and we realize we aren't as beautiful as we thought.

\*

Paradox: broken to be made whole, die to be reborn

\*

Friend,

I pray that you understand before you have no choice but to. That you find the meaning of your talents. That you don't receive your doctorate realizing that it is just another Dead End. That after screaming awake from another nightmare of an empty eternity, you throb for something more and *find it*. That godly men will always be at hand to answer your questions. That you will find Truth.

## MY DADDY'S HANDS

My daddy's hands were squatty, proportionate to his stocky body. The pores were a grid of dark salmon speckles against peach skin, palm broad and muscular but not calloused, fingers thick but not stubby, nails clipped for work but not dirty, masculine but not hairy. The middle finger on Daddy's left hand had a scar above the last knuckle that looked like a bow-tie drawn with someone's non-dominant hand. Those hands were perpetual like the black speck on his molar that I always thought was a kiwi seed but now realize might have been a filling.

\*

Left hand encompasses the bass's body while right slides under the fin and saws back and forth. Fingers covered in pink rivers and glinting circles lift white flaked flesh as water and blood soak into newspapers. Its jaw opens and closes, eyes glaze aghast, gills expand revealing red accordion rings, tail curls in final defense. Fin circles the air like a Chinese fan but gains no traction.

\*

Every day when the clock makes an "L" shape, Daddy and I walk down to the ever pulsing vein of highway. Daddy clasps my hand, his large encasing my small, a boxing glove locking us together, my body an appendage or sidecar. Coast Clear. We dash. I'm a kite tail bumping along the bits of gravel strewn by angry tires. Safe! We cling to the railing blocking the overhang from soybean field recently fertilized with manure. The rickety, formerly white box forfeits its' newspaper. I care nothing for the local paper, but crave defying death as Daddy's kite tail.

\*

“I can’t feel my hands.” I had kept sledding in the sucking cold of the December air until my fingers could no longer bend to grasp the sled string. The focus of Daddy’s eyes seems to sink back as he rips off my double pair of gloves thrusting my hands between his. His hand encasement is a furnace thawing my two frozen logs lodged between them. They are so warm it burns.

\*

The first time Mommy told me, I didn’t understand why she was crying so much. My 4<sup>th</sup> grade mind had never heard of cancer. We managed everything else, why not this? When I saw the 32 staples in the swollen horseshoe on his head, liquid ice slithered up my spine, and I knew it was unnatural, but Daddy never failed to meet my every need before: piggy back rides, extra dessert, late night runs for German Fries, dressing up as Martin Luther for school, anything.

\*

Until, on the one phone call from his mission trip to India, Daddy complained of his neck hurting. It was cancer. Again. Third time ‘round. Old stuff. Just another hoop we’ll jump through then we’ll be ok. Mere nuisance.

It wasn’t so simple.

\*

Over those final six months, Daddy’s hands weakened, became yellow, skin alternating between taut and hanging bag-like from a muscled skeleton. I can still see them, shaking, writhing, squirming in the air for no sensible reason. Those cells completely commandeered Daddy’s nervous system. Nervous system, not heart, not soul. He would look up to the heavens or close his eyes and mutter, gurgle incoherent sounds. His body may have been out of his control, but his soul knew what it was doing: Praying. For hours and hours he was talking with his Daddy. Mommy said one day she could tell that Daddy’s soul had come to peace. The wincing and shaking of his head turned into muttering and gurgling behind a serene smile. Daddy knew the safety of his daddy’s hands.

\*

I saw Daddy's hands in the casket. Folded over his best suit, they were waxy – powdery. They still had the shape, but those weren't the hands I had known.

\*

I'm a war veteran with a Phantom Limb thinking my amputated hand is still able to help me.

## ON SLEEPING ON MY FATHER'S GRAVE

It seems I am the only one at the cemetery at dinnertime on a weekday. I pass through older sections, plain gray slabs with weathered engraving, through newer sections with shaped stones, some topped with lambs growing moss over their concrete wool, past the large stone replica of the man's recliner that generations of the town's teenagers dared each other to sit in at night, and finally to the new sections where unclaimed plots wait before the fence next to the highway. Artificial flowers blow through the grid imposed on the gently sloping hills. I turn down a path to Section C knowing where it is but unwilling to look yet. I park the car at the edge of the section so it won't be in my view. I twist and pull out the key, hand drops to sheep skin seat, chest heavy and quivering. This is only my third time visiting. The first was when we brought my grandparents to see the stone shortly after it was placed. The only other time I drove my younger sister around. Just drove the paths, we didn't get out. We were buying time before we had to return home after being kicked out of it by our uncle who thought he could marry our mom. The first time the dirt was still upturned, raw clumps had washed and hardened together and were sinking into the earthen rectangle.

I walk along the path in the direction of the final scene of the funeral. When I reach the vicinity I turn my head left and scan for red granite. I see it: ROBERTS. Seeing your name on a tombstone feels like hearing your name over the intercom, though this offers no possibility of a prize. Our lives are the distance between two endpoints, and I'm staring at one of them.

Dad's stone is granite, a light pomegranate red with pink flecks. Its shape is the standard curved rectangle. Its surface is smooth and shiny except for the sloped top left unsanded. On either side of the base are bolted metal flower vases, as far as I know they have never had anything in them. On the back is *Rev. Thomas C. Roberts Nov. 30, 1964 – July 8, 2007* on one

side and *Anita S. Roberts Oct. 7, 1965* - on the other. Above is Married September 30, 1989 with wedding rings engraved below.

I leave my flip flops beside the path and approach in bare feet. I kneel on the grass a couple feet in front of the headstone. My eyes are level with the O and scrutinize the individual chips in the engraving. I try to pray coherently.

I stretch out on the ground, face down, arms outstretched, my hands claw at the dirt, slightly moist from a few days ago, dirt builds under my fingernails then accumulates past the nail and breaks off as more presses under. I wish it would break skin and mingle with my blood. I try to yell at God, demand why, beg for my dad back, tell Dad what the past two years have been like, but I can never yell more than the initial question word before the force behind my air breaks and it turns into a heavy sob. My mouth is open, frayed ends of the cuticle-like grass scrape the insides of my lips. My tears slide down cracks in the earth and soften the edges. A gentle breeze blows through rows of stones and ruffles my hair. I eventually exhaust from crying and succumb to sleep.

## THE CORSICA

White '92 Chevy Corsica with a black stripe along the side, some of the silver paint chipping from the hubcaps. Interior a luxurious red except the front seats which have cream faux sheepskin covers that Mom got Dad for Christmas several years ago when he wore the fabric through. I hadn't wanted to take out the bulletins, devotionals, plastic clerical collars, and traveling communion set that had always occupied the back seat. The inside of the driver's door and floor beneath the faded steering wheel are slightly more stained than the passenger's side. Dad spent an hour scrubbing them the day after a parishioner called him late in the evening to come help unload his turkey houses. The town knew the Corsica as Pastor Tom's car, but now it was mine. It sat waiting in the driveway, undriven, until my sixteenth birthday.

## FROM GRANDMA'S HANDS TO MINE

I was taking small steps, just bending at the knees so I could keep my thighs pressed together. If I crossed my legs then Grandma would notice and make me break from putt-putt. She was babysitting me in the Holiday Inn Convention Center while my parents celebrated their tenth anniversary in an event room. It reached the point where bright lights spotted my vision so I couldn't find the golf ball. I positioned myself over one of the white PVC, cup-like holes and relaxed. Warmth squirted down my leg and pooled in the cup. Grandma was gazing at the rooms lining the walls, but when she heard the trickling on plastic, her head snapped to me, quick gasp, a hissing exhale resembling my name, then she grabbed my upper arm and squeezed as if it would make me stop. Her hand clamped on me and dragged me downstairs to ask Mom if she brought a spare set of panties. Someone else watched me the rest of the evening.

\*

I'd never seen hands like Grandma's. The backs were famished, bones protruding, sinews squirming when fingers moved, purple veins webbing on the surface, skin a translucent rotten salmon with islands of age spots, middle knuckles swollen resembling noduled roots, nails short, brittle, and vertically ridged sloping upward in the middle.

\*

We visited Grandma at intervals according to when her fish tank needed cleaning. It was a simple twenty gallon with colored pebbles, two red rock formations, and a backing sticker of aquatic scenery. The occupants were descendants of our guppies and snails that snuck into our tank with the live plants. Inbreeding eventually washed out the beauty from the creatures, color faded and retreated from the fanned tails, snail shells perforated and betrayed growth ridges. Snails would colonize in clumps, bumpy brown tumors barnacled around the tank. One time

after greeting us Grandma explained her campaign against the snail pandemic: She made a grabbing motion with her hand turning slightly, thumb resting on swollen knuckle, “I scooped them and,” hand opening as it batted down to her side, “flushed them down the commode!”

Grandma could cut apples with a farm girl instinct that made them taste better than the one-shove slicers. She started by placing the apple in one of her frosted plastic, cabbage leaf shaped bowls. Palming the apple in her left, she would take a steak knife and saw off a near half sphere from the largest side. Her left fingers remained frozen in resting position not touching the apple and her right fingers curved behind the handle not nimble enough to grip it. After the section severed she would spin the bowl so the new largest part would be positioned for filleting. In between she would eat the slice, raising it to her lips using the base of her knuckle swelling as most people would the tips of their fingers, steak knife resting on rim of bowl.

At her church’s annual rummage sale, she would walk around folding rumpled clothes, plasticity skin smoothing pastel onesies. When knees would weary, she would sit at the checkout table pushing her hand sideways into the money drawer closing in half fist to trap coins between her thumb and index finger to drop them in the opposite palm then slowly pinch the proper ones for correct change.

\*

The last several years her rings remained always on her fingers because she couldn’t slide them over her knuckles. About a year ago, one of her doctors made her cut them off. Each of the four granddaughters received a ring. My oldest cousin got Grandma’s wedding ring. I, the next in line, received her engagement ring. It came in a tiny ziploc bag with a white sticker label in her handwriting. If the band were shaped perfectly it would probably be as large as a woman’s watch face, but it was a compressed oval, the bottom sliced with the ends overlapping like misaligned fountain streams. At the top perched a diamond the size of a miniature chocolate chip.

\*

Grandma now lives with my aunt, uncle, and two young cousins. I visited over spring break because Aunt Carolyn recommended “sooner rather than later”. I entered the house, a chair slowly scraped the linoleum floor and Grandma’s round face topped by wispy gray appeared around the doorframe to the next room. Her eyes were lit behind the protruding sockets and a smile lifted her sagging skin.

“Well, hi! Uh, uh . . .”

“Kathy.” A voice whispered behind the wall.

“Kathy!”

“Hi, Grandma! It’s good to see you again!”

Grandma bent down to give me a hug, the hooved base of her palm clapping my back. I could feel her ribs and spinal vertebrae through her loose velvet jacket.

Later that visit, my cousin thought we should play with Grandma to divide her hours of sitting at the kitchen table staring blankly. After many rounds of, “Come on, Grandma, it’ll be fun!” she sat in the living room next to me holding the bucket containing two bean bags, one stress ball, a tennis ball, and a golf ball for her to throw to the healthy nine-year-old who shared her name. Grandma scooped up each ball with the sideways fist motion I had always known, but now her fingers were curving sideways like exposed tree roots growing into a river. She flung the objects with an aggressive peck that neither Becca nor I were expecting.

Later, Grandma and I sat at the table while Aunt Carolyn was out with the kids and Uncle Bob was taking a smoke. Grandma started fidgeting and looking around.

“Do you have to go to the bathroom?”

She looked down and to the side. “Yeah, but, ah, the door’s always locked.”

“I can unlock it for you if you need to go.”

I grabbed the neon green golf tee out of the basket beside the stove. It was chewed up in a ring where the end of the lock hit when I pressed it into the door handle. Grandma padded to the toilet, lifted the lid, pulled down her velvet, elastic-topped pants and Depends. I noticed for

the first time an L-shaped scar the size of a bookend on the outside of her right upper thigh, a taut contrast from the loose cottage cheese of the rest of her thigh. It might have been where they went in for her hip replacement after she fell down the stairs one night or from where they borrowed skin for reconstruction after breast cancer surgery. After the trickling stopped, she reached for the toilet paper. Her clawed hand still grabbed sideways, trapping the paper between her thumb and side of bulbous knuckle. She only tore two sheets. I didn't have the heart to tell her to try again.

## LUST

It creeps, unbidden. You see it in pigeon-toes in Adidas stripes beneath a white belt cinching a loosely tucked dress shirt all topped by curly, red hair overdue for a trim. You see it when one corner of his lips curl in a snarled experiment of a pick-up line.

Its sounds beckon. You hear it in the swoosh of basketball shorts and coiled clang of rim retracting as lean, lanky muscle glides gracefully from a lay-up. In the low, subtle clearing of his voice before he speaks. In the aural caramel of a baritone crooning the tantalizing lines, melodies, words of *Music of the Night* that wash over you coaxing your head roll in the music as the musician nuzzles your neck and runs the back of his index finger down your exposed arm.

It's touch. You feel it dancing blues nearly hip to hip, his hand on the small of your back, yours resting on his thickly muscled shoulder, intoxicated by his cologne, dimly lit rotunda, 2 am. It's in palms so thickly calloused you have to squeeze to feel the flesh underneath. You wear it in the briskly soft flannel he lends you around the campfire on a chilly night.

It's scent. You smell it in musky cologne, faux pheromones, and reroute your path to your next class. In the smooth smell of alcohol on his breath mixed with smoke from the mesmerizing flames that flicker to veil ugliness and give confidence to wonder. In sweat mixed with pine sap as you trim branches on the edge of the clearing together. In the rich, woody smell of new cabinets saturated with the possibility "This is Home." In spring at your university when the Bradford Pears blossom emitting diaper-like stench with floral beauty and scanty spring fashions, heralding a surge of communal hormones.

It's taste. You savor sea salt caramel coated in white chocolate topped with a roasted pecan: rich, creamy, dark, organic, woody, nuanced. It's a dark chocolate truffle so rich it

nourishes your soul with secrets of life before mankind invented spoken language to communicate passion.

But, it's gone after you swallow, and leaves you with nothing but a memory, craving more. Always more, never satisfied, needing that flavor you remember so extravagant. Memory is not potent enough to recall every perfect nuance . . . so you *need* re-experience.

It has an aftertaste. Acidic vomit from overindulging – the most stridently mint toothpaste cannot scourge it from your mouth. It's the taste after eating spicy salsa: a painful heat burns from somewhere. You don't know where and it's preventing you from tasting and enjoying anything else, but you can't uproot this pervasive, ambiguous heat to extinguish it.

It has assimilated into you.

A lichen attached to your brain, decomposing once wholesome thoughts with acidic digestive juices.

Its tendrils wrap around the neurons of your brain, controlling your thoughts, holding your mind captive.

You are a slave.

You cannot smash your idols, only replace them.

## MY UNCLE: HANDYMAN WHO NEVER LEFT

House didn't need fixing, but after aunt died; faucets replaced, entry tiled, floors recarpeted, walls painted, lights refixed, tub installed, backsplash plastered, doorbell rewired.

Note from non-coffee-drinking mother: "Out to coffee with a friend."

Skipped rebellious-teen phase, but turn up internet radio and glue eyes to screen to drown the sloppy suction, labored breathing, and "We can do this together" drifting from remodeled living room.

"We'll stop if you're uncomfortable."

Satin bridesmaid dress ordered without consent. Shapely form flattering mine, deep red enhancing facial blotches and red-rimmed eyes.

\* \* \*

Now, phone is answered by: "Hello, Hello, Hello" every time.

Overweight shuffle thuds not exerting effort of Ham-Quad lift; rubber-soled slippers gratefully slide – linoleum (cross into new terrain) creak aged floorboards beneath plush carpet.

Stench of vinegar chips, fried potatoes, oozing sausage invading New Carpet scent.

Wet smacks chomping mouthful of grease.

In a different pew, he dives for bass in hymns, no idea how to use thick vocal chords, barely audible creek – haphazard jerking, like a settling house – about an octave and a fourth too low.

I'll learn to fix my own house.

TUBES TIED

### **Characters**

**Kathy:** Sophomore college student wearing jeans and a Women's Choir hoodie. Short, straight brown hair, no make-up. Still panting a little from unloading her '93 Ford Taurus by herself. Sister to Rachel.

**Mom:** Middle-aged with strands of gray visible beside the caramel highlights of her brunette shoulder-length hair. Her face is still youthful with dimples and crinkles at the corners of her hazel eyes when she smiles. The ring finger on her left hand had been pointedly unadorned for four years but now carries a bulkier gold and diamond ring. Still fertile.

**Rachel:** Junior in high school. Blonde layered hair with numerous shades of blonde highlights straightened and falling slightly below the shoulder. She has a habit of pushing her swoopy bangs off her pink rectangular glasses. Cheeks have scars of acne beneath heavy cover-up. She is wearing thick eye liner, mascara, and silver eye shadow. Makes effort to never smile but sometimes lets guard down around Kathy.

**Uncle:** Widower of twenty-two months. Balding. Slightly taller and markedly heavier than deceased younger brother. Off-stage because driving the 1 ½ hour commute from work to Mom's house that was recently put in his name.

## Setting

The first day of Kathy's Christmas break in a ranch style house in small town, Ohio.

## Scene I

*(Living Room. Kathy is still in her plain, black winter coat and is straightening up after setting a suitcase in the pile of her belongings in front of a bookcase filled with photo albums. Rachel enters from the direction of her bedroom.)*

**Rachel:** *(Matter-of-factly in a hushed voice)* Did you hear that Mom is having surgery?

**Kathy:** No. What for?

**Rachel:** I don't know. It isn't serious. *(Walks away.)*

*(Kathy's eyebrows scrunch together slightly, but she continues to unload her car in silence.)*

## Scene II

*(5-10 minutes later. Kathy is standing in the dining room looking through the stack of mail at her place at the table. Mom enters quickly. Kathy looks up.)*

**Mom:** Did you have a good final's week?

**Kathy:** *(Shrugs)* Mmhmm.

**Mom:** *(Looking at various spots on the wall. Kathy looks at her eyes.)* Good. Since you're home, I'd like you to cook. We'll visit Grandma and Grandpa for a couple days; you're welcome to join us. Julie wants to know if you can do special music on Christmas Day. I'll be having surgery between Christmas and New Year's. *(Waves hand at her side during last comment.)*

**Kathy:** *(Still trying to make eye contact.)* What kind of surgery?

**Mom:** *(Looks Kathy in the eyes.)* It's called Tubal Ligation. *(Purses lips. Pauses.)* It's a quick outpatient procedure. They go in, do it, and I'll be back the same day.

**Kathy:** *(Head tilts back slightly, eyebrows furrow together in a question then thinks better of it.)* Oh, ok.

*(Mom exits quickly and begins bustling around kitchen. Kathy's hand rests on table and her gaze wonders into the adjoining family room and rests on the wardrobe housing Uncle's shirts that won't fit in Mom's bedroom.)*

**Kathy:** *(whispered, to self)* What would I call that? A Three-Quarter Sibling?

## BUZZARDS

Gliding patiently, they ride currents of air, biding until their appointed time. Wings tilting obediently as the breeze commands. They slowly spiral, shining structures of ebony, gems heralding the next curve in life's circle. They bend over their charges like mothers lowering to caress a newborn baby.

## FIRE GAZING

Coals crackle  
Embers divorce in excited emissions  
Flickers lick fallen logs  
Sap spurts  
Flames fly to freedom, vanish into vapors

Eyelids lowered, bonnets shielding spools of thread winding  
The smoke sifts through us, binding souls.

## MORPHINE DEATH

Parched lips,  
Slightly separated <yellow saliva ebbs in corners>

Rasp, in - - -  
- Clear ribbon out

Eyelashes flutter  
Then  
fold

## BABYLAND

In X, the southwest corner of Greenlawn,  
Rest babies: born or unborn, dead, buried.  
Stones carved with similar themes, yet varied:  
“Forever in our hearts” “With the angels”  
Headstones clustered in lines like shriveled grapes,  
Too close to mow, so I approach to trim.  
Grass balding with hardy weeds aside stones.  
Concrete angels tied with lace bows sit guard.  
Teddy bears, fur matted and browned by rain.  
Stones lay in the backyard of the concrete  
mausoleum carved like a log cabin,  
as if they are a crowd of carolers.  
Parents listen but only hear silence.  
Black on the white wooden post: BABYLAND.

## STURDY BRICK

Sturdy brick, would I were steadfast as thou art-  
    Not laid in rigid uniformity  
And valued as a mere dash in some chart,  
    Like a cheap note in some hasty ditty,  
Individual manipulated  
    To fashion persuasive propaganda  
Or gray, over earth articulated  
    Of stone, conglomerate bits, not magma  
No – yet still steadfast, still reliable,  
    Predestined to lie in this exact place  
To serve in this functional mosaic,  
    With a slight dirt perimeter of grace.  
Knowing my flush permits people safe tread,  
And so serve ever – or else strive in dread.

## OVERCAST

The weather is constipated.  
Bloated cloud covering, saturated -  
weight, throbs for relief.

Need to precipitate.

Wind swells in exerted pushes.  
Cold condenses in this atmospheric container:  
Contaminated cotton strangulating its slaves.

## PSALM OF AN APPLE EATER

Magnify the Lord, oh my senses!

Nose, smell the damp earth, mineral-rich, sustaining the woody trunk and leaf canopy.

Eyes, see the near sphere, red from a distance, yet painted a rainbow of reds,  
vertically streaked diminishing an occasional brown freckle.

Hands, rub the smooth and waxy skin punctuated by a shoot of bark.

Ears, hear the crisp bite and hollow crunch.

Mouth, feel the splash of juice, taste the sour followed by sweet then the fresh sugary exhale.

Magnify Him, all you people! Praise our God who shapes and paints every apple for His good  
pleasure!

## SCRIPT

Letters formed by eyelashes lost as I rub my eyes awake late night. Irregular exhales from a head nodding as my thoughts weave to dreams. Lashes blown into letters serve as symbols from this subconscious oracle.

Sometimes letters are extensions of author's being. Blood bubbles out finger prick. Perched to roll, the finger presses the paper to express its soul. These letters pulse, please internalize their throb, understand.

Each unique ink stains stationary smudged with fingerprints – liquid emotion spills faster than letters solidify. Swirly Ls in Love,  
(Signature)

Others are dead. Clunks on keyboards. Transmitting type from one sedate soul to another.

## DANCERS AT A BAPTIST COLLEGE

I sit at the Jazz Band concert beside Emma. As freshmen, we asked a dozen guys before one would dance. As seniors, we just sit. Our shoulders roll with phrases, feet tap to beat, eyes close where heads would dip. Our bodies sit like ragdolls but spin, twirl, and dip as marionettes in our imaginations. In the back, girls with high collars tremble with excitement though they look like they're playing London Bridges. Emma and I exchange looks. Our hearts are hollow but the music energizes our bodies, a waft from the kitchen to abate our hunger until we can feast during break.

I confess my break plans of a dancing excursion to my white-haired co-worker; her eyes brighten. She asks me about my outfit then shapes the air into skirts she used to wear. She was a Jitterbug sensation. Then she met her husband, a Baptist. She's danced twice since – at her daughters' weddings.

## COLLEGE BLUEGRASS BAND PLAYING AT A CHURCH SILENT AUCTION

Saturday afternoon  
Past the folding tables  
topped with dusty wreaths  
and salon gift cards.

Traces of homemade hot chocolate  
and boiled hot dogs  
waft from a Sunday school classroom.

In the entry of the sanctuary  
stands four of the six band members.  
Black bass cover strewn over a pew.  
Collapsible silver stand focal of the half oval.

Freshman's forearm flaps across the front of the guitar,  
His red plaid rolled just above the elbow.  
Bassist plucks the strings in sideways casualty,  
His blonde brows raised in concentration behind wire rims.

Violinist's feet planted in firm V,  
torso swooping with each phrase,  
pronounced jaw angled parallel to slanting fiddle.

Mandolinist, lead, sings ballads in his horizontal voice  
with occasional cursive whirls,  
whistling when high, eyes rolling  
in acknowledged embarrassment.

Bass bumps, guitar flicks and swishes,  
mandolin plinks in hurried gasps,  
violin smoothes over top with creamly connected notes.

Mandolinist and violinist make eye contact over their glasses.  
Violin peels off, rebegins verse,  
line folded in places – extended in others,  
notes tumbling atop notes.

Instruments again equals, occasionally  
one bumps to forefront then recedes.

Swell,  
    nod,  
        group exhale.

## PIE A MALE NURSE

Homecoming 2014, Org Fair in the Fieldhouse  
Recipients of the ring-by-spring  
tote their toddlers 'round the track

The folded tables are organized in an oval.  
Bright posters display Greek letters, some with glitter.  
Cellophane-clad cookies occupy the table tops.

But set back in the corner is a blue tarp.  
Globs of white goop splatter  
Barbasol lines the edges  
Either erect as arsenal,  
Or rolled, discarded

With faces fringed with white froth,  
The guys poke each other with elbows  
The shoulders of their matching t-shirts speckled.

One squirts the cream into the silver plate,  
Another carries a pan in each hand to the restroom

A male nurse  
Squats to the toddler's level.  
The tike turns to his mom who urges him forward.  
He takes his fingers out of his mouth,  
Nurse squints  
Kid swings.

The girls behind their sorority table  
Glance  
Over their equally creamy  
Cupcakes.

## ALF: MINIATURE KING OF BRIAR BUSH FARM

Black mane and tail  
as thick as a bunny  
drenched then blow-dried.

He wears his bay coat  
fluffy and velvet in winter  
then downsizes to a spring fashion,  
gleaming and sleek.

His gait perks forward  
then mellows to a weary slow,  
neck bobs and belly wags.

He lunges,  
ignores my click  
until Lucky hands me the whip.  
His hind legs accelerate,  
propel his front.

Soon the ring has a sawdust wall  
to match his brown eyes  
walled in white.  
The braided leather  
remains behind my back.

After he finishes my apple core,  
I return him to the barn.  
There he will dominate  
the dappled Applejack,  
his stablemate and only subject.

## EDGE OF THE POND

The dock rots atop  
algae ripples  
under nature's exhalation.

Cattails, still erect,  
fur muffs  
embellish hollow shafts.

Geese imprint triangles  
as they waddle  
under the briars.

A toad's throat trembles;  
waves echo off distant rocks,  
and tap clay banks.

A copperhead hatchling  
ducks beneath the ridged lily,  
red squiggles through the algae.

## POEM CLOTH

Run your finger  
over the fabric of the week.  
Start with the starched  
collar,  
slip the cool  
silk  
through your fingers.  
Roll  
the ridged print  
over your palm.  
Scrape your skin  
past the razzled  
burlap.  
Where you feel the threads  
knot,

pause.

Don't look.  
Lift the scrap  
to your cheek.  
Rub the grain  
and inhale  
each nuance.

“KATHY’S TRAMPOLINE ADVENTURE” or “HOW KATHY KNOWS IT WILL RAIN  
TOMORROW”

(This is a picture book in the children’s series entitled *The Camp Adventures of Kathy Roberts*)

Ten months ago,  
in an indoor trampoline park  
far, far away  
(in Fort Wayne)  
bounced an innocent  
day camp director  
never to be the same.

She donned neon socks,  
yawned away the daze,  
and stepped into the buoyant realm  
medics often appraise.

First was the free bounce,  
then death by dodgeball,  
she launched into the foam cubes like a cannonball,  
and bypassed the short person’s opportunity to dunk the basketball.

Bored with petty sport,  
she returned to the free bounce court.  
There she claimed a square  
and leapt into the air  
just to feel the flicks of her hair.

Jumping jacks  
only impress  
after so many smacks.  
She needed a new shape to make,  
but skill was not something she could fake.

Not bold enough to backflip,  
she backed up and bounced  
onto the angled wall.

What a weird fall.

The land wasn’t memorable,  
not at all.

Her pinky itched just a smitch.  
Then on the drive home,  
surfaced tie-dye  
to match  
her shirt's tone.

Now, hear Kathy say,  
brace yourself,  
for tomorrow's weather  
will not be as nice as today.

Ever since that fateful day out,  
Kathy's pinky has been known throughout the land  
as LOMIK's most reliable weatherman.

## THE REMNANTS

A fork perched on the edge of the plate  
now has nowhere to go.  
Like an Alzheimer-eroded brain,  
it stabs its teeth into the thought,  
but all that is left is sauce.  
A girl in rain boots exits the elevator  
which then  
climbs then descends  
    climbs then descends  
the column of apartments.  
You leave behind your shoe  
cementing in the muck,  
a monument for the crocus head  
decaying in the clover.

WALKING ALONE, FRIDAY NIGHT

The sod puddles up its spittle,  
recently defrosted,  
layer by layer.

I walk barefoot,  
revive pricked nerves  
through weakened callouses.

Waxed grass blades  
gradually saw  
away shards  
of toenail paint.

From the country road,  
the catcalls disinterest me.  
Too many beer-breathed boys  
crammed into some sedan.

I rub my calves together,  
enjoy the lotioned silk  
taut over the curves of my leg.

The feel reminds me  
of the night of blues  
Matt painted his body with mine.

I walk through the brambles,  
invite thorns to slice  
my unseamed skin.

## DEPRESSION

My brain  
compacts, dehydrates,  
like  
clay.

A mummified  
peach  
pit,  
it  
bumps  
down  
the  
staircase  
of my  
vertebrae

and impales  
itself  
on a lumbar  
spindle.

Connected by a cord  
to command a  
cadaver's countenance – and  
force a  
phrase.

I'm fine.

## CHEST COUGH

My lungs are  
catacombs encasing  
airways  
for crematorium  
soot.

Shelved skeletons station along  
these  
labyrinthine  
lungs.

Each earthquake  
ruptures  
the architecture  
of my  
respiratory  
factory.

Strings of  
mucus membranes  
sever  
then suction to  
hall walls –  
reattach  
to reroute.

Organic gusts lift dust off  
coffin lids and  
out my open  
mouth.

## NAUSEA

There are goldfish  
in my gut.

Riding on bile,  
bumping into walls  
with their blunt bellies.

They nudge their noses  
against my tender intestines,  
now infested  
with foreign  
fish.

From my small intestine  
they swim upstream  
to then through my esophagus,  
until my diaphragm  
devotes its aid  
and sends a  
wave.

I discover,  
they indeed,  
were not –  
goldfish.

## IN PURSUIT OF SUBJECT

I have harmonized with the longest running Phantom of the Opera,  
stood as Maid of Honor against my will,  
balanced on irrigation canals in a date plantation,  
tiptoed through Mayan ruins in Tulum,  
army-crawled through a swamp.

I have sunk through snow on the Grand Tetons,  
scurried through a marijuana field at night,  
carried fourteen machetes through customs,  
counted an alligator's pulse,  
sat conscious while metal was scraped from my eye.

I have patted the walls after a stroke,  
descended slowly into a coma,  
lifted a drowning boy from the deep end,  
held a dying baby fluttering for breath,  
sung my father to Heaven.

Yet, I have nothing to write about.

## LATE NIGHT BLUES IN LOWER ALEXANDER

For the first two dances,  
you inquired  
though now you  
extend your hand,  
palm up, as if  
to accept  
payment, eyes  
on the open  
floor.

Lightly you lift  
my hand, escort  
me, tug with your left,  
fold to connect  
rights, soft torsos press,  
your shirt on  
my cheek, trails  
of breath  
ripple our chests until  
they sync  
– red wine, salt, mist –

A saxophone moans  
under a streetlight, for  
bones.

Legs interlocked, we  
shift, spin around  
couples, fog swirling our  
feet, slinking up my  
legs.

You push me, release,  
now free, I coyly  
twine, tilt toes  
inward, roll hips to flounce,  
wrists swim  
above my head.

You smirk, advance, I  
return the smirk and repel, you  
palm the small of my back.

Our legs  
rotate across the floor,  
double-time, sway,  
cadence ritards,  
spin in, dip, my  
neck bends, you  
arc.

## LUST AT LATE NIGHT BLUES

The lichen envelops my brain.  
Tendrils sink into the gray tissue,  
corrode synapses with an inky froth.

Talk to me, personify yourself.  
Because now your entire being  
is a derivative of your hips.

Cataracts inch across my eyes.  
Men become sculptures of flesh  
and emissaries of pheromones.

The music folds us together in the dim light.  
We share heat and breath during,  
but only names after.

## OUR 22<sup>ND</sup> VALENTINE'S DAY ANNIVERSARY

Me, Myself, and I faithfully call on me every Valentine's Day.  
They offer to take me anywhere,  
as long as I drive and pay.  
They adjust their tastes to mine,  
insist I have the seat with the best view,  
and devote all their time to me.  
This year, they patiently waited  
outside the post office while I  
handed flowers to deadpans.  
Perhaps, not a Valentine's Day has passed  
that their emotions  
were not petted by some pup of a boy.  
For this ailment of over-stimulation I suggest,  
they learn from my singular life and give it a rest.

## PASSION

*"No one has greater love than this,  
to lay down one's life for one's friends."  
-John 15:13*

The rough beams  
are scraggy with splinters.  
The man heaves his body up to breathe,  
shards of wood stab  
into the raw gashes on his back.

Smell the wounds – metallic –  
clots in bubbles softening  
the base  
where flesh concedes nail.  
Below each soft scab seeps  
a trickle  
black  
the further it flows from its source  
drying,  
sections chip as the flesh trembles.

TWO GIRLS PAINTING THE 1920s CAST IRON FENCE SURROUNDING GREENLAWN  
CEMETERY

The black chips into flakes  
like icecaps leave a  
glacial mass.

They flutter  
against my sunglasses  
then drop  
to the balding ground.

Tiny half-spheres eat into the metal.  
Each bar is coated with chestnut dust as fine  
and easy to release as  
powder on a swallowtail's wing.

# HIKING THE GRAND TETONS. MILKING A COW BY HAND.

## IMPRESSION:

THERE IS NO ACUTE BRAIN PROCESS, BUT FEATURES OF A LIKELY REMOTE LACUNAR INFARCTION OF THE SUPERIOR LEFT CEREBELLUM ARE NOTEWORTHY, GIVEN THE AGE OF THE PATIENT (20). EXPLANATION FOR THIS FOCAL ABNORMALITY IS NOT STRONGLY SUGGESTED, AND FURTHER EVALUATION USING CEREBROVASCULAR IMAGING IS STRONGLY RECOMMENDED.

I stood up from the toilet and my brain

Earthquake

I could pinpoint the epicenter in the left.

Centerline the fault.

Right hemisphere slid down forming a dip-slip fault.

On the house of my face the windows,

normally parallel,

were now

five stories apart.

My brain couldn't reconcile the difference in vision to read. I knew from reading it hundreds of times that the little sign on the stall door read:  
But, I couldn't read it.

**Please don't flush  
feminine products.**

*There were two signs moving in different directions  
on different levels.*

*There were two signs moving in different directions  
on different levels.*

My hands pressed against the stall walls to steady my drained frame amidst the **swirling, swelling, shaking** funhouse. I stumbled out of the bathroom, p a t t e d the walls to guide me to the make-shift mailbox inside Wick Hall. (At the time, mailing my letter seemed important.) I knew I had to lower myself to the floor before my body crashed into it; blackness **pulsed** behind my eyes **threatening** to **penetrate** and **pervade**.

I slid down

a clear spot on the wall,

between **head drooped** knees.

My fellow college-aged staff found me, probably within minutes, I really don't know. Everyone was most concerned about the

**right side of my face being swollen  
and right eye droopy.**

Rachel, our head lifeguard, asked me a series of questions all aimed at unveiling an allergic reaction.

*No, the problem is my brain had an earth quake.*

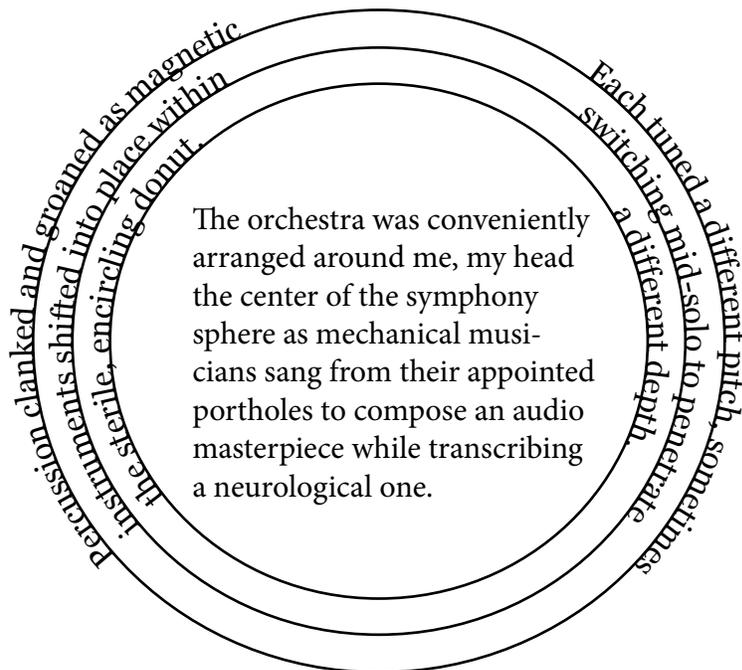
“If her lips swell more, take her to Urgent Care immediately.”

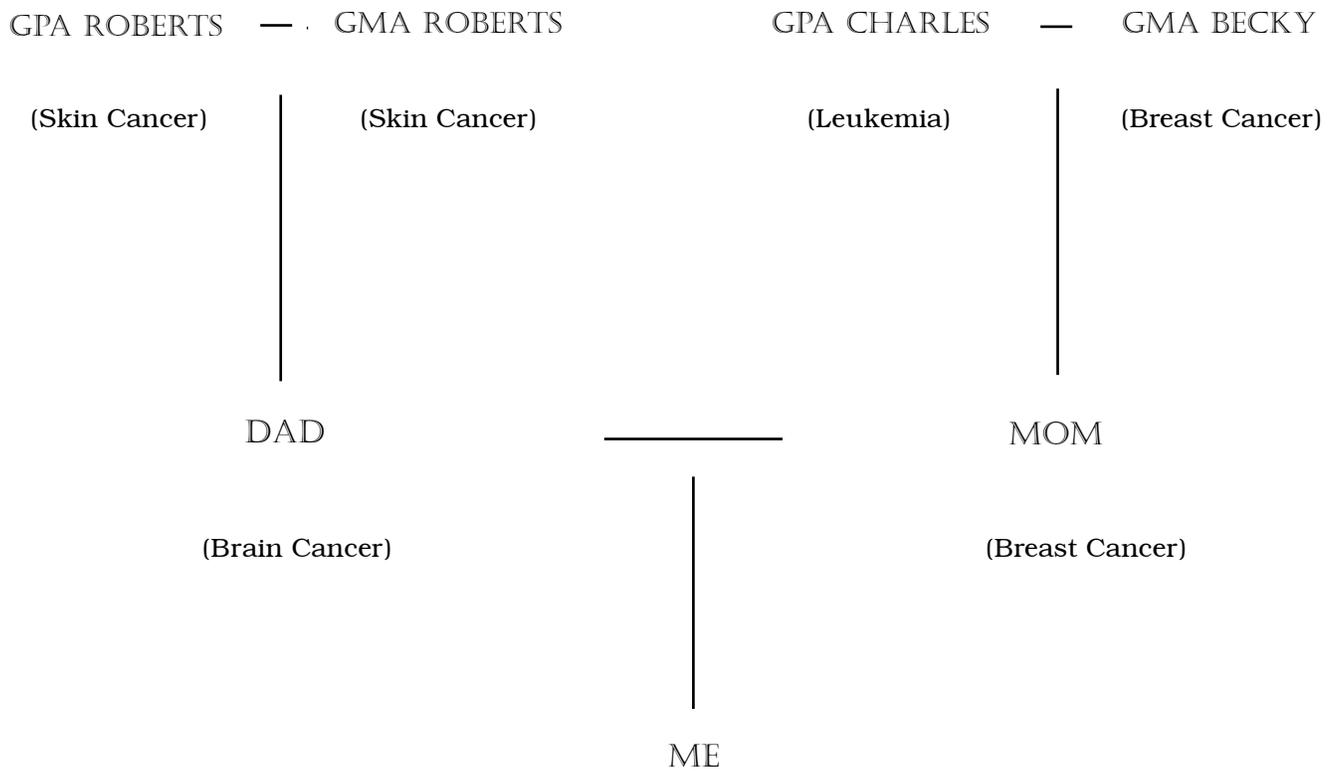
*I secretly hoped my lips would swell, but my thoughts didn't process far enough to ask.*

- Eyes tracked together to follow Rachel's finger; but emptiness, surface-level seeing, no comprehension.
- Remembered Fan – Grass – Cows immediately, after two minutes, after five minutes, after ten, two hours later.
- Passed test of laying down while Erin, health officer, raised victim's legs together.
- Pulse – normal.
- Drank pineapple juice to raise blood sugar.
- Swallowed Benadryl for swelling.

I didn't realize that in requesting an MRI, I was also buying tickets to a Postmodern Symphony. Not only did I have the best and only seat, but it was a lean, white bed sculpted to the human form and slid into the center of the orchestra.

I was, in fact, the subject of the ethereal composition.





Of the six, only Dad's case was fatal. So far.

I postulated what could be wrong with me. It could be a brain tumor. A lump of warped, diseased cells multiplying uncontrollably. Parasitic growth oozing into my control panel, wrapping its tendrils around quick firing synapses to corrode the once shiny gears. Central Nervous System slowly succumbing like an etherized equine until it can no longer support the burden of two lives.

And *collapses.*

