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# Toward Refuge, 43° 18' N., 70° 47' W.

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## ABSTRACT

This portfolio is a collection of some of my poetry and creative nonfiction pieces, all of which I wrote during my time as an undergraduate at Cedarville University. A few of the pieces in this collection have appeared previously in other publications. *Literary Yard* featured my nonfiction piece “Four Passages” on their website in November of 2014. *Blotterature Literary Magazine* published my nonfiction piece “This Is More Than Homesickness” in Volume 2, Issue 1, of their Winter 2015 publication. *Burning Word Literary Journal* published my nonfiction piece “Sun Fungus” in May of 2015. *Magnolia Review* featured my nonfiction piece “Nine Months of Conflict Taught Me How to Say ‘No’” in Volume I, Issue 2, of their July 2015 publication. *Referential Magazine* published my poem “Behind the Second-Floor Dormer” in their September 2015 issue. *Foliage Oak Literary Magazine* published my poems “The Red Paint Grave,” “Perkins Cove Port, Ogunquit,” and “Nor’easter” in their November 2015 issue. *Mount Hope* featured “Silent Cider Mill” in Issue 9 of their Spring 2016 publication. *The Albion Review* accepted my poem “Ordinary Time” for their 2016 edition. *The Cedarville Review* accepted “Lever-Action” as well as “January in North Berwick” and “Remiges and Retrices” for their 2016 publication. This collection expresses what I learned through homesickness and interpersonal conflict—how I yearned for and cherished my home as I dealt with difficult circumstances.

*TOWARD REFUGE, 43° 18' N., 70° 47' W.*

by

Ruth Towne

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

2016

Approved by

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## INTRODUCTION

In their childhoods, people often develop a special bond with their physical and social environments. This bond lasts well into adulthood, and often forms at least part of these individuals' identities. These primal landscapes, as sociologists and psychologists call them, determine how adults behave later in life, influencing the places people choose to live and the experiences they pursue. In writing, primal landscapes are akin to a sense of place, the effect produced when a character or a piece draws its identity from a particular location. In my own writing, I could say I've described my primal landscape or even tried to create a sense of place, but I have another word for my preoccupation with the places of my youth—and that word is homesickness.

My preoccupation began in August of 2014 when I felt as though I had no space of my own. I lived in a dorm nearly one thousand miles from home, counted down the days until I could return home again, and felt like I was diminishing the longer I stayed away. What Wordsworth wrote in his "Day Is Done" resonated with me:

I see the lights of the village  
Gleam through the rain and the mist,  
And a feeling of sadness comes o'er me  
That my soul cannot resist:  
  
A feeling of sadness and longing,  
That is not akin to pain,  
And resembles sorrow only  
As the mist resembles the rain.

Provisionally—and I don't throw that word around flippantly—provisionally, I discovered Creative Nonfiction and Poetry that same year through the Creative Writing minor. As I was taking these classes, I discovered I had a unique outlet. I could express my distress about homesickness or interpersonal conflict through poetry and prose. I could immerse myself in scenes from my home, in my primal landscape. I could give myself a sense of place. The subjects of my poetry and prose seem disparate, but in my mind, they are variations of the same theme, that theme being the journey of a young woman who discovered that writing was a powerful tool to preserve the images and emotions of my primal landscape and beyond.

When I knew what pieces I wanted to include in my portfolio, I didn't struggle to order them—they arranged themselves in terms of space, location, proximity to home. I divided my portfolio into two sections—"From the Central Plains" and "From the Coastal Lowlands." The first section contains poetry and prose that I wrote about experiences I had unique to Cedarville or the surrounding area. For example, "Panorama" and "Equinox," I remember writing at the beginning of my fall semester. In both of these pieces, I turned to the theme of nature but in a positive or at least neutral light, because even though I did not want to be in Ohio then, at the time I was still willing to remain positive. Other pieces in the section convey a stronger sense of longing, such as "Wake," "Behind the Second-Floor Dormer," and "Someday." An outlier, "The Vacant House In Moore, Oklahoma," I wrote in response to a death I experienced secondhand while in Ohio, but still not from the comfort of my own home.

The piece "This Is More Than Homesickness" marks a turning point in both my collection and in my personal life. I grappled with the piece for a long time, because what I had thought was just homesickness had developed into what would become a year-long

interpersonal conflict, a conflict in which I felt I was robbed of any sense of space. The poems following this prose piece hint at some of the distress I began to feel. “Pass a Xanax, Please” marks a second turning point—the point when my anxiety generally amplified. Consequently, the pieces “Remiges and Retrices,” “Incendiary,” and “The Stoic Calm” consider themes such as flight, communication, and passivity. In my mind, and in my collection, these conflicts culminate with the prose piece “Nine Months of Conflict Taught Me How To Say ‘No,’” the piece in which I get closest to naming specifically what I was dealing with interpersonally.

The final piece of the section—“Four Passages”—represents a paradox of sorts. Although the first twenty-or-so pieces represent my overwhelming obsession with returning to my home, this one highlights a great fear of mine. It discusses travel, the ways in which I could return home, complicating the fact that even though I was desperate to return to 114 Beech Ridge Road, I was terrified of getting there.

The second section, “From the Coastal Lowlands,” continues to work from far to near, both in location and in subject. Any pieces with locations as titles, such as “Sacrament at First Davis,” or “Behind Buffum Road,” are in order of their physical distance from my home. Some of these pieces consider family members as well, for example, grandfathers in “Timekeeper” and “October 27, 1950.”

I chose “Parse” as the final piece for the collection for a few reasons, chiefly because it is the one in which I take the most pride. I began writing this piece in late September, workshopped it through October and November, and submitted what I thought was a final draft in December. In January, I took a second look at the piece, and began the workshop process in again, refining it until I submitted it again in May. I take pride in “Parse” because I earned every word in every line of the piece, and because in it I discuss themes

that I think epitomize my experiences throughout the collection and my experience. It details my family, my love for language, and problems with communication. This particular piece publishers have rejected several times, but it's a piece I believe in nonetheless.

Although I struggle to admit when I feel vulnerable, this collection has taught me how to glean beauty from transparency. I never want to leave home, but I have, and I will again and again over the course of my lifetime. Having left, having struggled, having gleaned, I've matured in many ways I may not have experienced aside from this vulnerability. In some ways I have suffered, but I am better for it. As the poet Rilke writes, "They wanted to blossom, / and blossoming is being beautiful. / But we want to ripen, / and this means being dark and taking pains" (175). While this collection chronicles intense periods of struggle, may it also mark periods of unparalleled personal growth, and may I say I harvested beauty from suffering.

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## FOREWORD

I would be the first to say that I have a limited understanding of faith. Actually, I might say that I do not understand it at all. “Faith” appears most commonly as a noun—an item I can possess or a quality I can demonstrate. But I think faith should appear as a verb rather than a noun—as an action or better yet as a lifestyle. I know faith looks like Abraham poised over his son like a vulture, in his hands unsteady hands a blade that glints in the soft sunrise rays on a morning that seems otherwise uneventful. I can see Abraham’s faith, yet I don’t understand it. Nor do I understand why God sent him to the mountain in the first place. Faith is a complicated issue—but so is writing. Writing—the written word—is the means by which I demonstrate faith as I attempt to understand it. In a way, I view my work as a vehicle by which I can reach the abstract world in which faith resides.

Just as I struggle to define faith, so others often struggle to define the art of writing, particularly the genres I study: creative nonfiction and poetry. Both forms invite tension because they demand creativity—nonfiction in the strict boundaries of fact and truth and poetry within the guidelines of content and form. Likewise, faith operates within the confines of objective truth. Creative nonfiction and poetry, like faith, also take truth from everyday situations and magnify it, make it metonymy. But first, writers must notice the everyday occurrence—they must be the most astute observers of the world—and “see little stories everywhere” as Brian Doyle does. And like Doyle, the writer must “catch [these stories] and show them to other people much as a child catches a moth and exhibits it with glee to friends and passersby” (xv). And I must remind myself of what Rilke says, when I think my life is dull:

If your daily life seems poor, do not blame it; blame yourself, tell yourself that you are not poet enough to call for its riches; for to the creator there is no poverty and no poor indifferent place. (3)

With Rilke, Doyle notes that the writer must observe faith in everyday situations, for the casual writer does not exist. To a writer, the faith of Abraham is no more impressive than the faith of a man who, during the latter portion of a marathon, began to have a muscle cramp, prayed for a banana, and moments later saw someone standing in a gorilla suit holding two bunches of the fruit for which he longed. The writer sees the spirit of Abraham in the spirit of this runner because she observes, because she possesses, as Terrell notes, “an alertness to detail, a quickening of the senses, a focusing of the literary lens, so to speak, until one has magnified some small aspect of what it means to be human” (22).

As I encounter and record everyday occurrences, then, I meet other challenges of faith and writing: reconciling the ordinary and the extraordinary and confronting the human condition (Lott 23, 14). As Faulkner writes, this the universal goal for writers—to tell the story of human experience, “the anguishes and troubles and gifts of the human heart, which is universal, without regard to race or time or condition” (Ryken 12). So, in my faith and in my writing, I must be vigilant. In my faith and my writing, I must “write one true sentence...the truest sentence [I] know” (Hemingway 1). And so in the spirit of O’Connor, I embrace the mystery of faith, saying, “Faith comes and goes. It rises and falls like the tides of an invisible ocean. If it is presumptuous to think that faith will stay with you forever, it is just as presumptuous to think that unbelief will” (65).

Merely describing everyday occurrences is only a step in the longer process that is writing. After writing a scene, even if I relate its details comprehensively, my work only just begins. Just as faith rises and falls, so my writing ebbs and flows as I begin to revise. Using concrete language, I seek to anchor abstract concepts; I work and rework my language until it reaches a stasis that communicates beautifully, even if what I'm communicating is not fundamentally beautiful. As I revise, I reach toward what I don't understand. Dickinson does this well in her poem:

Hope is the thing with feathers—  
That perches in the soul—  
And sings the tune without the words—  
And never stops at all.

Because of Dickinson, I can imagine hope since I can imagine a bird sitting on a tree so I can imagine it sitting in my soul. Like Dickinson, I strive to master language so that I can relate faith to other people, even if I do not quite understand it myself.

As I consider the mechanics of the written word, I think that syntax has a great deal to do with my faith. I believe that fundamentally, I am a steward of language. Now, I don't mean that I am the only steward of language. Many speak and know the power of words that edify and words that hurt. Many write and understand the consequences of poorly constructed sentence structure. As I experiment in my craft, I am assuming certain responsibilities as a writer. I structure my syntax and choose my words with care so that each unit reacts with the ones around it, building to a larger purpose. And so with Didion, I say this:

All I know about grammar is its infinite power. To shift the structure of a sentence alters the meaning of that sentence, as definitely and inflexibly as the position of a camera alters the meaning of the object photographed...The arrangement of the words matters, and the arrangement you want can be found in the picture in your mind.

Here is the picture in my mind: I strive to show readers what faith is. In this sense, I show them how I have encountered faith as an action in the same way that a mail carrier described the powerful strokes of grace:

And finally, it was the terrible forgiveness of my grandfather, who said, Well, I guess the field needed burning anyway, and then plowed the stubs and ashes under. Then came fall, and winter was sodden and brown with a few bouts of snow that raced at the windows. Then it was spring, and I remember the green of that field. No one ever mentioned the fire. It was the green that got to me. (Garland 9)

I envy Garland for the way he has cared for the language, and I wish to do the same. In this way, I see myself as a tent-maker like the Apostle Paul: I want to care for language, if I do so excellently, I can use my works as a mean to express my faith. Like Paul, I can have a great impact just by having high-quality work, just by stitching tents. Not only will I communicate well, but I will also engage my readers and cause them to think about important concepts. As a tentmaker, I can remain true to my personality so that, as Lott notes, Christ can weave himself in my work.

As I consider myself a steward of language, I notice too that writing and my faith both require discipline. Writing requires individual writers to make stylistic choices—how much they compress, how much they embellish, how much they include. But writing also demands that writers treat others with courtesy and respect. The truth must come with grace (Gutkind).

I don't want to have all the answers, even if I pretend I do. I think my dear friend Madie Grapes has all the answers, and hers is a lot in life I do not envy. So with Rilke, I strive for patience, not answers. I want what Rilke wants:

[T]o have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer. (6)

I hope that my pieces reflect what I believe: that there is tension in writing, that writing should relate ordinary occurrences to extraordinary concepts, that writing demands calculated syntax, and that writing requires discipline.

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**FROM THE CENTRAL PLAINS**

## PANORAMA

Some prefer symmetry—parallel stalks  
plotted kernel by kernel until each ear nears  
the silo-straddling skyline.

Others seek abstraction—bending boughs  
intersecting in obtuse and acute angles,  
sharing shadows and swirling into one coniferous cloud.

Still more peaks admire—contorted highlands  
in cool, receding colors impasto,  
juxtaposed against flat-lying firs and the figureless fog.

And some sweeping seas, and others bogs unbounded;  
but all underneath an unrationed sky.

## EQUINOX

The calendar-year, that annual equinox keeper-king,  
stokes his own opal fires  
warm with quartz-colored smoke  
as the sparsely clad peasantry quiver. His high levies  
leave them beggared, bare to face  
the coming chill. The after-autumn empty trees  
own only sunlight. Their raw, barren boughs  
offer no haven from the nightly frost's embrace.

## HORSE SOLDIERY

### Missouri Fox Trotter

Not only did he gallop to the door and hold it too long, but he also unbridled his *you're welcome* before I tacked on a *thanks*. So I lunged to the next door, expecting no *thank you*. Not even wild horses could drag it out of him.

### Canadian Pacer

He stooped, two crutches astride, alternating steps, swinging so that his lead leg pulled him forward over around above obstacles, a two-beat trot. His stable shoulders seemed tired, but he was bareback thanks to his companion. She carted his books while he jumped thirty-two steps down into the lower-level of the library. With an unbroken smile, he laughed, saying, *I am so glad you were with me today*, which she never asked.

## THE FATHER OF TIME

matines,  
my brother,           you dream  
          in suntime shifts  
for nightlight shows all shadow.  
                          dial back, john,  
relieve;       the dial is black,     john  
belling brings  
                          bright unmetered life,  
cities rerhythm  
                  rewrite

sick jacques  
          tricked, shocked     thick plots  
quick caught slick Bach

You,  
you red—letter man  
                          for you recount  
the seasons;           for the sun  
                  —no longer liturg—  
left.

Our hours all calling       ring your prayer post  
                          Ring  
where are you  
                          sometime stirring  
And now no sleep

## WAKE

When you steal under midnight light, meet me  
among the pines, unboxed. Together, we  
will vanish, lost among the bough cortège.  
You'll gather me, embrace my empty frame  
in your full flesh; you'll whisper, sigh my name  
but not goodbye yet. Dear, lay restless me  
below-sky, over-earth, unhedged and wild,  
estranged to all between—to all but you—  
so plant my body vacant, soul-divorced.  
Forgive me if I cannot speak; I do  
not love you less. In my cleft cage, Dear, till  
bright Lilac bows—tactile, clusters soon will  
you soothe, the figure of my floral pyre.  
I'll be transfigured, yes, but no less yours.

## BEHIND THE SECOND-FLOOR DORMER

The two fissures beneath the windowsill whisper together like ivy. The lower seems to clamor up the wall, seize false handholds, but advance resilient toward its partner.

On the window ledge,  
the philodendron supports nothing but the warm air.  
It wraps itself in fresh threads of atmosphere,  
plaits of shine, and braids of floating dust.

Outside, the sunlight fertilizes buds of clouds  
and, with rinds of dayspring and stalks  
of graupel, composts another wet season.

And I search for you  
in the silence of sheetrock, in the abridged rhizomes,  
in the raised row beds of the sky.

## SUN FUNGUS

I haven't said my skin is ash. I hyperpigment where the band of my sports bra rests, where a racer back runs rigid between my blades, where my favorite strand of pearls wants to lay. I sliver tiny shavings of my skin where these polka-dots amass. I fragment, and I flake, but I fold myself in scarves and sweatshirts so nobody sees.

I haven't said this collects on every person's skin, just better on mine. It appreciates the four hours every weekday I spend outside, where it can absorb the hot, humid air. It appreciates that I sweat when I work out, that I moisten it, that I quench its thirst. It appreciates that I supply it with neighbors too—like asthma and celiac. Yes, this appreciates me.

I haven't said my skin is scales. Fine scales. Pale scales. Pink scales. In the shower, when I exercise, after sunlight. My flesh courses itself into rigid plates. On my back, they look like uneven roof tiles arranged in concentric layers. Patches overlap from head toward toe. Between freckles, they sink their uneven edges like teeth into my ribcage. They indent and project and flex and multiply, and multiply, and multiply.

I haven't said *Malassezia furfur*. Since this inhabits my skin, it will return. Since this can't leave, I can only hope the pale pigment patches on my right shoulder and the russet spots on my spine blend with my natural Band-Aid colored tone. Since I can't seem to shake this species that shadows me, I'll keep itching.

I haven't said my skin is rash. I apply lotion, shampoo, cream, foam, soap. I want to control this, to keep it from growing. Over-the-counter, prescription, topical, homeopathic, breathable, non-greasy, hypoallergenic, who cares. This is here to stay.

## ORDINARY TIME

*“Beauty, then, is not mere decoration, but rather an essential element of the liturgical action, since it is an attribute of God himself and his revelation. These considerations should make us realize the care which is needed, if the liturgical action is to reflect its innate splendour.”*

*–Pope Benedict XVI*

### *Ash Wednesday*

A man whistles smoke into the alley  
and with it purloins the air.  
He says in forty days we will cast  
our boughs down, cluster  
like lilies, and contour  
the streets with our bodies.  
My unlikely priest embalms  
stones underfoot with his cinders  
like frankincense. The fragrance endures  
between us, then advances  
soundless around the corner  
like muffled footsteps over dusty coats.

### *Easter*

The lawn crumbles like a wafer.  
Without rain, cut palm sprigs  
last at most seven days. Tomorrow  
will surge from darkness like evergreen boughs  
thrown over flame—it will incite  
the soot, smolder,  
then recess.

### *Pentecost*

Seven weeks evaporated. My greedy  
well will not offer water. Instead, it covets  
wet bones. I stand beneath a spire  
and listen to bells cough  
carols that seem out of calendar.  
Blackbirds screen together, fume  
in the wire nets near the brass. One shuffles  
across the brick wall and snares

dust with its wings. Far away, I see  
a man frost his own silhouette.  
The sluggish glare from his cigarette cleaves  
his lips. Silent, I see fire from his tongue,  
birds above like incense.

*Advent*

The labor of the sun bears  
my calendar. To begin  
the year I anticipate  
a tomb; to end, I contemplate  
a crib. Year by year, death  
and birth surprise, yet  
I remember neither the shroud  
nor the sheet in the ordinary  
time between.

## THE VACANT HOUSE IN MOORE, OKLAHOMA

Inert as an unhinged boxcar, the house  
trades its cargo for the taciturn chaos  
of this second land rush across the shortgrass prairie.

The chestnut front door shakes hands with each child  
and grandchild, but they shunt  
into the still rooms and do not greet their host.  
Even as the floorboards suppress their wails,  
the guests claim the living room, bedroom closet, and kitchen  
for their Manataka sundance.

Like hackberry scrub in the Alley,  
they sway to the barbaric cadence  
of the southwest wind. They collect china plates,  
off-white pearls, and open letters.  
Soon, they will lay still as sweet gum branches  
snapped in a dust funnel.

But when they rise again for the ghost dance,  
they will herd like bison, a reticent half-circle  
lowing together. As they gesture, they will shadow  
bones and beads that rattle  
against a prophet's painted chest  
while he howls between clans of ash.  
And they will supplicate—promise their trinkets  
if only the flint hills their dead will restore.

## SOMEDAY

*A feeling of sadness and longing,  
That is not akin to pain,  
And resembles sorrow only  
As the mist resembles rain  
—Wordsworth, The Day is Done*

I  
Someday half-hangs over the moon,  
anchored like a hidden halo. And toward the night  
our mosaic marble rolls as someday slides  
slightly back near the soon-seen light.  
Night by night I chart blue giant, pulsar stars,  
but no nearer find my red dwarf someday.

II  
Floating beyond the calendar week, someday  
eludes me as I lonely stride under the distant moon  
thinking that October leaves like stars  
assemble as Aquarius, Cehpus, Lacerta nimble in the night—  
that I can seize those leaves all sweeping, light—  
but someday, away, always slides.

III  
And as cloudburst beads dribble down, it slides  
the same—like April rain. Someday,  
refracting, reflecting back the fogbound light,  
clouds my sun more like the moon.  
And each day I thankless wish for night—  
each night think someday rests with the stars.

IV  
But I never catch them shift, those stars!  
For all my logbooks, charts, and almanacs, they slide  
as I sleep, glide imperceptibly across the night.  
And if those stars stir, so must someday.  
And I must like water drawn to my desert moon  
near the one who nightly grants me light.

V

If I show my scleras to the sun, that light  
like someday would scorch my eyes. For stars  
and someday I best love from afar. And so the moon  
reminds me, as from empty to full it slides,  
that if I could see wholly someday  
I may never see again a soft-star night.

VI

I seek now for four wooden walls the night  
interrupting—two stories with ashy shingles, with mild light  
from a slate cast iron stove splintering evening-dark. Someday  
not a time but a place with a burgundy front door. Untouched the stars  
but embodied is this someday where across planks my hand slides,  
and wood grains prick my fingertips, sheltered from the distant moon.

VII

Oh, my distant landmark, oh my moon—  
by your strength another day slides  
toward, you, someday, burning steady as the stars.

## THIS IS MORE THAN HOMESICKNESS

### Periodical

I'm trapped in my perspective or whatever. No one feels what I do exactly, but at least if I were at home I'd be feeling closer to those I love. Instead, their old news is my new news. New news. The newest information. I never got that before. Now it's nestled on a page next to its partner. Even those words get to be side by side. I don't. And old news? It's just nonsense. I want to be close again for more than three months or three weeks or three days or whatever fragmented break I'm on.

### Post-Haste

I send my friends letters so they'll feel special. Nevermind. I really send them letters so they'll write back. But they don't. I never feel less special than when they ask for my address again. Why can't they just write it down once? Apparently, it's too cumbersome to memorize and not useful enough to warrant the paper. Lately, I couldn't afford stamps. They are forgetting me. I just know it. And that's much more disheartening than simple homesickness.

### Contact

I'm fighting. Fighting the distance from the house I grew up in; fighting my long-distance relationships; now fighting myself. I made four phone calls on a Friday night—

to Shannon; to my parents Tim and Becky and brothers Ethan and Jesse; to Isaac; to Kayla. Naturally, I heard my dad say he loves me. Quite unnaturally, Isaac and Kayla both heard me sniff-sniffle suck in sobs. I described to Kayla that unthinkingly I kept rubbing my fist in wide clockwise ellipses up and down my left thigh. How pathetic is that? She called it self-soothing, something her eleven-year-old nephew Will who has Autism Spectrum Disorder frequently does. I see now that I'm more than sad; I'm oh so very sad. After my call, my mom sent a text saying, *You sounded very happy. I'm glad.* So I'm also more than fake; I'm oh so very fake.

### Dialectic

Yes, it's my third year here. No, I don't have a concrete identity. No, my name is Ruth. Yes, we've met before. Yes, I'm a Professional Writing major. No, that's not an English major. Yes, I'm on the track team. No, I'm a thrower not a runner. Yes, I'd go home if I could. No, I can't. Yes, I'm counting down the days. No, I can't tell my roommate because she says she's sorry she's not them. Yes, I know I'm hurting her by my hurting. No, I don't know whose turn it is to be hurt this time. Yes, if I sound happy she'll be glad. No, I'm not at all happy here. Yes, I'm okay. No, I'm really not okay at all. Yes, I'm terrified.

## A PRAYER IN SPRINGTIME

My pleas arise like crocus petals  
that yawn and shake in April dew;  
they stir toward cloudbanks above.  
But how will they mount the dawn, bear  
its banner against the pale  
face of heaven? Lord, teach me to pray  
louder than the flowers grow.

## GARDEN WALL

The pearl of iris blades portions  
the flesh of spring, carves  
between thin sinew showers that guard  
the warm breath within April's pleura.  
She perceives the same quiet violence  
of winterset in the cloying throes  
she cultivates. When the spasm subsides,  
she thinks the garden wall like pillows  
around the unkempt flower pyre  
their gardener predestined to chant  
a second-hand account of necrosis.

The legions of spring advance  
the season's campaign.  
The stones await the moment  
when this phalanx will recede  
again as countless before.  
And the stones endure their purgatory—  
though the starlings may supplicate,  
though the forsythias barter  
their gold, the stones remain  
outside the garden ritual.

## TECHNICALITIES

Javelin jolts me. I generate torque, separate my upper and lower hemispheres, make myself a lever. Physics changed me physically; my over-strong, right-side hip flexor flips up my looser left hip. Sometimes for days, I walk around with one leg a little longer than the other. I have athletic trainers regularly thumb my iliac blades. Invariably, they instruct me to slide half off the blue pleather table so that my left side sags limply. One hand on my right hip the other on my left quad, they depress my quadriceps as I shove my leg skyward. I can't seem to push the hands against me above the table. Usually we apply opposing forces three times, even though most often my right-side pelvic muscles spasm the first time, sharply signaling that we have righted my left hip. At least for now.

I encountered the javelin first as a fifth grader or sixth grader. My younger brother Ethan threw farther than I did. I sulked to our blue Chevy suburban and cried.

I've always struggled against the javelin. Shaina Richer beat me when I was in the eighth grade. I had three years of experience and it was her first time. Even though she was a junior, I fought against myself, angry for having not been not better but best.

### Exercises for javelin

- box jumps
- weighted springs
- karaoka sprints
- overhead toss with knees locked
- dumbbell laying pull
- pull-ups
- sprints
- ladders
- medicine ball twists
- medicine ball circuits

The Mycenaeans and Romans used the javelin as an offensive weapon long before I used it to defend my perfectionism. The javelin isn't a spear—it's actually lighter than a spear. I do not throw the javelin. I actually thrust the javelin. Competitors have measured success with the javelin by distance and death toll.

My sophomore year, I handed the triple, long, and high jumper Amberle Bennett a javelin saying, *I bet you'd be good at this*, so that she could impress Cam Spear. She became state champion—twice.

Several javelins I have met in my day. Legend I was an all-weather model with a flat tip, rundown handle, and rainbow gradient from tail to tip. Her counterpart—Legend II—was a crosswind jav with double round tip, a good handle, and the same spectrum as its complement.

The Nordics championed my event. In fact, they have won 69 Olympic Gold medals—69 more than I ever will.

And there were the veteran javelins: the red, white, and blue, tailwind, gluey grip implement Casey Trafton used to become state champion and the White one, a headwind jav that pinned a record of 135 feet for Tara Lehman.

My senior year, I only beat Shannon Kunz twice, at the first and last meets. It rained both times, but the second time at the state meet I stuck sixth place. I was the last person that day to medal. I never broke 100 feet officially, instead piercing a mere 99-10 feet. Two inches—an incredibly small increment but an insurmountable distance.

The lures three I still encounter frequently. They appear divided lengthwise by orange and white so that sometimes I see an orange jav, sometimes I see a white jav, sometimes I see both simultaneously. The Orange jav, a more common instrument, was a practice jav with a soggy grip and broken tip.

But there was—Diana no less than divine soars in a mathematically precise arc from between my split-finger grip, splicing each metered molecule in the white and blue marble sky because she, the headwind javelin, knows what her Nordic ancestors knew—she rises no less than spiritually over unseen frictions and forces until she slits between individual blades, sliding snakelike under our atmosphere, redeeming the ground over which she skims, she that precise air foil.

My words

- cord grip
- scratch line
- personal best
- run-up
- sector foul
- v or claw grip
- throwing arc
- finnish grip
- turf

One jav length for the left-first, first three slow near-bounce steps to start. Five jav lengths to accelerate to sprint to slide back my right arm stiffly, hips before body bent in the seated reverse-C. Four jav lengths between the double right over left and faster. (Jolt.) Two jav lengths remain to follow through.

At five nine, I'm taller not tallest. At one fifty-five I'm lighter not lightest. My thirty-nine inch vertical is higher not highest. My bench press, squat, and deadlift maxes tell me I'm strong but not strongest. I'm only a success when I superlatively surpass others.

The groaning knot in my right shoulder demands electrical simulation and ultrasound and kenesio tape and ice daily. It mandates that I sleep either my back or my left side but never my right side because my loose rotator cuff lets me fold too easily on top of myself. My tied tendons tell me I'm a not just a javelin thrower during practice times or meets—the knot reminds me that I'm never not a javelin thrower.

My teammates mistakenly consider me proficient now. I've still never thrown as far as Shannon did in high school. My coaches say I can break a school record—but that would be a twenty-foot PR. Twenty feet is greater than two inches. I imagine that soon I might defeat this underdog story. But I launched this narrative arc in middle school. I just can't seem to make it stick.

## PASS A XANAX, PLEASE

*It might hail today—I hope it does*, your brother says on the way home from church. Under rows of cumulonimbus clouds, your family drives in a Chevy Suburban down Blackberry Hill Road where it bisects the Dunn farm, where it splits the cornfield on the West side of the road from the homestead and barn on the East. He cites Revelation. He says Jesus will pelt us with hail twice our body weights. He says hail grows larger than golf balls, tennis balls, baseballs, softballs, soccer balls. He says, *It might hail today*. You hope it doesn't.

You remember your freshman year when you slept well. But five milligrams of melatonin is all you need to take the edge off, just enough so that even if your brain is awake it can't quite focus, the right amount so that you don't lie in the dark and check items off some master lists or add others in case you really can't fall asleep this time. Somewhere in the process, your mind loosens slightly in the same way you slackened your fingers from around the steering wheel that time you hydroplaned. Then it relaxes more, then you watch your dreams, then you sleep.

You're sitting in your desk in Mrs. Robinson's room next to the cubby where you keep your textbooks. You're thinking about the three miles you'll race too soon. Your pulse jitters, and your feet edge the chair leg. You're like this until the starter's gun releases you hours later, until you stumble across the line out of breath, until next time.

*Why am I still competing?* You wonder as the fourteen-passenger van lists in the wind. You wonder this every time you compete in college as you wondered it at every basketball game, at every cross-country race, at every track meet in high school. You wonder why it's worth it. You think it probably isn't.

It's Monday morning. You feel it nag just behind you like a mosquito out of reach. So you start the list, order your universe for the next two agenda pages, fill the expanse. In each line you draw a square. In each square, you will draw an "x," eventually. You miss what your professor says, but you feel better. For a little while.

You feel naked, as cliché as that might sound. It's more that you feel as though spectators see into you—which is worse than if they saw through you. Then, you wouldn't have to be there at all. But you are there, and you're waiting for yourself again.

You stand at the edge of an eight-foot inset concrete ring and hold a modern version of an ancient weapon in your right hand. You're choking on the paradox of thinking about not thinking, as many athletes have before you. This is the moment it's all built toward—your numb tongue, your moist palms, your clenched teeth, your restive stomach. Your coach says, *Control what you can; accept what you can't*. He says, *Have a mantra*. He says, *Just have fun*. You say, *I've already tried that*.

Miss Farrington talks about the Middle East. This is nothing new since you watched 9-11 live on Fox News the year before. Gordon Borek says, *My dad told me wars and rumors of wars mean it's the end times*. He thinks this is cool. Miss Farrington affirms his teachings. This is the first time you hear someone preach Matthew 24:6. You don't think it's cool at all.

In practice, you prepare steps for a new javelin run up. Each throw fails. Your coach doesn't speak as you sprint through again. *I don't even know how to talk to you right*

*now*, he says. You drop, rest your elbows on your knees. You say, *I don't know what to do*.

You're sitting in the passenger seat of someone else's car. You cringe. The Prius that rear-ended you in February, and the Jetta that rear-ended you in March, and the Focus that you slid into in January all arrive, all at once, all over. This time, you drive away.

Five milligrams isn't quite enough anymore. Ten seems to work fine. Some nights, sleep becomes your goal—something to focus your mind toward. Other students relax into sleep, but not you. For you, sleep is something difficult to achieve but ultimately rewarding. Until ten milligrams isn't quite enough.

Your amygdala correlates emotions with times and places. So blame your brain when you stand at center court and hope your forward out jumps theirs; when you anticipate the gunpowder and the snap of a start; when you flip over a blank test and apply your pen to the first essay question; when you skip past CNN or the Weather Channel; when you navigate between airport security and your gate; when you read your practice schedule and know which days involve hard workouts; when syllabus day arrives and you chart every item you must overcome in sixteen weeks.

It's April 15, the day a total lunar eclipse will complete its tetrad. This is the fourth of the Red Blood Moons. You're surprised because your coaches claim either a terrorist attack or the rapture is sure to happen today, but you're still sitting with them in a minivan on your way to the All-Ohio Track and Field Championship. You're surprised because you're still here.

The pool water grows tepid. Your parents stand in the center of the swimming pool while you and your brothers paddle around the edges and twist the water into a whirlpool.

*What about the basement or the bulkhead?* Your mom asks. *I don't know if it would matter,* your dad responds. *How would we know one touched down near us?* She says. *We might not,* he says. You kick closer to the edge of your lesser cyclone, farther away from them. They continue their conversation. You shelter inside.

Mrs. Butland lectures on the End Times. Four days each week for nine weeks, you prop your elbows on your desk so that you can cover your ears without her realizing.

You throw one into the net. You think, *It's just a warm up.* Your next warm up meets the net with equal force. You think, *This never happens in practice.*

Fifteen milligrams doesn't always work now either. You don't remember how to sleep until you've overslept. You don't remember how to rest until you're overtired. You don't remember how it got this bad.

You're walking toward an empty football stadium, inhaler in hand. You're trying not to talk, but you have to explain that this has happened before. You just need to breathe. You spend forty-five minutes telling someone that you aren't afraid of failure, you aren't afraid of anything. This isn't fear. It's much, much different. Two hours later, after you finish completing, your coach says, *You seemed exhausted.* You don't try to explain why.

When they plan your approach in javelin, they assume adrenaline will pump you a few steps farther, a few steps faster. But in this meeting of fight or flight, you fight only against yourself. You can't rely on adrenaline to spark your competitive spirit either. It just sends you straight into the flame where your fragile grey wings burn so quick.

You're tired of people complaining about stress. Everybody has stress. Stress can be positive. Stress can make you grow. You don't grow. You shrink.

They tell you, *I don't know how to help you*, or they say, *You just need to stop feeling this way*. So you know they're thinking about themselves or they're thinking something is wrong with you. And neither fixes the problem.

For Christmas, your nanny gives your dad a copy of John Hagee's *Four Blood Moons*. Your grampie sees the book, reads the back cover, and asks for a copy. He becomes fixated with the idea of prophecies.

You don't care which amygdala projects stimuli to your hypothalamus. You don't care whether it reaches the dorsomedial thalamus, the thalamic reticular nucleus, the nuclei of the trigeminal nerve, or the facial nerve. You don't care that after the ventral tegmental area and the locus coeruleus, the stimuli meets the laterodorsal tegmental nucleus. You just want it to stop.

You think, *Maybe it will rain this weekend*. You check the forecast—sunny and seventy-six degrees. You think, *Maybe I'll tear my rotator cuff*. You continue to move your right shoulder without pain. You think, *Maybe this time, I'll throw up, then I won't have to go*. You never get sick. Maybe next time.

You recite, *So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own*. You know that verse, better than he does, actually. *Still*, he says, *You're sinning*.

## REMIGES AND RETRICES

Would I were winged—but not so others see.  
Not hollow-feathered dapple-downed with brown  
or better chestnut, almond felt, pillowed, pressed  
against a pencil-sketched, blue-ruled sky.  
No, not a sparrow, not a dove (though white  
soft-frosted, snow-clad, billowed, blank) called  
upon to blot, erase, to clean long-cried  
war-words, to piece the fragments, hover, heal.  
Not even half-mast, flapping, an unfurled  
bald eagle waving over cities, crowds.  
For these winged-things appear more poorly plucked  
than true. Would I were winged—I'd rise where none  
survey, where none could daub my wings away.

## INCENDIARY

Ours the empty  
language ours  
the dry words  
that split twain—twice  
quartered  
stack neatly  
in rows in columns  
cord by cord  
(ours the sapless sayings) settled in soot  
cinders ours too  
the rose-red head  
match catching coals  
but ours a dull fire  
that fumes but cannot  
glow for ours  
the parched prose

## THE STOIC CALM

*“Say to yourself in the early morning: I shall meet today ungrateful, violent, treacherous, envious, uncharitable men. All of the ignorance of real good and ill... I can neither be harmed by any of them, for no man will involve me in wrong, nor can I be angry with my kinsman or hate him; for we have come into the world to work together...”*

—Marcus Aurelius, Meditations Book II Part I

After that, the graft,  
like a metal wedge thrust  
stiff into a stock—I sense a slit  
inside myself like cracked bark cut  
nearly to the cambium, wonder  
whether I will survive  
the inset scion that comes  
too soon. But I say  
nothing to those who set the awl.

## NINE MONTHS OF CONFLICT TAUGHT ME HOW TO SAY “NO”

Between buildings, a gust passes through me. I’m spectral, thin like a cool exhale lost in a vast meat locker. I can’t think about each step since my thoughts now pool. Again I fall into my heavy state. And I’m tired of it all, tired of thinking and not thinking.

\*\*\*

After she heard us laughing across the hall, she slammed our door. On the whiteboard outside it she wrote, *Love one another as I have loved you.*

\*\*\*

No I get 7 to 8 hours of sleep at least four nights a week

No I feel organized and in control

Yes I recognize stress symptoms

\*\*\*

September before last, someone photographed me. I wonder if other people noticed my clearer skin then. I wonder if they notice my acne scars now. I wonder as I use corrector, scrub, astringent, and caffeinated moisturizer. My skin’s a mutiny.

\*\*\*

In times when I had less control over my thoughts, I’d hope she would assault me. Then they’d see. Then they’d let me leave. Once, I dreamt she climbed to the top bunk and swung. I hit her with a hairbrush—I don’t own a hairbrush. Another time, I threw the first punch, a left hook. I missed.

\*\*\*

No I have at least one person who lives nearby whom I can ask a favor

No I am able to speak openly when angry, stressed, or worried

Yes I recognize when I am not coping well under pressure

\*\*\*

Cabled between caramel, flax, and strawberry hair, the strands of white appear no longer than the length of my last knuckle to my fingertip. White signals events the way tree rings berth a lifetime. My cross-section unfurls not black but white.

\*\*\*

This is what they said to do—if someone offends you, tell the person. If the person offends you again, tell an impartial third party. If that person keeps offending you, tell authority. Well I did that. All that. Authority told me I was a bad example.

\*\*\*

She's singing, *What if your blessings come through raindrops, what if your healing comes through tears?* So she thinks I'm her raindrops, too.

\*\*\*

No I confide with at least one person around me about personal matters

No I have regular, calm conversations with the people I live with

Yes I am engaged in interpersonal conflict with a roommate or close friend

\*\*\*

Too quickly, I say I'm tired, and step on the scale. Stress feels heavy, yet I've lost weight. Perhaps my body has not lost weight but my spirit. Yes, it seems my spirit shrinks.

\*\*\*

Two wolves pursue me as I sleep. The handler, a titanic Canadian, instructs me to hide with a booming gesture and a quick voice. From the balcony of a two-story hotel, passive, I observe the first sink like a snapped mast, slide against snow in a plow blade-wide path. The second ascends a man's spine before four men reclaim their captive. I hold fast my crow's nest view. When I dream of wolves, I flee.

## FOUR PASSAGES

1. I'm white-knuckled, twisted away from the window, eyes closed, lips tight, tighter at take-off. I'm terminally internally talking to myself—either up or down if we happen to be flying or that other f-word—saying, *We're not falling we're not falling we're flying we're not falling*. And when those inner tube-sized tires touch tarmac, I try to think that they won't snap on impact because, *We're not the Challenger* and *hey, I'm not Christa McAuliffe*. And when the brakes grab gravity tight like I do the chair arm, I avoid thinking, *Does a plane flipping end over end feel like a rollercoaster ride?* And when I land in Portland International Jetport from over the Atlantic, I reassure myself thinking, *The Hudson River is nowhere near here so we'll land on land not winter-water*. I'm afraid to fly, but planes are the fastest way home.

2. I'm on my way to the camp, since my private parents (my father especially) picked a plot (actually two adjacent lots of land) that we can access by boat only for our bungalow. We've boated over bags of dry concrete, truckloads—truckloads of crushed stone, plywood pallets, grandparents, generators, German shepherds, coolers, fishing poles, fly rods, brothers uncles cousins, table saws, chainsaws, axes. And if anyone saw us they never said so, probably because we often only barely slipped through the mile long surface with four inches of aluminum exposed, though we have faded Polaroids to prove it. But the water is so very black no matter what I've seen: First Davis Pond, Cider Mill Pond, Leigh's Mill, Knight's Pond, Moosehead Lake, Second Davis Pond, Frost Pond. Not only do I not understand how aluminum, which is denser than water, can float, but I also don't know how many or what kind of fish or how large the rocks or how long the swim or how cold or how deep or how long the soaked stumbling after. Or really just when the

pickarel trout salmon hornpout will bite me. And I'm weighted by the fact that I got held back in swimming school at four years old and would probably definitely drown when the boat went down because I don't float. But I couldn't boat home, even if I were willing to take the risk.

3. I'm driving overnight, all night. Passengers keep each other awake much like trapped winter weather wanderers huddled against each other and the elements. It's not just the wild white tails or the fearless family pets that trouble me. We might doze and damage more than they would. Other drivers scare me because even if I don't fall asleep, I never know who's tipsy who's texting who's too tired. Meanwhile, I'm recklessly eager to get home. These—my 2001 Honda CR-V with the more-pink-than-red hood, five seats stuffed with stuff for home, one-hundred and eighty or more thousand cautiously commuted miles, and only a cassette player and radio—are the most convenient way home. Still, they say I'm more likely to die on my way to the airport than on the plane ride home.

4. I'm rightly riding rails. They ferry people over land and don't go over under through like other transports do. Our highways, turnpikes, freeways—they all cut the land. They slit the grass and soils and trees in some complexly ugly loop like paintings children make by adding adding adding seeing late we can't subtract our glitter glue like we can simple sums. Once, DC bound, we moved across a city never sleeping, sliding over coasts and copses. Sounds so subtle soothe me like a clock tick-tocking; sights show inscape more than instress (these I perceive with my own two eyes); I'm feeling ploy-nylon wool benchseat backs curving close. And rigid rolling running rushing ever-onward rails convince me it's okay that I am not one of those people, one of those who travels just to go to any place at all, seems soothed by sitting in a plane or train or boat or CR-V, seems soothed and not unsettled, seems so still. Blue Water, Empire Builder, Crescent, Silver Star, my Downeaster—these lightly lulling loving let me know it's almost time. And oh that smell of sticky pine pitch, split wood, bags of balsam fir all cutting through the open window—they say *Don't you worry, Ruth, you'll be home soon.*

**FROM THE COSTAL LOWLANDS**

## AUBADE

I shed my day-thoughts, molt  
in the humid night. I hear loons cry  
from beyond my window and wonder  
why they forego their moans by morning.  
Each pond-cross echo nibbles  
the crust of dusk, laps  
the salt of starred-nights, draws  
nectar from midnight. I think they taste  
the reason I listen alone: they internalize  
why I do not understand. Yet,  
every night, their laments leap  
against the water into the deaf  
trees only to drift  
against the silent boughs.

## SACRAMENT AT FIRST DAVIS POND

Other days, he hovered separate  
from his own likeness and waded  
past his waist or cascaded  
over the tips of boulders then dove  
off the jetty—other days,  
he felt companion to the lake.

That day, he and his mother's father  
met the sheen politely. As the elder lingered  
the younger in a deep bow, I noticed  
First Davis became infatuated with the stranger,  
admired the way daylight speckled  
his skin like granite, and cloaked  
him behind satin.

Then the water, loath to release him, clasped  
him as he cleaved the surface.  
That day, First Davis bashfully recoiled.

Now to First Davis he restores  
himself each summer. The pond christens  
him over again and consecrates  
its partner each time he launches  
himself into the swell.

## THE RED PAINT GRAVE

A man filters his throat-heavy song  
through handfuls of silt. His neighbors, a reef  
of Etchimin with their arms flared  
open toward their sea, anchor their thoughts  
on their sister. Prostrate, she undulates  
between the shallow walls of the embankment.  
But when the brackish sand swells  
beside her, she will not tide  
to meet the damp rise.

An after-feast of split oysters, each a half-cairn,  
mark that the living retain  
of the dead only what they internalize—  
her black hair after rain as it pearled  
mothlight but never again the beads  
where the heavy ends waded; never  
his Etchimin, never again.

Soon, the man will pigment  
his dark melody with ochre. Soon,  
he will reconcile his refrain—he will saturate  
the silence, embellish the space above  
her, between them, pour paint  
into her black basin. And soon,  
he will address his land as a different man.  
In the expanse, he will seek  
her in corners where land breaks  
from slack water and crests  
against blue ice and frozen sky.

He will pace the soft cirques  
where floe striates the mountain flanks,  
but he will distrust the barren rocks  
and boulder clay since it rushes  
too quickly into the gravel deltas  
where the surf banquets  
the sand.

And though the sea allots the land  
no monument, he quarries  
what he can of his Etchimin in veins of oysters,  
in blank water, in bright strokes of russet earth.

## AMTRACK SOUTHBOUND 680

How strange it is to think how we converge:  
we find ourselves most often scrambled, crammed  
together like close riders sullen-packed  
collected within thunder underground  
in humid huffs and waterlogged, aware  
that we, with nerves unbalanced, are compact  
against our fellow passengers ill-fit.  
Transported, stiff, our motley shapes connect  
our one-way loops. Our sharp abutting limbs  
unyielding distance us when we collide.  
We jointly stumble, lean bestride, conflict.  
Yet—stranger still that we couple pliant curves  
and bolster others, interlock—links and pins  
composite chains of cars and latch our limbs.

## PERKINS COVE PORT, OGUNQUIT

Tonight, the sky is a galleon,  
a woman as she pulls billows of sailors  
across the soggy hem of her skirt,  
an admiral as he rolls his dirge  
to the tide of seagulls. The gulls cargo  
the notes that wave from under his tongue  
across the restless harbor.

Tomorrow, tomorrow, you said over.  
Beside you, seagulls constructed an altar  
of sturgeon fins and oyster bellies, danced  
around their shrine, and parsed their feathers  
as if they flayed their own flesh.  
You said, maybe soon rain will come.

Tonight, the sea weeps  
like a mountain that climbs to heaven, reaches  
toward the outstretched hands of the late dead.  
And the sea, now a granite precipice, sculpts  
between tectonic plates the relief  
of those who once birthed their songs  
in shallow bays of breeze.

Tomorrow, we will drift  
a shadow's length from today  
and think we have voyaged  
anew. We forget that we orbit  
our anchor. Perhaps, gulls never venture  
beyond where the harbor surveys either.  
The storm soon forgets the way footbridges  
and peers offer empty platitudes,  
their planks and joists lighter  
than trinkets and as idle.  
And the dry space gulls lap  
with their wings dissipates  
as rapidly as we do.

## SATURDAY NIGHT SÉANCE

Floating between Isaac and my Dad, both uncomfortable, suspiciously nonchalant in their athletic sneakers and boot-cut jeans. In the Newington Regal Cinema before the newest horror movie while both warm themselves in their pullover half-zip sweatshirts. One hides behind the official Nike badge. The other boasts the Berwick Police Department logo. Theatre number twelve down the dark drab corridor framed by movie posters instead of tapestries framed by fluorescent floor lights instead of dripping candle sticks—framed by a father to the left and a boyfriend to the right. In out in out of conversation. Bridging between two intermittently interwoven realms. It's a weak connection, since I hold only one of the two hands near mine.

Movies I've seen with him

- Storm of the Century
- The Strangers
- Carrie
- Insidious
- The Conjuring
- And now Annabelle

I'm never quite sure who to talk to since both simply salvage time with me tonight. I'm caught between them, a talking board. Our conversation seems flat—just letters of the alphabet, yes, no, hello, and occasionally, goodbye. Maybe the three of us lack enough energy. Maybe we can't find something in common. Maybe together we can't each place our fingertips on a tangible heart-shaped piece of conversation hovering over scattered

symbols. Maybe even if we had a planchette it would indicate only what we tell ourselves isn't true—that this October evening is paranormal. Ethan was supposed to bring Kristen—why didn't they just come? (But five is still an odd number.) So who's the odd man out?

Books I've borrowed from him

- *Bag of Bones*
- *The Shining*
- *Dr. Sleep*
- *Full Dark, No Stars*
- *Under the Dome*
- *Mr. Mercedes*

My dad impresses me with information that parallels the *Ouija* commercial. He tells me about his childhood neighbor Mary Tanner: how she played with Linda, Laura Lee, Karen, and Debbie until she partied without them; how she partied without them until she didn't come home one night; how she didn't come home one night until a skydiver found parts of her in a Kennebunk copse. He tells me that Pastor Tanner and his wife used their Ouija board often. He tells me he passed by it on in their living room next to the TV guide, the Portland Press Herald, the half-empty coffee cup, the LIFE magazine. He tells me they treated it like any other family would a telephone, connecting across tangled lines through numbers and letters to their daughter as if she stood with them in their candle-shadow static living room. I relay this to Isaac occasionally.

Things I share with him

- Spicy food
- Rare steak
- Poor posture
- A- blood type

## TO THE MI'KMAQ MARTYR

under a mosquito nimbus before long before afternoon thunder  
our sneakers excavate earth each stride  
our rubber soles roll heel to toe roll

over second hill after long after sunrise steam  
our footfalls pass two plywood one palette bridge  
our shifting pace mirrors balsam bends in summer shine

below the undimmed sky past long past midnight half-moon  
our trail from goosefoot into sweet fern over  
our sorrel sand once Algonquin sorrel sand

atop Agamenticus summit apart long apart departed schem  
Chief St. Aspinquid your stone stack shrine we shadowed with  
our mapalete radio masts and once deciduous observation decks

## NOR'EASTER

Twenty seasons of pressure pair  
with twenty seasons of ease—  
but this night, the trees neither laugh nor dance.  
From inside the kitchen, we observe  
the way they purpose themselves  
against wet crystal and cast their boughs like stones  
into the north-east wind. The squall pauses—  
they collect themselves, gather the rubble  
of their branches again. But the sleet coerces  
them. So you pluck your coat  
from where it grows dry next to the front door  
and sow yourself where the wind rends,  
where your birch trees labor.  
Perhaps you still may heal the piths,  
perhaps revive the spring and summer wood, perhaps  
arouse the cracked cambium, perhaps—  
Inside again, hours later, you conclude  
your vigil. Since the branches and bark travailed  
before, *Why*, you ask, *why do they break*  
*after living for so long?* So I wonder  
the weight of snow and the burden of each season.

## BEHIND BUFFUM ROAD

Across the brook, Amtrak eases  
over flat-bottom rails and concrete sleepers.  
We ripen in the fen above the bluff,  
mull in the day's equinox.  
With the train, an iron debitage refines  
this meadow. The lithic relief  
scouts the wild since countless  
April rains have stained this conduit  
until it rusted thick like bark.  
You stride inside this shell and hesitate  
where day can amble easy through the open port.  
And the dull light stencils your shadow  
against the pigment, patterns  
you in the cavern. This second  
hall of hands abstracts you over ochre.

## JANUARY IN NORTH BERWICK

Winter warmed its waters first  
with a stiff coat three inches deep—  
starched well for sliding-strides.  
But winter layered two more inches  
thick as fleece-felt mittens  
suited for snowmachines and snowmen.

Late winter warm spells rot the ice,  
thawing them like termite-tunneled floor boards.  
So no matter how shallow the mercury at Cider Mill,  
fathers fall too easily under—  
fall too far below to ever float.

But when the antique tip-up traps, trussed across  
eight-inch augers, hold  
rainbow trout taut on sturdy lines—  
how sons' and fathers' features,  
tucked below wool caps, unfold  
like pennants rising in that icebox air.

## SILENT CIDER MILL

### I.

Cider Mill Pond lived long ago. A vertical water mill once hammered the passing pool and ground waves with its runner stone. A slight vapor once rose as the paddle slapped again and again the stream like a beaver marking the water with a defensive clap.

Mark would perch in the bow. Ethan and I would fold ourselves on the fiberglass floor. My Father, steadfast in the stern, would guide the canoe. The four of us would cast our translucent lines across Cider Mill Pond when it yet lived. Father and son would slide us toward the dam, where the fish sunned themselves in shallower waters. I would close my eyes, expecting at any minute the dam to lower its concrete lip and swallow us into Maple Swamp Brook.

Once, we fished at night. We baited lines on the banks of Cider Mill in the same place where in daylight we would launch our fiberglass rafts. That night, my brothers caught hornpout. I released an eel. Sometimes, I think about the way that snakish thing reflected forward and back on the line, curving the bright of the flashlight against its leather. I wonder if that eel still resides in Cider Mill Pond.

Mark, Ethan, Jesse and I tamed our lot of forest, transformed trunks into bunkers, battered beeches into wigwams. We searched for White Birches but found few. Our father taught us to scavenge for berries we might recognize and avoid those we encountered as strangers. And any time we encountered ferns, we used our walking sticks to scatter them like flocks of roosting birds.

## II.

The mill never moves; the pond slips past it in thin sheets of splash that shine like black ice. Cider Mill House in disrepair now opens itself. It exhales the blight of books through the fissure in its roof. Now yellow oak leaves hue like the wrinkled pages of the bloating books they light on. In January, powder falls through the peak and completes the geometric pattern of the rug on the oak floor. In April, the mists melt the ice, lap the inside of the windowpanes, puddle under each sill. In August, cloudbursts storm past columned crossbeams and weep down the walls. In November, the final frost films on the abandoned dining china so that it seems the cupboards are museum exhibits behind glass. Cider Mill House released its spirit through the cleft in its peak.

Cider Mill Pond never speaks. Yet, it causes the wind and water and weary leaves around it to pause. Were it more than a shallow impoundment of warm-water fish, were it more than ten acres long and six feet deep, were it ripe with ice ready for harvest—perhaps if Cider Mill were not so humble, Cider Mill House would speak. But it will never shout or mumble or even whisper. So three-seeded mercury, maidenhair ferns, and allegheny vines pause and advance on. So ruffed grouse, green-winged teals, and hooded mergansers pause and drift on. So grass pickerel, yellow bullhead, and rainbow brook trout tread on. The spirit of Cider Mill has passed on.

## THE TIMEKEEPER

Long ago, my grandfather wound  
himself counter clockwise.  
Now he never passes time.  
He chimes—tell, retell, view, review, live, relive—  
wringing each repeated beat,  
for though freestanding, even stately,  
his thoughts swing  
heavy behind. But the notches of his  
hands, his face,  
explain his steady-lagging measure.

OCTOBER 27, 1950

I've known you only  
in the sixty-three  
years—in the sixty-three since  
you another son  
across the Pacific, the Sea of Japan, the front  
lines  
the three years of cold  
war  
froze you in photographs

(You and the 45th Infantry Division)  
(You and the 180th Regiment)  
(You and the Heavy Mortar Company)  
(You and Gil Orsby)

Sixty-three years since your nine  
months between  
trenches  
tributaries of the Nakdong River  
sixty-three years  
before  
your mailbox held six  
medals

(Combat Infantryman's Badge)  
(Presidential Unit Citation)  
(Army Good Conduct Medal)  
(Republic of Korea War Service Award)  
(Korean Service Medal)  
(United Nations Service Medal Korea)

Sixty-three years without  
fanfare  
since your  
America did not know  
you

TO MARK, ETHAN, AND JESSE

The Pitch Pine bundles itself against the forest  
with yellow-green needles in uneven threes  
which—stiff and sharp-tipped as harshly spoken words—  
slightly twist, persist. And the serotinous speeches  
of my Pitch Pine release seedlings winged in forest fires.

The Eastern Pine collects slow maturing cones  
and bundles serrate needle-sheaths—prepares for the bitter solstice.  
And so, this tasseled giant rises, guides a more common copse.  
Even four hundred and fifty years would be too  
slight for one so mighty.

The Red Pine, though still a sapling, shows  
a new whorl of branches each year. With each swirl  
this sapling—coated in crisscross plates, patterned fissures,  
diamond shaped scales—more and more surpasses  
even summer sunshine with its rich-brown countenance.

## LEVER-ACTION

### Solid Wood Stock

Before he was my dad, Timmy sniped a bull moose's left hindquarter as a five-year-old at Frost Pond with the Daisy Red Ryder BB gun his uncle gave him. Also at Frost after days and nights and days and nights of nagging, he clipped a *chickmunk* with his father's father's .22 pistol. When Grampa Nichols reclaimed the handgun after the single hip fire saying, *I would have given it to you sooner if I'd know you'd hit him on the first shot*, he said, *I would have missed a few times if I had known you would take it away so fast.*

### American Clip-Loaded

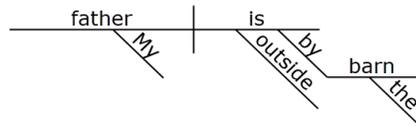
My patriarch pensively polishes: sitting on the burgundy living room loveseat under the rustic, faux-hide lamp with his oblong, blue-lid Tupperware box of circular tins and bent-bristle brushes, he dusts the surface dirt with the damp yellow cloth with red stitching, coerces the wax cream onto the toes especially, constructively and dully coating his work boots much like he would the barrel of his Springfield .30-06 rifle.

### Practical-Tactical

I've heard citizens of the Town of Berwick call him many things—Chief Towne, Tim, Timmy, just Chief—but if he isn't Daddy or Dad, he's most definitely Tim or Timothy. Not Timmy. And he might have shot someone with the G41 Gen 4 GLOCK with no external hammers or safeties and even weight distribution that he carries on his left hip, but I've never asked.

## PARSE

### I. noun phrase<sub>1</sub> + “to be” + adverbial of time or place



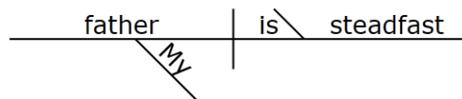
Before the fire, my father and I crouched between the two gambrel doors that closed off the half-barn, half-garage perpendicular to my home. That day, I received a wooden-handled hammer from my father. I had heard him hammering flimsy shingles in September sounds: green leaves rustling darker, brothers bounding hemlock to hemlock in the family’s thirty-two acres, chickens chatting before the coming cold snaps silenced them. I had internalized the beat, the rhythm, the pattern of each head-first hit of steel on smaller steel. But there was nothing symphonic or poetic about my slow swinging strokes. Three to bend the nail sideways, one to my middle finger wedged quickly between the shingle and the hammer. Then, sixteen steps across the eighteen slate stones of the front walkway to the three steps of the porch. From inside, I heard the syntax resume.

My father built our barn, structured it like words that form at last a poem. Poets collect the rich verbs that show who my father is, the ones that communicate that he cuts wood, shines his long-laced black work boots, levels our ever-sinking camp, cleans his

rifles, pistols, and handguns, mows his lawn, teaches his boys to become better boys—that he builds barns. But he doesn't say much.

I saw my father before his cropped hair gained an ashy look just above his ears. I saw him from over the beam that crossed top bunk at Wetstone Pond. I saw him break from the runs of nine and sets of four with his father, wife, and mother for sardines and saltines and Moxie. Then, as I sat with the pan of jiffy pop he set in my sleeping bag, I saw him finish his game in third place.

## II. noun phrase<sub>1</sub> + “to be” + predicate adjective



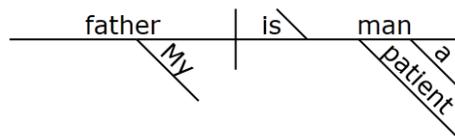
So much I wish I could say about my father—but syntax restricts me. Ten sentence patterns structure all but five percent of what I say. With the first five patterns, I can only link my father to adjectives, nouns, and adverbs that describe that he exists. The other five patterns show my father interacting with and acting on nouns. Even so, these patterns become redundant. And as the patterns become more complex, I can say less about my father. So after the whirlwind an earthquake, and after an earthquake a fire. And I cannot speak with the whirlwind or the earthquake or the fire or the syntax. If I communicate with a gentle blowing, will anyone hear me?

*Words strain,  
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,  
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,  
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,  
Will not stay still.*

Cinder blocks rested three high on the slab. They received their structure from the concrete below. Like a precise verb—an action word that conveys the exact meaning a person wants to communicate—the concrete slab attached nouns to itself so that my father could structure a simple sentence, the foundation of our half-barn, half-garage. But that was before the fire.

My father stored bales of hay above the ground floor of the barn, in the attic, away from sight. Hay he piled so high that it nearly touched telephone wires as truck and trailer idled below. Straw like snow would flurry in humid clouds around each worker. They hauled hay bales either up the staircase that rose from left to right in the back of the garage or tossed them from the ground to the attic through the second-floor door. I saw the slab of concrete and the cinder blocks support my father’s simple structure even with our careful stacks. I think my father communicated much simply because he structured his barn well, because it could carry any weight, because what he wanted to include in his structure he could include.

**III. noun phrase<sub>1</sub> + “to be” + noun phrase<sub>1</sub>**



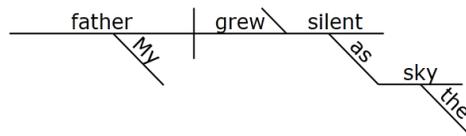
Language lives, changes every day. And whether I realize it or not, I internalize what I hear. That’s why I say, *wicked good*. Because the people around me do. That’s why I crave the oxford comma. Because Mrs. Robinson and Mr. Jepson taught me to. I can’t help but internalize language.

I remember something—a fragment. My father sitting across the room from Ethan and I, as we both struggled to be the middle child of the four. Fifty feet from the barn, inside the house, in my father’s den, under the first six-point buck he shot after he married my mother, together on the grey leather three-seat couch. I remember the balance. What my father said and what he did not. The sibling I had and the sibling he lost. I don’t think that he could articulate that harm, a burn so deep that perhaps it damaged him beyond what his somatic senses would allow. And I’ve seen my father cry four times and hugged him three out of those times. That day, just I blistered inches from my brother.

I want images, and I’m not alone. I want the thing itself not what it represents. Yet I manipulate language. My verbs are nouns: use is useful; demonstrate is demonstration; conclude is conclusion. And what do I want? Love. But do I love? And want do I demand? Acceptance. But do I accept? And what do I suggest? Faith. But faith is not a verb—faith is a noun. I’m still waiting for someone to explain faith to me.

*I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope  
 For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love  
 For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith  
 But faith and love and hope are all in the waiting.*

**IV. noun phrase<sub>1</sub> + linking verb + predicate adjective**



My father watched his structure fuel. How he had labored to build that barn. I knew his slab, I knew his cinders. His verbs held concrete nouns; beams like prepositional phrases; siding, shingles, and paint like adjectives and adverbs to adorn and complement

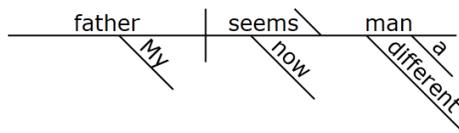
each other; nails, screws, and joints all tight like coordinating and subordinating conjunctions. I saw that fire—a burst a blaze—miscommunicate.

Before the fire, I didn't know fast. I had never seen my father run across our driveway to move our navy Chevy Suburban further away from the flames. I had never seen my father pause, decide not to move the silver Durango, and step back to the chest-high snow bank where the five members of his family stood fifty feet from the fire. I had never seen light and heat compete with my father. I had never thought about him losing.

I saw my father sitting across the booth in Applebee's on his birthday, three days before mine. He ordered French onion soup with Swiss melted over it—he hadn't before. His wife, three sons, and I ate while he hovered silently over his chilling soup. After dinner, he left for the hospital.

I felt the flames from outside the western-most side of the house. The sun doesn't really rise between a grey February sky and a pillar of smoke. The snow doesn't really melt the same way the tarmac of a driveway does. You can't really hear your bedroom window cracking in the heat if your barn heaves inward twenty feet away. You don't really notice how the heat cooks a tree and kills it until over half a decade later. When the structure fails, you notice the aftermath only.

**V. noun phrase<sub>1</sub> + linking verb + noun phrase<sub>1</sub>**

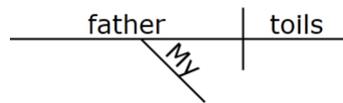


I could hear the fire trucks not far away. But the ice accumulated that February, but my father lost his crushed stone driveway under one great white sheet, but the North

Berwick Fire Department never actually drove the last fifth of a mile to the barn. Maybe it was best to start over since it was too late to sand the driveway, too late to wet the wavering structure, too late to reclaim what was inside the structure—and what it meant to my father.

The fire conjugated all before our eyes. Language transforms just like that fire. And the fire devours the red and white knit stocking my Grammie Nichols made me—the one that said my name. The fire gave me a pink polyester stocking from Walmart. Walmart cannot hug me like Grammie Nichols did. But Grammie Nichols died though Walmart never will.

## VI. noun phrase<sub>1</sub> + intransitive verb



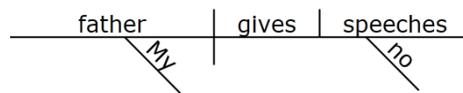
Before the end of fall this year, the great oaken giant that felt the furnace-like heat that February morning fell. I never heard the splintering echo the sparks of the fire six years late; I never saw the limbs once light in the air stub against the ground, heavy. Many mornings I had peered outside my skylight into its branches. I had taken the spare house key from the rusty nail that my father hammered hard into the dun-hazel bark. The conflagration corrupted its core. Six years the tree lived later. The heat of the fire, not even the fire itself, damaged the oak, damaged it deeply. I see that stump now like a tombstone where the tree once stood. I fear what I've internalized in the last six years alone.

Until I can tell you how the fire started, I can't tell you what this all means. Even if I have good verbs and concrete nouns, even then, you can still misunderstand me. But is

that my fault or yours? Is it because I communicate ineffectively or is it because you didn't listen carefully?

Simply because the fire burned so bright and hot and heavy against the tar, the smooth pavement next to the first barn scarred. Next to the side door of our new barn, I see a space once flat now folded in itself. I see empty where my father intended full. And the tree fell, and the window cracked. Oh, the power of fire, of empty words. Oh, the full price when we miscommunicate.

## VII. noun phrase<sub>1</sub> + transitive verb + noun phrase<sub>2</sub>



I observed our neighbors wading through beams through shingles through siding through burnt hay bales. But I remember when our fellow church people arrived. *What a shame*, they said looking at the structure. They left. And I saw the real shame darken my father's face so that it gathered even more light unto itself than any of the charcoal or cinders or smoke of his structure. He charred. He apologized to our neighbors and joined them amidst the smoke as they shoveled his knee-deep structure.

*scorning the pomp of must and shall  
my father moved through dooms of feel  
his anger was as right as rain  
his pity was as green as grain*

After Wentworth Douglass Hospital, York Hospital. After York Hospital, Maine Medical Center. I was silent toward my father when he was awake, when he was asleep, as his consciousness phrased and rephrased. I estranged myself from this comatose

patient. I saw him again when he returned home, a gaunt man. I think ravens fed him in his absence.

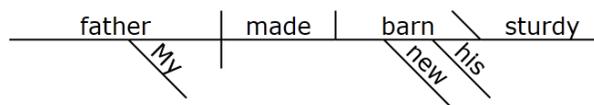
**VIII. noun phrase<sub>1</sub> + transitive verb + noun phrase<sub>2</sub> + noun phrase<sub>3</sub>**



My father began to rebuild the garage. He gave away the horse, the pony, the donkey, the goats, and the rabbits that once lived in the barn. Now instead of a half-garage, half-barn, he owns a half-garage, half-apartment. The garage, the downstairs floor, my father completed. Outside, it looks much the same. Only the second floor differs inside. This is a different building on the same syntax. My father began with the same slab, but the shape and the pattern and the poem differ from his first draft.

I watched my father reconstruct a barn where the first one stood. It was as if the fire were some metaphysical pencil, the ashes of the barn the great eraser smudge darkening the page—that concrete slab. So language transforms both ways. Even though the fire felled the oak and splintered my window, my father rebuilt his barn.

**IX. noun phrase<sub>1</sub> + transitive verb + noun phrase<sub>2</sub> + objective complement**



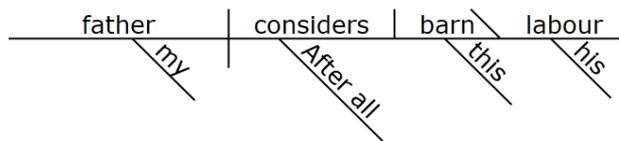
What have I said that hasn't already been said, that you haven't missed, that you have internalized? I have burdened myself with responsibility. With my words. Listen to the syntax of each hammer striking each nail as my father labors over his concrete slab.

Oh, if you have an ear, hear this—language transforms. Language transforms you and it transforms me and it transforms my father.

*A WORD is dead,  
When it is said,  
Some say.  
I say it just  
Begins to live  
That day.*

Neither I nor my father will live forever. So I wonder, will I burst bright and silent against the sky like the barn or drop sable into the ground like the great oak? Whether I blaze or bend, I will collapse. Whether he sparks or stoops, my father too will collapse.

**X. noun phrase<sub>1</sub> + transitive verb + noun phrase<sub>2</sub> + noun phrase<sub>2</sub>**



Ceaselessly my father works. His structure, though complete, he constantly revises. I cannot forget in all of this how he began. One thing remains. The slab. The verbs. The actions.

*Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning,  
Every poem an epitaph.*

Before another February fire claims another structure, I dare say I saw transformation. So I find the slab, since it never changed. I see a second attic, a space once full. My father has cleared the rubble. And I begin again with my father, with the hammer that will bruise my middle finger, with slab safely beneath us both. I and my father transform.