

2013 NWP-A Summer Institute Anthology

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Until

Josh Capps

I know the clink of our teeth like glass
Until the empty chairs and fake names
Mean much more to me than some gravel
Road I might find you down some day.

Carver, South Dakota

Josh Capps

I read Ray Carver for the first time in a motel bathroom in Deadwood, South Dakota. It was 2 in the morning, and below freezing outside, winter incoming. My dad and uncle were asleep in the next room. But I couldn't get enough of those Carver stories. They were bizarre, awkward, beautiful, mysterious, truncated, and somehow - amid all that - true.

My dad's wife (my stepmother) had died in a car accident the summer prior. We were now a few days from New Year's. This trip was a getaway for my dad and my uncle and me, three men separated by 20 and 10 years, all of whom had deal with tears for the first time back in June. We needed to get back to some essential part of our make-up, something shrouded in the mystery of time and danger and masculinity, somehow. We saw the Badlands, Mount Rushmore, the Canadian border, Teddy Roosevelt State Park, where we each walked with shotguns. I remember all of that - even those moments I didn't capture with my disposable camera. But what changed my understanding of what my essence truly was - what sticks with me the most - are those Carver stories.

I got back to Missouri and started writing a few stories of my own - guy meets waitress, guy drinks, guy loses waitress - aping Carver's spare prose and gauche set-ups. I filled in the emotional gaps with voids from my own life, re-casting the extremities of heartache and drama as more mundane - yet still quite human - failings and discoveries. I wrote past that imitation phase eventually, and eventually I even read my way out of my hero worship for Carver. But whenever I teach him - and I do it nearly every semester - I think of that motel bathroom in Deadwood, South Dakota, surrounded by vast histories, mostly my own. Then I stare out into that classroom and wonder whose heart will be splitting wide open, too.

Storytelling

Josh Capps

I. I decided to take things seriously the last half of the last half of my senior year in high school. To take more serious? Sports; girls; writing. I'd been wasting my time waiting for some inciting event before I realized I needed to seek them out.

I sought out Leslie. I sought out 20 points and 12 rebounds a game during conference season. I sought out some form of written self-expression that captures such tightly-wound, finite hope as those last few months of high school.

I handed Leslie eight handwritten masterpiece stories in our last months as kids. Margins painted with clever doodles, plots and images derivative of all I'd held dear - oldies, violence, vengeful humor. Then more.

I signed a letter-of-intent to play basketball at college the same afternoon I wrote Leslie a break-up story. It was the same afternoon she felt it was a good story to end on.

II. No more hoops, ankles shot; just classes at the State University, 25 to a class, even in upper-level English courses, where I found myself spit out for simply following my tastes. There was no way to stand out except for writing.

I wrote stories as an undergraduate, I wrote an underground newsletter, I wrote plenty of margin notes to any pretty girl who sat next to me on a given semesters.

I couldn't keep track of the stories, which is a fine way to live your early twenties but it's no way to take writing seriously.

I'd wake up next to a story and wonder what her story really was. Then I'd go and find me a better girl, maybe one who was simply impressed with drugs. I'm sure I handed her a story that night too.

III. "Here's the story," I told my fiancée, over the phone, a month after I'd graduated from Arkansas with an MFA in fiction. She was in Beirut. It was one week before I was supposed to fly there and marry her.

"Here's the story," I said again, after she demanded it, stories of their own having made their way back to her via email.

"Here's the story," I said one more time, clearing my throat, watching the NBA finals game on in the background, distracting my guilt before I proceeded to tell her every story but the story.

And every story was every story.

I handed her the real story eventually, but only after the other story was over, and I didn't really give a shit who was reading.

IV. And what do you think of this story? I ask. Will it be different, do you believe, because I acknowledge that all stories are stories of the past? Until you realize that this story - these words you read this very moment - are instruments not of looking ahead, but tools to dig up old graves, again and again, until we get these stories right.

And then we stop.

New York Knicks/Indiana Pacers - Conference Finals, Game 3, 1999 - Josh Capps

The game defines negative capability in the 3rd quarter.
The Knicks lull and mistake the Pacers into a tie by the time
L.J. throws up a desperation heave, one that Bill Walton claims
Is even more egregiously preposterous than the one to end the
1st quarter. The ball banks hard off glass, and falls. Half the crowd
Meets the half that was already standing.

In the Sports Bar, my Knicks jersey proud, I hustle my jingling cell phone
To the hallway. My hand cups it near my ear and I keep my chin low, my
Voice lower. I find an isolated spot near the pay phones, where I can finally
take this call from Mariah, miles away in the outskirts of Wyoming.

She has found out she is pregnant. It has been decided not to keep it
In plain unpretending language. And the doctor has determined she
Has been pregnant nearly a month now, through drinking binges and fights,
Through the NBA playoffs, Mariah notes, and the thing inside her, deserves
More than we can offer right now - it is an embryo, a clump of cells, it is
An instrument of destruction, it manufactures an end to the relationship.
It is something these two people are not mature enough to raise. It is a
Red glob that grows into a human or grows into an invisible cloud like
Some intruder who demands to disrupt any further proceedings.

I fix the date in my mind. June 5th. 1999. I register the date. I stamp it.

I know this is not completely unexpected. It is her second mistake, her other
Lives with its father in Florida. But the news is tough, it kneads, buzzes in my
Stomach, the prospects of having something shared then destroyed then
shared forever, painfully. It adjusts me, as I saunter back to my place
The big screen, making the heat from it sear my face, burning my fixed gaze.

Yes, I fix the date. I think of Super Bowl XXXII, a year and a half ago, drunk
That day as well, and before the game, hours from watching John Elway
Hoist his first Lombardi, I got the news that my brother had died of Cancer.
Sports miracles are the moments when you are absent because of an
Emergency, that matter when you seek solace from that tragedy. When
Elway dived for a first down late in the 3rd quarter, he was spun to his ass,
But my hope landed on its feet. Now this, I think. My own carelessness

A ghost before it even took a breath.

Late in the 4th quarter of the Knicks game, I straighten my jersey. They miss
A jumper to tie with 10 seconds left. They foul Rose, who hits one of two FTs.

NBC cuts to commercial, Nike and Gatorade and Coors Light and television
Shows re-imagined as gigantic summer blockbusters with Black Cowboys and
Mechanical Spiders. The Knicks prep a half-court in-bounds when NBC
Returns. Down 3. Only 5 seconds left. LJ has to extend to grab the tipped
Pass, but he gets it in his mitts and pivots to face Davis, twenty-five feet out
On the Left Wing, and he pumps once, dribbles with his left, and goes up,
Fouled, and the shot flies, and everybody watches. A foul whistle blows as
The ball is in flight, spinning, rotating towards the end. The Whole Crowd is
Standing, still. An announcer screams, "It's good!" And I'm sliding to the floor
Of the sports bar. Nobody notices, and I stay there as LJ hits his free throw
And the Pacers miss a desperation shot. The Knicks win.

I am under a seat shaking with enthusiasm and disbelief. I feel like part of
Something the does not exist anymore. Look at NBC cut to a replay of the
Shot, Sprewell stumped in front of the Pacer bench, staring at the rotation,
Along with the crowd, standing at once - and then they explode. The Producer
Cuts to a shot of an entire building of people on their feet, reaching towards
Something greater, in unison, and making that arena alive until its aired out
Later this evening. Madison Square Garden - it is a shell, a host, a womb for
Hope, it produces rumblings in the belly of New York City. It is an electric
Portal that channels energy wherever the TV signals take it.

And soon that energy will be gone. And some won't care. I feel the pain from
My fall to the floor. The bouncers discuss how they'll deal with me this time,
Shuffling closer as their loafers click the floor. Worry pangs on my
Consciousness. Game Four is suddenly as important as Game Three, when
You are not blessed with home-court advantage. But it is something palpable,
A thing to lose and carry around. Mariah will call back. She will tell me
That thing growing inside her does not exist anymore.

Reflection

Dolores Cormier-Zenon

Been there, done that, no regrets

Mother, father, brothers, eldest of four

Separated, divorced, excluded, loss, no remorse

Old school, no dating, no phone

School, private, structured, uniform, struggled, embarrassed

Confused, major, college away, choir, sorority

Accident, paralyzed, hospitalized, therapy, surgery, walking

Teaching, students, instruct, learn, assist, direct

Married, husband, children, sons, double blessing

Child prematurity, brain hemorrhage, learning disability

Sibling, loss, grief, pregnant, life bringing

Motherhood, wife, joys, sorrows, supportive, encouraging

Diagnosis, illness, chemo, surgery, chemo, radiation

Memory loss, attention skimpy, nauseated sensation

Hills, valleys, family, embrace, grace, mercy

Elementary, Middle, High, Bachelor's, Master's, Doctorate

Reflective, writing, thinking, thoughts, impart, knowledge

Professor, published, traveled, quoted, respected, Immortal.

Woman, Mother

Dolores Cormier-Zenon

I am a woman, a mother with faucet like breasts, 6 children extending
from the womb or maybe tomb.

Long arms reaching as if to seemingly cover every little soul, no smile
only a look of sadness and pain

A mother perhaps, with a body so shapeless and round from a pregnant
body that has just given birth.

What was she thinking, what does it all mean?

Exhausted life giving

Painfully delivering

Emotion so daunting

Her face seems haunting

Depressed, maybe hurt

Relieved, maybe unsure

Initial feelings

of just giving birth

Could children be as plentiful? Reflecting on days of the past when a man
is no longer a child?

Could decisions be premeditated disappointments? Reminiscing of
supporting guilt and unending shame?

Intently listening

Watching young men

Obsessively wondering, what could have been

Overwhelmed with regret, of false deceptive sin

An illness burns, searing to her soul

In a colossal room of nurses, where toxins drip cold

For hours this war is a battle raging on

Winning is evident, but the tradeoffs aren't yet known

Is this liquid medicine,

a punishment for sin?

Life is fleeting

Regret is seething

Life now forever changed
Struggling, with uncontrollable rage
No choice, no control, surrender
New day, new way, new treasure

A complete alteration of mind body and spirit is destined to unfold and
sculpt a new ending
What is she to do? What will her children become? And where ultimately
will the future take them? Or rather will the future be undone

Regrets can consume us
Wondering always
Are right decisions fair game
or merely props in life plays?

A woman, a mother, life's choices
Truly become her defining voices
Will forgiveness know joys
And Consequences grow scars?

Woman with breasts,
pouring fountain of life
your womb embraces fetuses
life giving is not meaningless

Your children represent a work tried and true
As your arms embrace the world of possibilities
Hang in there for reward is the gift
given for hard work, struggle and focus

Naturist Asylum

Dolores Cormier-Zenon

The landscape gave a calm feel of floating out to sea. How calming to listen to the quaint sounds of crickets chirping together in rhythmic harmonious tones. The stillness, yes, the stillness of this hot and humid day, the cool green still water moves seemingly motionless as micro bubbles sit on a thin and slimy film.

Smelling the sweet, sweet mixture of flowers and honeydew as the wind gently kisses each petal floating perfumes to the air. "Ouch! It hurts," red ants have gone feasting on human flesh. For a brief moment of distraction, yet attention is quickly averted to the large floppy eared greenery located sporadically around this calm and serene lake. Heart pounding moved to tears at this marvelous sight, the glory of God's creation, the blessings, Amazing!

As the leaves bow so majestically reflecting on to the mirrored water, thinking back on a time early in life of peace and tranquility. The world is a calmer place lying here in the cool green grass just to think and meditate. No worries, no stress just blessed to be present in this moment, embracing this intoxicatingly relaxing environment, frozen in time, be still. Mesmerized by the uncanny miracle of His sacred will to be so inspired by the touch of the Holy Spirit.

A Thank You Letter

Kari Duhon

Dear Sunday's Sicilian Spaghetti,

I'd like to start off by thanking you for all of the remarkable memories. I have vivid memories of my great-grandmother, my Mimi, and my mother working tirelessly every weekend to put you together. You've always been homemade with love and spicy meatballs that swim in a rich red pool of deliciousness. As my mind reveals in these memories, it leaves my mouth yearning for those flavors.

You came with my great grandparents on the boat to this wonderful new country to collect, connect and combine all of the members of my family once a week. You sat on the stove or in the center of the long wooden table waiting for conversations to begin. Conversations, good and bad, that will replay in my mind of years to come. Thank you for bringing us all together.

I delight in the way you consistently smell like the harmonious blend of oregano, basil, and garlic. The way you bubble up as if dancing to your own Frank Sinatra or Louis Prima song makes me smile. I depend on your relationships with the homemade pasta, stuffed artichoke, and fried eggplant. Your smooth, tangy gravy and moist, juicy meatballs gives my palate great pleasure.

You were always there when John played the drums on Popsie's bald head and when we sat around the piano and sang our family's favorite songs. You were present for the lighting of the unity candle and the blessing that was mumbled in a hurried fashion. The day LeLe made Aunt Bertha leave because she refused to have thirteen people sitting at the table; you were a witness.

I appreciate the way we fought over you; how delectable you were and who was privileged enough to take home what was left of your gravy. The children still argue over who will be appointed the prestigious job of sprinkling fresh grated parmesan cheese on top of you. You sometimes hid boiled eggs and pieces of veal with your crushed tomatoes and we fought over those too.

Thank you for gracing us with your presence for every holiday, birthday, anniversary, and most importantly, Sundays. Thank you for bringing my family together to create priceless and unforgettable memories. You filled, not just our stomachs, but our hearts.

Much Love,
Kari

P.S. See ya Sunday!

Emily and Eric

Kari Duhon

I remember Emily well, she was the beautiful blonde possessed of long legs and pearly white teeth whose office sat in the far corner, right across from Beth, the company's accountant. She had the seemingly perfect life with the perfect boyfriend, pet, vacations and job. I was somewhat jealous at times when I would discover another beach vacation to an exotic, tropical paradise that only few people are able to experience. She would keep track of her every move on the large pale green calendar with the paisley borders that rested on her desk, underneath the computer keyboard.

Eric was her boyfriend and they were paired together nicely like a bold cabernet and rich dark chocolate. He had thick blonde curly hair and smooth olive skin. His smile was friendly and his body was one to be compared to a Calvin Klein underwear model. Eric took Emily to many socially elite parties and to all of the nicest restaurants in town. I don't think Eric ever knew how excited Emily was about her nights out with him as she would make multiple appointments to have her hair highlighted, nails painted, teeth whitened and tan sprayed on, all in preparation for those special outings.

I'll never forget when Eric proposed to Emily; her ring was absolutely amazing and fit her tiny finger perfectly. It was a delicate antique setting with intricate details and flawless center diamond. She didn't waste any time taking engagement pictures, placing them all over the golden memory board in her office, along with save-the-date cards. Fun, playful pictures of Emily and Eric; some were more serious allowing one to almost feel the love that the two of them shared.

The plans for the big day came together quickly. The wedding dress was selected and fittings were scheduled. The church was booked; meetings with the organist, priest and travel agent were all in line, one after the other immediately after work, just weeks before the grand event. Three engagement parties, a bridal luncheon, a bachelorette party and a honeymoon in Fiji were just a few of the celebrations intended to honor their union. She had so many wonderfully amazing moments to look forward to.

Then suddenly it was over! I could feel the pain and disappointment in the pit of my stomach, as if it were my own future I was mourning. The once happily doodled reminders on the calendar that organized all of the

important meetings were now scratched out with a large black Sharpie. Small round spots that wrinkled the paper littered the calendar. Some were perfect little circles and some were oblong with a runoff of smeared ink, but each one represented the loss pouring out of her one tear at a time. I wanted to hug her, to console her in some way, by saying the right thing or simply giving her a shoulder to cry on, but I couldn't. I knew Emily, but Emily didn't know me. She didn't know my name or what I even looked like. She knew nothing about my life, yet I knew every miniscule detail of hers; kept there, obsessively organized on that pale green calendar. The calendar I looked forward to viewing with the events that would magically appear into the thin black squares. The calendar I saw every day when I came in at 6:30 every evening to clean her office and empty her trash.

Us vs. Them

Meghan L. Herron

Accountability:

If you were doing your jobs correctly, then there would be no need for our guidance.

If you understood our passion for what we do, then you wouldn't question our motives.

Differentiation:

If you were doing enough to reach all of your students, then your test scores would reflect as much.

If you truly cared about the success of every student, then your policies would reflect as much.

Common Core:

If you knew what content and skills were necessary, then your students would have mastered them by now.

If you valued innovation and creativity over the bottom line and results, then children would never have been left behind.

Rigor:

If you were challenging your students, then an achievement gap would not exist.

If you gave us the credit that we deserve, then it wouldn't be so difficult to replace us.

Compromise: You're here for the students, aren't you?

In the Gray

Inspired by "Untitled (Les Vieilles)" by Lisa Osborn
Meghan L. Herron

A mound of coarse, wiry hair swirls around her head, the cold color of graphite. Her features are worn, and her once majestic presence dimmed. Her arms outstretched, beckoning for the affection she once garnered so easily. Now she stands frozen in momentary stillness, in silence. The negative space echoes loudly. Gone are the good days, the happy days, the spiritual days. She is left with infants in varying stages of development and decay. The juxtaposition of hopelessness and deferred possibility on display for all to see.

The world was filled with such promise. His name fit him so well: Zion Amir, heavenly prince. I viewed this young life as a gift. He was the divine's gift to me. The light to guide me out of that dark realm that I was encased in. He would provide me with an endless supply of love and admiration. He would also be my gift to the world. I, who felt so slighted by mortal beings, would share this glorious light with others. A man who would inevitably lead the masses in their attempt to rise above their dire circumstances. A man who would be the avenging angel for those whose voices could barely be heard through their sobs and cries. A man who would be my redemption song. The divine, however, had other plans for my child. He took one breath and then slipped into the place where secret dreams are held. My gift was gone, and I was left to grapple with countless questions.

What could have been? The unknown is a vast, dark place. The image of the first smile or the sound of bubbling, playful laughter become lost in the abyss of sorrow and longing. The mother stoically stands in the midst of it all. She alone dares to wonder aloud about the promise that the fruit of her womb once held. Will the next time be different? Why should she waste precious moments imagining the future? But would she regret resigning herself to a life of solitude? A myriad of uncertainties veil her mind as her questioning draws to a close, ensnaring her soul in a miasma of doubt and angst.

To Blackberry Stained Lips

Meghan L. Herron

It sat atop her head, perfectly sculpted.

Her crown gave way to those dark tousled tresses.

The beehive was her signature look,

But it could never overshadow her signature sound.

You could catch glimpses of her genius

Through the haze of pain and madness.

How could a Jewish girl from Southgate, London

Evoke so much soul and depth in her verses?

As she slowly approached the microphone,

A hint of doubt flashed across her face.

She carefully whittled down her fingernails

Hiding her thoughts from the awaiting crowd.

The first words surged from her blackberry stained lips.

The melancholy melody mixed with the

Perfect imperfections of her haunting guttural voice to create

What critics called her signature sound.

The broken pieces invited spectators to relish

In her heartache and

To discover diminutive nuances

Of their own lives in her lyrics.

She gave pieces of her soul until there was nothing left

Except her signature sound.

Life in the Shadows

Meghan L. Herron

We worked eighteen hour days during the harvest season

With two hours off for supper.

I looked forward to those two hours more than

Any other time of day.

We would gather around the petite cypress table in the center

Of the house and pray.

Momee would commence the reverential tribute by

Giving honor to God and our elders.

We prayed for dry days, not just slightly parched,

But for elongated droughts.

We prayed for winter frosts, not just intersperse icicles,

But for piercing frigidity.

Most of all, we prayed for each other, not just for our kin,

But for the members of our lineage

Who were not connected by blood.

During those brief two hours, we prayed with

A degree of deliberation that surpassed

The rumored grandeur of our proprietor's dwelling.

We resided in the shadows, but we prayed

In a hallowed space beckoning the aid

Of our forefathers and mothers.

As the supper break ended, we reverberated

In unison the deep-rooted adage

Of our past: Ashe'.

So it shall be.

Simpler Times
Vanessa Knott

Calming waters.
Quiet surroundings.
Birds chirping,
Crickets sounding,
Smelling the mossy green trees.

Basin water,
Strong, refreshing.
Glistening lily pads,
Blooming flowers,
Reaching their full potential.

Cypress gathering like knowledgeable folk,
Sturdy and true,
Moss hanging from their branches.
Exposing sun,
Darkening shadows,
Momentary stillness,

Simpler times.

The days when children were really children, and I wait patiently as my grandfather sits on the steps of the front porch drinking his Schlitz beer and wiping the sweat from his brow with a white wash cloth. The Old Spice smell of him permeates the carport. He looks over at me as I sit on the metal rocking chair. "Okay, are you ready?" he says. My heart races, "Yes, Yes!" We began to walk up the incredibly steep hill on Indian Mound to our favorite strolling place. When we reach the top, there it is, "The Pond," a small body of water surrounded by lush greenery. Pine trees line the outer edges of the grass and as we walk the weeds, leaves, and debris crunch under our feet. We pass many chicken and cypress trees along with a multitude of shrubbery. He holds my tiny hand in his. His breath is loud and labored due to the many years of smoking. I am in heaven where security and peace surround me. Alone with my grandpa. There are no words exchanged. Just smiles as we walk toward the ducks and geese that approach us. We do not stop. We walk all the way around the pond, hand in hand. My heart is full of joy. We reach our little bench set by the water and sit enjoying the beauty as the Holy Spirit rested upon us and the Power of the Most High overshadowed.

Silence, Nature, Relationships,
All reflected in the water.
The stillness has so much to say.
Beauty beyond what words can express.
All created by God.
All to be enjoyed by His children.
Building relationships that are never broken,
Creating memories that never fade.

Rudbeckia
Vanessa Knott

Colors so vibrant that eyes cannot stray from bright yellow streams lining
the loose gravel. I feel colors so vibrant that sun beams dance directly
onto each golden petal soaking up its rays. Colors so vibrant that honey
bees cannot pass up the sweet landing spot. I reach toward colors so
vibrant that delicate petal reflections on the water seem real. Color so
vibrant that when I close my eyes I cannot shield the lingering
brightness.

Mary
Vanessa Knott

Her labored breath held a steady rhythm
Beautiful eyes gone, heart beating slowly
Was this the end?
Small flawless hands so swollen
No more raised veins to be traced
Her wedding ring never to be removed.
The smell of toxic cleanliness lingers
in the air and mixes
with her gentle smell of soft lilac powder
fresh and pure.
The touch of her cold lifeless arm
beckons me to pray and
gently rub her soft wrinkled forehead.
She was once a strong energetic woman
Now so feeble and weak
She cannot leave, this cannot happen.
Anger, Emptiness, Fear, Regret, Loss
All wrapped up in one.
It overtakes me
as death overtakes her.

Chores Gone Bad
Vanessa Knott

Thump, thump, thump. I paused as I walked down the hall towards the living room. Thump, thump, thump. The sound was familiar. Tennis shoes in the dryer? No, I didn't put tennis shoes in the dryer. Thump, thump, thump. Maybe one of the kids left something in the pockets of their jeans. As I walked into the utility room, I was hit with a very strange smell. I opened the dryer and took out Bryan's Levi jeans. My hands felt a little greasy and I noticed a strange brown color covering parts of the leg of the pants. What is this? As I looked into the dryer, I screamed, "OMG, No!"

It was a hot summer afternoon, and I could feel the heat coming from the back door of the utility room. Just a couple of hours before, I was preparing to leave for grocery shopping and I decided to put the last batch of clothes into the dryer. Finally I would be done with chores that I so loved doing. 'I sure am glad that we don't have to do without air conditioning,' I thought to myself as I put the jeans from the washer into the dryer. Every now and then my kitten, Fluffy, would jump up and try to catch the leg of one of the pairs of jeans. That silly little kitten was the only animal that had ever captured my heart. My family thought it was so weird that I treated the kitten with such affection because I did not care for animals all that much. It was not really my fault that I didn't have a love of animals. I just never could be around animals because of my severe allergies, but this little kitten never seemed to bother me. It would even crawl into my bed at night while I was reading and try to jump around and play. It was the cutest fluffy kitten in the world.

I swatted him a few times to move him out of the way, and I completed my task of filling the dryer, closed the dryer door, turned the knob to high heat and walked out of the utility room. I went on to take a shower and got dressed to go to the grocery store. It never took me longer than thirty minutes to do all of this, but today I was not rushed and I took my time. About an hour or so later, I decided to finish up with the jeans. 'They should be dry by now,' I thought to myself, and that is when I heard the loud thumping.

My youngest daughter, Lizzie, was watching television while waiting for me to get ready, and my oldest daughter had a friend over and they were enjoying the pool.

As I touched the greasy jeans, I struggled to figure out just what I was touching and the smell was horrific. It was kind of like burnt hair, sour, fabric softener all mixed up in one. It made my stomach crawl. That is when I bent down to take a closer look into the dryer, and I automatically felt vomit rise up to my throat and into my mouth and

nose. I ran to the trash can in the kitchen screaming yet trying to hold back the vomit.

My daughter ran in with a panicked look on her face. "What's wrong Mom?" screamed Lizzie, "What happened?" The only words that would come out between my sobs were "My cat, Fluffy, poor Fluffy." Lizzie looked toward the dryer and began to panic. She started to cry uncontrollably. We were both standing there crying when Joni and her friend walked in. "What is wrong with y'all?" She asked. "Mom killed the cat," Lizzie cried. "How...How did you kill Fluffy?" Joni questioned shockingly. All I could do was point to the dryer and as she turned her head her eyes widened with shock. She ran outside to tell her friend and all that I could hear sounded like uncontrollable laughter.

I sat on the floor and continued to cry and wonder just what I was going to do. I knew I had to get it together and be the adult in the situation. No one else was going to be able to finish the mess that I had just made. At this point I could hear Lizzie on the phone, but I couldn't understand what she was saying because she was still crying so hard. It seemed like I was in another world. This was not actually happening. Then I could hear my husband's voice on the other end of the phone, and he sounded very concerned.

Before I knew it he was pulling up in the driveway and running towards the door. He looked frantic and thought one of us were hurt because all he could hear on the other line was uncontrollable crying. Lizzie calmed down enough to tell him what I did. I was still very sick and unable to explain. He walked to the dryer, took out the cat, wrapped it in a towel and put it in a trash bag. I remained on the kitchen floor crying. Lizzie said, "Dad, I will help you bury Fluffy," and they walked out of the back door and out to our "Pet Cemetery."

It was about a week before I could even look at the dryer again, and we never did have another cat.

Chili Surprise

H. Michelle Kreamer

The van from the airport struggled up the mountainside like the Little Engine That Could as we traveled from the Denver airport to the small ski resort of Copper Mountain, Colorado. Flecks of white snow fell with more urgency from the dreary gray sky as we trudged closer to our destination. My mom was like a little kid experiencing her first trip to Disney World; everything amazed her—the snow, the mountainside, the trees. My dad was being nostalgic and telling stories about his apparent former ski glory, despite the fact that he hadn't been skiing in at least 15 years. As for my brother and me, well, we were less than thrilled. We were on Christmas vacation, away from our friends, and had been informed by our wonderstruck parents that our condo only had one bedroom, therefore my 13-year old brother and I would be sharing a foldout sofa bed for the next five nights. As a 15-year old, being separated from your friends for a whole week is terrible; having to share a foldout bed with your 13-year old brother is a tragedy.

That night, after a sufficient amount of complaining from me and quiet brooding from my brother, we made our way to one of the few local restaurants nearby, Ruby's. Being inside in the warm restaurant and laughing about my dad's former ski adventures helped to improve our moods. Although the home-style menu of stews and soups didn't appeal to my tastes, I ordered a bowl of the chili, which the Ruby's menu claimed to be a customer favorite. When the chili arrived it was scalding hot but delicious, filled with ground meat and pinto beans, and served with two handfuls of Saltine crackers. I ate every last bit and was feeling quite content for the first time since our journey had started.

Even though dinner had put us in better moods, that night when it was "time for bed" as my parents claimed at 10:30 p.m., Garrett and I were even more aggravated than before with our sleeping arrangement. The mattress was thin and I could feel the metal bar supporting the bed pressing into my rib cage. Garrett was asleep in less than three minutes and snoring. I angrily kicked his foot away from my leg even though it wasn't on my side of the bed but claimed it was when he woke up yelling at me. After that, I lay in bed looking at the ceiling exhausted but angry that I couldn't fall asleep. Angry that our parents hadn't found a more suitable condo. Angry that my friends were all spending vacation together at home and I was halfway across the country. Finally, at some point in the night I drifted off into a strange half state of sleep.

Around two in the morning I bolted straight up on the fold out couch. "Oh shit," I thought as I clumsily hurdled over Garrett. As I stomped on his leg in my disoriented state trying to pass over him, he yelled at me to

get the hell off of him, no doubt thinking I was intentionally kicking him again. I ignored him as I ran to the single bathroom in the condo cursing Ruby's and their chili. "I'm going to make it," I thought but as soon as the thought entered my brain—it happened. Projectile vomit all over the bathroom of our Colorado condo. My mom, ever alert to the distress of her children, rushed into the bathroom to what she still describes as something resembling a murder scene. Chunky red throw-up clung to the shower curtain and dripped slowly down the stark white bathroom walls, causing the whole room to smell of regurgitated ground beef and pinto beans. And there I was, lying on my back having slipped and fallen in my own vomit (the part that landed on the floor and didn't make it to the walls) in shock and unsure whether I was going to cry about the chunks in my hair and on my pajamas or whether I was just going to keep puking until my insides were raw.

After a shower, two thorough hair washings, my mom scrubbing the bathroom, and one more bout of puking (this time in the toilet thankfully) I was finally able to fall back asleep around four in the morning. Unfortunately, this was no deterrent for my parents' quest to ski. Just four short hours later I found myself at the top of Copper Mountain in an ironically Pepto Bismol pink ski jacket being told to "pizza" with my skis if I wanted to stop.

"Let's not talk about food," I grumbled as we began our descent down the mountain.

Camouflaged Baggage

H. Michelle Kreamer

His father told him he would always have his back and in a way, that was true.

Drew was eight when his parents divorced and his dad made the two and a half-hour move to New Orleans. It may not seem far, but to an eight-year old with parents who can't even have a phone conversation with one another, it was the equivalent to moving across the country. He couldn't remember what his dad told him when he left; the only thing he could recall was him rumpling his already messy hair and giving him his Guard-issued camouflage backpack with the name Howard stitched in neat black letters. For the next four years Andrew brought that backpack everywhere—school, sleepovers, even his little league baseball games. The few times a year he saw his dad, he always proudly sported the monstrous bag hoping his father would say something about it. He never

did. After one particularly disappointing trip, Andrew stowed the backpack in the depths of his closet and made a conscious effort to forget about its existence.

At 15-years-old, the bag had been gathering dust for three years. Although he hated the bag and resented his father because of it, he knew it was his best option to store everything he would need. Once he was done the bag contained two full changes of clothes, snacks stolen from the pantry, a cell phone and charger, a toothbrush, and \$87. He waited until his mother was asleep before he slipped out the front door only taking the backpack and leaving a hastily scribbled note to his mother telling her not to worry.

After his first failed run-away attempt Andrew began to repeat his process, each time being caught and brought home, usually in the backseat of a police car. Eight run-away attempts in two years and Andrew's mother finally gave him what he wanted—a new home, just not the one he had intended. He was enraged when his mom shipped him off to his dad's cramped New Orleans apartment. Book sack slung carelessly over one shoulder, duffle bags loading him down; he begrudgingly boarded the Grey Hound bus headed from Lafayette to his new home.

Andrew stepped off the bus with earphones jammed in and saw his father, hands in pockets, feet shuffling back and forth, and eyes intently studying the ground.

"Here, let me help you with that son," his father said gruffly as he awkwardly tried to maneuver the duffle bag from Andrew's hand to his own.

"I don't need your help," Andrew snarled in response.

Things went on like this for a while—Andrew's dad making half-hearted, embarrassed attempts at parenting and Andrew retreating further into himself with each uncomfortable encounter.

With his dad always working, Drew usually spent his nights in the apartment alone watching trashy cable shows and eating microwavable dinners. It was on one of these dull summer nights, when he was sick of eating Hungry Man frozen dinners that Drew decided it was time to explore his new playground. Walking the streets of New Orleans alone is not the safest idea. A 16-year-old walking those same streets alone at one in the morning means that bad things are inevitable. It was on one of his nighttime adventures, attempting to sneak into whatever hole in the wall bar he could get into, that Andrew met Zack. Zack, or Z as everyone called him, was a small-time drug dealer and for some unknown reason decided to take Andrew under his wing and teach him the inner workings of buying and selling in a big city. For the rest of his angsty teen years Drew worked for Z going on pick-ups and deliveries and acting as back up whenever he was needed.

That life was a world away now Drew thought. He trudged through the knee-high water caused by Hurricane Katrina. He was there helping to evacuate those who had refused to leave when told to and was patrolling for looters. It wasn't until several years of dealing on the streets of New Orleans that Andrew made a personal promise to become a different person. At 20 he joined the Guard, just like his father had. It was so strange being back in this city he thought. Back on the streets he had known so well as a teen but now seeing everything in such a different perspective. He didn't like to think about those lost years anymore. He shook his head of the memory and continued on, loaded down with by his backpack, the stitching of Howard still present.

A Young Lost Boy

H. Michelle Kreamer

So much depends upon
A young lost boy
Dread locks hanging in his face
Picking at his guitar strings
A crumpled cigarette dangling from his pursed lips

So little depends upon
A young lost boy
Slurred words on his lips
Letting his talent falter
A stolen bottle of Skol vodka hidden in his oversized trench coat

No one depends upon
A young lost boy
Shaking hands, desperate for a fix
Placing phone calls and making deals
A line of white powder divided into two in the bathroom on a sunny afternoon

Nothing depends upon
A young lost boy
Stiffly lying in a somber mahogany box
Hands folded, makeup lines crease his expressionless face
A final line but not the one anticipated; A line of stunned mourners waiting to say their last goodbyes

Black Hands

Josh Krieg

She'd sing on the good days.
Had a voice of honey.
It stuck to you
slow, warming
She'd wake in the mornin'
make biscuits from scratch.
Knead the dough,
roll `em out,
fry `em up,
the works.
I loved those mornings.
The minute I'd wake she'd kiss me,
marking floury stains on my skin.
I'd eat breakfast, tend to the dishes after.
All the while she buzzed around the house,
keeping herself busy.
Sweepin'. Moppin'. Dustin'.
Doin' the wash.
I'd come home late, the sun beatin' down my neck.
And there she was.
Waitin' on the porch, iced tea in hand.

We'd sit on that porch for hours on the good days
Mary would rock us and sing.
We would stay like that for hours you know?
Just Mary and I.
Hand in hand.
Swingin' on the porch.
The sun would settle.
Mary would start dinner.
I'd put on a record for her while I washed myself up.
We'd say grace, eat, clean the kitchen,
then she would play.

On the good days, I would sit back and Mary would play.
Her voice was warm like honey,

but her hands,
those was God's hands.
Mary had an ear for it all.
She could hear the music
and her fingers knew it.

On the good days I'd go to bed and feel our baby kick.
We was gonna have a baby, you know?

Me.

A daddy.

I've never held Mary so close:
'cept for the day we lost it.

The doctors came over as soon as they could.
By that time Mary was so meek, white.
There was lots of blood.

I, uh,

I 'member her screamin' out, holdin'
my hands so tight.

"John, please. Promise me. Promise me there's nothin' wrong with our
baby!"

I juss' stood there holdin' her hand stronkin' her hair.
Doctor said it was a miscarriage.
Said: "These things happen."

It was a rough fall.
Doctor said she needed rest, time.
And Mary did rest.
For a week she lay in bed.
She'd weep to herself, didn't want me to worry.
But a husbands supposed to worry 'bout his wife.

A week.

That's all she gave herself.
I argued with her.
"These things take time."
Mary said she'd taken her time.

I left it alone.

I didn't notice, not at first.
I mean she had a right to,
she deserved some sorta relief.
She prayed, sure she prayed
but how could she rely on God?
God who took our baby.

I 'member comin' home one afternoon
Mary wasn't on the porch.
It had been three months since the baby.
I saw the empty bottle firs'
then Mary slumped next to it.
She'd cry on the bad days.
Sad.
Even her wimperin' had this melody 'bout it.

On the bad days Mary would hit the bottle.
She'd sit on the porch bottle in hand and rock.
Wouldn't say nothin'.
She'd just rock and stare
hummin' lullabies.

The nightmares came on the bad days.
Night after night I'd hold her.
Her screams,
her sobs
crowdin' my chest.
On the bad days she'd ask why.
And for the sake of me I didn't have an answer.

Then the tremors came.
And that's when the bad days never left.
That piano always brought her back.
She'd sit and play and somehow she was fixed.
It started slow enough.
She'd miss a note, hit the wrong keys,
little things.

One day I heard her scream.
It's the kind of scream that sticks to ya'
bring a man to his knees.
Mary was bangin' on the keys with her fists.
Her tears was silent.
But her hands.
Her hands was shakin'
and they weren't stoppin'.

I sold the piano a week later
too many memories.
On the good days those was God's hands.
Now, they juss' hands.

Metamorphosis

Kellie Plaisance

The rectangular monstrosity hangs from the wall. The burgundy arches, rising, converge in a pointed pool of darkness. The moth, lonely and still, sits locked in the center, a hole cut just for him. The gray moth, sitting in his permanent stillness, is held in his prison by two strings. The strings are not the reason for his bondage. Perhaps he is frozen, paralyzed by his change, his metamorphosis.

Below the prison, a wide berth of light appears, a slippery slope that leads into the abyss of smoldering black flames. However, just above the prison stands a single golden arch. It is the only shimmer and shine of the piece, the only allusion to hope. There it stands, radiating light and goodness. If the moth could break free, he could see that life is hanging there, just above his reach.

She was barely eighteen when she landed in the ambulance, her mother by her side. As the paramedics asked her various questions, she closed her eyes and struggled to focus. Her mother, worried about her daughter, did most of the answering. Monca's face fell as he asked if she could possibly be pregnant. As the words "Heaven's no" fell from her mother's lips, Monica's eyes, still closed, welled with tears and her mom knew.

Monica wanted to say something to her mother, to explain the situation, to explain how she had desperately tried to tell her mother on several occasions, but the words never materialized. The words remained trapped inside her, and now, rushing to the hospital, with the sirens wailing, the paramedics' booming voices shouting instructions and the clanking of medical instruments, talking was impossible and Monica felt frightened. When her mother reached out and grabbed her hand and held it tight, Monica, for the first time in weeks, felt a little less alone.

The accident turned out to be minor and Monica walked away unharmed and although the damage to the vehicle was major, it was nothing compared to the damage Monica's heart would soon feel. Over the next few months, Monica and her mom, accepted the pregnancy and even began to feel excitement.

At some point during the pregnancy, things changed. "Monica, we need you to come in for another ultrasound," said the nurse. Monica's why was met with no reply. "How is tomorrow morning? First thing?" No other information was given and Monica hung up the phone feeling anxious. Although they had given her no further information, Monica knew

something was not right. She went into her mother's room, curled up in her bed like she did so many times in childhood and cried. She cried because she could not imagine that this baby, this living being in her body that she had come to love, may not be okay. She cried for her unborn child.

Exiting the doctor's office, Monica gripped her mother's arm tightly, leaving red finger marks on the skin. Her mother did not notice. A hole in the heart were the first words the doctor had uttered. Something about being related to Down syndrome. More tests would need to be performed. "Amniocentesis," he may have called it. Monica, blinded by this revelation, was stunned and befuddled. She wanted to ask, "How serious is this hole in his heart?" "What did you just say he...?" "Will we know for sure he has Down syndrome?" "Will he live?" But none of these words came out.

Instead, she sat. She sat in silence. She sat there not saying a word while her mother and the doctor finalized the details. Still unable to form whole thoughts, much less phrases, Monica and her mother drove home in silence. She went into her bedroom and cried.

She cried for the son she loved and would love forever. She cried for the son he was supposed to be and the son he would never get to be. She cried because in years to come, life was going to be hard for him. She cried because, as a mother, your child's pain, even pain yet to come, is your pain. She cried enough for the both of them and then she was done.

"No one would blame you if you aborted," the doctor said. Monica said no. He was her son, her love and she refused.

The day of his birth was joyous. Monica, for the first time since that ambulance ride, felt pure happiness. As the nurse placed him in her arms, she knew what love meant. Holding him in her arms for the first time, despite the hole in his heart, despite that he had Down syndrome, he was perfect, her perfect little man, her perfect angel.

At five months old, he was just beginning to wave. He waved to the nurses as he entered his hospital room. For three months, she never left his side. Despite the feeding tubes, the heart monitors and IV wires, she held him close, cuddled him in her arms and poured all her love into his being.

The nurses began to worry, not about him, but about her. "You need to get out," they said. "Live a little. We have things here under control."

After much convincing, Monica left, just for a couple of hours, just to live a little, just to catch a glimpse of that golden arch hanging above the moth's prison.

Like the caterpillar changes into a moth, the phone call from the nurse completed Monica's transformation. When she hung up the phone, she fell to the ground, paralyzed, she could not, would not move. Like the moth, she would remain trapped. Her vibrant colors dulled to an ash gray. Seventeen years later, she is still held captive, a prisoner of her metamorphosis.

The Pond

Kellie Plaisance

The turtle
plunges
into the water
the stillness
broken.

Ripples shoot
from the center
not enormous
but bigger than those
left by the insects
stopping for a drink.

The ripple
playfully glides
to the outer edges
of the pond
and silently disappears.

The pond
is still
once again.

It Brings Us Back

Kellie Plaisance

It's the reason we all return home for the holidays, Maw Maw Inez's potato salad. Now that old age and diminishing eyesight have stopped us from gathering at her home, it is the most missed element of family gatherings. Mom has tried, I have tried, Aunt Lisa has tried, even my sister has tried, but none of us can replicate Maw Maw's potatoes.

For years, we watched. We watched as she peeled the potatoes. In between songs from our living room concerts we'd gallop into the kitchen and see if the potatoes had finished boiling. Once boiled, Maw Maw removed them from stove, cut them into pieces and placed them in the large green Tupperware bowl.

Once in the bowl, she'd peel the eggs that had been sitting in a cool bowl of water in the sink. Although we often asked to help, we were never allowed. Maw Maw was afraid we'd ruin the eggs with our dirty little hands. Off we'd trot to hang on the clothesline in the back yard, checking in periodically to see if it was done.

We'd come in just in time to see her standing over the bowl, all four feet ten inches of her, sometimes singing, sometimes humming and sometimes silent.

She'd combine just the right amount of mayonnaise and mustard with the egg yolks. No one in the family has ever managed to unlock the secret ratio. We've asked on numerous occasions, but Maw Maw only tells us to put mustard until the color looks right. Our color is never the same bright yellow. Ours is a duller yellow, complete with a duller taste.

Once it was done, Maw Maw took the back of her spoon and flattened the top, creating a smooth surface, which she sprinkled with black pepper. When she took the green Tupperware bowl and placed it on the counter next to the pot of dirty rice, she was done and we knew the cooking was finished and the holiday had begun.

Country Day Play Skool

Chrissy Soileau

Some of my earliest memories are from Country Day Play Skool, the intentional misspelling of “school” being only one of the many grievances I had against the place. Country Day was my personal hell, and the fact that at four years old I was already an avid storyteller didn’t help my situation. I was the girl who’d cried wolf too many times, so my parents didn’t believe me when I told them they made us nap with towels over our heads, paddled us if we fidgeted in our sleep, and force fed us our lunch. It took my mom’s unannounced mid-afternoon visit to find me turning blue and choking to death on mashed potatoes (I knew carbs were the devil even then) for her to finally believe my crazy stories and pull me the hell out of there. But it wasn’t that near death experience that scarred me the most. It was the day I received my first sad face.

The last hour of every afternoon was reserved for art and crafts, and I lived for coloring. At home, I took meticulous care of hundreds of crayons, keeping them sharpened and always lined neatly in their boxes. I even hoarded their shavings; I’d fill gallon Ziploc bags with them so that later I could smear glue over posters and sprinkle the shavings on, creating memorials for our time together as dear friends. So that last hour of the day at Country Day was my haven where I could let loose and enjoy myself instead of shaking in fear over the next reprimand.

The picture we were to color that day was of a piece of fruit that looked exactly like the plums my Mawmaw and I had eaten earlier that week. I selected crayons in varying shades of purple and began layering the colors to capture the perfect representation of that sweet memory. I couldn’t wait to give it to Mawmaw for her to display on the refrigerator. I was hunkered over my paper, adding a little magenta to the mix when Mrs. CJ, the director, cast her shadow over me.

“Christina, what have you done?” she asked. “That looks awful!” Her meaty hand slammed down on my paper leaving a red blotchy sad face in its wake. “Apples are red! You ruined your paper, and I’m not giving you another one.”

Eyes brimming, I tried to explain to her that I hadn’t seen an apple; I’d seen a plum and my grandmother couldn’t possibly hang up a picture with a sad face on it. I remember she yanked me up by my right arm, knocking my chair over in the process, and shoved me into a corner of

the room. I was instructed to kneel there until I was ready to apologize for arguing with an adult.

I don't know how long I knelt there, but I know the tears continued into my sleep that night. I can still remember the sound of those red crayons – the right crayons - scribbling across the other children's papers, while I stared at the dusty wall, tears drenching the neckline of my t-shirt. It was the first of many incidents in my early childhood that would lead to insecurities about my abilities and intellect, my fear of making mistakes or being viewed as flawed. I continued to love art, but I never colored with the same abandon again.

The Yellow Station Wagon's Last Drive

Chrissy Soileau

George Michael sings on the radio
gravel flies
black leather seats
grow sticky with summer sweat
an arm hangs from each open window
riding invisible waves

Faded Glory

Chrissy Soileau

It's bath time, and I have forgotten to grab the overnight diapers. I run quickly to the next room to retrieve them, but I'm too late. Jasper has already taken the toilet bowl from his training potty and is using it to scoop water from the actual potty. Each scoop of water hits with a splatter against the other bathroom door and then silently slides under it to flood the entryway of the bedroom. The shower curtain and rug are all drenched. I throw a few towels down and halfheartedly dry the area where I'll be kneeling. I remind myself to stay calm and take several deep breaths.

"Okay, guys, time to get undressed," I sing. I let the bath water run and begin to undress the baby. Jasper tries to climb up and over my head so that he can adjust the water temperature to his liking. The next

several minutes are a flurry of kicking arms and legs, some landing with more force than others, all making it insanely difficult to undress two people who weigh less than twenty-five pounds.

By the time I get them in, they're both crying. I always remind myself at this point that keeping them from drowning each other is more important than cleaning behind their ears. The baby immediately begins crawling around, slipping and sliding and bonking his head on the side of the tub. Jasper stands at the faucet, swishing his hands through the running water. Droplets hit me in the face, and I feel my mascara run.

The knees of my pants are so soaked with toilet bowl water at this point that I just remove them. I try to catch the baby to wash him first, but he's fast and slippery. While I'm trying to catch Dawson, Jasper fills up the hair rinsing cup and dumps it over the side of the tub. He does it twice before I can settle Dawson and get to him. Now my panties are soaked and neither boy is remotely clean.

"Stop, Big Boy! Stop!" I yell. "You're making a mess." He really isn't because the floor is already covered with water and towels, but if I let him do it once, he'll do it again. "Help me wash the baby," I tell him. I start soaping Dawson and Jasper proceeds to rinse him with the cup.

"You're such a nice brother. Thank you for helping me. Watch Dawson's ears. We can't get them wet because he has tubes," I tell him. He fills up the cup again. This time he dumps it directly over Dawson's head.

Dawson begins sputtering and whining, so I throw some tub crayons at him to keep him busy while I wash Jasper. Jasper kicks and twists to avoid my soapy rag. "My eyes!" he screams, as I wash his face. He gets up to run from me, which encourages Dawson to chase and poke him. He's particularly focused on Jasper's privates.

"Leave your brother's ding ding alone," I fuss. I take a mental note to use this moment as blackmail against Dawson later. I finally turn off the running water and get out the towels. "Who wants to get dressed first?" I ask. Jasper starts screaming because I've turned off the water, preventing him from refilling the rinse cup from the faucet – the only place he'll do it.

"Fine," I mutter, turning the faucet on again. "You can play while Dawson and I dry off and clean up." I scoop out the baby, bundle him in his hooded towel, and begin picking up the crayons. Dawson wriggles from my lap and tries to run away. The one crayon I was missing is

wedged in his butt cheeks. I chase him down and smother him in kisses but still give a slight smack to his crayon-smuggling bottom.

"Okay, that's it Jasper," I say. "Time to get out." This time when I turn off the water his screaming escalates into a full blown tirade. I struggle to get him out of the tub while he sloshes water everywhere and goes limp every time I think I have a solid grip on him. The baby wraps himself around my leg and starts to cry. I try to shake him off, but then he starts slipping and sliding around in the toilet water that is still all over the floor. I decide to let Jasper finish his tantrum in the tub and carry the naked baby to their bedroom. I fling him in the crib and tell him to play while I get Jasper. He bursts into tears.

By the time I get back to the bathroom, Jasper is near hyperventilation and is lying in the bottom of the tub. I yank him up and start drying him, while his little fists pummel me. We make it to the bedroom and I sink to my knees with him. Both babies' faces are blood red and their crying has progressed to hiccupping sobs. "It's okay, it's okay," I say. I make Jasper look at me. "Stop crying, Big Boy. We'll play in the water tomorrow."

There's a moment where he's looking directly into my eyes, and I think we're making a connection. Then he vomits all down my chest and over my bare thighs. I sit in open-mouthed shock, patting Jasper's convulsing back. I look to the baby who's now yelling, "Mess!" He's in the process of peeing all over himself and his bed sheets.

A single tear slides down my face as I realize that everything that has just happened will likely repeat itself when the three of us head back to the bathroom. I am home alone with them until 9:30 p.m. and it is only 7:00 p.m. So I must bathe them. I must clean up the vomit. I must change the bed sheets. I must NOT drown them in the bathtub. I must love them and take care of them and be absolutely everything that they need at all times. But at this moment I'm just an exhausted mother in my Faded Glory underwear, covered in vomit, nearly deafened by the cries of my two little boys.