THE RED WHEEL BARROW
so much depends upon

a michael w delp

glazed with river water

beside the silver trout.

— Little Beetle Littles
little beetle

she who sees like a bird

bicycle
THE RED WHEELBARROW
APRIL 2011

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Prayers

Blue Swallow

I learned about secrets by watching the fish swim under the
docks after midnight in the dark waters off Nantucket.
They kept their secrets on their backs, dragged them down to bury in
cold gardens.

Barbed wire: three strands between my body and the horse’s breast,
clear eyes locked on mine.
I sucked the sharp scratches covering my hands and arms on my walk
home through the fog.

Plunged my hand through clouded water, fishing for a necklace that
held a silver breath.
It would fit around your neck, skin raised, resting in the crescent of my
hand.

On especially clear nights I like to float on my back, naked, keeping my
eye on the Milky Way.
Recent reports have said it has become unruly, spilling milk all over the
place, running with stars

When I picture the south I see fields of purple and a yellowed sky, red
dirt under dry toes.
I wonder how many splinters dug into black skin down there.

I dreamt I looked out from the belly of a banjo, white hide stretched
taut over my face.
From there I could hear a sandpaper voice, waking with eyelids closed
against white light.
Eyes burning with exhaustion and bones aching, I stopped kneeling at altars long ago.
Now I wake and stand with stretched limbs, knots in my back, reaching to the gods.

Yes, Victoria, there is little time to lick wounds in between fences. It is best to climb through all of it and lie shredded and grinning at the end, ignoring the ones you could not give yourself to.
It's unfortunate; the first thing I notice is that his office reminds me of Alex's with the nautical in the gold ornaments on light oak shelves, dark navy carpet, white walls - a constructed nobility in it all. A desk, in the same wood, too small for the sinewy, broad-shouldered psychiatrist with his paisley tie that's too thin for his neck.

"So Olivia, your wards tell me that you refuse to turn the lights out at curfew; let's talk about that. Why is it you feel like you need the lights on?" the doctor asks.

Dr. Sitwell wouldn't care about the lights if it wasn't for the screaming and the other people caring. If more than one people cares it becomes less about the minority and more about the majority, and the majority needs to be kept happy. That's what Alex always said; you could sweet talk the small people but you always need to keep the larger picture, and people, in mind.

"I don't like sleeping in the dark," is my short-term solution to his dumb question.

"Are you afraid of the dark, Olivia?"

I could lie and say that no, I'm not technically afraid of it. That it reminds me of certain things that I don't want to remember. That is reminds me of every nightmare I've ever had, some of the ones I've even lived through.

"Yes," make it sound meek and then they feel sorry for you, just a little bit, and conjure up another complex on your file.

"Why are you still afraid of the dark?"

I was always afraid of the dark. I sometimes hope and believe that secretly everyone is still.

I hated those times during the campaign parties when Alex would ask me to bring up alcohol from the basement. That required spending time in our hated, and otherwise forgotten, cold, dark, damp basement. The creak of stairs, the click of my stilettos on concrete, the dull hum of the refrigerator and they continue to ask me, you're 32 years old and you
openly admit to being afraid of the dark? It’s an ice breaker, a conversation topic for the party. The perfect wife needs a couple eccentricities to fall back on when people start thinking she’s too perfect. Oh well Olivia is still afraid of the dark, she’s not all pale and prosper.

Of course I’m not. The darkness is the whitest piece of paper on which we draw the darkest things. If you had my imagination, you’d be afraid of the dark too. As Alex’s wife, it’s true, I had no imagination. A smile is a smile, nothing creative about that. Outwardly it’s easy to see us both as a cutout of American Wife and Husband, but it’s a lot of work. It’s an art.

Maybe I had been done with Alex and I for a long time, before anything had taken a turn for the worse, before the shit hit the fan. That’s my reasoning behind the choosing of the baby and not Alex. I wanted something new and innocent. I was done with pep rallies, campaign ads, gossip about his sexuality, gossip about my sexuality. Why hadn’t I tried to bring my husband back instead of Alice? His ambitions existed, our ambitions existed. Our child was never here, it never had love for us but, I choose the baby instead.

My parents always gave me books for Christmas. When I was thirteen, it was horse books. When I was fourteen is was those old Nancy Drew novels. When I was fifteen it was a subscription to Seventeen. When I was Seventeen is was The Book. The Book with it’s intricate cover, written in multiple languages, leather binding and smell.

"Tell me about this Book," Doctor Sitwell again, and;

I wonder when he’s going to ask me how I feel about The Book. Do I blame The Book, do I feel that The Book lead me to do these strange and bewildering things?

"The Book was how I did it."

It was quite the conversation piece, sitting next to our paperbacks and New York Times bestsellers bought fresh from that big name bookstore Alex and I use to stop by for coffee. It had a thick spine, bordered by crepe paper so it wouldn’t make the bestsellers smell as moldy as it was. I had only flipped through it a couple times before this, just to temporarily satisfy my curiosity. Cocktails in hand, while the hor d’oeuvres went around on platters as white as our teeth, with the invisible hand of wanting campaign contributions extended, people would ask about The Book.
Mr. Crossland, that's a very interesting book you got there. Livia, darling, you must tell us the story behind this Book. Abridge or otherwise, our responses blamed my teenage years for my love of books. It was a Christmas present from my late parents. They died when I was young. I needed something to remind me of them.

This was mostly true, but the heavy exaggeration of emotion was the fixig of Alex and I, after the third time The Book was brought up. Anything to add a couple crocodile tears to the collection. Poor Livia with her dead parents and big, moldy book. Alex would always pinch me in the small of the back, playfully, whenever I told the story, our little code for a lie well done. Those were the only kinds of stories we told.

"What was your first feeling when you heard the news?"

The call came on a Saturday when I was powdering my nose for some errands — "You never know where the cameras are, Liv. You might just get shot at the supermarket," Alex always liked to joke — and the phone rings. It rang too many times, like when someone is calling you back to back, five rings become six. A seventh time. The eighth ring you can't ignore.

It was an officer on the other line, apologizing abhorrently; it's his first week on the job and he's already seen an almost fatal car crash. Drunk driving. Your husband has been sent to this hospital ... here is the phone number... Sorry, I don't know his condition as of now. The driver of the other vehicle is dead.

I went to the grocery store first, not even fighting the head rush, my makeup only half on. I like to hope, now, that the stares weren't because they recognized me from the Sunday edition, that I was unrecognizable (this must be the case now, that I've thought over it. People do look totally different without their face painted). Instead, it was because my hair was perfect, but only one eyelid had a golden tinge to it, my lipstick was smeared, my powder was uneven. My dress was white like a gentle morning, and then when I handed them my platinum check card, I felt the blood run down my leg.

Then I went to the hospital, and with Kleenex stuffed down my underwear, they told me about Alex. He might come out of it.

We had names picked out. We had boy names, Thomas, Daniel, Thor but we just had one girl name, Alice. We were proud that we had decided to wait for the birth to find out the gender; old-fashioned.
People asked, well what are you going to have? We get to say. We're going to be surprised! Then the third visit, which wasn't planned, which was as unexpected as the blood, they started to apologize. I'm sorry. It happens more commonly than you'd think. I'm sorry about your baby girl. Like I already knew what it was going to be. Not only did I now have a gender, I had a name for it. Stupid, stupid.

"You did exactly as The Book told you?"

They like it, the doctors, when you accept the responsibility for yourself because they see so many excuses in their offices every day. Someone told me to do it. It wasn't my fault, it wasn't my fault.

"The Book is an inanimate object, Doctor. It doesn't tell, I just read the instructions. I knew what I was getting myself into," here's accepting responsibility. I'm not ashamed of what happened.

So she was Alice. Alex and Alice, and I chose Alice.

The Book starts out with an introduction in some Romantic language. Then it gives a more basic incantations, spells, rituals, sacrifices, -- charm an animal, force a love affair, etc. -- but if you skip towards the back, that's where all the more complete and interesting stuff starts happening. Regrow limbs, chapter VI. Rebirth, Resurrection chapter VII.

I thought that the first I was going to need was a human sacrifice, but The Book just gave me these lines that you draw, you outline. So I drew those lines, those pentagrams in pink chalk, I don't know what they're called. People have named them, the symbols, arrays, but The Book does not. The Book is very matter of fact. It speaks like you already know the answer to all the blanks. Draw this and then it gives a diagram.

So in pink chalk left over from an Easter party, my basement floors became The Book. Here, the symbol for Mars, the body. Here Venus, for the legs. Pluto drawn on the faded green felt of the pool table. And since something can't come from nothing, The Books says, stack this above Jupiter; stack this above Saturn. Twelve grams of brimstone. Twenty five grams of saltpeter. Eleven dead pigeons, five cat paws, sixteen baboon hearts (but of course they list substitutes, so horse hearts was the next best thing), it goes on and on. It sounds impossible at first, but the goal was impossible to begin with. There are so many zoos in the city, it doesn't matter anymore. Nobody misses pigeons the same way nobody recognizes me by the look on my face. Crazed. People would understand, the horses were dying anyways. Everything is always dying;
didn't Sylvia Plath say that?

It smelled. I ruined outfit after outfit dragging item after item into that God-forsaken basement. My cocktail dress from our engagement party. The wool stockings I wore when I had my first date with Alex five years ago. My favorite fur-lined jacket. The pool table was in ruins, dripping a bit around the edges, out of the pockets where the balls were suppose to fall. The fridge bugged me through the whole ordeal, humming around meticulously while I labored over the ritual. I unplugged it, I never understood why we had it anyways. We only used the fridge for the parties. There would probably be no more parties. Sometimes the blood washed the chalk away, Neptune became obstructed and it has to be redrawn and cleaned up. Very annoying.

There is always a catalyst, that's one thing I learned. I could have the planets aligned, and the pigeons stacked, but if the catalyst wasn't there, those piles of dead parts were just going to continue to be piles of dead parts. The Book says, Catalyst; a pint of relative's blood, heated and poured over Mercury, second quadrant.

Blood gets cold faster than you'd think, away from the body. My old spaghetti pot worked well for that.

The woman at the blood bank was so nice, I almost felt bad. We're only going to take a pint sweetie, and she slows me how it works, how it siphons from my vein into a bag that's attached to a pulley and weight system, one that shuts off immediately when a pint has been taken. Convenient. The Book is so convenient.

I poured the catalyst, but that wasn't all.

It's all pain after the catalyst except it's not any kind of pain you've ever experienced. It isn't the pain from getting and nursing a burn, or stubbing your toe, or a paper cut, or a nick with your razor. It's like the most painful orgasm you could ever had; something that sears through your tailbone, to the pads of your feet, gripping your fingers into a fist. It's a mental and physical sacrifice. Honestly, I've heard people describe having children and raising children like that, one big sacrifice. The catalyst made sense, like I was giving something up. I felt withered, empty but accomplished.

Then it felt like I was waking up, like from a nap, my mind was clear of everything for a few seconds. The room was unfocused and too dark and too light all at once.

There was an almost steam rising from Mars, there were severed hands coming from where the pigeons were piled, there was an
intention coming off of Mercury, the mind, just a feeling like something caught in your throat. I felt the pull of the room, the basement, the blood splashed on the refrigerator with the warm wine in it, melting like it’s bleeding. Saturn were the legs, hear the scratch of nails on the cement, the clench of teeth somewhere from Uranus. Neptune, the eyes. Pluto, the heart. The tinny beat of my heart in my ears, the smack wet thump of her’s.

That’s what The Book all says that the first stage is pieces. I called out her name to the basement and all the blood. Then I finally heard the breathless boil of a wail Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter ... Uranus, Neptune and Pluto. It’s all assembled in that one noise.

I cried; Alice, Alice. It worked, it worked.

She screamed. Alice screamed as she was born. Her skin was the color of snow, white. She had veins, black, spider-webbed across her body, appearing like barbwire over her skin. Her eyes were lidless, colorless, stretched open wide but blind.

"Is this why you are afraid of the dark, Livia?" Doctor asks me. The orderlies ask me as well, Livia, why are you still afraid of the dark? And I wonder if these people ever get bored with asking people why they do stuff, especially supposedly insane people. That just seems stupid to me.

Her hair was flaxen just like his. It was truly Alice, it was, it was... Shock doesn’t misplace itself. You can’t go back and say, Alex didn’t actually die, the miscarriage didn’t happen. You think he’s dead, he becomes dead. You think she’s alive, and she becomes alive. You can’t turn back the mistakes your mind has made.

Alice breathed, she breathed, her mouth wide, head glued to the floor. Of course of course, babies can’t support their heads, they’re too weak... She flailed, and hissed. I cried when I heard my name for all she could scream was mother, mother, mother; blotted and bloodcurdling. Her longs limbs hadn’t worked, long and atrophied as she had tried to crawl towards me, I knew it was towards me She tried to reach for me, by God, she reached for me... I know. All the pain, it was worth it, looking at her for those few moments when she was alive.

Then somewhere in the house, for God knows we didn’t keep a phone in that basement, the telephone rang and told me that happy news that I didn’t want to hear. For a few seconds, they were I had them
both. The tinny beat of my heart in my ears quieted as the fear left me, but soon the basement was silent of everything, save my sobs.

"I heard Alexander came to visit," he says after the long silence. I pretend I'm not crazy, crossed my arms and made a face. Pretended I was just a sullen teenager not an ex-housewife. I have a feeling though, that Dr. Sitwell didn't care much for teenagers.

"I didn't want to see him." Looked defiant.

"Why is that, Olivia?" he might as well be making fun of himself folding his hands in front of his face, church steeple-shaped. "Is it because he reminds you of Alice?"

He reminds me of the divorce I expected to happen but never did. He reminds me of my imagination. He reminds me that I'm his sad story to keep around — there's no such thing as bad publicity, especially if you stick by your mentally insane wife's side through it all. I imagine he still comes so he'll have something to say about me when he gets on those talk shows and they ask about me. He reminds me of the dark.

"Yes."

"And Alice being your daughter, you and Alex's daughter?"

"Of course not. She's made up."

I pinch myself in the back. I miss the note.

"Do you often think about Alice?"

"Yes."

But Alice is in their imagination, not mine. She's real.

"What about Alice?"

This is the part where I'm suppose to say things like: What a mistake I made. I shouldn't of have brought her into the world. I shouldn't of killed all those animals ... I should of let worse enough alone. I feel guilty. I feel bad. This is where I slip though.

"How beautiful she was."

I'm suppose to avoid letting on just how crazy I am. It was easier when Alex was sipping Martinis and laughing, on cue, at the same jokes. Sometimes I joke that we married each other because we were the only people each of us couldn't lie to. We were good at having a house and keeping the basement locked. It all went to hell when I opened it.

"Why is that, Olivia?"

Can I look at Alex in the visiting room and lie to him when I know I won't feel a pinch? No. I see him exactly as he was before, his suit is still perfectly tailored. So I don't. I told him about Alice they first time he asked. I don't want more lies. I don't want to cry when I see her
eyes in his head. He's still able to tell those journalists that I'm going to be alright, I should be out in a few months.
   I doubt it.
   "She was my baby; how could she not be beautiful?"
On Sunday mornings
we climb to the roof and push off
the rotten mangoes with our feet,
watch them splatter on the pavement.
We pierce the ones with red skin
to make sure they are ripe,
and stuff the green ones
in our pockets and under our shirts.

The broken rotten mangoes
are given to our grandfather.
He plants them in the soil of his petunias
where the ladybugs sleep in the afternoons.
The mangoes make the dirt smell of the bitter
musk of rotting fruit.
The juice makes the flowers
grow violet and magenta.

The mangoes with red skin are sweet and soft.
When we bite into the flesh
with our baby teeth,
yellow strings stick between them

Others are made into mango juice
to drink with dinner.
Warm arepas stuffed with meat,
sweet plantain from the oven covered
in white cheese and butter.
The green, young mangoes
are all our own.
Those are picked
from the top of the tree
where the branches are thin and break
under our weight.

We eat them with lime,
vinegar; salt.
We eat in a hurry,
crammed between
the side of the house
and the neighbor's fence
where we hide the matches
to light bottle rockets.

The salt and lime
make our stomachs sour:
Some of us can't chew
through the skin, but try anyway
until our gums turn purple red,
maybe tooth falls out.

We hold an eating contest
until our grandmother catches us
and tells us the story of little Nena,
the girl who died from eating green mangoes.
Little Nena looked like you, she says.
She was five years old, just like you.

The taste of the green fruit and salt
turns thick and sticky
like the glue our grandfather uses to mend
our old shoes.
She leaves and we grow quiet
and I can see my brother climb
to the tallest branch of the tree
and reach for the highest mango.
After another cargo of used shirts
a deaf Sister at the Social Apostolate
blesses me through the window of my dad's blue car—
in one saintly gesture, knobby spotted index and ring fingers raised,
I'm ordained with the southern cross
draped with purple sashes across the city for Lent,
the first time I've been blessed
in my faithless family with our bloodless gravy
ironic in their professions; my mother makes stained glass windows.
Sister, I want to say, bless the tracks out of clover and switchgrass
of railroads never rebuilt after the Civil War;
bless me all the way to Baltimore on a fast train.
Let me see Towson High track team
doing morning laps in the bright cold,
pick out Will from the panting front,
show me Jordan at the market under Jones Falls viaduct
buying mustard, fish and raw wool.

Sister, you understand: I don’t know any prayers
but every day I pray. I don’t pretend to know
the differences between Protestants,
that Martin Luther did anything
other than tack a page to a church door.
I believe in Saint Will and Saint Jordan and their holy ghosts
floating through Savannah's twenty four squares
saluting John Wesley's statue, Tomochichi's boulder
and the Union dead fertilizing our live oaks
whose roots bust through brick,
nodding north to Sherman who marched to the ocean,
washed the blood off his hands and told his soldiers
not to burn Savannah, it was too beautiful.
What I want to say through the car window is I want to take you to the cathedral of John the Baptist and sit in the split light, hold your arthritic hand, listen to your mumbled Hail Marys which slurred and dulled when you stopped being able to hear your own voice. I'll bow my head and pray for the unreasonable to occur.

A flock of sea birds could come carry me north over the high eaves of the church and you, Sister, wouldn't even notice, you'd sign the cross over your heart, curtsy at the pew, hobble down the boarded up block back to the Apostolate without me, grinning and unable to remember why.
The little boy is at the circus with his mother, though he did not ask to come. The immensity of the open grounds frightens him, but he can't make himself run. The sharp, bright lights around him captivate him, fascinate him. The circus is set up on the sprawling field of dry grass a few blocks from their house. It is a familiar place, a place where he sometimes plays, but now it seems transformed. Earlier that evening they had set out hand in hand. Now he clings blindly to his mother's skirt, crumpling the smooth fabric with his grubby fingers. He is looking up at the sky, which has been stained the color of dirt by the searchlights luring the people of the town to watch the spectacle.

They stop a shabby stand with peeling white paint that reveals soft, damp wood near the large and slightly battered entrance gate. The air smells overwhelmingly sweet. The mother buys a cotton candy for her son and he eats it, alternating which hand he uses to keep hold of the skirt so that the already wrinkled cheap gray cloth becomes sticky with sugar. Looking down at her child, she is glad that he does not resemble his father. The mother and son look alike, with light brown hair and darker eyes. The thumb of her left hand is turning her wedding ring. Her skin twists with it. She does not know why she still wears the ring after all these years of separation. She has nothing left to say.

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Blue, plastic gems are glued to her face in spiraling patterns. Later, they will be steamed off with the vapor from a boiling kettle. Her face will be hot and painful for days afterwards. She hates the shows, putting on the blue make-up and gems, a tutu made of scratchy plastic material with cracked sequins sewn to the hem, and a sweat-stained leotard. Everything in the circus is part of this elaborate farce. No one in the audience sees her moments before her performance when she is backstage trying to keep herself from throwing up by focusing on her own

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breath that rattles and shakes like her bones. She is so terrified as she tries to keep away the vision of merciless, crushing hooves coming down towards her. It is a vision that she has tried not to imagine since the night after her first show. Now she wakes often in the night, sweating, in the jerky train car, to soothe away her fear with deep breaths and the pain in her face with a wet washcloth. Her single friend climbs up from the bunk below and embraces her and presses the cloth to her face for her as she shakes. They sit huddled in the dark with the smell of face powder for hours. The secret of the circus is that no one ever gets close enough to see the flawed details.

***

The mother has a weak smile but when she laughs, she laughs hard. Sometimes at night, she and her son lie on the living carpet and laugh until they have no more breath and stare at the ceiling, gasping for breath. He is so unafraid of the world that sometimes he seems like a complete idiot, wandering across busy streets as his mother runs after him, playing with matches that he finds in the bathroom. It will not stay that way, but she envies him.

***

She joined the circus at seventeen. Then, she had a round face with a gentle smile and bright blue eyes and blond curls. After high school she didn't know what to do and then one day the circus came to town asking for people to audition. They had let her in to sell concessions, thinking that her pretty face might draw customers. They were right – her booth made more money than any of the others. The job was dull and the performers and their assistants frightened her. They knew their way around this world that she was so new to, and she always felt that they were watching her, judging her. She had one friend – a young acrobat from some far away country who also lacked acceptance in the circus, though it was more because she had so much skill at such a young age than because she was new. They watched the others from a comfortable distance, admiring the long false eyelashes of the dancers. The glamour of this place, while cracked open by its age, still has its pull. After only a few weeks of huge success at the stand, the circus master, a little man with a sharp, pinched face, decided that perhaps she could
be useful in some other role. He had her start training with the woman who rode the horse. The technical term for what she did was "equestrian vaulting," but the circus called it horse-dancing. It took her years to learn it, though simply riding the horse was to her the most natural thing in the world. She loved the rhythmic force and pull and force and pull of the horse when she galloped, and she loved the horse herself, whose smooth hide was a light, soft brown and who smelled so very alive.

She started out with without any strength or balance. Every day she would do ankle exercises, turning her feet around in circles until she could no longer bear to move them. After a few months, she started wearing pointe shoes. En pointe, she would stand on a tattered old balance beam with stuffing that was starting to come out, from which she fell every day, until her sides turned a uniform bruised purple and her feet became twisted and bloody. In those years she was not entirely sure why she stayed. Perhaps it was because of the horse, the beautiful horse who she had come to love, or the rare smiles of her teacher, who could stand atop the horse with a grace so absolute she could not help but envy it. Perhaps it was the glare of the circus master that kept her there by fear. Perhaps it was the idea of her first show that she kept imagining must come soon, when she would finally be able to dazzle the world with her own impossible grace.

***

The little boy does not realize he is lost at first, but his mother does. She felt the stream of people forcing themselves between the two. The pushing shoulders of the crowd knocked her down next to the make-shift fence they had built around the field, and she fell in the flattened grass. Her skirt is stained now, but she doesn't care. Her mind and stomach churn with panic because she cannot find him and she finds herself mute for only a moment, a long, horrible moment of shock, before she screams.

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After almost two years, she started to stand on the horse. For training purposes, she held onto a zip line that was hanging above her so that she did not fall when she lost her balance. Her hands developed hard calluses from holding onto it. The calluses became white and lined
and then cracked and bleed with dryness and stung so badly when she touched anything that she cried. Her blood seemed to her to look more and more brown and dirty, as though it was rotting. Still, the rest of her remained beautiful, though her face seemed to age prematurely. Wrinkles developed along her cheeks and the purple under her eyes seemed to have become permanent. Her eyes looked tired, but they still sparkled in the light of the arena. No one could see that when she was on the horse, so as far as the others were concerned, it didn't matter:

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He was looking up at a poster of the beautiful woman. He likes the form of the words, even though he cannot read them. They spell "Rianne," in graceful cursive letters. There are signs like it all around the grounds, with photographs of the performers and their names, but this was the first he has noticed.

The little boy lives in a world that is shattering. Though he never sees his mother cry, she does nearly every day. One day he will see her in her bedroom, sobbing into her pillow, and will not know how to bear it. She feels as though she is coming closer to giving everything up with every passing hour, but she tells him nothing. He is the only person in this world that does not know that it is falling apart, but he sees something in this woman that he has rarely seen in his world. He has felt what he sees in her; but it seems foreign and exciting like some kind of tropical fruit. He sees a kind of carefree joy that is not careless but simply entirely free of worry or fear:

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Rianne is not really happy. It is wrong to say that she is joyful or free of fear. This photograph is a rare moment, a snapshot of her when she is intensely aware of her own beauty and grace. The photographer yelled and yelled at her to smile and so she plastered on a smile, but it wouldn't do. Then, as the horse was turning a corner and she tilted for balance and thought how lovely she must look. And she was lovely. Her waist curved perfectly as she leaned and every line of her arms flowed to her fingertips. As she smiled that wonderful smile that the boy so delights in now, the photographer had snatched the moment and put down his camera, declaring it "a miracle." It is for these snapshots that
she lives. She is lacing up her shoes at the moment of separation between the mother and son. The routine has become so mindless that it allows her simply to breathe. She closes her eyes and tries to bring herself out of her own mind. Often she wishes she knew what it is like to not be thinking at all. She wants to know what it is like to have a future to look forward to, to have something more than a next day and a next day of what she is already doing. Her strength has come at the cost of something else inside her. She sees dirt now when she bleeds, and it frightens her. After all these years of trying to teach herself to meditate she had not gotten very far. She remains frozen inside herself even, or maybe especially, when she wants most desperately to be anywhere else.

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The boy is strangely calm. He turns around to find himself alone in the crowd of people pressing in on him and is not yet at the age when he knows to be frightened. His mother is one of these people, and he will find her soon. The picture of the woman has washed away all the fear that was previously there. He walks through the crush of color and sweat stunned by happiness. Faces, weirdly distorted, flash in front of him like frames of a film that are moving too slowly so that it does not quite create the impression of motion. Everything is that strange color of dark brown faded by yellow light. He thinks he can hear his mother, but perhaps he is just imagining it. He tries to feel his way toward the sound, pushing through a maze of uncaring adult knees, unhurried.

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At night on the train, a wet rag will hang on the bar of Rianne’s bunk bed, dripping onto the floor and slapping against the side of the plastic mattress as the train jerks forward. She will twist in her sheets as faded images flash behind her eyes, images of a horse rearing in fear, in anger, in desperation, as it once reared before her. As she jerks awake she will close her eyes again for a moment and remember that night, and see the horse’s eyes flashing wildly as she stands up on her hind legs and kicks with her front ones at the sound of gunshots nearby. Her friend, the acrobat, had pulled her away as the horse came crashing back to the ground and hugged her, rubbed her back, told her it was alright,
that it was nothing. There had been some drunken men at the edge of the grounds celebrating the circus’s last day in town. As Rianne cried quietly into her friend’s shoulder, into her long, dark hair, she thought she would never be able to look at horses the same way again—and she was right.

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The mother turns around and around, blinded by the light that seems to glance off every surface. She feels the way she felt when her husband left, like she is falling and will never reach the ground. It is almost like flying, she thinks wildly as she stumbles again and grabs the fence to stay standing, except that you are falling instead of soaring, in a nightmare instead of a dream.

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Rianne does not try to overcome the fear now, because she knows that it will always be there. She tells herself that soon the evening will be over, and she will be sleeping, dreaming of something other than horse’s hooves. She is alone behind the heavy black curtain with the horse for perhaps a minute. In the darkness she breathes in the musty smell of the horse’s skin and sweat and hair and feels her breathing. She feels smooth and powerful and graceful and it is in this moment that she feels unafraid. There is a trust between them that is like a mother and child. They cannot speak so directly, though. They communicate through breath and touch and sounds that are not the words of humans. She could not say herself whether she was the mother or the child. Sometimes she wondered if it really mattered, or if there was even a difference between the two. She pulls herself up and sits for a moment, waiting.

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The little boy comes up behind his mother. He grabs at her skirt and catches it, pulling harshly and almost tearing it. She looks down and her face is frozen for a moment before it falls into rare smile of relief. She picks him up and holds him close to her; squeezing him so tightly that he can hardly breath, as though bringing him as close to her as possible will
make up for the momentary separation. They hold hands as they walk into the arena. The lights blind them for a moment and then they see again. Everything is seemingly faded with the brightness and noise, almost like a mirage. They see thousands of seats surrounding a circle of dirt where the performers will do their acts. The mother holds the boy on her hip and they walk through the crowd to find a place to sit. When they find a place at the bottom of the stands, she pulls him onto her lap.

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She rides out as beautiful as ever; long arms pale and extended, shining in the exaggerated light, the coat of the horse faded to tan. The little boy sits up a little straighter and watches her as she smiles to the audience. She seems entirely confident. As she passes by him he can imagine that she is looking at him, that her smile is only for him, that she is giving him a gift.

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He will imagine it in later years, rather romanticizing the idea, as a small gift, wrapped in plain paper; that he will leave unwrapped as a memory, a conversation piece of sorts. He will tell his friends "I remember when I was at the circus..." and show them a small, faded picture in a program, and they will listen to the story. He will tell stories well, if not entirely factually. He alone will remember her just as she was, and it will be her story alone that he can tell just as it was.

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It is on the second round that she fumbles. Her feet slip but people do not really notice at first. The time feels like a slowed-down movie reel, where everything has that washed out brown shade and it stops for a moment between each frame, clicking and clicking and clicking as the motion becomes more and more broken. Her head turns slightly, her smile falters, and then she falls. Maybe he is imagining it again, but he thinks her eyes lock with his as she falls and maybe one day, as he tells the story again and again, he will remember that look in her eyes and understand it. She tries to grasp at the horse's back and her legs swing helplessly. She sees everything fading to copper then brown then
black. The lights do not seem so bright now. The little boy cries out and she closes her eyes as her nightmare is coming to life.

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The next moments are a half-reality where light and darkness seem to mesh together and time extends horribly. The little boy's eyes widen again in horror as she hits the ground with a terrible thud and she bounces up a bit. The dirt around her clouds and forms a protective dust around her body. The horse rears up then crashes back down but misses her by inches and thunders on as she lies there. The horse stops, confused, on the opposite side of the ring. The acrobats dangle above her; swinging slightly in the air; waiting. Time is suspended.

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The little boy is waiting for her to stand up. He does not like or understand prayer; but he tries it now. "Dear God, Dear God, Dear God." She remains unmoving.

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The pain is more than she thought it would be. Just falling was something she had never really been afraid of. It was always seeing the hooves coming down towards her unprepared body that had frightened her. Now she lies, wondering if she has the strength to stand up again. She stretches out a leg, wondering why it hurts so much. She fell day after day from the beam and then she was already bruised, falling onto tender skin. She brings herself upright and sits for minutes, doubting very much that she can stand. Finally, she brings herself to her feet. She pulls herself up and waits as the horse comes back. She wraps her arms around its neck and something entirely new happens at the circus. There is silence. The arena shines bronze as if it is an old, tarnished memory. No one even whispers as they all hang in time. Watching the woman and horse, the mother pulls her son closer, tucking her chin over his shoulder. Her breath is warm and soft on his skin. She curls her hand around his fist and they breathe.
Dear Jerry,

Like you, I grew up with the sounds of my father’s music drifting from the living room through the gaps under my bedroom door on those late, intoxicated nights. Music, alcohol, and that Hispanic tendency towards aggressive addiction flow in me as well, passed down through the bloodlines and years of guitar riffs lulling me to sleep. But I must admit, my father knows your music in ways I never will, and your lifestyle in ways I hope to never experience. I have the curiosity, but not the guts. As much as I’ve always wanted to pull everything into my life, let go, and let live; I have my mother’s anxiety rather than my father’s fearlessness.

You said that death comes at us no matter what we do in this life, and to equate drugs with death is a facile comparison. And I believe that, because drugs are just drugs and death is what you choose to do with them. I see those pieces of your life in him, and I can’t help but wonder if they will ever surface in me as well. I am at constant struggle with the part of myself that wants to be swept into the life I know would come naturally to me. Day by day, I must go one the way I imagine you did for those 40 years of crazed delirium, singing “I will get by, I will get by, I will survive.”
I ask you
if you believe in an alternate universe
and you say you don't know.
We stare into glasses of beer—
piss yellow. The end of the muggy day
has made them foamless, impotent.

There is a terrible jazz band playing tonight,
the horns are off kilter and the lead singer
is an ass—there's no other way to put it.
We sit in white plastic chairs
in one of the red dust pits of a bar downtown,
eat boiled peanuts
and fried yam, fresh from the grease,
too hot, so it leaves little off-white blisters
on our fingertips.
The city seems promiseless,
the only way a city can seem
after you've already told someone how
full of promise that city is.

We are young
and there is a sour paste of
peanuts and cheap beer
between our teeth
and settling thickly onto our tongues.
The sky is heavy
in a way that predicts torrential rains or great love;
surely we should be happier than this.
But we are what we have always been, waiting for something cataclysmic, waiting for whatever this way comes. And when nothing does we talk instead.

You tell me of things I could never possibly understand, explaining the tinned music behind us in terms of tempo, downbeat, polyrhythms, enunciating slowly and demonstrating with snapping fingers, a beat that my head starts to follow.

It reminds me of when my father used to talk me to sleep. He would tell me things that he never dared during the day, keeping his voice low and soft, speaking tightly of his childhood, eighteen years of collective memories that I had never wondered about, never asked for.

When I woke I would have only tatters of the night before, images of shirts stained with the leftovers of fat morsels of fried plantain. There were names: Collins, Tom, Billy — boys that he played soccer with. And although I've never been sure I think one of them was a retarded brother, my father's brother who ran away from home, but I never had the courage to ask. I was afraid of losing that moment right before sleep when I realized that my father was no longer speaking English but had slipped back into Ewe, that he was
no longer talking to me but to himself, and that either I was crying or he was. It was hard to tell.

I hope that in the alternate universe things are clearer. And maybe that's why I asked the question—to pin-point the identity of the well meaning boy who slurred all his words, couldn't stop the drool leaking from the left side of his cracked mouth.

I don't say any of this to you, only repeat my question and you repeat your answer. And we sit there, your explanations of the music lulling me to sleep as we wait for the moon to crash down or the beer to kick in or simply for a sign that something is coming our way.
While I have come to love the woods and lakes of Michigan, the place feels too new to me. This is not my country. Though my teachers speak of lakes and forests thousands of years old, I cannot fully sense the age of them. I feel blind here, the plants new, the soil foreign. There is no red dust here, no singing desert, nor are there the languid palm trees and rich dampness of the air I know. There is no ocean here, though Lake Michigan stretches into the distance and the dunes loom large. I am a stranger to this place, and while I find immeasurable beauty in it, it is not my country.

I look back on my notebooks from my last trip to the Western Cape of South Africa. Far from home, I have only impressions and scribbled notes to hold onto. In class, a teacher asks for the origin of the word “nostalgia” and I tell him it comes from the Greek, nostos, meaning “ache or longing to return”. And nostoi is the story of the return home, he finished. On the way back from class I feel the cold through my jacket, an unnatural cold for me. I ache for the air and soil and touch of my homeland. Always a wanderer, it is strange to be homesick now, but I am. And so I make a nostoi for it, my country, that stretch of land at the furthest edge of it, and the memories it holds.

My father and I take a two-day drive down to the Western Cape. The rest of the family is travelling by plane: a journey that takes an hour. My father laughs, jokingly refers to one of my old poems, saying that now I really can take a road trip with James Dean.

“Tai chi chuan is the art of softness containing hardness, of a needle concealed in cotton.”- Fu Zhongwen

As we leave the outskirts of Johannesburg, he teaches me the breathing techniques he uses in Tai Chi, tells me about how when done properly, when the mind is calm enough, transparent enough, you can

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see the paths of energy traced across the sky, feel it moving through the fingertips, down the spine. How energy becomes a visible thing, the currents of those secret rivers close to the surface and felt in every nerve. He says sometimes he can sense it all, the energy and essence of clouds, of grass, of earth, of road. He says he knows I have a talent for sensing it, and it is one of the highest praises he can give me.

I read my father poetry as we drive. I wonder if it distracts him. Always a worrier, I ponder the what ifs? What if we crash into one of those few and far-between trucks that break up the silence of the road so forcefully? What if we swerve to avoid something and we crash? To die with the last words a poem...

We drive for miles through the Groot Karoo, a landscape that has always fascinated and frightened me. The sky stretches on too long until it grows pale, a washed-out blue strained and wild as the eyes of the Afrikaner girl in a yellow dress I saw at a stop. She was holding the hand of a little boy, and singing into the desert. The land itself is terrifyingly ancient, the history of this country and its bloodshed the same colour as the dust. All the times we drove through here when I was young run through my mind. There was one time I was sure I saw a crow turn into a man and stand there, staring at me as we drove past. There was the burnt-out house at the bend of a road on the edge of a small town. No one would tell me what had happened there, and I felt something small and sharp-toothed settle into the car, beside me. For miles it whispered, and only disappeared with the next morning's first light.

Crows. Crows wherever we go. The heat settles into our voices, our gestures till they are heavy, languid. I watch the road through half-lidded eyes and ache for the sea waiting at the end of the long road.

Mountains – silence. Rock gleaming rust-red in the late afternoon sun. And yet they are fragile at the same time. They feel too ambitious, too close to the tender line between earth and sky.

My father and I climb the stairs hewn out of the rock to the waterfall, hidden behind worn-out bushes. The metal railing sings under my hand, and my shadow seems too dainty a thing against the rock the colour of dried blood. Birdsong echoes in the chambers of the rocks, the birds themselves out of sight, in the shadows that grow longer, spilling
across the surface of the rocks like unfurled cloth. I feel smaller than ever, a secretive thing fleeing the heat, finding here the roar of water, the slick stones turned the colour of bruises. It is refuge, and I try to breathe in those slow, measured breaths my father taught me, but too many things distract me. Birds flit through the shadows. Water rushes. The air is damp. The sunlight is too dazzling at the edge of the shadows. I give up, smile, and say to my father that I wish we'd been more prepared to swim.

When we leave that place, a bird flies out finally from the bushes. Black, with an orange gleam under the wings not unlike the fire spreading across the sky as the day fades.

Bougainvillea grows on barbed-wire fences, blooming purple against dull metal, standing against the pale blue sky and the red dust. Girls must pick the blossoms for tables on Sundays to greet the scattered congregation that files out of the small church nearby. They must pick the blossoms for weddings, for adorning their hair; I'm sure. I wish it were Sunday. I wish we were welcome. There's no one here now, the road empty, the wind only barely stirring the petals.

The lone street of De Rust. Four o'clock sunlight washing everything so it gleams. A fine layer of that eternal red dust still settles, silent, breathing heat, over the town and its people.

At a crossroads we come across a family on a donkey cart. One of the children is singing, and the women have flower-patterned dresses. You can see the traces of the Khoi-San in their faces, old faces no matter the age, worn down by sand and wind, rich with earth and memory, the faces of that race long vanished from this place, their only traces paintings on rocks and the lines on men's faces. We take a picture, and they smile and wave, laughing at how ridiculous the world has become.

Jackaranda trees line the lonely street in De Rust. Signs proclaim "This is a water-stressed area!" in pale blues and greens, colors reminiscent of the water the place longs for. Men stand in the bed of the Cango river, their hands empty, their faces blank. I think of taking a picture for one second, and then am ashamed.
We drive on. A bird's nest is tangled in a fence, abandoned, all explanation gone.

Hours later and we reach the coast. The sea calls, calls, gets into everything, skin, hair, clothes, bone marrow. I would not have it be any other way than this. Clouds wind and work their way into the curves of the hills of the Outeniqua Pass. The scene is like a Japanese painting, blues and greens deep and hidden in mist. There is that fine breath of water everywhere here, the watercolours of the scene dissolving into each other, finding form then losing it, simple and powerful impressions that work their way down through my skin into my blood. My bones settle into their places here. This place is called Wilderness, one of the most fitting names for a place I have ever found. The belt of lush landscape along the coast which encompasses it is known as the Garden Route, again, a fitting name. The still-unfallen rain settles into everything here, is laden on breath and words. Everything holds the promise of water:

The evening we arrive is overcast, the sky the colour of a pearl, the sea wind-tossed as a woman's hair, and as beautiful. Night slowly drops down on the world as the clouds do, and everything is rain-laden, expectant. Birds call out from the still ponds. A few tall pines stand on the hills in the pale, green distance.

Swartrivier; its waters mirror to the trees and houses that stand out bravely across the water; winds down to where it meets the Indian Ocean. So too does the Touwsrivier; meandering to form an estuary known as the Serpentine. There are secret places along the banks where startling arum lilies can be found in spring, rising from the green like the women of mythology. When I was young and saw a tall flash of white among the trees and shrubs beside the black water I thought I had finally seen the Lady of the Lake from the legends my grandfather told me. Something in me still believes in the water spirits and woodland sprites I was so assured of as a child. There is mythology worked into every part of me, every line and scar and curve. When I watch the sea, I think of the sirens and fear for my father casting his fishing line into the waves. When I catch a glimpse of my mother in the late afternoon sun, her eyes green and laughing, her hair long, I think of Guinevere, or the Lady of Shallot.

Salt-sharp air at seven in the evening. I want to disappear into the green. Everything is lush and laden with song: a lone songbird calls
out from the waiting trees. I close my eyes, offer a prayer in thanks, and for once I do not have a teenager's striving for God-knows-what. I come closer to surrender.

I soon settle back into the life we have here, the comings and goings of sun and tide. At the night market every Friday there's a man who sells jewellery made from leather and hemp. He uses shards of shells here and there, uses carnelian and quartz to catch the light. He has kind eyes and a gentle way of moving his strong hands, as if all too aware of the choice we have between holding and hurting. The air around him has a kind of invisible humming, as of bees, an aura around him full of wings and song. His smile in the light from the lamps in the trees is quick and bright, and I think I love him for it.

When I move on, I feel lonelier than ever, and the night stretches on, empty.

We go for walks on the beach every evening. I try to take photographs of as much as possible, because I know the limits of words. You cannot describe the exact angle of light on your sister's face perfectly with words, nor can you paint the gleam of the Indian Ocean reflected in her eye.

A gull sails low, low over the dunes and then over the lace at the edge of the waves. We scramble up the dune and sit where the wind catches our hair, looking out over the beach, everything sun-stained. I keep trying to photograph the gulls, few and far between and too fast. I count seven of them wheeling against the painted sky, a lucky number. The dune grass casts slender, elegant shadows against the sand almost the colour of my own skin.

Abandoned railroads on the way out of the village lead nowhere but into greenery. Like something out of Marquez, they speak of elegant ruin and a kind of everyday sorcery glistening beneath the abalone shells scattered between the tracks, the red and white cosmos, the sweet and fatal oleander. The metal gleams, cold against rich soil, overgrown with weeds and grass. The tracks lead nowhere. Children play hopscotch among the cold metal and the wild blossoms.

On the way to Knysna, I watch Island Lake gleaming under a pearl-lit sky. An egret lands in the water with a woman's elegance.
We stop at Buffelsbaai, the beach strewn with broken rocks and stones glistening under a fine film of mist. The sea dashes itself against the rocks, foam and spray unfurling in the air to dissipate, borne away by wind. A whale, far out past the waves, rises slowly out of the water and back again, a darkness against gray. I think of whale song echoing deep into the farthest reaches of water; how the Maori of New Zealand believe that with the right song we can speak to them. I feel illiterate in the ways of the world. Voiceless.

A gull swoops between the rocks, death jagged and inches from its wings. It calls out across the deserted beach, brazen and in surrender to the wind. Always skittish when the wind is strong, I shiver; draw my coat closer around me, and cannot help but smile at the way a seagull can master in one breath what will take me a lifetime.

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Far from home, I am alone in my room and the snow is melting outside. I try to find a kind of stillness, I try to meditate, but it doesn't work. It's been a difficult day, and my thoughts won't quiet. I want to get at that elusive feeling of Chi concentrated and flowing throughout the body and throughout the world, but the walk I took in the winter sunlight helped only for a little while. Here is nostos in all its melancholy, in every vein. How can I become a part of a landscape that finds no echo in my skin or bones?

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"Poem that opened you
the opposite of a wound.
Didn't the world
come pouring through?"
—Gregory Orr

We take a walk in the forests near Wilderness. We walk along the forest path and I try to practice the breathing once again. I try to clear my mind. I breath in and out in time with my footsteps, gradually become aware of each leaf, blossom, dust mote. Soon there is a warmth in my hands, rising up from the ground, from my stomach, from my dan tien, the body's center of gravity. Everything becomes sharp, clear, ringing.
I feel the currents and flow of the world so acutely my body leans into it, I lose all notion of separateness. I cease to cling. I surrender.

Breathing brightness in the early morning. My skin is the sky. There are so many birds.
Told that humanity used to dream as one, a man dozes off, hopping to enter a dwindling collective.
He sleeps for two days. On the third day he wakes, speaking a native tongue no one recognizes.

The lake isn’t blue because it feels cerulean. It is blue because it stole the essence of the sky.
You wonder if someday you will find the perfect shells of stars washed up on shore, never returned.

Moths with short memories are burned to death as they try to become one with an imaginary sun.
Oh Icarus, imagine your story played out a million times over. Such is the effect of night.

Hear that voice, resonating through every bone, the one you know, but can never place.
Remember me, remember; remember, remember me. Say the words until they mean nothing.

How does a language die? How are the threads of speech severed from the tongue of a dying speaker?
I’ll tell you. It dies in silence, as all beautiful things are said to.
INDIAN NAMES

Little Beetle
Danny Rothschild

She Who Sees Like A Bird
Aly Sarafa

Blue Swallow
Victoria Baldwin

Black Sparrow
McKenzie Will

She Who Speaks Like The Wind
Deborah Urdaneta

Laughing Stork
Jackson Rollings

Little Flower
Emily Hittner-Cunningham

Singing Wolf
Darci Lopez

Wandering Moon
Delali Ayivor

Little Wing
Mishka Hoosen

Summer Owl
Kelly Clare

Grumpy River
Michael Delp
so much depends
upon
a red wheel
barrow
glazed with rain
water
beside the white
chickens.

—William Carlos Williams