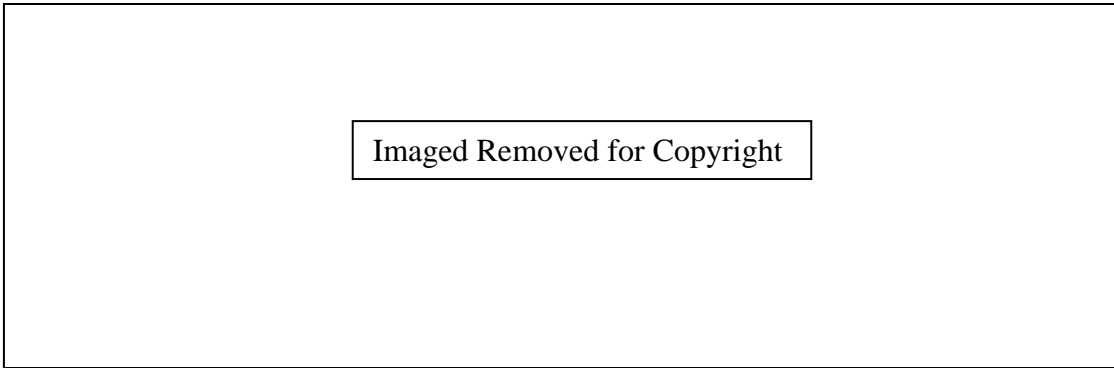


**This is Not**



**the Whole Story**

**A thesis in completion of the Creative Writing  
concentration of the English Major**

**April 9, 2009  
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**Welcome**

You've crossed state lines, passed that big green and white sign that says, Welcome to West Virginia: Open for Business. No one we know likes that sign. It used to say, West Virginia: Wild and Wonderful. That just goes to show.

But that is another story. This one is about you. You came to us from somewhere else, from a big city, and you asked us questions. You wanted to know things. About these mountains, about women here, about us.

*I'm asking you, begging you, dying for you to do this for me* you said. You looked at us with eyes that seemed nice but looked away too quickly. *Tell me your story*, you said, *so that we might write it together*. Why? we asked. You're not even from around here. You don't know what's at stake, what rumbles and explodes and dies underneath this earth. Don't know what it's like to live in a town that used to be a town but isn't anymore because all the coal's gone. What it's like to live somewhere that is stripped, ravaged, and covered with pellets that we are told can replace what's been taken, that we are told can grow grass but are only bits of rubber. What it's like to have never left the state, the county, to be told your tits, your face, are all you have. You come from somewhere else.

You shake your head. *That's true*, you say, *and it's not true. I just feel somehow, like I've been here before*, you say, shyly. When? we ask. Where? *No, you say. I can't say when or where. All this seems so familiar*. We look at each other. *Maybe, like I was here a long time ago, or like I dreamed it*, you say.

You keep on talking and saying things we're not sure we understand. We wish you'd go away. We wish you'd stop talking. And then you say, *I just want...* you pause, can't say it, and you look like you might cry. *I just want to know you both*, you say, *I just wish you could tell me your story*.

Why? we say again, still not convinced. *Because it's important*, you say tentatively, then louder, *because...because telling it is freedom, because doing something is better than sitting here around this campfire not talking. Tell it like you wish you could tell it if anyone ever asked you. Tell it like you know women from around here used to tell stories. Tell it like that*, you say, smiling now, *but most of all, just tell it to me; I listen, I am listening.*

We stop to consider. We look at each other. Freedom, you say? That shit's scary, we say. But it's true, no one *has* ever asked us before. That's perfectly true.

You nod. *Together*, you say, *I'll help you the only way I know how. We'll write it together.*

All right, we say, but you asked for it.

**Steal Back**

Ask your mother for your inhaler, ask again. She doesn't answer, but when it comes time to leave for school, she gives it to you and holds your arm.

"You're sick, Kayla. Let me take care a you. Just you and me, huh? I'll make it better." Baby Carly cries behind her. You pull away and run for your life, and she catches the back of your favorite t-shirt with the frogs on it and presses a hard package into your hand. "At least get us a little somethin' to eat. Those kids at school will love these," and she smiles and makes a sound like a gun cocking. And there is nothing left to do but take the package and make a break for it towards the school bus that is honking at you to hurry the hell up. Inside the bus, the sound of the turn signal echoes your mother's sharp sound, as if she were following you.

There is only one other girl on the bus, you know her from around. She asks you what it feels like to have short hair. She wears jeans and a pink short-sleeved shirt with a heart on it that shows her throat and the top of her breasts. Look down at your own, a band of softness, but not beautiful, not right.

"How are you feeling?" she asks, with kindness as the bus goes over the first big hill.

Say "Fine," and feel a piece of your ability to tell the truth break off, shrivel, die. A little ways down the road, Robby and Jake get on.

"Hey, Kayla!" Robby says, putting out his hand for your shake. You look up at him and it hurts your neck to look, he is so tall, thin as a post, but solid. Jake has a new haircut, a mohawk that makes his ears stick out.

"You look like hell," says Jake, taking a seat across the aisle and spreading his legs wide in his baggy pants. "You sick again?"

"Fuck you, you should talk, goth boy. I'm fine," you say, laughing.

“Good,” Robby says, smiling at you, and he runs a tan hand over his thick curly hair. Look out the window at the dark green maples, some of the leaves just starting to turn.

The ride is long, and you and the boys fall asleep almost immediately, jolting awake only when the bus stops suddenly to pick up other kids. When the bus pulls up to the school parking lot and you get up to go, feel the eyes of the first girl on your ripped t-shirt, your hard back and calves, your loose fitting army pants. She looks up at you and raises a hand.

In pre-Calculus, Mr. Jeffreys hands out an ACT practice booklet. Spend the next hour and a half coloring in the space of the “A” to look like a teepee, the “T” to look like a tree. You used to have a plastic tree in your basement until one of your Mom’s friends, high on God knows what, passed out onto it, taking off one of its triangular branches, a hole there now, turned to face the wall. There were some times like that. But remember also the time before junior prom, back before you lost the house, when you were all down in the basement, just killing time. Cassie was there, wearing a light orange dress with little ruffles around the hips, and you were afraid to touch her for fear of crushing them. Remember there was a smell, so heavy it ate up all the air in the basement, and you could hardly move. And one of Cassie’s friends joked that your mother was trying to kill everyone, trying to suffocate you.

“That’s the least of it,” you said. But when your mother came down the stairs a few minutes later with a pan of fried okra still hopping and sizzling in oil, a gigantic smile on her face, everybody clamored around to get some.

“Don’t git any on your suit now, Kayla,” she said to you, even though she had fought so hard to get you in a dress. You’d stolen the suit from a second-hand store in Lewisburg, but even so, it felt crisp and new. You took one of the big hunks of dripping

okra and put in your mouth, hot and magnificent as a sigh, and let it melt. Remember days later, when you got sick again and couldn't breathe for fear of crying, and Cassie had already packed up her whole life to go to college, how the basement still smelled like fried okra.

The bell rings. You haven't even opened your booklet, and the board is covered in hieroglyphics. You can see that the equation begins somewhere and ends somewhere else, but you cannot, for the life of you, understand how it got to X.

"Kayla?" Someone is speaking. "I'm closing this room," Mr. Jeffreys says. Pretend you were studying the board, and shuffle out the door. Open your eyes wide as you brave the hallway, a long three-lane highway; feel the wind in your hair and swerve to avoid oncoming traffic, a big, slow-moving truck of a boy with long hair and a Nirvana t-shirt. Imagine slipping over into the body of someone else, every boy you meet, imagine looking down and seeing your chest all flatness, plains and vast expanses; a hardness in your stomach and a weight in your groin. Imagine that place of slippage, between you and them, not so big, in fact, minute. Feel dizzy and lightheaded, imagine yourself slipping there, falling into that body, hard and perfect and cold.

Awake to a cluster of faces and noise around you, and the school nurse applying something cool to your head. Come down hard into your own body, feeling between your legs for what isn't there. You feel hot and sick, a watery salty taste in your mouth, and you breathe and breathe but nothing comes inside the way it's supposed to.

"What a freak," a girl in frost-pink lip gloss and highlights says, laughing with two others. "That girl," says a boy in a jean jacket, and holds up a backwards peace sign, penetrating it with his tongue. Let the school nurse help you up and hand you your back pack, let her take your hand and lead you to the infirmary, weak and obedient as a little girl.

After lunch, sit in the parking lot, smoking a cigarette and fingering the hard package, folded in a white envelope. It is hard to remember how many times you have done this for your mother. Enough to get a reputation. Unfold the envelope and take out the pills. They are round and blue, and you'd hurl them away if you could, stuff the envelope in the drain pipe, except then they'd just be pills wasted in a drain pipe, and your mom would still be high and useless, only down a few pills.

Next to you, Jake and Robby nurse a fat blunt rolled in newspaper, and cough. Robby passes the blunt to you, holding it by its soggy tip. You take a half-hearted hit and pass it to Jake.

“Hey, Robby, see that sign about a shooting competition this weekend?” Jake says.

“Naw, what is it?”

“The fair's comin to Lewisburg, ferris wheels and rides and all that shit, but then there's cool events and stuff too. They were signing kids up for FFA and for the shooting contest in the hallway. It's a two hundred dollar pay day.” Your attention is caught now, for sure.

“Yeah?” Robby says. “I dunno, I think I'd need a lot more practice.” You know that Robby and Jake are both terrible shots. But maybe, maybe if you kept practicing. Your brother Gary and you used to go behind your house and practice shooting beer cans off a stump.

The idea begins to grow roots in your mind. See yourself with all the other boys in a great straight line. The judge will shake your hand and call you “son” and put a medal in your hands.

“I know someone that will pick those up, no problem,” says Jake, flipping his head towards the pills in your other hand, and you are brought back to yourself.

“Oh yeah?” you say.

“Want me to text him?” You shrug. Robby lies down on the asphalt, and Jake wanders off towards the far side of the parking lot.

“God, I’m blazed,” Robby says, bringing one knee up to his chest, and letting it down again, his Timberland boots scraping the ground. Let your eyes wind up his body, studying it. The easy mountain on his throat moves up and down. See the mountains off in the haze, now a mosaic of oranges and reds and dull yellows.

But there is a hole in the line of the colors of the mountains where the mountain has been strip-mined, a dull flesh color where the top’s been ripped out. In school, they tell you the mining companies understand the problem. They’ve reclaimed these mountains, here in West Virginia. They’ve sprinkled pellets that look like grass, which are supposed to grow more grass. The pellets are made of bits of rubber from recycled tires.

“You alright, Kayla?” Robby’s voice floats in from the side, his face framed by brown curls to his shoulders.

“Yeah,” you say, looking back at him lying on the asphalt. “Thanks.”

“That’s was really weird earlier. They said you passed out?”

“Yeah, I dunno. I guess it’s just the asthma. The doctor I saw a while ago said I should be able to keep it under control, but that felt different.”

“What did it feel like?” says Robby, crossing his arms under his head and turning to look at her.

“It felt like...It felt like this really hard pain in my chest and like you’re trying and trying to breathe in, but the breath never quite gets in so you can let it out again and so you

just keep trying. And wheezing and puffing and making all sorts a weird noises.” They laugh together. “And the more you can’t breathe, the more you get freaked out, and the more you get freaked out, the less you can breathe. It’s fucked up.”

Robby laughs. “Yeah,” he says, still looking at you. Then after a pause, “Is it hard this year, now that Cassie’s graduated and all?” Look down and away from him.

“Whatever,” you say. She packed up all her clothes and left the state to go to a college in Kentucky you could never get into even if you cared enough to try. Her dad worked at the high school, had helped her fill out the applications. She had so much help, you think bitterly.

She came over the night before she left to say goodbye, and you told her it was fine, just fine. That you hoped she’d be well. She cried and gave you a small, smooth black rock her cousin from out of town had found at the beach.

“For your collection,” she said, and then she was gone. Every so often there is a call in the night on your cell phone from her, and her voice on the machine. Her tired voice, fine and fragile as glass. “Kayla...please just pick up the damn phone. I’m sorry. I really am. I’m sorry you think I abandoned you and all, but you’ll get outta there, I just know it, I just know you will...If you want to, that is.”

Jake comes back with a guy in jeans and a construction vest. His shirt is taut across the chest and arms, you can see the hardness there, the bigness.

“This is Kayla,” Jake says to the guy. He coughs and smirks at Jake.

“Shit,” he says. “From across the lot I coulda sworn you was a dude.” He laughs.

“Yeah, whatever,” you say. “You want these or not?”

“Oh hey, she’s tough,” he says to Jake. “You got a brass pair in there, sweetheart?”

Jake laughs, but Robby doesn’t and gets up off the ground. You harden your jaw.

“Fuck this.” You pick up your backpack and start to walk towards the school building. The bell for fifth period is ringing.

“Naw, naw, honey, come back, we’re just playin’.” You turn. “Come on back, I’m sorry.” He looks down at the asphalt. “Please.” His eyes are dry and red-rimmed, and one of them doesn’t open all the way. “Please,” he says again, this time quieter.

“Fine,” you say. “But they’re expensive.” You flip him the envelope and he hands you a wad of soft bills. As you count them, he smiles and flicks his eyes up and down your body.

“Thanks,” you say, tentatively.

“No, thank *you* baby,” he says, the swagger back in his voice, and you feel there is a sharp edge there, at any moment he might pull something on you. Robby walks over to you, standing at your left elbow. Robby takes your arm and you jump and breathe in hard, for sometimes it is hard to tell who is putting their hands on you. But Robby is soft, his hand clammy on your flesh, and he looks the man in his red eyes and says,

“Come on, Kayla, let’s go back in.”

Sit in the back of the bus with Robby, behind Jake and a couple of other boys who carry aerosol cans in their backpacks. Ready yourself for the long ride. Put your feet up on the seat in front of you and try to doze off. Your body feels exhausted, creaky. The sound of the boys in front of you inhaling the aerosol becomes a harsh geometric pattern, a lullabye. You dream that you are a business man. You wake up in the morning and pick out a navy blue suit from a closet of suits. As you sit down at the breakfast table, you hike up the fabric of the dress pants to allow creases around your groin, and it is the most natural thing in the world. Cassie is your wife and she brings you the morning paper, puts a hand on your

back. You have a small black dog who begs for a piece of bacon. You feel the tightness loosen. You can breathe.

Then your face is sticking and pressed. The bus has lurched forward and you have smacked your head against the blue leather seat in front of you. It is six and almost dark out. The bus is climbing up Droop Mountain, up past the sign for Monongahela state park and the Civil War battle site. The state park is not so much a park as it is a dead forest and some picnic tables. Most of the good trees were cut down by the big logging companies, and the rest burned down in the fire a few years ago. There is only charred stumps left now, and the mushrooms that grow in ash.

The bus climbs higher, crosses the county line, the boundary. The mountain takes you higher and higher, the bus winds around and around the peak, and you are back where you started from, seeing the same trees, the same piles of brush and trash, the same abandoned construction sites. Play a game with yourself where you see if you can find the coal seams in the side of the mountain, black and uniform like a thin layer of chocolate frosting in a vanilla cake. You always win, and you follow the seam around and up the mountain like another road.

Gradually the bus empties as it stops in front of McCaul's gas station, Howard's auto repair, a few houses for the kids who live really out there. The park is the last stop. Drag yourself down and off the bus, and watch it wheeze down the road away from you. Mrs. Fischer will be there in her bathrobe, sitting on a lawn chair.

"Hey, sweetie!" she says. "God, it's cold, today huh?" Pause and take a puff of your inhaler, as you watch the orange line of electric light go down behind the black hills.

"Yeah," you say, "Sure is." Keep walking towards the center of the park. Cut through the hole in the fence to avoid Taylor's dogs. You can hear them barking next to

you through the brush, anyways. Some of the guys are having a bonfire and drinking beer. Taylor is there, drunkest of them all.

“Hey there, Kayla. Your mom home?” You keep walking.

“I dunno, go look for yourself.” Take the final steps towards the screen door, hearing already the television’s roar. Walk up the steps you made out of rocks you found. Most of them come from the woods around the park, hidden under moss or buried in the dirt. Some of them took hours of digging and prying to get out. Once, you found a beautiful green one near the parking lot at school, next to the iron guardrail, just like that.

Shoo the cat out of the way, and open the door. She is there on the couch watching Baby Carly loll on the floor.

“Hey baby,” she says.

“Hi, Mom,” you say to the back of her head, brassy blond, just visible over the top of the couch. “Hey, here’s what I got today.” You walk over and hold out the crumpled, soft bills. She doesn’t move, then slowly puts her hand up and opens the palm. You put the bills into her cracked palm. She closes it again, like a clam.

Walk over to your bed and throw down your backpack. Your breathing becomes short, and high, as if there is a mountain, and you are rising, but you cannot get over the top, and you know for sure now that your asthma is getting bad again. Reach down under the bed for the nebulizer, feel for its hard cage, but don’t find anything. Walk back over to the couch.

“Mom, where’s my nebulizer?”

“Sold it.” The hot panic rises in your throat and lungs and there is the hump again and the breath that will not breathe, that is taken from you. You feel your hands growing sweaty, and you look down at them through hot tears and a heart beating, and they are hard

and empty. There is so much that is out of reach. And there is so much that is yours that you would disown if you could, this body that will not follow direction, that is curvy and mountainous, where it could be, should be, flat. This body that rejects air and seeks to die, as if it knows the inevitable, trying to make its way back to this raw earth.

Hurry back outside, thinking maybe the cool evening air will be easier, smoother going down, but it just makes you shiver and chatter. Hear gunshots in the distance and head for it, hoping that it is Robby and Jake.

Find them in the usual spot, the junk site behind the old hotel, shooting tin cans off of Robby's dad's busted four-wheeler. As usual, they can't shoot for shit. Robby holds a forty in both hands and Jake closes one eye as he aims for the can, about ten yards away. The shot is way off, swiping off some tree bark a few feet wide to the left.

"Ohhhhh, dude," Robby heckles, and Jake gets Robby's head into a headlock, shouting,

"Shut the fuck up!" Some of the beer spills on the ground as they scuffle, then Jake grabs one of the beers and downs a long swig and notices you.

"Hey Kayla!"

"Hey," you say, "What's goin on up here?"

"Jake sucks at shootin', that's wassup," Robby says, looking at Jake and laughing.

"Fuck you, faggot," says Jake, going for the headlock again, but Robby's too quick.

"Whoa, where'd you get the beers?" you ask, wanting one.

"Where d'you think?" Jake says, panting. "Swiped 'em from McCaul's when the girl wasn't looking." Jake fakes another attack, and Robby jumps back.

"Alright, alright," Robby says. "Kayla, you wanna try shooting?" Neither of them have ever asked you to join in the shooting before. Try not to show how excited you are.

“Cool,” you say and walk over to take the gun from Jake. Robby puts a new can on the four-wheeler, and steps back. Take the gun in your arms gently, and run your left hand down its long barrel, scratched in places, but cold and smooth and hard. Remember the good, heavy feel of the gun the first time your brother Gary put one in your hand, as if you were not just a girl, poor and counted out, but someone capable of making a loud noise even if it was only a sound like a bomb exploding and an empty shell casing. Your body shifts and clicks into place, and in one languid motion, you release the tension in the trigger and the can flies off the four-wheeler and the sound rings loud in your ears, deafening you for a moment.

“Hell yeah!” Robby and Jake whoop in the background and Robby puts his hands around your shoulders and neck and squeezes hard.

“Damn,” says Jake. “Do it again.” So you do, three more times, three more cans. Each time there is an explosion and the orange brightness of the setting sun in your eyes when you close them and Robby and Jake’s cries of encouragement, and then a silence before you do it all over again.

“Damn,” Jake says again. “Gary teach you to shoot like that?”

“Yeah,” you say, smiling out one side of your mouth.

“Shit,” Jake says.

“Whaddya you hear from him over there?” asks Robby, quieter, and you consider what to say. Gary came home from Iraq still the same kid, looking forward to eating Hardys and sleeping around on the army base. But instead he found himself shipped right back where he came from, stunned and rattled loose as he waved from the bus taking them away to deployment training. You had come with your mom who was bloated and swollen with

Army Mother pride and Baby Carly. The other mothers cried and felt her stomach, and she cried, for Gary or for their touch, you'll never know.

“Not much,” you say, letting the gun rest on your shoulder. “He isn’t much for writing letters. He said he’d call on Christmas, but Mom hadn’t paid and they’d disconnected the phone. He’s happy I guess.”

“I’m thinking about joining,” Robby says. “I’d like to wear those uniforms and go on missions. Shit, they sent my cousin to France. Fucking France, you guys! Can you imagine?”

“I heard French chicks are easy,” Jake says, laughing and puffs himself up, “Vu lez voo cush eh avec mwa?”

“Shut the fuck up,” Robby says, and pushes him. “No, but seriously Kayla, you should totally enter the shooting contest this weekend.”

“What’re you smokin’, Robby?” you say, “I just got lucky.” But there it was, the best thing he could’ve possibly said.

“Yeah, yeah, that’s right,” Jake jumps in. “And that’s not getting lucky. You’re damn good.” Your face feels hot and good, and you smile.

“I’ll think about it,” you say. “When is it, again?”

“Uhh, hold on.” Robby goes over to his jacket and pulls out a bunch of folded pieces of paper. “I put the thing in here somewhere,” he says. Jake takes the gun from you, reloads it, and shoots. He misses again by a good three feet, this time to the right.

“Give it up,” you say laughing, and Jake punches you in the arm lightly.

“Oh yeah, here we go.” Robby is staring at a piece of green paper, reading it slowly. Then, he lets out a breath. “Shit...”

“What?” you say, kicking the dead leaves.

“It’s fucking tomorrow!”

“Let me see that,” you say, taking the flier from his hands. Sure enough, Greenbrier County Fair and Youth Sporting Competition. Saturday, October 14. It is tomorrow. “I don’t know,” you say, but the images spin threads in your mind. Calling Cassie with the bills in your hand. *Guess what?* you’d say. *I’m the fucking county shooting champion.*

“Sure you do,” says Robby, taking another swig from the forty. “Think on it tonight.”

“Yeah,” you say, re-reading the notice. “Can I keep this?”

Later, in the night, you can hear the men outside still drinking, the fire reflects on your windowpane, and you can’t sleep. Bed is swampy, just a place to roll. It is fall again. Your cell phone vibrates against the floor next to your bed: Cassie calling. Let the phone ring and ring itself out. Think of her listening to the ring, running a hand through her long dark hair, almost black. *I’ll come get you, anytime you want, you just have to ask*, she’d said. Then she is there with you, holding your chest and back as you try to breathe, as you breathe and cry, and breathe again, and inhale what you’ve tried to cry. Water in your lungs, or something else.

“You’re alright,” she is saying and looking at you, dead-on, and saying again, “You’re ok, you’re alright.” You’d been scared, but Cassie never was, even in the face of so much that you couldn’t make sense out of: her head asleep in the crook of your arm, the terrifying give of a waist, a smell like a secret. She wanted to touch you too, make you feel good, but it’d make you sick. You hated the thought of her seeing your body that way, exposed, folded. You imagined you had a dick down there, but she looked right at you, the way you were, and you wanted to throw up and die.

You hear the screen door open, and then laughter, your Mom's, and then a crash.

"Shit," says Taylor's voice, and then a low, guttural laugh. Baby Carly, from her crib in the hallway, lets out a few fussy squalls, then seems to comfort herself or roll over and go back to sleep. Hear things being shifted, re-arranged, in the living room. Your mom and Taylor on the couch, the floor, bumping the fold-up coffee table. Throw on a sweatshirt and climb out the window. Run for the woods, just past the edge of the clearing. Find the oak whose branch you broke when you were seven, and bear right. There is something like relief here, or else, just a quietness. In a moment, the outline of the old hotel comes into view, and you crunch across its short driveway, littered with Keystone cans and empty bags of chips among all the moss and ash. It's late enough, so you hope the place will be empty, but it's not: Jake and some girl are moving in the corner, a single red glare in the dark. Jake breaks away, "Hey Kayla,"

"Hey," you say to the floor, to the place where the planks have given out.

"You want?" Jake says, picking up the joint that burns in the ashtray, the girl still on his lap.

"Naw, thanks." The girl turns her head around as with a great effort and looks at you, her eyes are huge beads of black where the whites have been chased out, and you see that it is the girl from the bus. See her bare hips above the top of her jeans, that soft vulnerable flesh, as she perches there in Jake's lap, precarious, and a queen. If you were her, if you had to sit there and be pretty and fragile and elusive in the dark, if you stopped fighting, even for a moment, you would die. It is just that simple.

"Night," you say, and head for the back porch that looks out on a pond, except that it is not a pond anymore but only a kind of hole. Let your legs dangle over the side and clutch the railing. Take out the one blue pill that you stole for yourself. It is hard and round

in your hand like a prayer. Swallow it down dry. Close your eyes and wait. Wait and hope to fly, to be high, so high, high up, where the air is thin, and fresh and salty, rolling in from the coast. Feel it on these breasts and hips that are yours, for now anyway. Feel it in your hands that can pull the trigger of a gun, that will make you win tomorrow, you've decided. Ride that place just below the top of the mountain, hold onto your own hand as you ride it up and over the other side.

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Wake up late to the sound of Baby Carly squalling and pans clashing in the kitchen. A jolt of adrenaline runs through your body, when you remember the shooting competition. It's Saturday, and today's the day. Force the warm wool covers off and stumble into the living room, bracing yourself on the couch. Your mother is in the little kitchen, standing over a smoking pan.

"Morning Mom," you say, yawning and trying to make a fist but your muscles aren't awake yet.

"Oh, look who's up," she says, laughing and glances over at you. "I'm making eggs." In her clumsiness and playfulness, you can tell she is drunk, but not very. Drunk enough to want to talk. You can smell her lotion and cigarettes smell.

Outside, the wind blows hard for a moment and the sound of leaves scratching up against one another is deafening.

"Sheesh," she says, "would you listen to that wind?"

"Yeah," you say, sitting down on the couch. She picks up the frying pan to turn the eggs, but in her drunkenness, misses the stove trying to put it back on, and the pan clatters to the ground, the eggs smattering on the floor.

"God fucking damn it to hell!" she screams, jumping back.

“God, mom!” you say, getting up and coming over to help.

“Sorry baby,” she says bending down, her hands fluttering over the mess, but not knowing where to land. She stands back up and takes a cigarette from the pack above the fridge, lights it. You get a towel and start cleaning up, and she stands over you, smoking. When you move to put the towel in the sink, notice there is new picture up on the fridge among the glossy mess of relatives and the bumper sticker that says “Coal Keeps the Lights On”—it is a black and white photograph of a middle-aged woman. She wears a bandana over grey hair that hangs down her back in a long braid, and a plaid jacket over a heavy flannel work shirt. She is smiling and her face is dark and leathery, made of different patches of skin. Her hands look hard too and scarred from work, horses maybe.

“Who’s this, Mom?” you say, pointing to the picture.

“That’s your grandma, don’t you know that? I just found this picture in a box of old shit I had under my bed. Would you look at those hands. God, they were huge.” Study the picture some more, wanting to know about this woman, only a grey outline in your mind.

The wind howls outside.

“God damn that wind,” she says, letting her heavy drunken head fall and rest on her shoulder. You turn to go. “Just wait right there, you. Did I ever tell you about the big storm that happened here when I was little?”

“No, Mom,” you say, feeling the relief of being outside by yourself just out of reach, desperately wanting to run and find Robby and Jake and go to the competition.

“Well,” she says, picking up her can of beer from the counter. “It was about this time. Must’ve been ’71 – or ’72 maybe?” She looks at the ceiling for the answer. You sigh and shift yourself onto the back of the red corduroy couch. Baby Carly makes soft noises and wriggles in the corner of the couch, one leg up on the armrest, her face almost purple

from so much trying. Your mother leans into the kitchen counter with one hip and begins to speak. She speaks into open space, to a point in the back of the living room, or somewhere far away.

“There was this great big storm when I was little. The lights went out and we had no water for six days. It was so bad that all the frying pans in the kitchen blew off their hooks and fell on the ground and me and all my sisters were so scared. And then there was this really tall, handsome woman who came driving all up over the bank near our house and my mother let her in, and she just sat on the dining room table and she held out the skirt of her dress real wide and me and my sisters got up underneath it.” She pauses to sip from the beer, still thinking. “God, I just remember it feeling so warm and safe in there, under her skirt, like there was no storm outside at all.”

“Who was the woman?” you ask.

“It was your grandma, Kayla! God, do I have to spell it out for you?” She sips again. “Damn, that woman was something though – she’d never be caught dead in a place like this,” she gestures with the beer in her hand to the interior of the trailer. “She was so goddamn tough. She and two others just marched right up to the foreman of the mining operation out behind the park here and told them to stop,” she snorts, starting to laugh, laugh hysterically, laughing so hard in high-pitched noises she can barely get the words out. “Can you imagine that-“ she makes her voice deeper in imitation, “Hey, you there, just stop all that blasting!” She goes into waves of laughter again, bending over, laughing so hard no sound comes out. “And her horses!” she says suddenly as if remembering something important. “God, she loved them. She was always cleaning ‘em, talking to ‘em, feeding ‘em. Paid more attention to those damn horses than me,” she says laughing and taking another sip.

Listen carefully to the story she is telling, for it sounds familiar though you've never heard it before. It's a good story, and you want to know how it ends. But that is all there is. She straightens up suddenly and stops laughing, wipes tears from the corners of her eyes.

“Kayla! Can't you see the baby's cryin'? Can you get her somethin' to eat?”

Grab a bottle of formula from the fridge and bring it over to Baby Carly. She feels warm and sickly as you grab her around her squishy chest, and you prop her up against the back of the couch with the bottle of formula near her mouth. As you turn to go, she will reach halfheartedly for your breast which hangs, for once, low and free in your shirt from sleep. She fumbles her small hand with fingers that move slowly and out of synch with one another. Dodge angrily out of her grasp, and leave her there, looking stunned and still.

Go looking for Robby and Jake, and you find yourself almost running. You find them shooting off the four-wheeler again.

“Yo!” Robby says, right before he shoots. His shot nicks the can, and it teeters, but doesn't fall. You stand back and watch. You feel good, really good. The sun is warm on your back and shoulders and Jake hands you a beer and you drink some of it, and stretch out on some old tires by the junk site. The day is bright and not too cool even with the wind, and brown leaves cover the ground so that the boys' feet make crunching noises in between the gun blasts.

“Kayla! Whaddya think about today?” Robby is calling. “The competition's at 4:00. We can take my mom's truck.” Smile and kick the dirt under your feet. Two hundred dollars is enough to do anything – to buy those pants from the men's section, to take the bus to Cassie. If you could win this, if you could be a winner, strong and admired, you and Cassie might work, might fit. All the rest –the wrong bodies, the distance – would flatten out and pale. Money in your pocket, fat farmer boys jealous and spitting.

“Hell yeah, let’s do it,” you say.

“Yeah, alright!” Robby play punches you in the chest a few times. “Let’s go, Jake!”

“Yeah?” Jake says, smiling.

“Yeah,” you say. And then you are all running, flushed, and hot in too many layers in the fall sun, over the field past the old hotel and through the woods behind the park and Robby’s grabbing the keys from under the mat and you are running to your house. You fling open the door, about to take your coat from the hook on your wall, and realize your Mom is gone, there’s only Baby Carly lolling on the couch. You check the back, check outside, but your Mom’s nowhere.

“Shit,” you say, under your breath, pacing back into the house.

“Kayla!” Robby and Jake are yelling outside for you to hurry up. You fling open the door again and go outside.

“I can’t, go,” you yell, your voice quivering a little. “I’m stuck with Carly I guess – I guess Mom’s screwing Taylor or something. I can’t find her anywhere.”

“Whatever, bring Carly along. She’s alright, as long as she don’t make too much noise.” You hesitate. There will be screaming and throwing when you come home. But then the judge, kind as a father, is giving you two crisp hundreds and girls that look like Cassie are watching from the sidelines. There is no time to hesitate, and so you are grabbing Baby Carly who clutches her bottle of formula and feels good and warm against your cheek and Jake is jumping into the cab of the old white truck and has called “no bitch” and you are protesting, and Mrs. Fischer calls from her lawn chair to keep it down boys, just keep it down. But you boy, boy oh boy, you are on the inside of a truck that is fast and can carry you away from here, and then you are gone in a lurch and a start.

About forty-five minutes in, the whole dashboard starts to make a clattering, shuddering noise and then a wheezing. Baby Carly lets go of her bottle and starts to squall.

“Shit, shit,” Robby says, whacking the dashboard down a few times. “We need gas. Anyone got any money?” You hold onto Baby Carly with one hand and reach down into your pocket with the other for show, knowing the contents already – a few pennies, your bus pass, a half chewed piece of gum put back in the wrapper, the smooth black rock that you carry everywhere. Pull out something that feels like money, but find it’s only Cassie’s number written on a slip of paper. Once, just wanting to hear her voice, you used a pay phone to call and hang up.

“I got like...seven cents,” you say. Jake’s still digging.

“Yeah, um, I got like...a little over a dollar,” he says finally.

“I got maybe fifty cents,” Robby says. “We’re so fucked.” The dashboard continues to rattle and the wheezing gets louder.

“Hey, hey,” you say, spying the red and blue of a Chevron sign just over the crest of the hill. Panic grows in you and turns into a kind of drug, running hot electricity through your heart. “Pull into the gas station, maybe they’ll give us a break.” Robby jerks the wheel to the right and the car skids into the gas station and he turns the engine off in a hurry. The three of you are sweating, cramped together in the cab and panting.

“Shiiiiit,” Robby says. You sit in silence listening to the whoosh and whir of the cars going by in both directions on the little two-lane road. Down the road is the Blue and Grey bar where your Mom and Taylor and his friends go sometimes, and there are a few cars parked there already. It is two in the afternoon, and the sun has gone behind a big cloud that looks like a turtle, and the contest and the judge might as well be on Mars. Then you remember the two hundred dollars, can almost see the crisp twenties in your hand.

“Hey, I’ll be back. Get out, wouldja Jake?” Jake hops down and lets you pass a bit stunned. “Where’s she going?” he says to Robby as you walk towards the little gas station store. The bell on the top of the door jingles as you open the door, swagger towards the counter, stopping to peruse the candy and chips. The woman behind the counter, tall and skinny with big front teeth and a yellow scrunchy in her ponytail, looks up from her magazine and eyes you suspiciously.

“Afternoon,” you say, trying to be cool, but your face is flushed and you can feel your whole body breathing.

“Afternoon,” she says, her voice unsure, following your hands with her eyes, then flicking back to her celebrity magazine. Putting back a Twix bar, you saunter over to the counter.

“Hi!” you say.

“What can I do for ya?”

“What I really need is some gas. See that white pickup in front?” you say, pointing out the clear front panels of the store. Robby waves.

“Yeah, alright,” she says. “How much you want?” You smile, wide.

“Well, you see, I got a little problem.” She looks up from her magazine, and leans against the counter.

“What kinda problem?”

“Well, I’m a county shooting champion. And I’m on my way to the fair in Lewisburg to be in the contest over there. But me and my friends, we’ve run outta gas. And the funny thing is, we don’t have any money!” You laugh nervously, but she does not, just keeps staring at you and leaning into the counter.

“You a shooting champion?” she smiles, and humphs. “You just a girl. How old are you?” You feel hot all over and reach for your inhaler in your pocket, but you find it’s not there.

“Yeah, I am, really. And once we get to Lewisburg we’ll have the money for sure. We’ll just come right back and give you the money. Like an I.O.U.” Wait hopefully for her response. She shakes her head.

“Honey. We don’t give out no I.O.U.s for gas. Come back when you got some money.” And with that, she goes back to her magazine. Tighten your jaw, and breathe in quick a few times, wheezing a little. The woman looks up at you again, this time her face kinder, more open.

“You ok, girl? You look a little pale. You want some water or somethin’?”

“I’m fine,” you say and turn and walk back out the door and towards the truck. Robby and Jake have the cab doors open, and Robby is cradling Baby Carly in one arm.

“So?” says Jake, expectantly. You scuff the bottom of your Vans on the ground and look down.

“No dice,” you say.

“Shit,” says Jake, looking away, over at the road.

“Well, we can’t be that far,” Robby tries, hopefully. “We could totally walk the rest of the way, We’ll be there in like an hour.”

“You wanna *walk* to the fucking fair?” says Jake.

“Well, we don’t really got a lotta options here, do we?” Robby replies. There is a silence. In the silence, one more thing dies, one more dream of something being easy.

“Let’s go,” you say.

The walk is longer than Robby expected. The whole way there, down the side of the small highway, Jake plays a game with a rock, where he can't lose it, has to keep kicking it, and following it to where it lands so he can kick it again. Baby Carly begins to smell, and you hold her awkwardly over your chest. After the underpass, the dirt changes to asphalt, stores appear, banks. You pass Wal-Mart', blue and huge, on your left. A young couple loads the rear of their car from a blue Wal-Mart cart in the parking lot. They are loading in lawn furniture: together they lift a round table and then four chairs, all of the same white fake iron curlicues. Then there are plants, the woman grabbing them by one side, flowers and ferns, while the man shoulders a big bag of potting soil into the space that's left. Imagine the home they have together, a home with flowers and a lawn where they will smile at one another. The man will take the woman's hand in his own.

Baby Carly needs a new diaper badly, and your mouth is dry and sticky from thirst. Robby sees you looking at the couple and asks if he can take a turn carrying Baby Carly. You say you're alright, but you need to rest on a bench outside McDonalds for a few minutes. Jake swipes a coke that's been left behind on one of the tables.

Take a short cut that Robby knows, that cuts through some woods behind the McDonalds.

"It's way faster like this," he says. Half an hour or so in, when you're really in the woods, there is a big downed tree in the path, and with the weight of Baby Carly and your own wheezing, it's a challenge. Hoist Carly up first, but you can't get yourself up, your arms feel like pudding.

"Hey, gimme your hand," Robby says, and pulls you up. Just as you reach the other side there is a big blast and a deafening noise that fills your ears and cancels everything out

and dust flies everywhere and something in the ground underneath you moves. You trip and lose your balance and lose Baby Carly.

Far in the distance, see a huge cloud of brown dust, falling, falling.

Jake turns around angrily. “What the fuck-?” he is saying, brushing himself off. Search frantically for Baby Carly and see with relief she’s fine, squirming in a bed of leaves. Bring yourself to your knees and pick her up. Robby steps back, dazed.

“They’re blasting again,” Robby says, still staring at the cloud of dust. Follow his eyes and see that moments ago, where the top of the mountain was visible through the trees, it isn’t anymore.

“Whoa,” you say, “I’ve never seen it up close. They just took that mountain’s whole fucking top off.”

“Fuck that shit,” Robby says, spitting out dirt and a little blood.

“Whaddya mean, fuck it?” Jake asks.

“I mean just what I said. This is the third one this month. Have you seen what they did to the mountain behind the park? To the one near the diner where my mom works?”

“Yeah, so? That’s money in the bank. That’s my dad up there, my dad’s buddies. We need that stuff.”

“Yeah, right.” They stare at each other for a moment, facing off, there in the woods. Think of your grandma, standing up to the mining company, and wonder if her strength is in your blood. “Let’s go,” Robby says finally, and you are happy to get going, the blast still ringing in your head.

When the turn off for the fairground finally appears, over the crest of one more hill, Jake breaks into a whoop and lets the rock he’s been kicking rest by the side of the road. The light is dim, and it is turning cold. Robby looks at you, and says,

“Well, there you go.” You smile, but the two of you know it’s probably all finished.

When you arrive at the entrance, there is a big clock that reads 4:10.

“Shit,” Jake says, kicking the ground. Baby Carly is asleep in your arms, her little alien hands, moving jerkily in sleep against his wool jacket.

“We’re too late,” you say. Cassie’s dark hair, her hands on your back as you breathe. Nothing has changed, and you can’t go to her now, just a girl with empty hands. *Just ask.*

“Whoa, hold on,” Robby says, putting a hand on the back of Baby Carly’s head. “We can still make it, they have to let you in.”

“Yeah,” Jake says, “you’re gonna win this.” You’re not so sure, but Robby takes your arm and pulls you towards the entrance. You are all running wild, your left arm curled around Baby Carly and your right pumping as you run, flailing in the electric air. You follow the signs to the main tent stuck on stakes into the ground, but they are confusing, and you all get lost. Keep running and weave with Robby and Jake through the booths of water gun shooting and stuffed animal prizes, the cotton candy stands, fried Oreos stations, goldfish in plastic bags. Middle-aged couples in football sweatshirts meander through the booths, trying to keep track of small children and aging parents. Baby Carly slows you down, and Robby and Jake round a corner and you lose sight of them. Look around, panicked, but through it, see a rock collector’s booth. You have to stop for a moment. There are three tables of the most beautiful rocks you have ever seen. There are sparkly silver ones, and translucent purple ones, and deep green ones, and smooth black ones like the one Cassie gave you that comes from the ocean. They’re beautiful, but there is something strange about seeing them all laid out on this table for display, like pets in a zoo.

“Sorry, we’re just closing up,” the owner says apologetically, and starts to bring down the metal gate in front of the rocks.

“Sure,” you say, still looking.

“Kayla,” Robby says breathlessly, appearing from around the back of the booth. “We gotta keep goin!” and you turn to follow him, but seeing the owner’s back to you, you reach out and take a small shiny rock, the label says crystallized coal, put it in your pocket and keep running.

When you finally get to the entrance of the main tent, you hear gunshots already firing,

“It’s started,” you say.

“It’s alright,” Robby says, “let’s just see.” He pulls back the tent flap and you all step inside. The noise inside is deafening, people talking on top of guns firing one after another like firecrackers, and a voice on the loudspeaker saying, “Contestant number three...ready...fire away.”

You stand there, Jake, Robby and you, watching the rows and rows of boys with guns, the rows and rows of paper targets, men with bullseyes on them. Stand there and watch the blasting, blast after blast. Feel each kickback into your own flesh. Men stand around the sidelines, chewing tobacco, yelling encouragement, the veins in their faces red and pulsing as hearts. Something inside you recoils, pulls back from an edge, and you feel this is it, this is as far as you go.

“What can we do for ya?” A large man wearing a white collared shirt and holding a clipboard has come over to you.

“Well, uh, I wanted to enter the competition,” you say, feeling dazed.

“Competition’s closed,” the man says, not even looking up. You look at Jake and Robby.

“Yo,” Jake says. “You gotta let her in, she’s the best in this whole damn place.” The man looks up now.

“I don’t gotta do anything. You gonna tell me what I gotta do, now, is that it?” Jake bites his lower lip, and is about to start in.

“Hold on, hold on,” Robby says. “We don’t want any trouble. We just wanna get our friend here into this competition. You see, our car broke down and we had to walk here! We’re only a few minutes late. Couldn’t you please help us out, give us a break here?”

“I said, the competition’s closed,” the man says again, looking straight at Jake. Then the man looks you up and down, and looks at Baby Carly and says, “You gonna change that baby or what? She smells somethin’ awful.” And if before you were one of the boys running wild and free, now you are some kind of half-way creature, holding a baby that smells. Feel it coming on, you begin to wheeze and wheeze, cursing yourself for leaving your inhaler at home. Baby Carly begins to cry, loud, and some of the men turn to look at you, confused and scoffing. Wish with your whole self that not everything you ever did always turned out the same way, with a smell like something dying.

“Well, I guess that’s it then,” Robby says. “I’m sorry.”

“I could kill that guy,” Jake says,

“It’s alright,” you say. “I don’t know what I was thinking, that I could compete against all these guys.” The voice on the loudspeaker says something new and a whole line of boys fires at the same time, like an army salute.

“Well,” Jake says, and then opens his big palm to reveal three tiny white pills. You and Robby shrug and each take one, and you all swallow them down, smiling a little.

“Hey, there’s another girl here,” Robby says all of a sudden, pointing to a set of shooters off in the corner. Turn to look, but you don’t see anyone who looks like a girl.

“Don’t be a jerk, Robby,” you say. Wish these pills would begin to kick in, already.

“I’m not! Come on, let’s go see.” You follow Robby again around the periphery of the room. Baby Carly howls, her howling blending into the mixing of sounds, just a faint sound beneath all that blasting. Sure enough, when you reach the other side, the girl comes into view. She is thick and tall, wearing a big t-shirt and a backwards baseball cap. She has short hair like yours. She pulls the gun up level with her eye, like Gary taught you, and releases it easily, getting almost a perfect bulls eye. Her face looks old for a high school competition, the skin has that yellowish, tough look to it. Like the picture of the woman on the fridge.

“Whoa, she’s good!” Robby yells, elbowing you. A crowd of guys watching too, stares at Robby and then at you, then back at the girl. You nod, watching. She sees you all watching her and looks away, focusing on the competition. Two more shots, both good ones, though not perfect.

“God,” says Robby, “This stuff is strong, I’m really starting to feel out of it,” and Jake takes a little fake bow.

“It’s the good stuff,” Jake says. You are really starting to feel it too, though you try not to show it. Your head feels a hundred miles above your body, and Baby Carly is so light you can barely feel her against your neck, and you can breathe, slowly, easily.

Some of the boys step out, and it’s just two boys and the girl shooting now. The final round, you guess. You are really riled up now, Robby is clutching your arm, and you are yelling,

“Come on girl, you can do it!” Your body feels numb and tingly at the same time and you take a few steps back to steady yourself. The announcer says,

“Contestants...ready” they all raise and aim their guns, and you take a sharp breath in, “fire away,” and they do, and Baby Carly is crying again. But you can’t care because they’re measuring the shot marks but it’s clear that the girl pulled through the one perfect shot when it counted. Feel yourself rise up, jump up, whoop once, twice, Robby’s shining face next to your own, and Jake hollering too.

And it occurs to you suddenly that you should give her something, must give her something, she is the winner after all, and you want to be a part of that, because you are implicated in what she has done. But you have nothing, your hands are empty, save Baby Carly.

“Come on,” Robby says, “let’s go,” and takes Carly from you. You linger, looking at the girl. She is standing in a cluster of people, receiving stiff congratulations, but you make yourself turn and follow Jake and Robby towards the exit with the rest of the crowd.

Darkness has fallen and the air outside feels good on your face and throat. Walking feels strange, you can’t remember how to move your feet right. Robby and Jake move quicker, and you can’t see them anymore in front of you. Stumble over your own foot, and fall on the ground. A little blood comes from your nose.

“Are you alright?” Someone is asking, offering you a hand.

“Yeah, you say,” covering your nose with your hand. A young woman stands in front of you. She is dressed simply: blue jeans, a white t-shirt, her brown hair in a short ponytail. Her eyes clear, green. “Thanks.”

“No problem,” she says. “You sure you’re alright?” Then someone is calling out to her,

“Jan!” and she is turning away from you. The girl from the competition, the winner, comes over and hugs Jan.

“Hey, I won!” she says laughing, and they hug again.

“You sure did, man!” Jan says, giving her a high five.

“Who’s this?” the winner asks, looking at you.

“Oh, sorry,” you say. “I’m Kayla.”

“Hey Kayla,” the winner says. “I’m Al. I saw you and your friends cheering for me. It helped a lot. Thanks.”

“Oh,” you say, shifting your weight, and your head still feels so light, “sure. No problem.” Jan and Al look at you, not the flicking up and down glance of the man who bought your Mom’s pills, but more just taking you in, studying you thoughtfully and seeing something there.

“Where’re you from?” Jan asks.

“The boonies,” you say smiling. “Forty minutes away from here or so, just over Droop mountain.” They smile and look sideways at one another.

“Damn,” Al says. “I used to live right near there. Soon as I graduated I moved here to Lewisburg. There’s ah...how do I say it...more to *do* here.” They laugh again.

“Yeah,” you say, laughing too.

“Well, we should get going,” Jan says. “I gotta take this one out to celebrate,” she says, slapping Al’s back.

“Alright, but I’m buying this time,” Al says.

“It was nice to meet you Kayla,” Jan says. “You should come hang out with us sometime. We’re always in the café on Main Street.”

“Yeah, whenever you’re back in town,” Jan says, turning to go. There is an easiness there between them that you want, that is contagious. You see them turn and take light steps. Put your hands in your pockets, and feel, suddenly, two rocks. And they are yours to

give for they belong to you, as this earth belongs to you, if nothing else does. Words are hard, your mouth feels dry as a wad of cotton, but suddenly it is open and you are saying,

“Hey, wait.” They turn around.

“Yeah?” Al says, her eyes dark and serious.

“Here,” you say to Al, holding out the rock you stole, the black shiny carbon, in your hand.

“What is it?” she asks, confused.

“It’s just a rock,” you say, “but it’s all I have. I just wanted to say congratulations. On the contest,” you pause, “and everything.” She looks at Jan then back at you.

“Thanks,” she says, taking it, looking at it, then looking back at you. “Coal, right?”

“Right,” you say.

“Thank you,” she says, touching your arm. Think, looking at her, that there is strength there, woman flesh be damned.

And then they turn to go, this time for real, their quiet shadows fading into the dark and colored lights of the fairground.

Watch them until you can’t see their shapes at all anymore. You don’t see Robby and Jake anywhere. The music from the ferris wheel is the same accordion over and over. There is a slight breeze. You breathe in the fall air, breathe and breathe, and you think you hear another mining blast, but it is only the sound of the gunshots from inside and your own heart in your ears. The tops of your mountains have been blown off. You’re a woman. Cassie is gone.

*Just ask*, she said.

You try to breathe again but can’t, high peaks and pockets of air that you can’t summit, can’t get over, you breathe and breathe and breathe again. Your heart seems a great

mistake, filling and bursting and not knowing how to use itself, except to hurt and use itself up, and if this is love, you think, you are going to it.

Reach onto your jacket pocket, take out your cell phone and dial Cassie's number, your fingers knowing already what to do. Everything falls away, except wanting to hear her voice. In the ringing, there is the sound of something moving, the electricity traveling the winding path of the wires, the distance between you and her. When the ringing cuts off and Cassie's voice comes on, say,

I'm asking.

**This is Not  
the Whole Story**

In the night, there is a sound like a beating heart and it will be your own. In the bunk below yours, the girls are up to the usual shit. Tracy has stolen a bracelet from the woman who does rounds and is trying to sell it for fifteen dollars. Later, Tracy discovers that the head of her Justin Timberlake poster has been torn off, and you rub it in your palm under your pillow. She is in one of her moods. She shushes the other girls and gets up to see if you are awake. Stare into her ugly, fat face. The state-issued window bars make patterns like geometry on her skin, and orange steam rises outside from the heater in the basement making the room seem like a kind of hell, as if you are all already dead, and only waiting for something.

Pretend not to be scared of her when she gets like this.

“Hey, Hope,” she says, and puffs up her fat cheeks, and then punches you one, hard, right between the legs.

After a minute, realize the sound is coming from down there, a dull ringing you can almost hum. Touch yourself there and the skin feels numb and thick, but not dead, not nearly, it still feels good to touch it. Later, when you get up to pee, terrified that Tracy will grab your ankles as you climb down the ladder, you will find a used tampon in your shoe. The things you use as weapons.

In the morning, Tracy has calmed down, as she always does. She asks you to help her put on her butterfly necklace that her Dad gave her before he took off. As you are hooking the clasp, see the hairs on the back of her neck, soft and vulnerable.

Wear jean cutoffs that show off your thighs. On the long bus ride to the public high school, goose bumps appear on your legs suddenly like a secret you tried to hide. Sit with your legs spread apart during algebra and biology. In history, Jason who sits two rows behind will give you the eye, staring at your breasts, your legs. He will pass you a note:

“Check one: 1. chem lab, 2. parking lot behind building C.” There will be square boxes. You have next period free anyway.

After Jason is done, he takes your hand, and asks you if want to do it again. Toss your frizzy blond bangs out of your eyes and consider. His hands are soft and hot and clammy on your neck and you cannot see for a moment through the pins and needles and those hands do not belong to Jason any longer, but to him, your brother, afternoons after school when your foster mom wasn't home. He would corner you by the plastic kitchen table where he would take your arm and press into you saying, “please,” asking so politely, you almost felt in charge. Or he would take you outside, down to the secret waterfall, heaving and wheezing into you, then offering you his hand, so clammy and hot, up out of the pile of leaves. Leading you back towards the house, he would warn in a high, whiny voice, “Don't step on the red ones! They're poisonous. Don't step on them or you'll die,” pulling you faster and faster.

Once, you made up your mind to tell her. Your foster mom was watching the morning soaps.

“Pat,” you said, finally, after minutes of working up your courage.

“Shhh,” she held a finger to her lips like a cross, “Don't wake your brother. You know what the doctor said.”

Jason notices your glazed look, staring at the chalkboard, and pulls back for a moment.

“Hope?” Take his head in your hands fiercely, and kiss him, your face pressed dryly against his, your hands gripping his spiky, gelled hair.

Get caught the second time by Ms. Campbell, the English teacher. She opens the door half way, closes it suddenly out of habit, then walks back in as if remembering something. She is young and not shocked.

“Ok, get your clothes on,” she says, crossing her arms over her small breasts and looking away. Her face is tight as she leads you and Jason towards the principal’s office, her hands nervously running through her hair. Before the cafeteria she makes a wrong turn and Jason has to correct her. On the walk to the principal’s office, focus on her oval face, and the solid heavy jaw, almost like a man’s. Her hair is cut short just past her ears, not straight across, fashionable. Know that she is from a big city. When you pass the girls’ bathroom, another girl from the home is coming out, and the smell of cigarettes is upon you suddenly.

“Again?” she says, shaking her head. “Slut, slut, slut.” Give her the finger and keep walking.

The school principal has a new secretary, a thin stupid woman who wears suits that are too big for her. Feel superior as you wait, and swing your feet like a child, savoring the loud thuds they make against the linoleum wall. Jason looks bored and plays with his cell, texting, probably texting Hank. Hank works at McCaul’s and you still see him sometimes anyway. Sometimes, if you have a quarter, you’ll call him from the home. Hank wasn’t so bad. He had a mean streak in him but he wasn’t so bad. Just a boy from around who was good with cars. He liked to go to the movies and put his hand down your pants.

The secretary smiles at you gently, from behind her beige metal desk, as if you might be easily broken. Know that she is imagining you, pitying you, and her pity stinks, a smell like something dying.

“Hey,” you say, whispering over to Jason.

“What?” he says, still texting.

“Think she’s hot?” you tip your head to the secretary and smile.

He looks up. “Meh,” he says. “She’s alright. I mean, I’d do her, if that’s what you’re asking.” She puts her hair up in a ponytail absentmindedly, making sure no strands are left astray.

“Yeah,” you say, “You should fuck that virgin,” and Jason stops mid text to look over at you.

The principal opens his door. “Hope, we’re ready for you.” *Who’s we?* you think as you get up, and saunter through the doorway. Focus on the terrible job he is doing of combing his hair over, the strands clumped and oily as paint. See Ms. Campbell in the corner in corduroy pants the color of mustard. Feel her eyes upon you, and refuse to meet them.

Slump down in the chair the principal points to. Suddenly you feel tired, so very tired from a place that is hard to locate, like the core of you, the back of your back, but bigger, deeper. Your body is exhausted, can’t sleep at night, terrified that Tracy will get her hands on the few good things you still have: a silver crown for being second runner up in the county beauty pageant, a bottle of cherry lip gloss, a walkman from Pat.

“Hope,” the principal says, in a painful molasses way, clasping his hands together and bringing them down over the crotch crease in his blue dress pants. He always was a pervert. “I really don’t want to have to suspend you again, but you aren’t leaving me much choice.” Ms. Campbell looks uncomfortable, crosses and re-crosses her legs.

“Shh,” you say, “the doctor said.”

Last period is English with Ms. Campbell. She’s only been here a couple of months, and rumor has it she’s only staying two years. She is young and there isn’t the same boredom in her, ending class early, assigning coloring books for Christmas. These things

don't mean much to you. There is still a barrier there, and you are still on the wrong side. But sometimes when you look up suddenly, you catch her looking at you, straight on. Once, she called on you and you knew the answer.

While she's writing on the board, some of the boys in the back make cracks about her ass and mime grabbing motions. She writes a poem on the board.

"After great pain, a formal feeling comes." She reads the poem slowly, lingering, with a toss of her short brown hair. "As freezing persons recollect the snow—" Turn towards the window that looks out over the asphalt parking lot, the mountains in the distance. It is fall again, chilly in the breeze and too hot in the sun, but soon there will be snow covering those mountains. The snow came rushing at you all of a sudden. It was the first time with your brother, and you were eleven. One moment you had been making a snowman, running and bending over to collect the best snow patches, and then an icy white wetness in your hair and his hand slapping your face. There was a pain in your chest. The heart breaking is more than an expression. You looked down and saw blood, shocking on the white snow. How bright the air was that day, how clear and bright, and how hungry you were afterwards. You went back to the house and ate six donuts, fast like an animal. He squinted at you, as if through a telescope.

"I have to lie down now, my head hurts," he said. He went to his room and closed the door quietly, *click*.

December will make one year in the home for girls.

"...then the letting go," Ms. Campbell reads. Ms. Jenkins, the counselor from the home, tells you that it is not your fault: your brother was a very sick boy, not normal in the head. She repeats this over and over again as if it were an answer, or a prayer. Say it, say it again.

Think of your brother when he was in his repeating stage. Places, names. *Pat, Pat, Pat, Pat* he'd say, happily, pointing at her. You and your brother had been placed with her when you were ten and he was thirteen, after your mother got arrested for the third and final time. Pat had made Jell-o cups with whipped cream and let you and your brother eat them in front of the T.V. She'd liked that you were pretty, entered you in the county middle school beauty pageant, bought you shirts with fake jewels on them. She'd yank a brush through your thick, mangy blond hair, no matter how many times it took.

But soon she started getting headaches, took to going to bed before it was dark out, watching the soaps on T.V. all day long. Sometimes you'd come home from school and she wouldn't have moved since you left that morning. Your brother really started to push her buttons. She hated the way he stuttered, his ticks – he wouldn't eat red foods: no hamburgers, strawberries, or red peppers. Jam was a challenge. Ketchup would push him over the edge.

“Oh just eat it,” she'd say, pouring ketchup onto his paper plate. But he'd just sit there blinking. By then, he spoke only in exclamations.

“No way, José!” he cried back.

During your second month of high school they took you from Pat. One of your brother's special education teachers noticed that he was coming to school in dirty clothes, his hair unwashed for days. On the home visit, the social worker opened the door to your brother's door and nearly passed out from the stench. There were jars of curdling milk on the table, yellow and watery and thick, candy wrappers and Styrofoam takeout containers from China Buffet littered the floor, all mixed in with endless scribbles on scraps of yellow paper. *Great scott!* said one. *Believe you me!* said another. There were mice in the holes in the

walls, moldy pieces of pizza between the sheets. Pat put out a hand to steady herself on the couch. She claimed she hadn't known how sick he was.

At the end of class, Ms. Campbell hands back the last paper to the class. She makes a face like regret, tight but kind, when handing you yours.

“Anyone who got below a C has to stay and check in with me,” she says, and takes a seat at her desk. After the bell, a line of students forms near her desk. You were supposed to meet up with Jason, but you dutifully wait your turn. There are two boys in front of you who are clearly pissed, digging their hands into their jackets and sighing. The girl speaking to Ms. Campbell now chews gum and says “uh huh,” every so often. Your eyes are tired. Sit down in one of the chairs in the front row and cover your eyes with your hand, letting your eyelids rest.

“Hope?” Ms. Campbell puts a hand on your shoulder and you jolt out of sleep.

“What?” you say sharply.

“About your paper,” she says, taking a seat next to you.

“Yeah,” you say. “What about it?”

“Well,” she says. “The ideas are good – it just needs a lot more development. It needs to be pushed farther....” There is more, but this is enough, the same old story and you don't want to hear it again. The mountains, faint as watercolors in the distance, seem upon you all of a sudden and then they are everywhere and you are among them, at any moment they might crush you. Where you had in mind to go, they say, is nowhere that's away from here.

As Ms. Campbell speaks, imagine she is your friend, imagine you are at a restaurant like you've seen on T.V. and it is dark and noisy and she is trying to tell you a secret, but it is hard to hear.

"You're smart," she is saying, you can just make out over the loud music. "You're really smart, Hope," she says again, the words vibrating in the empty classroom.

"Yeah, well," you say grinning, but you wish she'd kept it a secret.

In the coming weeks, pay more attention in Ms. Campbell's class. Come to understand that Emily Dickinson was not simply crazy, this is not the whole story. Sometimes, hide a flashlight at the foot of your bed, and after Ms. Jenkins has made the rounds for lights off, take it out, pressing the book into the wall. A poem reminds you of telling a story, the way your grandma used to tell it, nights when your Mom was out; confusing as hell in her thick hick accent, but more and more familiar the more times you hear it. It comes to remind you of itself, of something else, of yourself.

See Ms. Campbell in the hall sometimes, in loose fitting jeans and a wool sweater like a sailor. She will be coming out of the teacher's lounge, or getting a drink from the water fountain. She will smile wide and say,

"Hi there, Hope!" Once, she placed her hand on your shoulder as she passed you. "Whoops!" she said, weaving by.

Another time she keeps you after class and gets carried away lecturing you on thesis statements, and you miss the bus. She is flustered, apologetic, and the sun has already disappeared behind the mountaintops. She insists on giving you a ride, though you resist, not wanting her to see the yellowing cement block building, the bars on the windows, not wanting her to think you belong there.

“Whatever,” you say, following her to the parking lot, but as you get into her old black convertible, your cheeks burn. It is a clear, cold evening with a biting wind, and the trees etch black skeletons against the dull sky. She shifts gears smoothly, her fingers surprisingly thin and delicate on the wheel. You talk non-stop to choke your awe, chattering of boys, of cars, of music videos, and she will nod and smile a big, toothy smile. But you can feel her mind wandering away. Feel her simply waiting to drop you off and exhale, the relief of it. So you say, to fill the silence, “I was raped, you know,” tripping over this word that they have taught you to say, that you say all the time now. Say it, say it again. She will turn her head from the road and look at you as if it mattered.

“No,” she says, “I didn’t.”

“Yeah,” you say. “It was my brother.” She keeps driving, more slowly now.

“I’m sorry,” she says, with feeling. “I really am. That is not how it should be. It is not ok for it to be like that.” There is a silence. “Did you report it?” she asks shyly.

“Sure. There was a report, but nothing much came of it. They said there was no way to prove it.” She shakes her head, thinking about what you’ve said. Then a Rihanna song that you love comes on the radio.

“God, I love this song,” you say. She reaches over and turns up the knob, and puts a hand lightly on your shoulder. Squeezes. You smile and turn away.

Bop your head along to the music, and she glances over at you several times, but you look straight ahead. When she pulls up to the home for girls, avoid her eyes.

Say “thanks,” and turn to go.

“Hope,” she says, leaning over into the passenger seat. “If you want anyone to talk to...I mean, I could listen, if you want.”

“Sure,” you say, and slam the door.

But she gets to you, after all.

When the next paper is due, take some of your free periods in the library. Jason will be pissed and will get in your face.

“What the hell are you staying in there for?” Slam the locker door closed in his face and keep walking. Work on it for four nights in a row, with the flashlight, scribbling into a marble notebook, crossing things out, scribbling again as the other girls in your room make their moves, exchanges, threats. Mary from the next bunk over will offer you a pack of cigarettes for your notebook, and you almost take it, but change your mind at the last minute. Commit yourself. Read the poems again, and consider. *My life had stood—a Loaded Gun—*. Smile to yourself, liking the idea of yourself as a gun, as something capable of danger and loud noise, something people might fear. Try to write this down: Emily Dickinson was not simply depressed, this is not the whole story either, though she surely was obsessed with death. There is something powerful there, for the other poem seems different: *Some wretched creature, savior take/ Who would exult to die/ And leave for thy sweet mercy's sake/ Another hour to me.* Though the words seem old and awkward, understand for a moment that a choice is being made, a plea for something precious. Feel the words pulled in two directions, between all that makes you want to toss the book aside and call someone, Jason maybe, and all that might keep you there in that bed, confused and sweating but trying, trying.

Feel the essay getting worse each night, feel what you had unraveling. Once when you have it close to the way you want it, you come back from dinner and find that Tracy has torn it up and left the scraps in your bed. Swear under your breath, and gather up the pieces of paper. Tracy will be standing in the door.

“I’m sorry,” she says, chewing on the end of her sandy brown ponytail. “I dunno why I did that.” But when you are frustrated and angry, saying,

“Tracy, goddamn,” she shoves by you and says,

“What’re you think you’re doing with that shit, anyway? You can’t write no essays.”

Try to think of something, anything to say. Say nothing at all.

Catch yourself speaking more slowly, imagining dashes at the end of your sentences and yourself in a loose white gown. In the big bathroom mirror in the group home, be surprised to see your own skin, your own hands. Fall asleep the last night, head on your notebook, listening to Tracy’s heavy sighing below. In the morning, the flashlight will be dead and your paper will be seven pages of loose-leaf.

After class, wait for Ms. Campbell to be free. You will explain the situation, why the essay is nowhere near done. As she finishes talking to a girl with a ponytail, begin to doubt her understanding. You could turn and run.

“Hope?” she says. “What’s up?”

“Well,” you begin. But there is no beginning and no end, there is only the same boring story, not even told in a complicated or clever way. She looks at you, almost fearful, and you think that it is too bad you are not trying to fool her this time, this once, for she would surely believe you. There is a ringing noise in your ears like what is left over when you stand too close to a stereo speaker.

“Are you alright?” she asks. Have trouble breathing, feel as if your mouth is on fire, hate everything you are, all the stories that have been told about you, even the ones that are true.

“I tried, I really did to make this one better than the last one. I made notes and I brainstormed and I underlined, all like you said, I –“ That is it, for the hot tears roll down now though you are not sad, only furious.

“Whoa, hold on, Hope. It’s ok, really. We can talk about this – how about an extension until Monday? How about you just sit here and breathe a minute.” She guides you towards a chair near her desk. She sits down at her desk. “Now just breathe for a minute, go on.” Imagine there is blood and it is running down your leg and pooling in your shoe, then spreading to the carpet, bright as blood on white snow. Imagine there is a pain and it starts in your heart.

She will lean in close to you, looking in your eyes, straight on, and take your trembling hand between hers.

“It’s ok, Hope, really. It’s not the end of the world.” She looks as if she is somewhere far away and you try to go there too but you can’t because the room is too loud, so loud, roaring in your head like a bell. And you don’t know what this wanting is, to be close to her, for the lines seem so blurry, bodies so soft, and the heart so vast and empty. This wanting to be close to the girl you see in her eyes, blond and frizzy haired, but not dead yet, not counted out, just young and blowing loose.

Close your eyes, your face is upon hers and she tastes wet and like nothing at all. Feel yourself pushed off, your name called. Keep your eyes closed because you know when you open them there will be nothing left and what she said won’t be true anymore, and all that there will be is a sound like a bell ringing, and then a silence.

“Hope,” someone is calling. “*Hope?*” and her face comes into view, eyebrows furrowed. Get up and run.

At dinner, after Ms. Jenkins has said prayers, Tracy will come over and rest the top of her belly fat on the table in front of you.

“Heard you got a little sexy with the teacher,” she says, lingering over the words *sexy*, *teacher*.

“Shut the fuck up,” you say.

“You’re a little slut, that’s all you are,” she says, and though you’ve been called that hundreds, millions of times before, it seems true only now.

Staring at Tracy’s fat, oily cheeks, vow that this is the last time you’ll be back in the home. That the next foster placement they find you will be the one. Pat had been the one, or so you thought.

After dinner, you debate carefully. You’re sure Tracy has something planned for you from the way she keeps glancing up at you from her bed. You feel hot and desperate, and like to have to keep moving or jerking, otherwise you will keep playing over and over again the scene with Ms. Campbell like a movie rolling and rolling in your head. There is one body on another, the warmth of flesh colliding, slapping – what else is left? Walk down the hall to the pay phone and check the slot on a whim. Your finger feels a piece of loose metal in there, grabs a hold of it, a rusty quarter between your thumb and index fingers. You’re sure it’s a sign, and you dial Hank’s cell phone number in a frenzy.

“Hey asshole,” you say when his scratchy voice comes on the line. “Wanna pick me up?” He will say yeah, and you will walk calmly to the bathroom, stand on the toilet seat and pull yourself up to the ledge, your arms hard and strong, and then weasel your way through the opening where one of the bars was sawed off. Jump down with satisfaction onto the dusty gravel.

Pull a pack of cigarettes from your back pocket. There's only two left, and you promise yourself you'll make them last a while. Pull one out and light it, taking joy in the red glare, the careful puff, the deep exhale, the way it makes your hands feel skilled and precise. As you wait for Hank, wonder if tonight's the night. You've hung out with him before, but never gone all the way. Mostly, wonder if you haven't made a great mistake.

"So he raped you?" You asked another girl at school, who'd tried to warn you about Hank.

"Well not at first," she said, "but then...yeah, I guess. I wanted to stop. He pushed me up against the garage wall."

"Sounds like rape," you said.

"Whatever. Everyone said they saw us kissing at the party. Anyway, what difference does it make what you call it?" she'd asked. No one had ever been able to answer that question for you either.

"Hey," says someone behind you in a low voice, and you turn around to see that it is Tracy, leaning up against the wall. She is not smiling, and you know what's coming.

"I said hey, slut," she says again.

"I heard you," you say, taking another drag.

"Let me have a smoke," she says, moving towards you, her big breasts shaking underneath her flimsy cotton tank top and jacket.

"Sorry, last one," you say, looking down at your feet, and shifting your weight to keep warm.

"The hell it is."

She grits her teeth and charges up to you and snatches the cigarette from your teeth and throws it on the ground and then grabs your hip before you can fight her off, feels for the hard box in your pocket. “God damn it Tracy!” but she already gets it out.

“Well, well,” she says, opening the box. “Looks like there’s one more in here, after all.” And she takes it out and puts it between her thick lips, gunky with shiny lip-gloss.

“Don’t keep things from me Hope. I can always tell. I’ve known you longer than anyone.”

“Fuck you Tracy!” you shout. “What do you even want anyway? Why are you following me? You don’t got anything better to do?” Sit down on the curb, and put your hands in your hair, the hard thickness of it feels good to grab onto.

“I just came out here to watch you make a fool of yourself.”

“What are you talking about? What you got planned? I swear, I’m really not in the mood.”

“You know what I mean. Aren’t you waiting for some guy to come pick you up? Take you away?” You look back at her, and she is calmly smoking her cigarette, arching her eyebrows, one hip popped out. Turn back away from her.

“Yeah, so?” Hear her sounds behind you, the strained exhale, the quiet crackling of something burning.

“I’d never do that. I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” she says ominously. Where the fuck is Hank? you think. Tracy was poking, prodding, defeating the point of all this.

“Yeah, what’re you gonna do about it?” you say, puffing yourself up and turning to face her, and her face changes, seems to implode, come into itself and its sadness.

“No, I just meant...,” she shakes her head. “Why’d you do that to the teacher? Are you a lesbo or something?”

“Fuck you.”

“No really. I want to know.” She comes over and sits down on the curb with you. Eye her up and down suspiciously. She clasps her big ruddy knees with her hands, hugging herself like a child.

“I dunno. I guess she seemed so nice and all. She made me feel...not like me at all...” But the words are square and angular, instead of round and supple like they need to be. They don’t fit. They aren’t enough. Say, “Fuck you, Tracy,” and get up and look straight ahead and Hank will be pulling up in a green pick up borrowed from the garage. He rolls down the window.

“Hey, get in,” he says, and you start to step up into the cab, about to slide into the grey velour seat next to him.

“Hey, Hope,” Tracy calls, still hugging her fat self, but the anger back in her face now. Pause, your hand on the door handle and look at her.

“Just be careful, ok?” Take her in, all it once, this mound of quivering flesh that always made you feel small and insufficient before and like you were fighting alone.

“Alright,” you say and close the door.

“Where you wanna go?” Hank asks, looking at the road, the sharp profile of his crooked nose and powerful jaw in silhouette.

Say, “Just drive.” He turns and starts the car up, the engine rumbling beneath you, and you wish to turn back, for a moment only.

He parks in the high school parking lot. The floodlights for the football field bathe the cab of the pick up in light so you can hardly even see Hank’s face. He unbuckles the belt holding up his jeans and leans over, pulling you to him. Take his face in your hands and kiss him, hard, wanting something on you, in you, filling you up, tearing you open. He will pull down your jeans and jolt into you then, holding you hard by the flesh of your hips, feel each

individual finger grabbing you there. Close your eyes while he's fucking you, shut yourself off, trying not to feel the hard steering wheel in your back, the seatbelt buckle under your knee, and swing your hips to meet his. You'll be damned if anyone's gonna say you're frigid. He'll shift you then, pushing you down hard into the passenger seat and shoving into you, rocking fast and hard and cold, and you tremble holding onto the passenger side door. He reaches for your arms to pin them against the door and thrusts so hard you make a little cry of pain.

"Shut up," he says, and slaps you one, right across the cheek bone.

"Stop," you whisper. For once, you let yourself say it, just a visceral response to pain, but he keeps fucking you, even harder. "Stop!" you say, louder, and bring up an elbow to push him off. He slaps you again, harder, with the back of his hand, and you go crazy wild, trying to push him off. He holds you at arms length, and laughs.

"Shhh, sweetheart, you don't want to do that," he says, and the light of the parking lot floodlights reflects off something shiny, the blade of a big Swiss army knife. "Easy now, girl," he says, taking the knife and making a light surface cut on your right breast which is exposed where your shirt's been torn. Be unimpressed, you've done worse yourself, but when he takes the blade with his thumb and presses it into your neck, saying, "Come on now, you don't want to do that," you stop to consider. Your arm's been twisted, your favorite shirt torn. You'll have bruises on your face for weeks. Where is left to go? You'll be locked out of the group home, maybe have to sleep outside. You've been raped, over and over. The body seems just a place to put things, to stuff up and plug, to bandage, dab, repair, to bleed and bleed. Think of Ms. Campbell, of her telling you that you're smart, of her saying *that is not how it should be, it is not ok for it to be like that*. Think of Tracy and her fat, pimply face, but the only friend you've got, her heavy sighing in the night your lullaby for a

year now, maybe your lullaby forever. Think of your brother, locked somewhere too, spending his days in front of a T.V., writing on his little slips of yellow paper. Last month a letter came from him. *Greetings from the loony bin!* was all it had said, and there had been a little picture of a palm tree drawn in pen. Smile, thinking of it now.

“So, what’ll it be?” Hank asks, gyrating his crotch a little bit, and pushing the blade harder into your throat. Make your silent plea: *Leave for thy sweet mercy’s sake, another hour to me.* Breathe in hard and prepare, bracing yourself to make a fist. Spit in his face, and caught off guard, he lets the knife slacken against you, and you squint and punch him hard upside the nose. As he recoils in pain, scramble for the car door handle, your body falling hard onto the cold asphalt, but get up and run for your life. He is swearing and shouting after you, and you hear the car door close and his footsteps behind you, but you keep on running.

Run around the bleachers and over to the school buildings. Decide you’ll never make it home, not with him still there, his work boots making loud scuffing sounds behind you. And so you make a break for one of the side entrances of the gym you use to sneak out sometimes with Jason. You jam your hands into the space between the door and the rusty frame and wrench it open with everything you have and a little you didn’t know you had, and slip inside. Pull the door closed, hard, and take the padlock that’s dangling from the inside bolt, and lock the door to the bolt. Keep running even though you know it’s locked good, and there will be jangling noises and kicking and Hank’s voice swearing and yelling *bitch*, over and over.

It is dark and quiet and warm here, where the janitors keep their supplies. Wander aimlessly down the corridor, looking for a place to lie down. Your body feels so tired of being in motion. Bear left when you get to the darkened cafeteria, thinking of all the empty classrooms, and pass a big window looking out onto the parking lot. Hank’s truck is gone

and there is only the moon, huge and orange, a harvest moon, lording over the mountains which seem quiet now. They are only wise, dark outlines against the black beyond and you feel caught between somewhere that is home and somewhere that isn't.

The call to rest your body urges you on. Head for a light you see on at the end of the hallway, perhaps an unlocked classroom. When you get to the door, you can see Ms. Campbell at her desk, a lamp on. She is eating from a bag of potato chips and smoking a cigarette, her stockinged feet up on the desk, and a thick paperback in her hand. Inhale sharply and take a step back, not wanting her to see you – your torn shirt, your bloody chest, your face which stings and feels puffy where the bruises must be starting to show. Creep back to the window and look at her again, the furrowed brow, the runs in her stockings. Wonder why she isn't at home, but understand that you may already know the answer; aren't we all hiding somewhere?

Brace yourself to open the door. Imagine you are stronger, ballsier, more powerful. Imagine yourself as Emily Dickinson, her loud stomping feet, her quiet steady voice, a white night gown trailing behind you. There will be a lot of noise and talking, you'll have to explain yourself to the principal one more time, maybe to Ms. Jenkins. But the other choice is not a choice, not anymore. For if life were all pain and logic, who would want it? But you want it, god, do you want it.

“Hope! Jesus Christ,” she says, when she sees you, your hand still on the doorknob. She stubs out her cigarette clumsily, fumbling to pull her skirt down, and jolts her feet to the ground. She stands up and reaches out a hand for you, then thinks better of it, and puts it back in her pocket.

“I'm alright,” you say, “really.”



**Because Telling it is Freedom:  
An Afterword**

My project, “This is Not the Whole Story” is clearly at once literary and activist. This is a terribly difficult line to walk, though many illustrious writers have walked it before, from W.B. Yeats to James Baldwin, to Primo Levi, to Adrienne Rich and Dorothy Allison. There is an apparent contradiction in terms implied in writing that is political, that has a project that seeks justice for someone, or seeks to right some wrong. In her famous essay “Blood, Bread, and Poetry,” Adrienne Rich wrote:

[T]he artist must choose between politics—here defined as earthbound factionalism, corrupt power struggles—and art, which exists on some transcendent plane... We are told political poetry, for example, is doomed to grind down into mere rhetoric and jargon, to become one-dimensional, simplistic, vituperative; that in writing “protest literature”—that is, writing from a perspective that may not be male, or white, or heterosexual, or middle class—we sacrifice the “universal”; that in writing of injustice we are limiting our scope, “grinding a political axe.” (Rich, “Blood, Bread, and Poetry,” 53)

Here, Rich is calling for a radical questioning of the term “art”, and for the expansion of the term from including only the obscure and the aesthetic, occurring at three in the morning to the isolated artist, to encompass also political acts of protest, bearing witness, and survival that are rooted in passionate concern and inextricably tied to the social and public realm. And she asks us to challenge ideas of the “universal,” the timeless, saying that the definition that we have inherited is the result of a language of privilege. At the core of Rich’s project then is a re-situation of the artist in our society. She seethes,

[C]oming from this dominant culture that so confuses us, telling us poetry is neither economically profitable nor politically effective and that political dissidence is destructive to art, coming from this culture that tells me I am destined to be a luxury, a decorative garnish on the buffet table of the university curriculum, the ceremonial occasion, the national celebration... (Rich, BB&P, 42)

We begin to see then the paradox which Rich claims we have accepted: at the same time that the political artist produces bad or simple art, he/she is also engaging in faulty or ineffective activism – that is, the work isn’t artistically interesting, and it isn’t making social change

either. By trying to do both, it does neither well, and is relegated to the sidelines of art and politics, is considered a luxury.

“This Is Not the Whole Story” actively engages with these questions of art and political urgency. The preface of sorts entitled “Welcome” constructs a framework of narrative urgency that tells us there is more at stake than simply telling the stories of two girls from West Virginia, tells us that it is urgent that these stories be told, and urgent that they be heard. The narrator(s), presumably the voices of the two girls about which the later stories are written, tell the reader that an outsider has come in, saying, “So I’m asking you, begging you, dying for you, to do this for me...tell me your story so that we might write it together” (4). Here then, we get a sense that someone’s survival (the two narrators, the outsider, perhaps both) is at stake in the telling of these stories, more specifically, there is a sense that death is possible for someone if these stories are not told (“dying for you to do this for me”). Furthermore, there is a sense of meaningful revelation, of silences being broken for the first time in these stories, “tell it like you would tell it if anyone ever asked you” (4-5). There is a link then, between language and action: language is posited as powerful, revelatory, as well as deeply personal.

We tell stories to survive. This idea is not new. To return to Rich again, she writes, “Every group that lives under the naming and image-making power of a dominant culture is at risk from this mental fragmentation and needs an art that can resist it” (Rich, “BB&P,” 49). Rich wants to figure art as a necessity for socially marginalized and silenced groups, a necessary and powerful weapon of resistance. In the stories here at hand in “This is Not the Whole Story,” it seems reductive but necessary to state that the group of concern is women in Appalachia, both straight and queer.

Though the act of storytelling is certainly central to both “Steal Back” and “This is Not the Whole Story,” we might see what is being figured as powerful about storytelling in these pieces as the ways in which telling stories opens up other realities, allows us to engage in a fantasy life that is also intimately linked to survival. What does it mean to be able to imagine a space where you might be able to speak, or a life or identity different from your own? How can fantasy sustain us, empower us to make change, or close us down? In her book *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler confronts the idea of what makes a livable life for people who live on the margins of sexual and gendered categories. She writes,

[F]antasy is part of the articulation of the possible; it moves us beyond what is merely actual and present into a realm of possibility, the not yet actualized or the not actualizable...the foreclosure of fantasy—through censorship, degradation, or other means—is one strategy for providing the social death of persons. (Butler, 29)

In “Steal Back,” the central character, Kayla, is essentially rammed up against a wall of imagination. She understands that her body and gender identity are at odds, yet cannot imagine what it might look like for her to achieve a unity between mind and body because such a radical transformation has not been shown to be legible or possible in her world. There is such a sense of stagnation in Kayla’s world: “The mountain takes you higher and higher, the bus winds around and around the peak, and you are always back where you started from, seeing the same trees, the same piles of brush and trash, the same abandoned construction sites” (14).

More fundamentally, her stagnation seems rooted in a particular sense of place that doesn’t allow her to feel she can move, travel, or change. The specific geographical setting of the mountains of central West Virginia is a strong force in the story, creating a crucial sense of place as emotionally, culturally, and historically charged: Kayla lives in coal country, and with all the implications of exploitation, scarcity, and violence that are connected with that industry. In “Welcome” again, the narrators articulate their sense of identity, of what

they are and are not capable, as fundamentally linked to a sense of place and determined by the fact that their land has been strip-mined; ravaged, stolen, and said to be “reclaimed” but these efforts are laughable, are only a kind of cover up: “In school, they tell you the mining companies understand the problem. They’ve reclaimed these mountains, here in West Virginia. They’ve sprinkled pellets that look like grass, which are supposed to grow more grass. The pellets are made of bits of rubber from recycled tires” (11). For Kayla, and for Hope as well in “This is Not the Whole Story,” we begin to see that their personal struggles are only reflections of bigger struggles about silence, violence, exploitation, and power that characterize their social and geographical space.

However, if there is one thing that saves Kayla and Hope it is their ability to engage with fantasy. Kayla is certainly capable of fantasy:

You dream that you are a business man. You wake up in the morning and pick out a navy blue suit from a closet of suits. As you sit down at the breakfast table, you hike up the fabric of the dress pants to allow creases around your groin, and it is the most natural thing in the world. Cassie is your wife and she brings you the morning paper, puts a hand on your back. (14)

In these lines, Kayla is imagining herself in a world where she might be a man, and where she might be with Cassie, her best friend and the woman she loves. However, her fantasy reflects the only world she knows and sees possible – the world of the monogamous, heterosexual couple, leading a “normal” life. This will fundamentally never be possible for Kayla in her own body –she can never achieve the kind of legible, “normal” lifestyle that is all she is able to imagine. And so, there is a wall there.

Of being a gay woman in rural South Carolina, Dorothy Allison writes in her memoir *Two or Three Things I Know For Sure*,

Let me tell you a story. Let me tell you a story that is in no part fiction, the story of the female body taught to hate itself. It is so hard to be a girl and want what you have never had. To be a child and want what you cannot imagine. To look at women and think, Nobody else, nobody else has ever wanted to do what I want to do. (Allison,

*Two or Three Things I know for Sure*, 49)

In this way then, Allison shows us how her failure of imagination was the result of a culture that showed her the right, good, and natural thing was “the female body taught to hate itself.” This passage also reveals a sense of feeling cut off from the past, cut off from any kind of history of feminist or queer resistance – because she believes that “nobody else has ever wanted to do what I want to do” she feels overwhelmingly alone and isolated.

In her groundbreaking poetry collection, *A Dream of a Common Language*, Adrienne Rich goes one step further to say that these histories of women’s resistance have been purposely cut off and concealed:

But in fact we were always like this,  
rootless, dismembered: knowing it makes the difference.  
Birth stripped out birthright,  
tore us from a woman, from women, from ourselves  
so early on  
and the whole chorus throbbing at our ears  
like midges, told us nothing, nothing  
of origins, nothing we needed  
to know, nothing that could re-member us. (Rich, “Transcendental Etude,” DCL, 75)

The intense violence in these lines – “dismembered,” “stripped,” “tore us from women,” – allows us to see that this sense of isolation and disconnection is not a personal failure, but rather a constructed and enforced act of erasure of this particular history of resistance. Furthermore, there is a sense of brokenness still: we are, have “always [been] like this... dismembered.” However, the solution that Rich offers is consciousness: she writes that only “knowing it,” or being aware of this brokenness, can fix it, can “make the difference.”

In *Anything We Love Can Be Saved*, Alice Walker shows us how we might come to connect ourselves to our origins, to our past and how powerful this connection can be.

We do not come from people who have had nothing. We come, rather, from people who’ve had everything—except money, except political power, except freedom. They said: Yes, we were captured. They chained our grandmother to the mast of a ship that carried her away from every other face truly reflecting her own; her last view of home

being, perhaps, that face, resembling her own...And yes, the singers said, it is not over yet. For we are all still captive! Look at the lies, the evasions, the distortions of truth, with which we live our lives. (Walker, 54)

For Walker, as for Rich, it is crucial to admit that our past is one of un-freedom (“Yes, we were captured”), it is crucial to chart and understand the ways in which we were un-free in order to begin to understand how those mechanisms still operate and how we still struggle under the same confines: “For we are all still captive! Look at the lies, the evasions, the distortions of truth with which we live our lives.” Walker suggests that this act becomes empowering, and allows us to finally work towards real freedom and towards an understanding of past injustices as important, meaningful, and linked to our current push for liberty, such that we can begin to reclaim our own history: “We come, rather, from people who’ve had everything—except money, except political power, except freedom.”

For Kayla, as she begins to look at these lies, these distortions, it is indeed “knowing it that makes the difference.” She begins to discover her own past, discover another model of femininity that is strong, capable and powerful: “this really tall, handsome tall woman who came driving all up over the bank near our house and my mother let her in, and she just sat on the dining room table and she held out the skirt of her dress real wide and me and my sisters got up underneath it” (23). For Kayla, this is an undiscovered past, and it begins to open up possibilities for her in her own life, allowing her to begin to imagine a different relationship to her own body, gender identity, and to Cassie, and to identify that past being manifested in, and inhabited by, the girl who wins the shooting competition: “Her face looks old for a high school competition, the skin has that yellowish, tough look to it. Like the picture of the woman on the fridge... Think, looking at her, that there is strength there, woman flesh be damned,” (34, 37). In this way then, connecting oneself to one’s past can be an incredibly affirming experience, empowering people to inhabit identities that suddenly

seem more imaginable and allowing them to survive. Finally, though we might see Kayla's journey as focused around a struggle with her gender identity and sexuality, it becomes clear that the greater issue for Kayla is a struggle for power. As gender theorist and historian Joan Wallach Scott writes in *Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis*, "The binary opposition and the social process of gender relationships both become part of the meaning of power itself: to question or alter any aspect threatens the entire system" (Scott, 70). In other words, the gender binary and the accompanying heteronormative assumptions are one of the most fundamental organizing principles of power in our lives. Kayla's fight to push at the limits of these categories and find power and legitimacy in her own body mirrors the greater struggle depicted in these stories, that of young women in great poverty trying to come into their own power in a place where that has been rendered nearly impossible.

Judith Butler becomes useful here again when thinking about the connection between power and social legitimacy. She writes in *Undoing Gender*, "Possibility is not a luxury; it is as crucial as bread. I think we should not underestimate what the thought of the possible does for those for whom the very issue of survival is most urgent" (Butler, 29). The story "This is Not the Whole Story" also revolves around the question of survival. In this story, Hope skirts and flirts with death at every turn. At times it seems she is almost looking to die, as she places herself in dangerous situations, walking the fine line between sex and sexual violence. Hope too struggles with fantasy and imagining herself in any other way, in any other life. Of the man who she knows is a rapist, and who ultimately tries to rape her, we are given, "Hank wasn't so bad. He had a mean streak in him but he wasn't so bad. Just a boy from around who was good with cars. He liked to go to the movies and put his hand down your pants" (43). In this way then, we come to understand that Hope does not see that she might deserve better, that love and sex and violence might be different things, that

things might be different. When she is told by her roommate and unexpected friend Tracy, “What’re you think you’re doing with that shit? You can’t write no essays” (50) she cannot muster a reply. The narrator says, “Try to think of something, anything to say. Say nothing at all,” showing that she has internalized and believes all that Tracy has said. However, Ms. Campbell seems to be the center of the change for Hope. It is Ms. Campbell’s reaction to her multiple rapes, “That is not how it should be. It is not ok for it to be like that” (48) that allows Hope to begin to care about the essay, which in turn allows her to engage in a more active fantasy life.

Hope even starts imagining herself as Emily Dickinson: “Catch yourself speaking more slowly, imagining dashes at the end of your sentences and yourself in a loose white gown. In the big bathroom mirror in the group home, be surprised to see your own skin, your own hands” (50). Eventually, this power to imagine propels Hope forward to confront the mistakes she’s made in her life and with Ms. Campbell: “Imagine you are stronger, ballsier, more powerful. Imagine yourself as Emily Dickinson, her loud stomping feet, her quiet steady voice, a white night gown trailing behind you” (58). The decision to open the door is linked to the decision to resist Hank and fight him off. And we might see this connection simply as Hope’s decision to choose life, a choice that can be made and articulated only where and when death/destruction is the norm, the default option. Of her own experience of feeling death as an inevitability, Dorothy Allison writes in the preface to her collection of short stories entitled *Trash*, “The decision to live when everything inside and out shouts death is not a matter of moments but years, and no one has ever told me how you know when it is accomplished” (Allison, *Trash*, 6). Hope’s decision is certainly not accomplished or finished, but she is empowered to begin to choose life by her engagement with fantasy, which is rooted in Ms. Campbell’s authorization of that fantasy. It is no

coincidence that this act of imagination takes the form of Emily Dickinson, which, similar to Kayla, seems to be a gesture back towards an excavation of a feminine tradition of resistance. Emily Dickinson also resisted traditional female narratives and pioneered new possibilities for female power and authorship.

But for the narrator of these stories, figured in “welcome” as the “you,” there is also a clear sense of excavation of a powerful past. To return again to “Welcome,” we see the “you” engaging in an explicit and distinct reaching out to the past that suggests this journey is in many ways, a journeying *back*. The outsider feels fundamentally that she has “been here before” “a long time ago, or like I dreamed it” (4) implying that in some inexplicable, almost mystical way, the outsider feels a strong connection to this place, yet in the realm of the strictly “real”, she has no tangible tie, for she is, as the narrators tell us, “not from around here.” Finally there is a language of loss and recovery – in response to the narrator’s claim that “you come from somewhere else,” the “you” responds “That’s true, and it’s not true” as if this journey to West Virginia were a kind of quest to find or reclaim a sense of origin. This line also indicates the outsider drawing a thread between herself and the two narrators, to align herself with those struggles and claim a common history. Furthermore, the lines, “Together...I’ll help you the only way I know how. We’ll write it together” (5) takes this sense of a common history and figures it as centered around storytelling as a tool of female resistance.

This brings us to an important formal element of “This is Not the Whole Story” – the second person voice, and the intentionality with which the narrative authority is abandoned, questioned, and fractured. “Welcome” asks us to see the work as a whole as a kind of collaboration between the “we”, two young girls struggling for power and authority and peace with their own female bodies in a context of poverty, stagnation, and silence and

the “you,” the outsider who is pushed the “we” into telling their stories, but ultimately displays simple interest and concern in the well-being and survival of the “we.” However, the two long stories, “Steal Back,” and “This is Not the Whole Story” are also told in the second person, and the intended referent of the “you” in those pieces is harder to identify.

The second person can accomplish a variety of different goals. Firstly, the second person can serve to create a sense of direct conversation between the narrator and “you” such that the reader feels they become the “you,” commanded by the text and thus directly implicated in the story. The second person can also create a sense of distance between reader and character, as the reader is denied the interiority of first person or close third, and instead given only tentative and limited emotional insight consistent with a directional tone, as in “Feel it on these breasts and hips that are yours, for now anyway” (21). Here the “feeling” stems from the direction of “feel it” rather than an explanation of the complex emotions at play. Finally, the second person can serve to accomplish a sense of self-address, which seems to be the primary function of the second person voice in these two stories. That is, we feel the “you” is addressed to the character in the story, as in the first line of “Steal Back,” “Ask your mother for your inhaler, ask again” (7). Thus the reader does not feel we are being told to turn to our own mothers, rather we feel the character’s distress and emotional stuntedness that she must talk and command herself in this way.

However, there is also an element of the narration that directly involves or implicates the reader as well. Adrienne Rich is the master of this, as in her poem “Dedications”: “I know you are reading this poem because there is nothing else/left to read/there where you have landed, stripped as you are” (Rich, “Dedications,” *An Atlas of the Difficult World*, 26). In this way, Rich draws attention to the “you” of the reader by referencing the act of reading. In these stories, a similar tool is employed – we are reminded of the storytelling act in the

repeated entreaty of “Tell me your story” in “Welcome”, and the reader is made to feel implicated simultaneously in the “you” of “Welcome” (as an outsider who is forced to “listen) as well as in the “you” of the two stories. For example, in “This is Not the Whole Story,” we get: “as you climb down the ladder, you will find a used tampon in your shoe. The things you use as weapons” (40). This “you” functions as a kind of “we,” asking the reader to participate. Finally, there are several instances where the narrator explicitly uses “we”: In “Welcome,” “We’ll write it together” (5) and at the very end of “This is Not the Whole Story, “aren’t we all hiding somewhere?” (58). In this way then, the reader is invited into the story simultaneously as a character and as a narrator, as the lines between each of these positions bleed and blur into one another.

The use of the second person then is a conscious and intentional move towards enacting some of the goals of my project: opening up storytelling to become a collaboration between all involved parties, and to invest in the survival of those whose stories are at stake. In her essay, “It was a Dark and Stormy Night, Or, Why are we all huddling about the campfire?”, Ursula Le Guin envisions acts of storytelling as essentially *structured* like a campfire – circular and collective. Le Guin writes, “Why are we huddling about the campfire? Why do we tell tales, or tales about tales – why do we bear witness, true or false? We may ask Aneirin or Primo Levi, we may ask Scheherazade or Virginia Woolf. Is it because we are so organized as to take actions that prevent our dissolution into the surroundings?” (Le Guin, “TWADASN,” 28). Le Guin essentially sees storytelling as acts of inscribing oneself into history, but also as acts that depend on a listener to acknowledge them – thus stories are in equal part an assertion of one’s own existence and a declaration of one’s survival within the collective context of storytelling, and at their core lies most fundamentally an investment in the storytelling impulse. In another essay, “Some Thoughts

on Narrative,” Le Guin goes on, “Narrative is the central function of language. Not, in origin, an artifact of culture, an art, but a fundamental operation of the normal mind functioning in society. To learn to speak is to learn to tell a story” (Le Guin, “STON”, 39). For Le Guin then, storytelling is a central function of *personhood*, of being human, and storytelling asserts, affirms, and makes powerful that sense of personhood. To tell a story is to be alive, and to declare that you will survive. In both “Steal Back” and “This is Not the Whole Story,” Kayla and Hope change drastically in relation to their stories and how they tell them. For both girls, there is a sense that they have no control over how their story is told, and they have little investment in telling it: “But there is no beginning and no end, there is only the same boring story, not even told in a complicated or clever way” (This is Not the Whole Story, 50). But by the end of both stories, each girl lays active claim to determining what her story is and how to tell it. And ultimately, both achieve acts of articulation at the end, Hope to Ms. Campbell, Kayla to Cassie.

The transmission of the story is just as powerful as the tale itself – this might be seen as the central motivating factor for the “Welcome” section, and the construction of the text as a collaboration between the “you” and the “I.” It is an attempt for the “you” and the “I” to talk, to begin to understand that their histories and struggles share common threads, and to endow both with personhood and the ability to survive. And we might also see the structure of this collection as a kind of attempt to enact the very marriage of art and resistance that Rich is calling for. The literary device of the second person, and a second person that switches, draws attention to the ways in which certain people get to speak and others don’t, at the same time as it’s simply an intentional artistic choice that opens up possibilities that the first person closes down. In writing these pieces, I refused to write them from the first person because these are not my stories to tell – the second person

allowed a more tentative appropriation, but an appropriation nonetheless. And I won't be so arrogant as to contend that in using the second person and switching the point of view I have avoided the pitfall of creating a power dynamic of voices. Certainly the girls are only allowed to speak in this project because the "you" of "Welcome" invites them to (because I invited them to), and thus the privileged outsider still holds the power. But I hope, through enacting these power dynamics on the page, I have contended with them, and I have been clear about the fact that I can never claim these struggles as my own: I can only honor them, and inscribe them somewhere where others might begin to honor them too.

What then did I want to do with this project, ultimately, when it comes right down to it – write a good story or make change? Simple, of course: I wanted both. For as Dorothy Allison writes, "Two or three things I know, two or three things I know for sure, and one of them is that to go on living I have to tell stories, that stories are the one sure way I know to touch the heart and change the world" (Allison, *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*, 72).

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