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I am awake in the bell houses.
Time creatures live off the loam, feed in
Clay and mushroom

We hold onto each
Other in the loam

Our bodies are houses. Hours
Roll by these hands

Our bodies are clung like
Salt. Tongue to mud

Sticky

Hours sound to our bones. Counted out

We are awake in the bell houses. Cross-legged we all night
Face east, towards the hem, at dawn we
Pace the floorboards, dirt

Selving our deserts

How to get true to these bodies, ours, clocks
We are awake in the bell houses.
We live off the loam, feed in
Clay and mushroom

We hold onto each
Other

Can feel the veins in these thumbs

Ours, time shows in our bodies, a bloodbeat, how these have
Got caught together in the landloaf

Your self speaks
Time

A lazy eye, mine

And none
Can sleep
Busch Trash and Charlie the cat,
Hurrying troubles

You must still drop pennies on the floor when you get undressed.

And here I understand about that bookcase, the wallpaper
More than I know corners should be full,
More than I know I pulled them to you
I understand I am

Who held the blackjaw pigeon tombing

Who shotgunned
Under Jimi in the bedroom while your mother got her hair done

Who gathered up the moonbones, in piles of shell
By rackety elbows. The pharmacopeia notebook and vomit-body

Who spoke only of holy poems and maps, to you
Burning in the ugly snow
I know you more true than my self could prove
Love you more close than my body comes
Feel you more here when I am not with you

You, who were backyard angel to the neighbors and stairwell
The dry voice,

My being admits all you to itself

You need not think of me, again or now. I carry there were
times in you
I held the most of myself and forgot you were I

My being admits all you to itself

“It’s all the same root,”
You told me beneath the blinds. We
Being hid out from the other bodies who had what they had
had and have,
Surrogates them all within

But I know you to the only,
My being admits all you to itself.
“Class, please turn to St. Crispin’s Day.”
Our fingers obey
Deftly marching us on
To join the ragged, waifish ranks of soldiers,
Falstaff’s merry band of Prince Hal’s brothers.

To get there we must march
Over Hamlet’s solemn mucking
In the misty bogs of the mind,
Around Mercutio’s ghostly last smile,
And through the morbid naivety
Of young love.

My finger slips on a page,
And a young Boy dies.

Is this how Shakespeare felt?
Lying on his deathbed
In that little Hamlet Stratford?
One turn of the unoccupied mind
Bringing him to a new sect of England.
Where mere men
Masquerade as monsters and angels
And vice versa?
We can hold his mind in our hands. 
Notate his thoughts, 
And discuss at length 
The marvelous synapses of his brain. 
And yet, we grasp his skill as tightly 
As a howling dog does its motivation 
For accosting the moon.
I sat in the school library surrounded by shelves of books, most of which probably hadn’t been touched in years. The room had the smell of old, yellow-paged books and the faded, over-hygienic stench of my grandmother’s nursing home. For the past few weeks, I had struggled to find any enthusiasm in my school work. Every hour spent doodling on worksheets or listening to my teachers tell the same stories felt forced. I floated from home to school to soccer practice, day after day. Distracted, I guess you could say. With dust on my fingers, I flipped through the pages of books on the Great Depression and the work of the Post Office during the Civil War.

“What’s the point of this stupid history project, anyway?” I thought. “Aren’t Ms. Phipp’s lectures enough?”

“Five more minutes left in class, everyone,” I heard my teacher say from behind a stand-up poster explaining the Dewey Decimal system. “I want each of you to have chosen a topic by the time you leave.”

I sighed, but felt better when I heard the chorus of quiet groans ring out from the books around me. At least I wasn’t the only one. I carried four books that I had been aimlessly flipping through back to the shelf, sure that I wouldn’t find a topic in five years let alone five minutes. As I slipped A Man, A Plan, A Post Office back into its place, I noticed a leather
bound book whose abnormal size caused it to stick out into the aisle, threatening the foreheads of passers-by. The book had a brown binding speckled with dirt — or maybe mold — and the top part of the spine had been repaired with packaging tape that was starting to yellow and peel. Inside were black-and-white photos that followed the travels of an older couple and an unnamed son, no older than ten, through Europe. The woman even reminded me a bit of my own mother — at least what she used to looked like — and the boy grinned with the same stupid faced grin of my younger brother.

Each photo seemed like something out of a movie, quaintly framed images of people of an earlier time standing in front of world landmarks. Lisbon, Florence, Berlin, London. These people went everywhere. The captions beneath each of the photos detailed what was shown, words scribbled by hands that appeared to be shaken with Parkinson’s. “6 Weeks in Europe. 1967. Leave from Toronto, May 12. May 13, Lisbon,” was written in large, block letters at the top of the first page. I grabbed the album from the shelf and rushed over to the librarian’s desk.

“Any idea where this came from?” I asked, slamming the open album onto the wooden desk, knocking over a coffee mug holding pencils with animal shaped erasers.

“It’s probably been here for years,” the librarian told me, shrugging, tired. “I don’t recognize any of these people.”

“Alright.” I returned to my desk with a project topic finally in sight. “Finding out who these people were counts as history,” I thought. “And it’s certainly more interesting than the Civil War.”

When the bell rang at the end of class, I managed to slip past my teacher without having to lie about my project. The librarian said she didn’t mind if I took the album home, so I carried it with me for the rest of the day, the corner jutting out from the hole in the bottom of my backpack. As far as I
knew, the couple in these photos — this Bill and Noreen — had died years ago. They couldn’t have been younger than fifty in the photos and this trip took place almost fifty years ago. I knew I’d have my work set out for me, trying to find these people, but I didn’t care. This treasure had fallen into my lap and I needed to find someone, even if not Bill or Noreen, who could value it so much more than I did. The son, or maybe a grandchild, a friend, a nephew. Anyone. And even if my search had no end, it gave me a glimpse of a family, happy and alive. Someone else’s memories to fall back on. My very own mystery that I hoped would unfold like some TV show adventure. Something to distract me from the reality at home.

In every class after the library, teachers and friends opened their mouths and spoke the usual somethings. But each time, I looked up to see faces that didn’t match the voices, faces I had never met but knew so well. My teacher stood pointing at the blackboard like Noreen captivated by the Eiffel Tower. I kept finding my thoughts drifting back to those European cities, guesses about who these people could be and where they’ve been. After two more hours of classes, I escaped. The path from school back home took fifteen minutes, leading me past the homes of neighbors I barely knew. Taking a shortcut between the tall, brown fence of someone’s backyard and the soccer field of the elementary school, I dirtied the legs of my pants with mud that splashed up from the wet grass. I walked home a bit quicker than usual, eager to get past my father and up into the quiet confines of my bedroom.

The screen door whined as I opened it and our old German shepherd on the porch didn’t even stir in his sleep to say hello. My father stood at the stove stirring a sizzling something in a tall, chrome pot. My brother was anywhere to be found. Nor was my mother. Probably sleeping, the bedroom being the only place I ever seemed to find my mother since the surgery.

“Welcome home, Hannah,” my father chimed from the
kitchen, peering over his shoulder. “How was school today?” He turned from the stove and wiped his hands with a towel tucked into his apron. Dropping my coat onto the chair next to the front door, with my backpack in hand, I ran up the stairs.

“Fine, nothing to report,” I shouted back. The slam of my bedroom door behind me muffled the kitchen sounds coming from downstairs.

The couple wore such elegant clothing in every photo, he in suit and tie, she in knee-length skirts and pressed blouses. In every photo of Noreen, she stood center-frame, staring sweetly at the camera with only the hint of a smile on her lips. Bill’s posture changed with each backdrop. In one, he stood right-of-center, arms crossed, looking off into the distance as the tall spires of the Cologne Cathedral reached out above his head. In another, he leaned casually against a low-stone wall, the snowy Swiss Alps behind him. Some photos were black and white, others in the faded colors of years past. Every image captured a couple so clearly happy and so clearly in love, experiencing a world so drastically different from the gray suburban skies outside my door.

The closest thing I had to a clue was a postcard pasted into the fifth page beneath a photo of Bill lounging in his underwear in a hotel room somewhere in Germany.

Hi Gang, Having a great time. We are headed off to Switzerland in the morning. Then on to Vienna, Italy, Spain, and Portugal. From there, we finally head home and it couldn’t come too soon. We’ve loved our time here, getting too fat from good beer, bread, and wine. See you all in a few weeks. Bill.

The postcard was addressed to somewhere in Niagara Falls, New York, but I couldn’t make out the name of the addressee. It looked almost like the name of a company but the scribbled handwriting hid the message.

“Hannah!” My father shouted from the bottom of the stairs, “Dinner’s ready.” Frustrated by the lack of clues, I slipped on a sweatshirt and went down to the kitchen, following
the smell of roasted garlic and lasagna pulled freshly from the oven.

“Where’s Mom and Jimmy?” I asked, taking a seat at the empty table.

“Jimmy went to his friend Tom’s house for dinner after school.”

“And Mom?” I took a slice of lasagna the size of my fist from the pan and set it onto my plate. I dabbed at the sauce that covered the floral design of my plate with a piece of bread, careful not to stain my shirt.

“She’s taking a nap,” he said with a sigh, joining me at the table. “Sorry she can’t join us. I know recently—”

“It’s okay, dad. I understand.” We both proceeded to eat in silence. Outside, a police car raced past. My father danced between the table and the kitchen, never in his chair for more than a minute or two before getting up to find a napkin, more milk, or the salt and pepper. As I ate, I thought about the pasta and gelato Bill and Noreen must have eaten those sunny afternoons in Florence.

“Thanks for sticking around for Spring Break this year. I know you wanted to go on that camping trip but it’s meant so much to me having you around with everything...”

“Dad.” My interruption sounded harsher than I had intended. “It’s okay. Really. You don’t need to apologize. I was happy to stay.” He smiled at me, but I could tell that sorrow and confusion sat behind his eyes. I just stared down at my plate, the different colors of the foods beginning to blend together. Everything had to be an apology for my father, as if by struggling for excuses for things that didn’t need to be excused he could chase away all of the problems in our life.

“Can we go to Europe this summer?”

“Europe? Why Europe?” My dad reached across the lasagna, putting a hand on my head and gently moving my bangs from over my eyes and behind my ears.

“I don’t know, I guess it just seems like a cool place to
go,” I mumbled. “The four of us travelling together again, like the road trips we used to take to Grandma’s.”

“I don’t know if that’ll be possible, honey. But as soon as your mother is feeling better, the four of us can travel the world. We’ll go even farther than Europe.” I heard tears forming around his words. My mind was trapped in the checkered pattern of Noreen’s dress. “You, me, your mom, and Jimmy.”

“I can’t wait, Dad.” I wanted to look up but knew that seeing him cry would only make me start, too. One of us had to be strong.

After dinner, with three heavy helpings of Dad’s lasagna sitting in my stomach, I rushed back upstairs to my room. As I walked past my parents’ half-opened bedroom door, I could hear a quiet cough coming from their bed. My mother called to me as I opened my bedroom door.

“Hannah. How was school?” her voice was soft and feigned cheerfulness. I walked over to their room and peered inside. My mother sat up in bed. The lights were off and curtains were drawn and in the little bit of light spilling in from the hallway, I could barely make out her tired eyes and wool cap that sat on her head. When I was younger, my grandmother knitted me that hat, but it was too big and I thought it smelled like old people, so my mother wore it instead.

“It was good. I got that big math test back today. I didn’t fail.” My mother just laughed. “Sorry if I woke you up.”

“That’s alright, dear. There’s no need for me to be sleeping at 6 o’ clock anyway.”

“Sure there is, Mom. You get as much sleep as you want.” I couldn’t bear seeing my mother like this and my own weakness killed me. Every day I just wanted her to get better, to spend more than an hour or so out of bed, but instead I just saw less and less of her. I gently pulled the door shut. Like with my dad’s tears at the dinner table, someone had to be strong, I guess. “Goodnight.” Downstairs, I heard Jimmy
and Tom come shouting through the front door as my father shuffled dishes in the sink.

Thank goodness for the Fulton News Press, documenting over fifty years of the Niagara Falls Gazette in pdf-form on a website that looked as though it hadn’t been updated since 1996. I searched through endless black-and-white stories of a world I’d never know. Marriage announcements and Eagle Scout projects and advertisements for suits and skirts. I took a break from my pattern of “Ctrl-F-Bill”, “Ctrl-F-Noreen” to read a story about a boy who had driven off a cliff, only to climb back up in time to make it to his basketball game later that day. April 4th, 1960 announced the marriage of a Bill and Noreen Weiner, but that Noreen would have only been 36 in 1967, much too young to be the Noreen of Swiss alp skiing and lazy Parisian mornings.

My father came to my bedroom bringing with him new sounds: a light tapping on my doorframe, the shuffle of papers caught in the draft caused by the slowly opened door, the loud voices of my brother and his friend fighting over a video game downstairs.

“Hi Hannah, working on homework?” he asked, standing beneath the photos of me and my friends at last year’s school-wide pool party hanging over my door. My desk was littered with pictures and slips of paper that had slipped out of the album. Now that the sun had set, only the light from my computer lit the space between us.

“Sort of. I found this old couple’s photo album in the school library. I’m trying to find out who they are.”

“That sounds fun.” Over my shoulder, he scanned the album, which was opened to the page with the postcard.

“Yeah, these people travelled all over Europe. It’s kinda cool seeing all these different places. Unfortunately, I only have first names.”

“Hm...‘Laur and Mack’s Contracting Company’, at least that’s something to work with.”
“What? You can actually read that?”

“Sure. I know you won’t believe it, but we used to write in cursive like that all the time,” he chuckled and put a hand on my shoulder, squeezing it. “You’re sure there’s nothing else in here that might help you? A last name or something?” As he spoke, I couldn’t stand staring at the computer screen and turned my head to look out the window.

“Nope,” I said, my voice almost too quiet for me to even hear myself. “Nothing. Just guesses.”

Outside, a younger couple walked down the sidewalk in front of our house. The man, his hair buzzed short against his head, tugged on the leash or a long-haired golden retriever whose nose was buried in our yard. The woman stood a few steps behind him, holding the hand of a young girl who was pouting and sitting on the concrete, her arms crossed in defiance. My dad picked up one of the photos sitting on my desk, a shot of Bill gazing out at the hills of Florence, a glass of wine in his hand.

“I’d love to be there again someday,” he started. My ears perked and I pulled myself away from my empty stare.

“You’ve been to Europe?”

“Haven’t I told you? Your mother and I went to Florence on our honeymoon. We certainly didn’t have the adventure these two seemed to have, but we spent a week in the city a few months after we got married. And then you came along.” He lifted his hand from my shoulder and set the photo back down on my desk. I sighed and tried to speak, but my voice cracked a bit so instead my father and I just listened to the sounds of Jimmy and Tom chasing each other downstairs and the dog barking as they played.

The next day, I spent fifth period hiding in the library searching through old high school yearbooks instead of listening to another one of Miss Phipp’s dry lectures on the importance of MLA format. I tried slipping through the back door of the library to avoid the questioning eyes of the
librarian. As I slowly opened the door, I heard someone mutter a startled ‘oops’ and shuffle out of the way.

“Um...excuse me, but students have to use the front door and sign in,” the librarian said before she even looked up at me. I considered turning around but hoped a confident stride would help me avoid any suspicion. “Oh, Hannah! How are you?”

“Just here to work on my history project,” I started towards the twisting corridors of books.

“Well, come find me if you need anything.” I nodded and mumbled a wordless reply. “How’s your mother doing? We’ve all missed her sense of humor at the faculty meetings.”

I stopped for a moment, unsure of how to answer the question. “She’s doing alright. She sends her love.”

“Tell her if she needs something to do while she’s home, she should send us some of her chocolate chip cookies, too.” The librarian laughed her mouse-squeak giggle. I whispered ‘will do’ as I disappeared behind the shelves.

Since I found the album in the library, I thought Bill or Noreen may have been alumni of my high school, here in this Maryland town far from Niagara Falls, New York or Lisbon, Portugal. No evidence to support my claim, just guesses to keep my mind away from the discouraging grasp of empty searching. Thankfully, the library kept copies of old yearbooks going back almost as far as the turn of the last century, more tomes of faded photographs of people long forgotten but well cataloged. I scanned row after row of headshots, stopping at each Bill, William, or Noreen, squinting my eyes, tilting my head, doing whatever it took to imagine if these high schoolers would grow up to be my Bill or Noreen. Nothing. I had no real idea of what year they would have even graduated. Only guesses.

Guesses that they went to my high school. Guesses that this search was worth my time. Guesses that the next round of treatments would work. Guesses on my math homework.
Everything right now was just a guess for me, the future of my seventeen year-old life wonderfully and terrifyingly uncertain.

By now, I was getting tired of my inability to stop my search. Each minute that I spent searching felt like hurried steps in random directions, my only certitude being that I wasn’t making any progress. Each clue came right as I would start to give up, insignificant fragments that brought back that feeling of excitement that wouldn’t let me end my search. Minutes soon stretched into an unproductive hour. The sixth period bell rang — gym class — but an award of “Best Couple” given to a William and Noreen kept me in my seat.

“That’s the bell, time to get moving to your next class.” One of the younger librarians — one who hadn’t asked about my mother — found me in my corner at the back of the library.

“I … actually have another study hall. Can I stay?”

“Two study halls?” she asked, raising her eyebrows. She walked over to my desk and looked at the yearbooks sprawled in front of me. I noticed that the best couple award was dated 1949, too late to be my Bill and Noreen. That meant I had already been through 30 years of Owings Mills High School history. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you in here during sixth period. What is your name?”

“Just let me stay, please?”

“I’m going to have to ask you to leave and move on to your next class.”

“Fine,” I stood up, the legs of my chair scraping against the wooden floor of the library. “I’ll just check these out and leave.” With my backpack slung over my shoulder, I picked up as many yearbooks as I could hold, years of suburban history spilling from my arms, and rushed towards the front desk.

“Hey! Get back here and put away these books. You can’t check them out, they’re reference books.” As the librarian shouted after me, I stopped beneath a poster of two dogs in sunglasses urging kids to read. I went limp and the yearbooks littered the floor, some remaining closed, showing off the
antiquated design of their covers. A few had fallen open. Black and white photos of students who would have been my peers had I been born eighty years ago stared up at me. My knees trembled, but I managed to stay on my feet. Bill and Noreen were nowhere to be found, but still I saw their faces in twenty years of basketball games and talent shows. I started swaying and grabbed a nearby bookshelf to stop myself from falling over. My breathing was heavy and sporadic. The librarian rushed over to me, looking now more worried than agitated. It was then I noticed I had been crying.

* * *

Still shaken by my breakdown in the library, I took the long way home, not rushing but winding through the streets of my neighborhood, sometimes walking down the same street twice in two different directions, then looping around the block and down a dead-end road, circling the cul-de-sac. I passed by Suzy Pranser’s house, the site of my first kiss, a sloppy and unsatisfying affair with Kevin Mahoney at Suzy’s fourteenth birthday party. Rumor has it she refused to eat until her parents let her invite boys.

When I got home, I noticed my dad’s car was gone, the driveway littered instead with a football, a baseball bat, and Jimmy’s bike. As I walked into the house, my eyes fixed on one of the photos of Bill and Noreen sitting on the beach that I had been looking at for most of my walk home, I kicked some of Jimmy’s toys that had been left on the floor, the pain sizzling in my toes.

“Jimmy!” I shouted. “Pick up your toys.” No response. Strange. Dad and Jimmy must have gone off somewhere. Maybe Jimmy had a doctor’s appointment?

I hurried upstairs to my room. Photos from the album were still scattered about my desk. As I sat in my final class an hour earlier, trying to hide my tear-stained face from the other
students, I had the idea of going through phonebooks online to find Bills and Noreens that maybe, by some stretch of luck, would be who I was looking for. I opened my computer and started searching through directories for both the Baltimore and Niagara areas, still working with the wild guess that they’d still even be in one of those two places.

William and Noreen Eisenberg. Baltimore, Maryland. A disconnected number. Noreen Hampshire of Hunt Valley, Maryland told me with a raspy and tired voice that she’d never left Maryland — let alone the country — in, as she put it, ‘her whole, sorry life’. William Weiner of Niagara Falls simply shouted obscenities at me, paranoid about where I might have found his number. Then I tried a Billy and Noreen Beda, of Essex, Maryland. An old man answered the phone after only a single ring.

“Hi...” I said into the phone, anxious about getting yelled at again. “Sorry to bother you and I know this probably sounds absolutely crazy, but did you spend six weeks in Europe in the 60s?” The voice on the other end remained quiet and after what felt like minutes waiting for a response, I said, “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have bothered you. Have a —”

The man took a deep breath and finally spoke, forming his words slowly. “I did. With my wife before she passed away. May I ask who is calling?” I couldn’t believe it. Somehow, out of all the Bills and Noreens in this world, I managed to find my Bill and Noreen. They’re real. All of those memories captured in black and white in this photo album I found in my tiny school library. Real.

“Well...this might be hard to believe,” I said, my words stumbling over my excitement, “but I think I found a photo album of your trip in my school library, I’ve been trying to find the owners — you — for days. I can’t believe I actually found you.”

Through tears on both ends, Bill and I talked about Europe and his late wife and agreed upon a place to meet so
I could return the album to him. After we hung up, I started pacing about my room. I found them, somehow I found them! But...passed away? I knew the people in those photos had to be very old by now. I was lucky that Bill was even alive. But still I felt like I had lost someone close to me without ever meeting them. I was so caught up in my thoughts that I didn’t hear the front door open until Jimmy started crying about something. I grabbed the sheet of paper on which I had written Bill’s phone number and our plans for this coming Saturday and ran down the stairs.

Jimmy lay curled on the floor, gasping for breath between hysterical cries. My dad sat at his side with a hand on my brother’s shoulder. He wasn’t crying. He just stared at me, his cheeks glistening with still-drying tears. Both of them wore the faded, yellow bracelets of hospital visitors. Before I could open my mouth to ask what was wrong, he got up, walked over to me and squeezed my arms against my body in a giant hug.

“I’m so sorry I told you we can’t go to Europe, Hannah,” he said, finally able to choke out a few words.
Still Against the Speed

Erin Winseman

I was looking at the over-turned
sky of forget-me-nots
on the side of the road,

my husband’s hands on the steering wheel,
dirt creased into the lines of his skin
like small blackened rivers flowing into his veins
from the planting he did this morning
on our little tree farm;

the blue mixed with the green,
watercolors spilling onto a canvas,
blurring as my eyes tried to focus
on the still against

the speed when out of the field of blue
he came running into the road
pink tongue lolling and stillness
halted like an uprooted tree before it—

falls.

I didn’t see him, my husband says later,
running his finger over the place between
the tip of his ear and the vein in his temple,

I say I should have paid
more attention;
blue blur of melded

fur and metal: as I fall asleep that night
I see the watercolors fade until all
that is left is the sound of blue and green
running against pavement,

silently we extinguish the heart
of those breathing color-shades:
outside I hear the wind move the fir trees
that for green inside winter we will soon tear

away—

things that move still we do not pause for,
enamored by the sky of forget-me-
not blue.
Night in Arizona is different from night in the Northeast. The air is dry and it is neither warm nor cold, as if there’s no weather at all. Everything is still. My father, stepmother and brother have fallen asleep, and my elderly grandmother, whose home we are visiting, finally turns her light off.

I pad into my grandmother’s bathroom, careful to remain silent, and take an assortment of pills. They’re in the back of the drawer. I tell myself that they are expired scripts she won’t be using.

The back door of the house is made of glass, and it opens to a small pool fenced in from the surrounding properties. I sit down in a plastic chair next to the pool. Lights at the bottom of the pool ripple upward to illuminate the water’s surface. I think about how still the night is.

My grandmother comes out from the house and sits down in another plastic chair next to me. She tells me that she hasn’t been able to sleep well lately, that the pills aren’t any help. She tells me that she comes out to swim when she cannot sleep. I agree to join her.

The water is neither warm nor cold. It doesn’t feel different
from the air, except thicker. I hold my breath and bring my head underwater. I come up for air, and we float on our backs, looking up at the sky.

My grandmother tells me that my stepmother is too young for my father, that she must be using him for money. She tells me that my brother is not actually an adult yet, that he cannot manage his life.

“You’re going to do well though,” she tells me. “You are at ease with everything around you.”

I get out of the water while she continues to float on her back. She asks me to help her make breakfast in the morning. I agree and tell her goodnight, and as I walk back into the house I feel proud of myself.

The sun rises, I scramble eggs, and she spreads cream cheese on bagels. We pour four glasses of orange juice, and one glass of water for myself. The heat and humidity begin to set in.

“Did everyone sleep well?” my grandmother asks.

I watch my father’s bald and bulbous head through my glass of water. It is magnified as he nods.

Droplets of sweat form on the nape of my neck and slide down the hollow of my back. I lift my glass and drink.

Twenty-five hundred miles away in the place I call home, there is a river called the Stillwater. And though it is anything but still—instead riddled with broken glass bottles and rushing currents—it is beautiful. One day, I will swim there with my grandmother.
Phoebe Mitchell

Untitled 1 & 2
Nolan Ellsworth

Excerpt from SEEK
Emily Cox

Sunflower
Cole Bortz

Ripple Potrait 2, 6 & 7
Natalie Burlant

Untitled
i wrote out poetry on the inseams of my favorite pair of jeans. they’re tight so sometimes when i wear them i end up with a backward inside out tattoo running up and inside my legs. i tried smoking for the first time tonight. not cigarettes because even though the boy i love is an ocean away i would hate to taste bad. no, something out of a pipe and i felt calm, and like the woozy light that lingers around street lamps and i’d always thought that i belonged in the sharp dark space between those glows but maybe i’m the light and maybe my light is unrelated to that quick flash that flickered by the end of the pipe for just a second -- like a gas station firework or like a sharp cough at something unfamiliar -- but six dollar champagne has never made me feel this way, especially sipped out of dixie cups. i got distracted on the way upstairs, sat and lay back on the landing wrote something in the air with my pinky finger and tried to
remember it
because i said something important.
the way i’m feeling has something to do with sand,
sand in all your pockets maybe or how hot it gets and burns
your feet.
i pressed my lips against the pipe like everyone else.
but i coughed too much
and everyone asked why are you doing this?
and i don’t know.
not because i’m scared of the dark
but maybe to prove that
i can fill up my lungs for a moment, with sand or street lamps
or something else,
try not to cough it all out,
feel a little woozy and a little light.
and because when all my buzz is gone, when i turn out the
lights
and strip off my jeans,
at least i’ll still have something about yellow fog and
disturbing
the universe written backwards inside out along my legs.
I would write a history of love, 
extinct that it would be filled with nightmares about 
drowning 
and the long letter you wrote me about the stone wall outside 
your house 
and angry questions about initials carved into trees.

Maybe instead I’ll write the romance of disappearing, 
of losing my phone and running away to a place 
without a name or a name without a place, 
of hiding away in a barn with a few packets of instant 
oatmeal 
and a book I’ve never heard of before, 
of finding a beach with a strong current and 
letting it pull me for a while, 
of losing my pearl earring back to the sea, 
forgetting what the ground feels like under my feet.

I could write a love song for getting lost, 
for driving at night until I cross a bridge with bright lights 
that looks different in the dark, 
for not turning around but turning east 
and racing towards the sea 
because there are a thousand metaphors that go with ocean
and I need to prove that I’m not afraid of any of them.

I could write a eulogy for home,
a guidebook to not saying goodbye,
a novel explaining everywhere I’ll say I’ve never been.
Easier to fall in love with disappearing
than fall out of love with you.
like the images we flip through at 2 am on a weeknight pretending it’s going somewhere

like the girls in tights slipping by you in the East Village or even the photograph of your grandmother under a dogwood in Brooklyn.

the girl feels so old after two years of college. will the rest of life be like this will it go by this fast

almost every keepsake I threw away and that’s what I’ll remember.

the Polaroids in her desk she took for her first real boyfriend. her first time his eleventh.

she thinks, I’ll throw them away only before I die or move away.

she wonders if he remembers what she looks like naked

where did she put his letter?
they watched the stars after
and she saw ryan watching them.

she asked a friend to photograph her the next day
they broke up three weeks later

january came and went
everyone thought, what if i was dead

she threw up on the grass beach

on the break she spread a triptych
3 photographs of her childhood home
the same angle of the blue vinyl house in Southern suburbia:

a summer day after a lemonade stand.
lit up in multicolor for Christmas, the dog in the snow.
the front yard oak tree uprooted after the storm.

the things you remember.
that tree never meant much alive,

the setter blinking at a flash in the snow.
The sun beat down on him like stones or frogs.

In the basement, a woman finds a bug in her laundry machine.
She’s out of quarters but look, it survived the cycle.

Twirling the sign might be cocky, the man thinks.
On the way home from piano lessons, the family reads, “Anything helps.”

I had my daughter when I was 55.
When she’s grown, I’ll be made out of stone, and that’s why I can’t keep regular office hours

(he told Judy).
Also, take a look at the original poem.
August is a mistranslation.

You’re drawing references from air.
Pound didn’t speak Chinese.

The eight month is supposed to sound sad!

Do you want to paint faces at my daughter’s birthday?
I can give you a ride there but not home.

This is our routine,
you see.
This was your decision, they tell you.

It’s not like you didn’t know love prickles when it runs down your skin and plucks hairs upright or that it cracks like dry lips in dry air and is brittle like leaves after they’ve forgotten to turn red this year.

This was your decision, they tell you.

And sometimes you forget how to know things people haven’t told you or you forget how not to feel guilty when the skin of your eye tears and the salt of your body falls out.

You wanted this to happen, they tell you.

When you dropped your pupils into the soft of his hand, half-forgetting you needed them to see, and therefore half-remembering.
You can’t go back, they tell you.

And the truth clangs on the floor and rings. It falls into the cracks in the floorboards.

This was love, they tell you.

And you forget not to believe them.
Kipper and I had spent the entire night chain smoking on the patio, and I’m not even a chain smoker. I guess I wasn’t drinking because of something. Maybe I felt bad for the host. She was a fool. I mean, who willingly hosts a party for a bunch of fucked out high school graduates. A damn fool, that’s who. Yeah, so I was sitting there, smoking to keep from disorderliness. I think I wanted to be able to help. Not her really, but her mum. I mean, she was all alone. Occasionally she would drop in to fill a trash bag with beer cans, but mostly, she was absent. But I mean, I have no idea where she was hiding out. Seemed to me like the whole house was run over. Maybe her bedroom had a lock. I damn hope so, otherwise who knows who would’ve been attempting to make some kind of dilapidated teenage dream between her sheets. It was sometime around my tenth menthol when I realized that Kipper and I had hardly said a word since our eighth. I mean, yeah, I had been daydreaming about teenage dreams, probably because it hardly seemed like I would ever have any. I guess you could say that I was feeling pretty melancholy, stuck in my own silent sober superiority. So I went for a wander. I suppose it was luck that I found him before anyone else did.

Josh was standing on the landing, seething. All taught and chiseled, but with nothing in his eyes. Looking like that guy in American Psycho. I ran up the stairs to see him staring
at some chump in Nantucket Reds and boaters. Josh had his fist poised. I swear it was like slow motion or something. I pushed the chump out of the way and Josh slammed his fist into the wall, crushing his fingers through the apparently plaster facade. He stood for a second, staring at hole in the wall, while the chump nearly fainted onto some coital couple on the floor. Then Josh pulled his hand out and ran for it, practically smashing his face into maroon stair-carpet. I took the weakness of the wall as encouragement, and moved the stylishly posed fruit-on-a-table-photo from next to a door to where it could cover the hole. The chump gaped and ran his mouth about how he should sue that kid or something. So I told him to breeze it and handed him a joint. Seemed like a perfect fix, cause he shut up pretty quickly.

I didn’t really mean to go looking for Josh, not really. I just wanted to check that he was alright, still standing and everything. Plus, I didn’t have much else to do. So I followed him out of the door and lit another menthol on the porch. The whole front garden had turned into an overcrowded parking space for those sweet-sixteen SUVs, and as I walked among them I realized that their extensive trunk space might have been some kind of incentive. I saw Alex with that other girl’s boyfriend and she winked at me through the glass. I guess the joke was on her, later it turned out another boyfriend she snatched had some weird strain of herpes. Anyway, she had cold sores for months afterwards, and the whole time she complained over her coffee, all I could think about was that wink. Not that it really mattered in the end. The cold sores eventually went away, but the wink stayed.

Meandering through the cars, I found Josh sitting cross-legged behind one of the few empty SUVs. He wasn’t doing much, just rubbing his hands into the dewy grass. The blood on his knuckles was mixing with the dew and becoming watery. I asked him if he was alright and he started talking about this
time he had been at a party in a barn in the countryside in North Carolina. Something about being in love with this girl and following her all night through fields and professing his undying love to her before they ended up at a railway track. She had lain on the middle of the track and told him that if he didn’t stop loving her, she would lie there until a train hit her. So he told her that he didn’t love her and they walked back to the barn together. She spent the entire time talking about how much she wanted chicken wings, like to him, death, love, and wings made sense. He spewed all that out in about one minute, with his eyes closed. I touched his hand. I think it was to find something like comfort and closeness, but I pretended I was checking it wasn’t broken. His eyes snapped open and he asked me what the hell I was doing following him out here. I said I just wanted to know how he was doing, and he said something like, shouldn’t you be with your boyfriend tonight. I didn’t really agree, so I just sat there. I think my hand was still on his when he told me that I looked like an idiot smoking. And something else about menthols being pussy-cigarettes. It was around then that I got up and went inside, throwing my menthol near his feet.

I entered the house and found myself standing by the beer pong table, watching some girl throw ping-pong balls in her underwear. She looked pretty good, you know, considering the misogyny. I was thinking about that for a bit when my vision honed in on the lump behind the underwear-girl. It was my boyfriend. Passed out on the floor, drooling. I guess I didn’t have much of anything really. But neither did she, because she took her bra off and all I could her was the sound of squawking. Surprising that he didn’t wake up, considering the noise. I looked back at her, in all her glorious bounciness. She probably felt free and open. I’m pretty sure she didn’t even realize that all the guys she was playing with still had their shirts and pants on. And even if she did, she bounced anyway, so maybe she just didn’t care.
The mother was standing next to me. I think she was supposed to be cleaning up, but naked girl had distracted her. So I decided to help her. I picked up some bottles and tried to divert her attention from naked girl, but instead brought her daughter to her attention. She was sitting spread-legged on the sink, eating spaghetti with some guy named Jason. There was nothing in it really, at least not compared to naked girl, but her mum snatched the bottles from my hand and stormed to her hiding place. And I found a sofa in the sitting room. It was opposite the lump of my boyfriend. So I watched him for a while, until some girl started climbing on top of me. I didn’t really know what to do. I hadn’t exactly spoken to her before, and I thought that her clawing at my shirt was kind of insensitive given my current state of introspection. So I pushed her over and she landed on the floor with a thump. She then proceeded to crawl over to some sleeping guy and do pretty much the same thing. But when he didn’t wake up, she curled up next to him, placed her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes.

I think I dozed off for a second, because when I woke up the lights were dimmer and people were strewn across the floor. There was a couple next to me, writhing impossibly. My mouth tasted like tar and I couldn’t feel my tongue, so I got up for some water. Looking at the couple next to me, I saw Josh’s face. His eyes were like hollows; they didn’t even flinch when she started rocking. His gaze moved upwards and caught mine and he winked. Like a dead-end track. I didn’t even smile.

I was sipping my water when I noticed that the girl was still naked, passed out on the beer pong table, with two solo cups balanced on her breasts. I decided to move them and put a blanket over her. And then I went outside and joined Kipper. I guess she had finished two packs by then because even her glasses had the grime of smoke stuck to them. She asked me how it was going and I asked her if she had a light. Nodding she passed me a Bic and a joint. I guess she was
right, I could get a little hazy. It was just the two of us in the night, the sound of fornication in the background. As we were sitting there, Alex walked out of the bushes with another girl’s boyfriend. He looked sheepish and zipped up his pants before ducking into the house. Alex grinned and snapped her fingers. She was doing that thing again, that thing where she tried to get as much as possible in the shortest amount of time. I never understood how she did it. Aside from the detachment, there was the chafing. Maybe she just had it mastered. Or maybe she carried her own KY. Probably she was just redeeming her pride. Apparently some people did turn her down. Great night, she said, and ruffled my hair. She told me that maybe I should look around and pointed to the pile of sleeping boyfriend, insinuating that anything was better than that. She walked into the house, pulling the blanket from the girl and exposing her, again, before sliding into the darkened living room.

Maybe I wanted to prove her wrong, so I sidled up to my boyfriend and tried to hold him, but he woke up and spat something about my breath smelling like shit and cigarettes, so I went and sat in the middle of the room. Everyone was sleeping and it was just me, awake and watching. Watching nothing, I guess. Thinking maybe. But that’s when he came up to me. Some chump in Nantucket Reds. Not the same one exactly, but the same type. His name was Beau but they all called him Bo. Always reminded me of the presidential dog. But here he was, on the floor next to me, cross-legged and holding a bottle of Black Label. He said something like, I always wanted you, but you weren’t part of my crowd, I never had the balls to talk to you, yada yada ya. As though it would impress me that only now, after four years, in the darkness of the early morning, with a bottle of half-finished whiskey, he found the balls. So I nodded. I told him that my boyfriend was sleeping over there and gestured to the corner. He grinned, telling me that he was over there for a reason. I swigged his jack and my eyes blurred. It wasn’t that I was interested. Chumps don’t do
it for me, but. I mean, goddamn, what was the point? He was over there, drooling in a ball, Josh and Alex were curled into some kind of togetherness and I had nothing but Black Label and the wet nose of a dog. So I was about to kiss him, I really was. But then he told me that I was beautiful, and all I could think was, what a chump. So I smiled and said thanks but no thanks. But I took the whiskey.

I didn’t really know what I was doing in the light of that morning. I mean I know I was making some Mr. Coffee-whiskey-Irish concoction, but I didn’t really know what I was doing. So I decided to balance the solo cups on the naked girl’s breasts again. Anything was better than full-blown nipples, and the solo cups kind of looked like art. Modern art that is.

I went to sit on the patio with my coffee and I lit up a menthol. I was sitting there alone for a while and then Beau the chump came out. He told me that he thought I looked damn fine with a cigarette in my mouth. I asked him if he thought menthols were pussy-cigarettes. He laughed and said he didn’t even know what that meant. He was silent for a bit and then he asked me what it meant. I said that being told you smoke pussy-cigarettes is a little bit like someone telling you they would rather eat chicken wings than love you. He looked confused, but he said that maybe they were just telling you to man up and smoke a real fucking cigarette, or something like that.
...showplace, but of a very different sort... 
one of the most remarkable Negro slum 
exhibits in the world.”

   John Bartlow Martin,
   Harper’s Magazine, 1950

All through the atrium you could hear
Jimmy’s and Priscilla’s Mecca Flat Blues;

the melodic, slow tune made for people
forced to live a fast life; the sinking

of piano keys beating against steel and mahogany wood as
floors shook

and vibrated to the agony of blues; and the Mecca Flat Men
and Mecca Flat

Women danced and jived, trying
to get that rhythm right just one more time.

And that’s the type of people we’ve always
been proud to stroll our blues around
until we left it at a place we could always find it again. Yes, those were simpler times,

but we lost it all in the wreckage. My, we witnessed a history crushed and resurrected

into something they always planned not for us our lives have always been the outliers.

No more aromas of Sunday dinners that took all week to harvest by inured hands,

serenading our living room floors; no more hymns and gospels being regurgitated

from the vacant bellies of those who were quick to force feed us what they couldn’t digest;

no more Sammy the butcher on the fifth floor, quick to cut you a piece of meat if all you had

was millet to get you by; no more Maggie the hairdresser who could get you a new ‘do,

free of charge; and no more Uncle Lou who made sure you knew who you were...

We now pass by the ruins with heads shackled down, thinking of the temple it used to be;

of all the history bound to its decay; the house they built, but the homes we created...
If that niggerboy knew how to swim,  
maybe he would have lived.  
-Anonymous

Found him heavy black, blue, puff  
eyed and sponge like, floating  
in the lake; a dead rainbow,  
they called him. I tried to hold him,  
but I just was squeezing out blood tainted  
water; he smelled like salt water trout.

Felt like my first time holding him,  
full of unseasoned life then,  
naked and unaware of the world women have  
the power of bringing men into.  
I whispered in his left ear ‘cause he always been  
kinda hard of hearing in his right;  
the boy always did turn left  
when you called on him, ain’t that funny?  
I whispered you gots to wake up
chile; you gots to go to bed
so you can be rested
for school tomorrow.
Hyde Park, Chicago

after Gwendolyn Brooks

“The Chancellor and the President gazed out across the park
They laughed like anything to see that things were looking
dark. ‘Our neighborhood once bloomed like the lily
Just seven coons with seven kids could knock our program
silly. Forget it, and thank the Lord for Willie’ ”
- Robert Maynard Hutchins and Lawrence A. Kimpton

Somewhere in the echoes of alleyway man
and backstreet women drowning Night Train
or Thunderbird, we still find a way to think of you,
our dear neighbors in Hyde Park, as above the influence
of our ghetto heaven.

Somewhere in the pores of distressed smiles and retired
grins from old southern settlers, who only find a way
to your homes when it’s time to tend to your peachy children,
we still find a way to praise your funny way of keeping us
distant, yet closer in servitude.

Surely, your children can’t be like ours in Woodlawn and
Bronzeville. They must reek of freshness, of cleanliness;
but then again, we bathe them for you so you can parade
your little joys, wondering why our little miseries
can’t be civilized.
But we can imagine:

After all, we are your backyards you never find the time
to use, unless its forgotten waste so your picturesque front
yards (manicured and polished by us of course) can continue
to out glow us; we can only hope for visitors, but they come
like man observing the wild.

More than that what pains us is your way
of pretending to envy us, who just want a little touch
of that happy illness you suffer with so gracefully.
It’s the feigned aches you display, covered in satin...
the misery shrouded in silk...
we have the privilege of living pain in pain’s clothing.

Excuse our way of seeing you, but you must understand
you are our only glimpses of luxury the way it was intended.
Some of you do come to lose yourselves in our vices and
levees to feel that negro wildness, with the comfort
of shedding it off before tomorrows promised job.

We can only imagine losing ourselves in your paradise,
without a promised blood shed, shortly after.
Two cars shared the road a while
     Or so it seemed to the birds on the wire,
Squatting still above fields
     Where seasons pass in four perfect pictures
Of birth
and growth
and work
and death
All the lisping days of life carried by the fruits of field to
lonely men,
     Who fear their days,
Each as long to them as the road beneath the road
Where birds sit and watch cars pass.