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Burning Wings A Memoir

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BURNING WINGS

A Memoir

A SENIOR HONORS THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF LANGUAGES AND LITERATURE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS TO GRADUATE WITH HONORS

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This thesis for honors recognition has been approved for the Department of Languages and Literature.

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Without the help and support of many individuals, this journey would not have been possible. I owe a great deal of thanks to the people who never doubted that my story was a worthy endeavor.

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And to my audience: That which does not kill us makes us stronger.
Abstract

This memoir is an introspective creative writing effort exploring the causes and consequences of self-hate. Using a half-marathon as a point of departure, I recount moments of my life, exposing the compounding crises that undermine the fragile confidence of young adults. Scenes shift between the intense emotions of the race and elucidating episodes of self-doubt. Through the examination of my relationships with peers, pets, and parents, I learn the lessons of both loss and growth. I also address the rampant perfectionism that motivates me. As the tensions escalate, the struggle between acceptance and death must be reconciled. Finally, in the doubtful journey towards self-acceptance I explore the extent to which healing can occur.
# Table of Contents

- Introduction ......................................................................................... 1
- Burning Wings ....................................................................................... 8
- Bibliography .......................................................................................... 61
TO STRIVE, TO SEEK, TO FIND, AND NOT TO YIELD.
-ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON-

IF YOU SURRENDERED TO THE AIR, YOU COULD RIDE IT.
-TONI MORRISON-
INTRODUCTION
As the millenium approaches, many individuals are questioning their place in the universe and the purpose of their lives. It appears people are seeking connections, relationships, and most importantly, an understanding which they can carry with them into a time of change and progress. This greater need for the realization of our humanity can account for the rising popularity of the literary genre of memoir. Sometimes referred to as “spiritual narratives” or “spiritual journeys,” memoir is a relatively new genre that is worth exploring.

There exists a bit a of confusion as to the distinction between memoir and autobiography. In an article in *Boston College Magazine*, Robert Atwan contributes to the definition of both. In the 19th-century, memoirs, plural, was a term used by a public figure, a president for example, recounting public events. When Benjamin Franklin wrote the details of his life he used autobiography in his title, not memoirs. Atwan says that the “autobiography originally was considered the private life, a more thoughtful, spiritual kind of a narrative” (“The Voyage” 26). These early definitions of memoirs and autobiography switched places somewhere between Benjamin Franklin and Frank McCourt. Within a hundred years, memoir, now singular, tends to center around a specific crisis, and for this reason is considered “focused and thematic” with the capacity to both “convey something of the essential self” (26), and “teach you something” (27). A memoir seeks to “touch our humanity,” says Atwan, and make connections between people (36). Memoir also has an element of confession in it, which some find distasteful. In contrast, the autobiography has become a book about a “public life” (27), a compilation of facts of an individual’s life, an overall, encompassing view of the author’s existence. Tobias Wolff, author of his own
memoir, describes autobiography as something which would “use a lot of supporting documents, would be about affairs of the state, and would be as documentary-like as possible” (qtd. in Glass 25). Whereas a memoir seeks to give insight as to what makes us human, an autobiography offers superficial reading while failing to negotiate emotional terrain.

One controversial issue with the modern memoir is authenticity. It is presumed that the author writing his or her memoir makes a contract with the reader that everything included in the memoir will be truthful, with no elements of fiction. This is where a problem occurs. John Irving wrote in his own memoir that “to any writer with a good imagination, all memoirs are false. The correct detail is rarely, exactly, what happened; the most truthful detail is what could have happened, or what should have” (Irving 5). Hooper says “Probably in a memoir you would have more liberty to conflate certain events and maybe you could create a little bit more than in an autobiography” (“The Voyage” 26). This view that memoir is somewhat fictional seems to be acceptable, especially since memoir is considered to be a genre within “creative writing.” This “creative” aspect can be coupled with the distorting nature of memories. Memoir is often called “the literature of memory.” Psychological experiments have proved memory to be relatively unreliable. Many memories, especially of early childhood events, are unclear, and with suggestion, the memory of an event may alter. Oftentimes people remember events occurring in the way they had wanted the event to occur, not necessarily how it did occur. But the important thing about memory, and therefore memoir as well, is that the events and feelings are real to the one who remembers them. Maybe Frank McCourt didn’t receive “such a light penance” (29) from an Irish priest, as Atwan insists never could have happened, but in
McCourt's mind, he did. Tobias Wolff can best conclude this issue with a statement from his book's opening. Memoir, he says, "is a book of memory, and memory has its own show to tell;" the role of the author is "to make it a tell a truthful show" (qtd. in Glass 25). A memoir, then, is only as authentic as the memories that create it.

Perhaps a more important issue is the reality of the human experience that is conveyed in a memoir. The realness of a memoir, perhaps, can account for its popularity. There is obviously a need in people that this genre is fulfilling. Helene Atwan, the director of Beacon Press, says that people today "yearn for authenticity...psychological truth...relevance" ("The Voyage" 26). Political ethicist Leon Hooper proposes that the "appeal of memoir may be that these stories transcend a kind of loneliness, a cultural distance, that modern readers long to bridge" (31). As the year 2000 draws near, many people are wondering what is coming next in the progress of man. People are worried and doubtful about everything. However, a line from the recent movie Contact gives insight into the most obvious way to find comfort. An extra-terrestrial life form says that humans "are capable of such beautiful dreams...and such horrible nightmares. You feel so lost, so cut off, so alone. Only, you're not. See, in all our searching, the only thing we've found that makes the emptiness bearable...is each other." Individuals are finally realizing this and reaching out. Tristine Rainer, author of a book about writing autobiographies, says "part of the appeal of a memoir is the fact that sometimes readers expect to find their own lives reflected in someone else's—and perhaps draw insights or strength from the lessons the writer has learned" (qtd. in Terry 5). Historian Mark O'Connor points out that memoir is "an interestingly optimistic genre" ("The Voyage" 33). Basically, they are survival stories—the point of them is to "go through some drama, some revelation, and
come out well” (33). That memoirs all end with closure and resolution is debatable, but the fact remains that memoirs are comforting. Memoirs reassure people that we all live some kind of mixed-up life, that we’re all “dysfunctional.” Concluding the discussion of what memoir accomplishes, Rainer asserts that memoir “opens up the wonder of what a life is,” because both audience and author are “exploring the mystery of their lives and sharing those lives with each other” (qtd. in Terry 5).

Despite the emotional fulfillment many readers experience reading memoirs, some individuals, like Associate Professor of History Paul Breines, see the memoir as “Ricki Lake for intellectuals” (“The Voyage” 30). The confessional nature of memoirs makes the author an exhibitionist and the reader a voyeur. Memoir, in Breines’s words, is “talk-show television for people who don’t watch TV. We read instead, but we get basically the same thing” (30). The difference, though, is the intellectual level at which talk-shows and memoirs are produced. Such shows as Ricki Lake and Jerri Springer are based on shock factor—the more they can make the audience squeal the more they’ve reached their target audience. Memoirs have a certain amount of shock factor they could exploit in the same manner, but don’t. Memoir doesn’t need shocking events to reach a reader—it simply uses human emotion to seek an understanding of the human condition. They tell a shocking story not so that the reader will squeal, but so that the reader will understand, and try to connect with the experience of the author. Charlotte Bruce Harvey, senior editor of Boston College Magazine distinguishes between types of audiences saying, “It’s not mere nosiness or prurience that motivates my curiosity; it’s the desire to understand other people” (31).
One of my concerns regarding this confessional aspect of the memoir, is *why* people are feeling a need to “confess.” Some writers suggest that the memoirs written by those who are “unknown authors,” those written by average people, are actually a therapeutic process, and a form of personal expression (Terry 5). Others suggest that because we are “faced with an overwhelming amount of manufactured identity,” memoirs are coming out from underneath asserting that “I really have to understand who I am, not who the culture is telling me I am” (Richard Louv qtd. in Terry 5). Still more believe that memoirs are “raising the question, Am I who I appear to be? And the answer seems to be, I’m not” (Breines qtd in “The Voyage” 31). In quite a few of my Psychology courses I have explored what is called “the impostor phenomenon.” Many individuals who have great, or even mediocre, achievements attribute their success not to themselves, but to external forces, usually luck or coincidence. I think memoir is an outgrowth of this phenomenon, especially my memoir. I project an image of a healthy individual—confident, happy, somewhat intelligent, yet through my memoir I’m basically saying, “I am not who you think I am”—I don’t like myself, my abilities, my choices, (or at the least, I am unaware of my abilities). I wonder how many other memoirs are written because the authors, who are living normal lives, feel they aren’t acknowledging an event or an obsession that could prevent their success in living a normal life. Still, I think most people who “confess” are seeking full acceptance. They want to know they can still be esteemed by others who know of their deepest faults and traumas.

Because memoir is not universally enjoyed, it is somewhat important to distinguish what makes a memoir good. It is suggested by both H. Atwan and O’Connor that most memoirs are worth a read. Atwan says that “[memoirs] don’t all have to be great” to
make a point. She continues, “You might be impatient with them because the writing isn’t good…but they nonetheless have something to offer” (“The Voyage” 36). O’Connor agrees, asserting that “it may not even matter whether [memoir] is high or low art or even art at all, if what memoir does is touch our humanity” (“The Voyage” 36). Paul Diehl, head of the nonfiction writing program at the University of Iowa, agrees that good memoirs turn an individual story “into a song that we can all share ourselves” (Terry 5). Patrick Smith says simply that “it is the way memoirs value some things and devalue others that makes the best worthy and the poorest of them undeserving” (30). If Atwan and O’Connor are correct, then, as a writer of my memoir, I have less qualms about my project.

My memoir will have something to offer, or at least that is my expectation. Like most memoirs, mine is tightly focused around one crisis—my self-loathing. I think at one time or another, everyone has experienced a period of self-doubt, when they are not sure who they are, why they’re living, or even how they progressed as far as they have without knowing these things. This is the human experience I am addressing. I don’t see my story as exceptionally shocking or exhibitionistic. It is as honest as my memories, and that is the best I can hope for.
BURNING WINGS
The dream. Erica and I on the bridge at the Royal Gorge. We look down into the parched, stony canyon, the sheer walls on either side, and nothing but fresh air in between. A long way to the bottom. In slow motion, the bridge snaps and we fall, floating. I'm not scared or screaming. With awe, wonder, disbelief, I turn to Erica. "Look, Cha... I'm flying."

Of three thousand runners, one thousand prance at the starting line ten minutes before the gun. The other two thousand nervously bounce in running shoes, numbered bibs fluttering in the wind, waiting for twenty porta-potties. I'm second in line when the starter warns, "Three minutes to start!" Panic, because there is no way I'm going to stop during the race, especially for something as trivial as going to the bathroom. I make it in, discover that I can't pee under pressure, manage to anyway, and pull up my underwear with "One minute to start!" Stumbling towards the starting line, I recinch my shorts.

The gunshot and we're off, and I realize I didn't have to rush—it takes two minutes for a fraction of the contestants to clear the starting area. The others don't really matter, though. This half-marathon is a "personal goal"; I'm not competing against anyone but myself. I run with the mass through the small community of Georgetown, avoiding heels, rubbing elbows, dodging through gaps on the side. Finding my pace and settling in, the hardest part, passes rather easily and I'm surprised by the second mile
marker. *I can't have just run two miles!* My watch shows it’s been twenty minutes. *This might not be so bad...*

Except I’m dehydrated already. Until now “cotton mouth” has been a myth; puckering my lips, I fail to salivate, and each breath burns my tongue and throat. I can make it nine more minutes to the water station at mile three by distracting myself with the view of the mountains around me. The excitement, the anxiety has burdened me, and I still have over eleven miles to go. *Christ, am I going to make it?* I remind myself why I’m doing this, why I can’t stop.

I began running to stay alive. I run for my life.

The early days of summer wake me with dreams of death, a constricted gut, and a hollow heart. I sleep until ten, lie in bed until eleven, sit staring, glaze-eyed, out my window. I think of everything, nothing. Cars pass, I see through them, void out to places where I should not let me be. And then I’m worse. Words in books blur into commands: *Come on, Carolyn—it's so easy. You know where they are.* I escape to the park, to the lake, to a bench by the water. It’s one of those sodden overcast days early in the season that make me doubt summer is possible. As I look for the ducks that are usually around, dread slinks up next to me, whispers, *Easy.* For a minute I indulge it, listen again. *Easy as drinking water. Water. Remember your comfort, your road less traveled? It could make all the difference...*

The pills. I know just where they are—in the prescription box, next to the razor blades, the bottle of ibuprofen, the dental retainers I wear once a month, on top of the tablets I clean my contacts with. For migraines. The directions say that you shouldn’t
exceed three tablets, that some people experience heart failure and even death from use,
that the first tablet should be taken in the care of a physician just in case a heart problem
occurs.

I haven’t opened the box containing nine tablets. I’m saving them. I know just
where they are, how many to take. Silent companions. Secret companions. No one
suspects them. Later, back at home, I lean back into my pillows, burrowing into my
sheepskin. Warm, cozy, I try to remember if caffeine or alcohol exacerbates the fatal
effects.

But no. I can’t do it, not just yet. I remember. There’s been happiness.

Great columns of Easter morning sunlight whisper past the towering windows of
the living room, and I squint the brightness. The green shag carpet grows more artificial,
sparkly somehow, in such stark light.

I sit in the entryway, the cold brown linoleum presses its textured pattern into the
back of my bare thighs. Three years old, I am pretty in the red and blue checkered dress,
and I like the way the blue ribbon in my ponytail tickles my neck. The thick seams at the
toes of my socks have clumped up again, and the feeling drives me so crazy I can’t get the
buckles on my shoes undone fast enough.

Behind me, near the front door, stands a wooden figure, nearly three feet tall, a
wandering man with a pack on his back, a walking stick in hand, and a devoted dog
hugging his calves. His face, frozen in an expression void of emotion, shows neither
delight nor dismay.
Socks straightened, I put my shoes back on, happy I have conquered the buckles without help.

Outside, Dad warms up the car, Mom rushes about upstairs, pulling on her knee-high stockings and misting herself with the Rafinee perfume she keeps at the back of her dresser so that I can’t reach it. My brother, Brian, is curiously absent, but I suspect he’s outside playing with the cats, pulling their tails like he does when he thinks no one is watching.

I would like to stay here, on this morning, in Littleton, Colorado, in this place my parents built—this warm and happy place, where people tell me they love me, where I can play and be me. I have a place where I fit in, without a doubt.

I want that happiness again, I long for it, think I might deserve it. I want to start over. I graduate from college in a year. I figure that if nothing changes in a year, if I’m stuck in this darkness, I have a way out. Funny, though, the migraines stopped altogether after the breakdown. Little by little, I’ve been scraping away at my own life with how much I hate myself. Classes, all the time classes, not understanding this class and failing and homework and reading, reading, reading, all work and no play makes Carolyn a dull girl; laughter stopped, friends, lovers distanced themselves, eating myself from the inside out, hating more because I failed—hating that I am not smart or pretty or someone worth while. I picked away at Carolyn, pecking bits until my head spun, and I collapsed.

There’s a kind of crying, of tears that seep deeper down, that hurts with every heave and hiccup, because you truly believe that no one and nothing can help you—nothing. Not even the people you love or trust the most. It is almost death, except for the
sobs. I cried that cry, admitted yes, I hate myself, and a kind of stillness settled in. If you ask a member of any twelve-step recovery program, they might say half the battle of recovery is acknowledging you have a problem. But then again, just because you know you have a problem doesn’t mean you can resolve it.

The worst is morning, waking up with cramps of disgust and the taste of death on my tongue. So I set the alarm for 5 a.m., when I’m too tired to feel the grief, head out to the lake, run, and warp into a new existence.

Running, my world simplifies and I am unneeded to think critically. My only concern is the physical pain I create for myself and how to endure it. Usually thirty minutes into my run, calves burn, knees ache; I want to stop. But all I have to do is keep going. *All I have to do is keep going.* Stopping hurts—if I start again after walking, the discomfort is worse than if I had just continued to run. Stopping is another let down, another failure. *All I have to do is keep going.* I don’t have to go all out, set any records or pass anyone. All I have to do is finish. Finishing is winning.

But maybe I run four miles a day so that I’ll like my body. I’ll watch the muscles in my legs become defined, my stomach shrink. I’ll like the way I look in a swimsuit. I’ll wear whatever I choose, because skinny people can wear anything and look great. I’ll have more energy, and be more outgoing, and people will like me, and I’ll be happy. Skinny, I will like myself.

My heart knows why I run. I run fast enough, far enough—to fly, morphing through a silver wind, a painted prayer on the wings of falcons, sleeking back skull-feathers of eagles, skimming mountaintops, chasing lightning, floating above it all, looking
down, dancing in the eye of the tempest. Self-empowered, unrestricted, and nothing else. Essentially me.

To fly, I must run. And I do. For now I can run away, not leaving the problem entirely behind, but reducing it to its simplest terms, terms I can understand and resolve. Up here is new perspective; looking down from a distance, I watch, above it all.

Mile three ends after a soothing downhill stretch. Long strides, using my whole leg, landing squarely on each heel, propel me towards the mile marker. Trying not to think of my dry tongue, I focus on breathing. Running downhill is easy, and I often forget to inhale, paying for it with cramps when the course levels off and I start breathing again. Rounding a shaded bend, I see relief ahead—the first water station. A young girl hands me a cup, and I pick up another from the table, dumping one over my head and shoulders, and drinking from the other. Still jogging, I clumsily sip at the water, coughing as it hits my windpipe. One cup is not enough. I grab another, and manage to gulp it without choking.

Refreshed, I look ahead to the rolling hills of the remainder of the course, the bobbing heads a moving trail through the valley. My watch indicates a nine-minute mile pace, remarkably good, taking into account the three minutes I lost at the starting line. *I think I might be able to do this, after all.* Filled with the optimism water and watch restores, I head into the fourth mile.

It's brilliant and sunshiney and five minutes left of recess. It's too late to start a game of tag, and I'm bored with jump rope. I think I'll test my speed. In front of the
main building, on the hot black asphalt, I start to run—not towards anything, but in the
tiniest circle I can manage without pivoting on a leg. Trees, monkey bars, girls playing
hopscotch, trees, monkey bars, Corey Lambert who just wet his pants, fly by again, again,
faster, brighter, and one step I don’t pick my foot up enough and I hit the ground, knee
first.

Pain in my left knee jerks through my stomach. The unforgiving asphalt under me
tingles my hands, the August heat draws more sweat from my already wet forehead. I’m
going to puke. My knee is open, bleeding, big chunks of black mangled with soft tissue. I
can’t take it.

In the emergency room the doctor laughs, “You did it up pretty good. How old
are you?”

“Six.”

“How about six stitches for a six year-old?”

Six stitches is pretty impressive, but... “I’m almost seven!”

Laughs again, “Well, seven it’ll be then.”

The power of choice—choosing how to heal wounds, choosing to believe in the
benefits of pain. Somewhere between laughter and doubt, somewhere between
imagination and hate, somewhere I stopped believing I have choices. Somewhere I
stopped believing in me.

It’s Tuesday, the girls’ turn to switch classrooms for our fifth-grade segment on
REPRODUCTION.
Miss Parrish rolls the film on ovulation. I look at the girls around me; the flashing light from the movie screen makes their faces hard to read. I wonder if they realize what all this means, all this business about twenty-eight day cycles and bleeding from there. Do they understand where all this is leading, that everything is changing?

I wonder if the boys in the next classroom will hear the same story about how we’re all going to grow up, or if the story they’ll hear is altered somehow—less graphic, less realistic. Less tragic. It probably doesn’t matter. Boys don’t care about much else besides what they call “boobs.”

Class ends with an anonymous question-answer session. If we have questions that we’re embarrassed to ask, we write them down, put them in a box, and Miss Parrish answers them with a straight face, biting her lower lip. The question she’s answering is, “When do I become a woman?” She mumbles through something about your mother’s age, breasts, menstruation. I think about how I’m going to be grown up, a woman, choosing a career, a husband, a life. I’ll be confident, successful. It’s weird to think I’ll be someone else.

We file back into our homeroom, and take our seats for History. I glance over at Kevin Suchey, but he won’t make eye contact with me. Neither will Greg or Jason. Miss Parrish is telling us about a project each of us is to do on a famous explorer. Jason is picking his nose again, so I guess he doesn’t count, but Greg always makes faces at me when the teacher is talking. What’s wrong with them? Are they afraid of what we are to become?

In the hollowness of the bathroom, after dinner, I hold a razor in my hands. The smooth contours of the handle fit my fingers perfectly. The directions on the crinkley
plastic wrapper say to "immerse in water," and I have to guess at what "immerse" means.

I soap my right leg and hold the razor just above my ankle. My first, slow swipe at the
childish hair on my leg. The air is cool on my now bare skin. I feel as if I'm molting,
exposing a new layer that has always been there, just waiting for the right time to emerge.

But nobody told me that once you shave your legs, you have to shave everyday, or
every other day. Nobody told me I'd hate my body and question my self-worth. Nobody
told me how uncomfortable adolescence would be. Nobody told me I could never go
back.
During my 5 a.m. training runs down at the lake, I usually never have a problem with the wildlife. Geese pause their foraging and stare when I pound by, prairie dogs freeze on the edge of their holes, rabbits dart into the tall weedy grasses, the beavers paddle on. One morning I was surprised in a gully by a coyote, but never have I felt threatened by the animals who make their homes near the concrete path. Until today.

I plan four laps around the lake, each taking fourteen minutes, and complete the first with no remarkable events. Two minutes into my second lap I feel creepy, and my skin crawls. I'm being watched. An awful whisper above me and to the right, rhythm of beating wings, the sudden horrifying scream of a flying predator dips next to me and is gone. I glance around, there is nothing, and I wonder if I might still be half asleep.

Fourteen minutes later, approaching the same area, I have forgotten the strange warning. Then, the horrible pulsing next to my ear, and before I can turn my head to see, the unearthly wailing screeches; talons bite into my scalp. The wailing pitches higher like disappointed moaning, the talons release, and this time I see the angry, black and orange bird fly into his tree. My head tingles from his grasp.

Another fourteen minutes and I check the trees, the air above me, expecting more. But the sun has crept up the horizon, and all is quiet.

In tenth grade Erica, Nicole, Rachael, and I created a new way of living. We call it cha-ism. Not “chaw.” “Chuh.” Membership is restricted to certain individuals, based
only on name. One simply must have a name that converts into the shortened “cha.” For instance, CHarolyn, EriCHa, NiCHole, and RaCHael (who likes to claim that she is the only REAL cha, because “chuh” naturally occurs in her name). People who tease us about being chas don’t realize what “cha-ness” is. It is a way of life, a pursuit of “happy.” A cha loves rain, Frisbee, laughing, sunburns, flying, pain, challenge, McDonald’s, daffodils, everything ‘80’s, carmex, independence, color, photography, facial expressions, cynicism, macaroni and cheese, Tom Cruise, tee-peeing, reading, Peter Pan, and lightning storms. The four of us are all chas, but I am cha-est to Erica.

The first time I met her, she was wearing a sunshine yellow T-shirt that invited me into her world. Somehow we attached and together we cry through calculus, cry about our weight, cry about loss. We exercise together, eat together, color each other’s hair. We challenge our minds, encourage creativity, discourage self-loathing. Most important, we run together. She introduced me to running, the one sport I’m coordinated enough to handle. She gives me tips, encourages me, pushes me harder.

I’m alone running this half-marathon without Cha. I know what she’d say right now—“Mile eight is probably going to suck the most; six is nothing—you do that all the time.” She’d be wrong, though. I am in the middle of the sixth mile and beginning to feel the most intense pain of my life. If eight is worse than this, I hope to pass out and be carried off on a stretcher.

This summer I’ve run four races with Cha. She runs with me as a sign of support, keeping in mind my alternative to running. During a couple of the races when she was in more pain than I, she told me to go on ahead without her. Each time I stayed with her—
except for the last time, the race before this one. I was worried I wouldn’t be ready for this half-marathon. Cha told me to go and I went. She knew I needed a good time to build my confidence.

What I need now is water. Water. Oh God Oh God Oh God. Doubled over, I manage to keep on running. Dehydrated again, only worse. A terrible internal pinch grips my side, the type that worsens each time I try to take a deep breath. Each shallow gasp drives the pain up into my chest, pushing it out against my sternum. Oh God. And nausea worse than any hangover. The sun on my face is too much, my feet too heavy, the heat tangles my legs. I have to stop—just one more step and I’ll stop. One more.

It’s winter of our senior year. Starting out from Erica’s house, we head down a huge hill to the greenbelt that runs alongside Bear Creek. We can’t work into a snug pace, so we stop so Erica can stretch. I squat and draw stick figures in the damp winter soil. Two minutes later I stand; feeling dizzy, I turn to Cha. The ground swings up at me, like on a carnival ride. No time to think.

Black, everywhere black, a dark room without walls. I am riding a heartbeat, the way you would ride a horse. Odd. Riding a heartbeat—a warm, comfortable essence of Carolyn. The pulse is slow, rhythmic, a gentle ride. Fearless here, though I can’t see. Life plays out before me—Not in scenes or sounds, but in senses. Not possible. Face-to-face with me, the not-me, the darkness. Doubt. Cha... Cha... Cha... Cha...
“Cha! Cha! Wake up, get up! Oh please!”

Erica kneels over me, pleading. Tears slip across my face, gravel squishes against my cheek. Confused and crying, hysterical in Erica’s arms, hiccuping and breathless, I try to articulate the vision I just had, and the sense that I had been unconscious for a long time. She looks at me in awe, but a scared expression hangs in her eyes. Slowly, she tells me what my body did.

After swan-diving to the ground, I sprawled on my side, eyes wide open, gurgling and sputtering as if choking on my tongue. I didn’t convulse or thrash, nor did I blink or respond to her continuous shouts and little slaps to my face. Finally I blinked, looked at her, and tears filled my eyes. An hour of my life is gone, but she says I was dead to the world for only nine seconds.

Though we are both cynical about God and religion, all we talk about walking back is our shared feeling that some greater force was watching when she called me back from my midnight canter. Years later, she occasionally reminds me of this experience, and I tell her my vision again. She shakes her head and says she wishes she could have been there with me, on that flying escapade through time and Carolyn. But she was there. Had she not called me back, I would still be racing headlong through the darkness.

Erica and I love airplanes and the idea of flight. Jet noise—the sound of freedom, the Air National Guard says. We look to the horizon at sunset for the marks of high-flying jets, the white contrails that linger and gradually disperse. I think of the pilot, looking down on everything, nothing mattering except shooting through the delirious burning blue, silver wings dancing the skies. Between two worlds. Then I look down at my feet, the
concrete, cracks in the sidewalk, realize how grounded I am, only because I choose to be. Taking a deep breath, I raise my head.

It’s mid-August, when the Perseids meteor shower has Erica and me lying on our sunburned backs out at the lake, after the sun’s gone down. The stars fall in blues, greens, whites, the whole night, sometimes five nights in a row. We always start out wishing on each meteor we see, but find, surprisingly, that we run out of things to wish for after the first few. Erica asks me if we’re really that content with our lives, and sprawling in the summer evening air, I know we are. In a week we’ll start our senior year in High School, but for now earth and time are ours. We stay out until the blades of grass grow too cold against our skin, and the mosquitoes swarm against our legs.

Summer is the best season. Without the burden of high school, I am free. Summer is recovery time from all the discouraging pettiness—not belonging to the popular crowd to whom I compare my social life, looks, and body. The painful shyness, knowing I’m missing so much because I can’t find the witty thing to say to make me enchanting to every person that passes. The anger at being denied free time to read books outside of the county curriculum. Summer makes me happy to be alone to remind myself of the dreams I used to have, to put the focus back on me. Summer is my time to heal.

For three months I live in my two favorite places, the backyard and my room. Long hot days of ninety-degree weather are meant only for lying in the sun reading for pleasure and swimming. The concrete radiates intense heat. Pulling myself out of the water, I lie down right next to the pool without a towel. One half of my body touches the fiberglass edge of the pool, the other half presses against the pavement. Tiny fingernails of
flame grip my skin, scorching my butt and thighs and calves, yet I don’t squirm; I have to know just how long I can stand the pain before I roll back into the pool for relief. I last nearly forty-five seconds, taking deep breaths, focusing my vision on ivy climbing the trellis, the silhouettes of the clouds, and the creamy outline of the house. Back in the pool, I loll around stomach-up and look up through branches to triangles of cobalt sky, realizing how tired I am.

When I’m good and crisp from too much sun, I come inside and fall asleep, exhausted on the sheepskin. Soft against my tender red skin, almost ticklish, deep in the wool there is a heartbeat, a connection, that draws me in, says I can let down my walls for now.

It is my senior year of high school, and I don’t feel like a senior. After school, I head home to start on homework. No one should have this much to do, especially not in high school. Erica, Rachael, and Nicole are out with their boyfriends. Arriving home from work, Dad pokes his head into my room for a minute. I break only for dinner, and the occasional snack. Dad shakes his head at Mom and they exchange worried glances as I poke around in the refrigerator for ice cream and then head back up to “the cave” for more studying.

I think it was a good idea for me to remodel my room four years ago, now that I spend most of my time here. I built this room, built it with books, with goals, with failures, with too much thinking. I built it, and I have to live in it. These four walls make me lonely and feed my separation; without this constant feeling of isolation, I wouldn’t know how to define myself.
Calc is hard today and twelfth grade sucks, but maybe sitting outside to do homework problems will make me feel better. I close the screen door, step into the afternoon sun; my silhouette faces me, up against the house. Crooked honky nose, too big for my face, and too-short chin jut out. I hate my profile, feel ugly, feel stupid thinking of the dumb joke I told in class today and how gross my nose must have looked when no one laughed. I sit down in the rattan lounging, wincing at the shortness of my shorts and the plumpness of my thighs, thinking of the way people must have stared at my fleshy legs as I bent down into my locker during passing period; I try to concentrate on the differential equations in my lap, but the concept is over my head, and I want to bang my calculator against my skull at my stupidity. I can't do anything right, and the bile of self-loathing rises in my throat; I know that I'm pushing her back, the real me, making her keep her true face hidden and her mouth shut, as usual. She cries and wants out, wants to play with me. But I can't. It's been another bad day.

There is one thing—my sheepskin. When I was sixteen, my parents and I went to the United Kingdom. After two weeks I didn't want to leave. The misty moors of Scotland seeped into my lungs, became a breath of kindred life. The harsh landscapes reached out with icy fingers of isolation, and I finally understood the bleakness that was central to Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*. I belonged out there, in the chilly melancholy air, on the crag longing for Heathcliff.

We passed hillsides awash with sheep, pastures crawling with them. We visited at the end of the lambing season, so most of the big sheep were accompanied by little white dots that kept close by their sides. They were everywhere, on the side of every road, even
major highways. As we drove to Glasgow in our rented car, we were passed, going eighty, on the highway. The car in the next lane pulled ahead of us, and as it did, ran over a meaty mound of sheep. The carcass bounced into our lane, hit our front tire, and flung away, the skin and legs torn off long before it reached our car. This bloody ball of flesh was all that was left to skitter around in traffic. Horrified, my mother and I both sat in silence as my father drove on as best he could. In the backseat, I thought of the Loch Ness monster, Inverary Castle, the Tower of London—anything to keep from openly sobbing.

In Edinburgh I bought a sheepskin, not really knowing why, but feeling that this ended life was now a part of me. It sprawls on my bed, covering up half of the comforter, tail end towards the foot of the bed. The other end where a head would be rests close to my pillow. It calls out to me when I’ve read so much European History that my eyes roll back into my head, back through time. I nestle into the long fleece and feel the softness. I could have been a lamb in another life.
One more step becomes two and I can’t stop. Mile seven begins. Hardly conscious, hallucinating, ready to beg water from spectators, evergreens spin, dried brown grass on the side of the road blurs, my hamstrings quiver. I can just barely feel my numb right ankle. I move all the way to the right side of the road, preparing to slow down to a walk. My mind is set. *I will walk.* *This is unhealthy.* I try to pull my legs in, slow them down. But something in me will have none of that. It is physically impossible for me to walk—I smile, thinking of the joke Cha and I have about autopilot running, about finding some mechanism, whether it’s pace or time, that allows one to run freely, almost machinelike, without pain or thought. Not counting the bodily discomfort, I think I might have found autopilot. But really, my cramped muscles won’t release to allow my legs to stretch to a walk. Then it’s not so funny... *Something else is in control here... Something won’t let go.*

Perhaps a fall, a desperate lunge for the dirt might stop the actions of my legs. Briefly considering a dive into the ground, I see the runners ahead of me slowing—a water station. I had forgotten. The water is close, I can hold on.

But the water is different this time. I don’t feel better after drinking two cups. I’m not quite right. Blue skies bleed white, my limbs detach, dragging. I want to stop, don’t want to stop, don’t know what I want anymore.Disconnected, not whole, I keep running, trying to pull me back together.

* * *
Voices in this damn dorm clang like rifle shots in a tin can. Does 24-hour quiet mean anything to anyone? Being a double major in my junior year is hard enough without people in the hall constantly interrupting my studying. Take your music and your laughter and your good times somewhere else. I’m busy.

After two years at this college in Montana, I finally earned a room to myself. Like my room from childhood, I built this room, too. I filled it with things of comfort—the big round papasan chair, the bed lofted on cinder blocks to make me feel powerful—only to realize that this was a room like the other. Another cursed place to study. Every moment out of class is put to use in this room on the never-ending reading demanded by five literature courses. Friday nights I hear the girls gather out in the hall, delirious with anticipation of their exciting night to come. I have a date, too. With Herman Melville. I persuade myself that all this will pay off, that I don’t mind missing another party, another movie, another chance to meet people. I kid myself; I’m dying to be with the people I call friends. I am missing something.

Summers in Colorado. Semesters in Montana. Enough time spent at each to make me want to go back to the other. I don’t belong here, don’t belong there, anywhere. I’m on the outside again, with not enough time for friends, for play, for life. I gave up life when I decided being intelligent was important—when I decided intelligence came from school and a guided curriculum. The only person I can blame for creating this “home” is myself. Sense of place? I have one. On the outside.

Miraculously, someone found me, found a part of what used to be the real me. Eddie found a part of me to love, shows me everyday a place where I belong, where for once, I know I belong. I fit there, without a thought, in his arms.
I remember being six, or maybe five, on the same playground that would later tear open my knee. I sit on a hillside of that playground, digging trenches next to my legs, leaning forward and drawing the sand back towards my waist, pushing aside the dry sand to expose pixie dust, the wet sand I love. The cool earth, falling through my fingers, freckles my legs and makes me fly. I soar over the kickball game, roll above the teeter-totters, bank over the abandoned barn. I laugh and look around for Peter Pan.

Pixie dust draws him. We’ll fly together, have adventures together, and never grow up. I want him to lead me to Never-Never Land. But we never make it. Sometimes I think Tinkerbell won’t let him bring me. Other times I get the feeling that there’s something I don’t know—a riddle to solve or a password to say that would shoot me across the sky to Never-Never Land. Until I can figure it out, I stay near the playground, sometimes with Peter, sometimes alone, never far enough or high enough to get hurt.

Still I don’t always need Peter—I can fly without him. I have the pixie dust. It’s mine. It’s here. And I swear I can fly.

A first kiss determines the strength of a relationship. I was belittling myself, Eddie told me to shut up, and kissed me. His shoulders were warm and hard beneath my hands. Solid. Just what I needed. Nothing about Eddie, or his kissing, could have been more perfect.

Ms. Hayward, my high school Psych teacher, would say he is physically perfect for me. He stands five inches above me, which makes him five feet, ten inches. His muscular arms can bench 145 pounds, but he tells me he’s working on upping it. His legs are the
best part about him. No little scrawny bird legs for Eddie. Years of playing basketball, baseball, and running cross country have built plump calves and solid thighs. Our bodies conform absolutely, making it easy to lounge on a twin bed.

His full lips make the greatest smile, especially with his round cheeks. Curious, sensual eyes—greenish blue, bluish green, more green than blue—set off by lashes that lie on his cheeks when he sleeps. He’s so beautiful, lying there. Mine. He says he loves to show me off, but I adore showing him off. He’s proof to myself, and others, that I am loveable.

And he’s more than just a body. He says and usually does all the right things, without being manipulative. On our first date, he held my hand, kept holding it as we walked into the dorm, not afraid to have people see us together. He hates that I put myself down, gets disgusted when I say I’m stupid. He actually enjoys having pictures taken of us kissing, which I never would have done with anyone else.

He’s brilliant with children, and struggling through General Psych. I’m horrible with children, although I’ve taken a ton of psychology classes. I still don’t have the natural connection to people Eddie does. He’ll talk to anyone, and that makes him appealing, different. His self-confidence probably attracted me in the first place.

He has a way of telling me I’m beautiful, showing me I’m beautiful, making me believe I’m beautiful. Feminine, alluring, alive. A woman.

Eddie is the most emotionally sensitive male I know. He is so masculine, and yet so compassionate he seems almost... unreal. We cry together, when he’s homesick, or when I doubt myself. He assures me that I’m smart, and he’s slowly teaching me to relax
and not worry about everything. Dad says he’d love to have some of Eddie’s easy-goingness. So would I.

Sometimes we don’t spend as much time together as we’d like, but we have one
day a week when we always go out to dinner—Double-stamp Tuesdays at Subway. Eddie
knows just how to work the adolescent female behind the counter to get extra cheese on
his sandwich for free. He smiles down the counter at me and nods when he knows he’s
got her right where he wants her. When we finally sit down to eat, he doesn’t mind too
much when I steal the extra napkins, and pick the fallen globs of mayonnaise, mustard, and
lettuce off his sandwich wrapper.

My room is warm and quiet. Luxuriating on my bed, we can see Mt. Helena out
the window. Two weeks into our relationship I took him to the base of the little
mountain; Eddie hadn’t yet felt the power of hiking it with another person and I wanted to
be his first.

It is eight o’clock in the evening, dark, and the dirt trail shines faintly underfoot.
Eddie is ecstatic about tonight—that I planned it, that it’s a new experience, that I’m with
him. Scared of the night, I clutch Eddie’s hand, focus on not twisting my ankle. We share
the path that is meant for single file, and talk about our friends from high school. In his
excitement to gain the top, Eddie hauls up the mountain like the incline is nothing. Wind
rakes the surrounding trees. My plan isn’t exactly perfect—we’re in the middle of a
thunderstorm.

We round the side to the first plateau, and the rain starts. Slashing into us from
behind for a full five minutes, it gradually softens to a lingering mist. The lights of Helena
spread out below, blanketed by the fog, shining supernaturally. Kindrick Legion Baseball Field glows, competing with the Capitol Building for our attention. The blue lights of the airport runway urge us on.

Rockier towards the peak, and much windier, I tighten my hood and Eddie pulls his knit cap over his ears. We crest, leaning against the wind and ignoring the lightning. Eddie squeezes my hand, smiles, and together we touch the sky.

Persistence pays off. I don’t remember mile seven or eight, but as I near the next water station at the end of mile eight, my body pulls itself back together. The pain is back, too, but I can feel my tendons and muscles working together, my arms pumping at my sides again, no longer lifeless. I’m back in my body; my reward, water.

My most satisfying feeling is drinking water when I’ve been running—the most relief I can expect to feel. It’s instant, and the expectation and deprivation of it make it all the more powerful. Again, freedom and the feeling of belonging loosen my gaze, and I can look up; yet there is still weakness. Not a hurting kind of weakness, but the tired-hungry-no-energy weakness due to lack of nourishment. One more mile and I can grab a packet of PowerGel from tables run by volunteers. The gel isn’t exactly gourmet, but like airplane food, it serves a purpose, sparing one from starvation. The instant carbohydrates will strengthen me somewhat, so I must make it. The promise of PowerGel keeps me moving. A slight wind chills my wet face and I relax, thinking of the help waiting up ahead for me.

* * *
The State Penitentiary where the Oklahoma bomber was held is only a mile from my house. The main road and a bicycle path run parallel to the prison property for almost another mile. Summer brings thousands of prairie dogs to the edge of the street from the field between the road and the prison. Some stand frozen on hind legs at the lip of the sidewalk, noses twitching for something on the air, forepaws together, praying. Some run in the grass, or send warning calls from deep in their burrows. Some try to race through traffic to get to the median or the other side of the street. Most don’t make it.

During a few of my training runs, I head out past the prison on the bicycle path. It’s hot today—seven a.m. and already seventy degrees. Wiping the sweat from my forehead I hope that none of the prisoners are up and watching me from their tiny windows. On the sidewalk ahead of me lies a dead prairie dog, tossed from the road, flattened like a run over can of cola, its original shape indiscernible. I run past another one, then another, and wonder how they get all the way over here to the path, a good thirty feet from the road. Does someone move them, or are they scattered from the impact of the cars?

I remember driving over to Cha’s house along this road a couple years ago. It’s a pleasant summer night, the dying sun creates the eerie blue glaze that adds distinction and detail to objects. My window down, the radio turned up, traffic moves along pretty well. I see brake lights, then the cars ahead swerve to the left most side of the lane, avoiding something. I move over, too, picturing a board with nails or a flattened prairie dog. Closer, it’s a prairie dog, but he’s not dead. I worry that in his terror he might dart out in front of my car. As I pass I see there’s no way he could have run in front of me.
Oh God. His hind legs have been totaled—they’re now part of the street. His front end is alive—his little face is alert, paws frantically clawing, he’s trying to pull himself to the safety of the curb. How can he keep going, keep trying like that?

Why doesn’t anyone hit him, do the merciful thing? His struggle sickens me, yet I can’t bring myself to circle the block and aim for his little head. I head for Cha’s house, watching my mirrors for headlights of a big truck, hopefully hugging the curb.
Eddie thinks he knows me. I thought so, too. I thought I had changed from high school, that I had become sure of myself, confident about my abilities, happy with what I can achieve. For a time I was all of those things. I knew there was an essential me that lived the right way and could laugh. But events have a way of arising and challenging everything I’ve ever thought about myself, and things change.

There’s this class, Literary Criticism. It’s senior-level and required for my English Literature major. I’m only a junior, but this shouldn’t be a problem. Only, it is. I don’t understand Bakhtin and his premise that language is a social process, nor do I get Bloom’s theory of kenosis. Foucault isn’t exactly light reading, either. In class I am silent, unable to participate in discussion, because I don’t know enough of literary theory to explore more, and unable to seek clarification about theory, because I don’t understand. Each class I tell myself that I will begin to understand this stuff, but I don’t. I don’t understand this. I look around the room and everyone else seems to get it. I am so stupid. Everyone else can ask questions and respond. I just sit here… so stupid.

I leave drained, with a migraine, believing that English should not be my major. It must be wrong for me if I can’t even understand these theories that are the basis of discussion in this field. God, I am so stupid.

I spend hours on this class—hours wading through the thick reading, hours trying to figure out what I just read, hours staring out at the Commons knowing how dumb I am. I’m not anything. I’m not worth anyone’s time, not worth anyone’s notice. I’ve been so
busy with school I don’t go out and have fun anymore, or even think about things outside
of my academic existence. I have no idea what’s going on anywhere, but I wouldn’t
understand the events even if I knew of them. I don’t get politics, I don’t get foreign
policy, or the economy. I thought I knew something about literature, but I was wrong
about that, too.

I rarely see Eddie, and when I do I’m concerned about the time that I should be
spending studying instead of with him. He catches my comments about what a dumbass I
am, rolls his eyes, tells me to shut up. I tell him he doesn’t understand. I list my
homework, Eddie turns away. He leaves, says to call him later.

I stare outside. Evergreens peak at my window and I watch descending birds dip
down, catch the wind, slingshot up to the tops, alight. They rest a moment, then plunge
again, into the fluttering snow and fog.

Mile nine beckons me closer with its anticipated yellow tent. Runners cross over
to the other side of the street where the tent covers a table for the distribution of little
packets of custard-like carbohydrates. Approaching, though, I see the volunteers standing
in front of the table, shrugging their shoulders and yelling that they’ve run out of
PowerGel. Intensely disappointed, my feet trample the discarded golden packets glittering
the road. Many of the packets look as if they exploded, like the little packets of ketchup
from fast food places that kids jump on. The trails of uneaten custard disgust me. I’m
starving—what a waste! I can’t do anything about it, now, though. Irritated, I speed up,
cursing the recklessness of those who ran before me.
Overwhelmed, I don’t go out on the weekends anymore. I don’t go to movies or parties with Eddie. I rarely see my girlfriends. Instead, I stay in my room, reading. And it’s not just Lit Crit—this is a full semester, with five Literature classes, one Psych class, and Spanish. The homework piles up. Everyone else is out having fun.

Eddie’s out partying. He’s getting sick of this. Sick of me being busy, sick of me harping on how dumb I am. I just know he’s looking for someone to take my place—someone who actually has time to do things with him. I still wonder sometimes why he’s dating me when he could be with anyone else. I know I’m not his type. I’m a dork, a nerd, a schoolgirl. He should be with someone like a cheerleader or soccer player. Someone sociable and confident, pretty, who is sure enough about herself to not hide behind books. *God, I’m so stupid.* He’s probably dancing with her right now, the way he used to dance with me. *What am I doing?*

Eddie stops by and it’s so good to see him. We talk, relate again, have a really fulfilling conversation like we used to—the ones when I didn’t have too much on my mind. Everything is right again, everything in its place, this night. In this piece of contentment I feel every reason for loving him, and I fear I might push him out of my life.

Spring Break is next week. I really just want to go home, get away from school for awhile, get away from my unhealthy thoughts.

7:45 in the morning, headed home to Colorado for another college Spring Break. Eddie will be the one thing I miss about that place. Alone, choosing my own music,
upbeat, despite the gray day and slippery highways. I'm getting away from all the crap at school, the people, the loneliness.

Passing Crow Agency, red, blue flashing lights ahead, a great gaggle of cop cars in the median. A wreck in the snow. A Montana policeman steps out of his car as I slow down, motions me to stop. He's not dressed in uniform, but jeans and denim shirt. Almost like this isn't official business, not important enough for a uniform.

"Little lady, we're going to have you stop here for a while."

I pull over. My windows have finally defogged. The two semis I passed twenty minutes ago stop behind me. What the hell is the wait? It looks like it's all in the median anyway. Another obstacle. I have my life to get on with.

The cop sidles up to my window, taps. "Go on ahead, but slowly."

Our procession sneaks by the wreck, slugging no more than three miles per hour, slow enough for me to check out the scene.

Two fire trucks, an ambulance, six cop cars, two men on crutches and... a yellow tarp—thrown over a body. Two thick man legs poke out from underneath the covering, like the wicked witch's in *The Wizard of Oz*. I can tell by his feet that the man is face down. Big black pull-on work boots. The left boot is mangled, all squished, rolled up. I wonder why he's on the cold, wet ground, face down. He must be Crow. No one treats a white man that way.

The wreck three miles behind now, tears haze my sunglasses. My thoughts unsettle me, and I'm no longer in quite the same hurry to get on with life.

* * *
Eleven o’clock creeps up. I pull Dumbo, my little Dodge Colt, into the driveway. He is exhausted from the fifteen hours it has taken us to fly from Helena to Littleton. The security floodlight snaps on, and, heading towards the front door, I wonder why no one has peeked their head out to greet me.

Fumbling for the right key on the porch, I glance in the window partially obscured by lace curtains Mom made herself. Dad is at the sink, back to me, finishing up dishes. He never does dishes this late, so I know he has been waiting for me. I give up on the key, tap on the glass; Dad turns around, grabs a towel, dries his hands as he hurries to the door.

We hug, and as we pull back I see a familiar face, somehow different. Dad’s blue eyes, just like mine, are still as alert as ever, but wrinkles hide in the corners behind his glasses. The good ol’ Sobczak-nose hasn’t changed—still on the big side, not quite pointy, not quite rounded over like an eagle’s beak. His moustache is gone, but that’s been gone for years. He was forced to shave it when we traveled to Australia. On a boat anchored at the Great Barrier Reef, frustrated with water leaking into his ill-fitting snorkeling mask, he borrowed a razor from the Water Life Specialist on board, and neatly scraped his facial hair. Dad’s smile is still the same. The little baby front tooth catches my eye again. Dad grew up in a poor family in Michigan, and they hardly had enough money for food, never mind a dentist. The baby tooth never fell out, and an adult tooth never grew in.

“I saw Dr. Brodie last week. He thinks I worry too much. You know, I think he might be right. I’ve been having problems with this project I’m working on. I can’t figure
it out, but I can't leave the damn thing alone. Once I get going on it, I can't stop thinking
about it until it's perfect."

"I know, Dad. I'm the same way. We're just perfectionists."

"Well, I think I somehow passed it on to you."

*No kidding,* I'm thinking, but I'm not bitter. Not anymore. In fifth grade, one of
my report cards glowed with straight A's, and one A-. After looking it over, Dad said,
"An A-? Can't you bring that up?" Of course, I was devastated, but I made it my goal to
always get straight A's. I didn't want my parents disappointed in me. This resulted in
overzealous enrollment in advanced placement courses in High School and feelings of
failure when I struggled.

"Don't worry about it, Dad. It's just the way I am. Anything good in the fridge?"
Subject changes, but I can tell by his vague responses that he continues to think about our
shared habit of worrying.

I spend this week trying to get ahead on schoolwork, and playing with my dog
Claude. She's a little beagle terrier who's been with me since I was ten, when I picked her
out at the pet store. We had our cat put down because of skin cancer a month or two
before, and I really wanted a dog to replace her. But Claude is different than the cat—
she's like a real person who likes to play and be held and cuddled, and who misses me
when I'm not there. She became like a child to me, a sister, and a best friend. Claude
slept on my bed with me, had snacks with me, and I'd talk to her all the time, especially on
days when school was bad—when I got in trouble in fifth grade, when I was tormented in
seventh grade, when I was lonely throughout middle and high school. She looks at me, and I know she understands what I’m saying, feeling.

God I love that dog. She is my world. She thinks she’s human. She has personality, always smiling, always happy and wagging her tail. We have a waist-high ledge of bricks circling the house that she jumps up on. She stands or sits there, sometimes lies there with her little paws hanging over the edge, looking in the back door at us. From the ledge she has a great view of the kitchen table, and she gives us a look that says we’re leaving her out of dinner. But we spoil her, and I know there are homeless families that have never had the kind of care Claude has. She knows how to fake shivering to get us to let her in, even if it isn’t really cold, and when she wants a treat she spontaneously performs the few tricks I taught her.

But there’s one trick I love the most. Claude can fly. I get her all crazy and wound up, she races around the house, runs upstairs then back downstairs. She used to come down so fast that she finally realized it was easier just to jump. On her way down, fourth stair from the bottom, she leaps. She flies across our entryway like Superdog, at eye-level, and I always get the biggest kick out of it—her big smile, her ears flapping as she soars. That’s my dog.

I’ve always been scared that if she ran away she’d never come back. Part of me thinks she’d never come back because she doesn’t like me. She adores Mom and Dad, but puts up with all the attention I focus on her.

One of my high school boyfriends used to joke, sometimes disgusted, that I loved my dog more than I loved him. I’d laugh, lie, tell him he’s wrong. But everyone who knows me knows that when Claude dies, I will falter. My biggest fear, since my freshman
year in college, is that Claude will die while I am in Montana, without me. A couple months ago I had a nightmare that Claude died, and I wasn’t there for her. The tears on my temples woke me, and I couldn’t sleep for hours, believing it a sign she had died 800 miles away from me.

Claude has developed some “conditions” in the last two years and lost a lot of weight. We give her six pills a day for her heart and kidneys. I’m scared she doesn’t have too much time, so I spend as much time with her as I can this Spring Break, remembering each minute as best I can. Dad and I give her a bath to make her feel a little better. Holding her in the tub, rinsing her… all bone. The morning I leave for school it’s hard to say good-bye. I kneel before her, fingering her ears, petting back the hair between her eyes, hugging her. This might be the last I see Claude. I cry like I usually do when I leave, only I can’t get her face out of my head, I can’t shake the longing look she gave Dad and me as we poured warm water over her little skeleton.

The weekend after Spring Break I work a retreat with Eddie. Across the room he is wrestling with a girl I can’t stand; he hasn’t wrestled with me like that in a while. She’s so much prettier than I could ever be. She’s cheerful and unreserved and popular. He laughs, pinning her down, and perhaps his gaze lingers longer than I think it should. He laughs louder, his head thrown back, and I’ve lost him.

He walks for the door, I follow and grab his arm. Pain tempers the rage in my voice, and I manage to say that this isn’t going to work, I can’t take this anymore, we’re over. I leave him no chance to reply, walk to my car, take off. Hardly able to see through
my tears, I end up parking at the base of Mt. Helena. Hidden in the half-light of dusk, I hunch over the steering wheeling. The shadowy mountain embraces my sobbing.

I told Eddie to go. But I want to reach out, pull him back; I’m not worth it, and the realization suspends me. No way could he love me ever again. I can’t have him. He wasn’t supposed to allow me to feel greatness. He wasn’t supposed to tell me everything I’ve wanted to hear. He wasn’t supposed to love me.

It’s not just losing him that upsets me. The knowledge that will keep me up at night, that will stretch the ball of loneliness in my gut, is not that he doesn’t want me, but that I did this. I did this. If I could just acknowledge some kind of goodness in me, accept even one little part of me, maybe I wouldn’t have disgusted him. If I could destroy this hate that dictates my life, I could have held on to the one thing I want. This hate, it cost me—I cost me the one thing I want, the one thing everyone wants—to be loved.

What could be worse than to know that you cost yourself someone you could have made your life with? I cost myself a relationship that made me feel alive; I hate myself so much that another human being can’t stand to lie next to me. It’s not my fault; but it’s my fault.

An odd sound alarms me, and I notice how hard I’m weeping. My wailing seems hysterical, even to my own ears, and gripping the wheel I cry like never before. I don’t know where to turn, what to do. I want so badly to die. And I want help so bad, but everything I’ve done in my life has led up to this moment. I have done all of this, and no one is going to help me. No one can help me. In the rearview mirror I see a face, red, puffy. I don’t even recognize her, the real me, the one I can’t accept. Who are you? she asks. Why are you doing this to me? She’s there, in the mirror pleading with me, and I know she will die. We both know I am the key to her death—I can kill her or save her.
I'm the only one who knows she's there and needs help. Our eyes lock, neither of us bend, neither of us give in. She has more tenacity than I expected, and after a few minutes I am the first to look away.

The mountain and moonlight make me crazy, hollowed out by the silver shine, and I start the car to get away from this place, her. I head for the dorms, stop at the main road and glance in the mirror one last time, but she's gone.
Minutes into mile 10, I have given up my anger to exhilaration. I am confidence. I drove the course five days ago—the next two and a half miles are a gradual downhill, but downhill nonetheless. I am free. These are my miles. Relaxing into them, I look around me at the valley, the miniature waterfalls that appear ever so often trickling down to the road. My own in-flight movie. I enjoy the run. For real. I smile into the mountains, *I'm king of the world!*

I feel my place, a functioning part of the universe again. This is me; I belong here, running forever.

Spring Break is long over, Easter is around the corner, putting me in mind of Easter long ago. Pretty in my checkered dress and ribboned ponytail. Over fifteen years we grew apart. I lost them. Didn’t know if they loved me anymore, because they never said it. Since I came to college, we talk once a week on the phone, Sunday nights at seven, but I never get personal, never share my worst problems. But this night is different. I return to my dorm room after leaving Eddie and the retreat. I am failing at school, failing with relationships, failing myself. I want to break something, break myself, jump off the dorm and join the ghost of the fabled priest who killed himself. Hysterical, hardly breathing, I know I have gone too far, that if I drank alcohol in the same way I marinate in self-hate I’d be in a rehab center. I need help. I almost drive the twelve hours back to
Denver in the middle of the night, but for some reason I call home. Dad tries to calm me down, Mom picks up the extension.

They hear how unstable I am and decide to drive up the next morning. Later, I call them back and convince them to wait until Easter.

Crying every day, I make it to Easter. While my parents are on the road I get a message from our vet in Colorado who is boarding Claude for the weekend. It tells me that Claude has had a seizure, that she seems to be okay and is resting in a quiet room by herself. Listening to the message I collapse to my knees on the floor. My heart is broken. She is without anyone she knows, without anyone who loves her, scared. She might die this weekend, and all I ask is that she wait until Mom and Dad are home, to hold her when she goes.

My parents finally arrive, I tell them the message. We don’t share our feelings but Claude is one thing we all care so much about. Dad tells me that he had a sick feeling when he dropped her off the night before that he would never see her again. Not exactly what I wanted to hear.

We go to Easter mass, Easter brunch, and take a little Easter hike up Mt. Helena. Sitting in my room we talk. I don’t know how we start but we talk for four hours. I tell them everything. We figure out why I am afraid of failure, why we grew apart, why I hate myself. They see how I see things, and I understand many of their past actions. I never expected anything like this—to be close to my parents, to be able to talk to them about love, to be able to feel like I belong again. We cry, and we get each other. If nothing else is going okay in my life at this point, I know my parents are there.
After dinner they drop me off at the dorm. I stand in my room, running through the day in my mind. Know I am loved by Mom and Dad. I cry again. I had forgotten. Today is Easter. I lost them so long ago, but on Easter I recovered my parents.

Claude lasted that weekend, but today she will die. Dad called me mid-day, and I knew it was time. At 5:45 my parents will go back to the vet where Claude has been resting all day. I can’t believe this is happening, when I’m so far away. I wanted her to wait until I could come back and say good-bye, pet her one last time and kiss her soft little head and floppy ears. But she couldn’t wait and it’s better because her eyes are dull, her kidneys have failed and her emaciated body is filled with poison. I beg Dad to tell her I love her and to kiss her and to please hold her and to love her as she dies. I don’t want her to be scared.

I run down the hall for a friend, not knowing how much more I can handle. Can anything else go wrong? Stumbling down the stairs, I hope to fall, break my neck, and end it all. I have four hours to prepare for Claude’s death.

It’s 5:40. Head hanging, I walk down the hall, down the stairs, outside, as my parents are pulling out of the driveway. 5:41 Lying down under my window in the shadow of the tree as my parents are turning the corner, almost there. 5:42 Eyes close, limbs sink into grass, offering my heart up, as my parents park the car. 5:43 Bite my lip and tears slip from my closed eyes down my temples to the grass as my parents are led into the room where Claude is lying in her little bed. 5:44 A calm sob as my parents are told what will happen and are left alone to say goodbye. 5:45 Looking at the bright blue sky as Mom and Dad hold Claude, pet her, finger her floppy ears, hug her, kiss her, share
their total love with her, share silence with her. 5:49 Eyes close again, the wind dragging loose pieces of my hair through my tears, as Dad cradles Claude and Dr. Cauldwell gives her the injection. 5:50 Eyes open to the sky letting the tears out and the sun moves past the top of the trees and lights on my face as Claude’s head droops, eyes close, body rests. 5:51 I can breathe and all of me is up in the air, urging Claude on to a painless plane, as Mom and Dad close their eyes and bow their heads. 5:53 Wind cools my tears, two parallel jets chased by their contrails pass overhead, one headed East, the other towards the setting sun and I know, as Dr. Cauldwell checks for a heartbeat, she is gone and beautiful.

The backyard will be oddly quiet without her. Mom said the day after was hard, yet comforting. “It was so quiet behind the house,” she says, “So full of peace. I felt it. I watched her walk around in pain, and felt it, and now it’s gone and only peace is left. It’s so quiet, Carolyn.” Still, I don’t know how I’m going to live without her. I don’t know how I’m going to go home to a backdoor with no Claude excited to see me.

Nearly done with mile 12 I realize that, despite my confidence, August heat in dry Colorado mountains doesn’t exactly facilitate cooling of the body during a race. Sweat dries quickly, except from my neck and forehead. Tiny beads of sweat tickle across my scalp underneath my hair, and on my cheeks, the salt left behind sears my skin. This race is not like the Bolder Boulder, which winds through residential areas and shuts down the whole city for half a day; no sprinklers on, no fire hydrants tapped by firemen hosing down runners, no spectators blaring stereos. Truckers passing by on the adjacent interstate blow
their horns at us, and every few miles there are groups of cars pulled over to cheer us on. 

But I really miss the water.

I pass mile marker 12 and see spouting water just ahead. I'm so delirious, though, I could be wrong... Nearing it, I'm right. Some blessed soul has a sprinkler out, and though it costs me six lateral steps to get there, no words describe the relief of wet face, wet neck, wet arms, wet stomach. Leaping through the spray rejuvenates my skin, the wind heightens my chill. I head into the last mile, mile 13, and bear down on thoughts of the future, thinking of what is to follow.

Following the night of my mental collapse, I stop getting the migraines I've had for the past two years. Staring out at the early April rain, I wonder at the loss. Is my body rewarding me for admitting the secret I've hidden so long, the secret of how much I hate myself? Were the headaches beating up my body the way I beat up myself? The thought makes me smile, that I've earned this physical reprieve.

A perplexing part of me, though, whispers that I don't get migraines, so I won't use the new medication, the one with all the possible side effects. My body is being practical, helping me save that medication for something more important. Why waste pills on a migraine when you can stop your heart with them? It occurs to me I've been given a way out, and I wonder if I'll take it. Outside, the wind and the rain shift to drizzle my window with careless slashes, and I crack the window open to the numbing air.

The day was too long, it was hard to keep my chin up, and I'm inspired to take a walk in the dark. The street lights from my dorm window look like a runway, perfect
straight rows heading off toward the mountains. I take off down the closest one, go further than I had expected, and return to lie down in the grass beneath my window. The ground is a bit colder in April than in August, but I let the cold seep into my fingers and let my eyes adjust to the light and distance of the stars above me. Forty-five minutes later my heartbeat has slowed down and I am almost happy. It seems wrong to just stand up and walk away, so I wait for a feeling to overtake me, a sign from the universe that I can head back up to my room, take another step, get through another day. The next moment a white meteor carves a two inch path at the apex of my sight. I make a wish to be mentally healthy, smile at the internal wording of my impromptu request, then inhale, exhale, sit up, go to bed in a daze, sleep until the alarm wakes. No nightmares, no sick feeling in my stomach upon waking.

My head down, I pass a group of guys on their way to dinner. Five feet after they pass his smell hits me. Sporty cologne mixed with the soft sweaty linger of his skin and detergent. I whip my head around, wondering how I could have missed him as they passed, but he’s not among those in the group. I stand for a minute, question how another person could smell just like Eddie. I have to sit down on the knee-high rock wall that runs up the hill to the dorm. Clouds sneak over the afternoon sun, shadows fall, and I remember lying on the floor at the retreat, crying, praying with a candle. After I ran away, Eddie came to retrieve me in the middle of the night, convinced me to return.

Eddie asks to pray with me. He lies down with me, his hand stretches out holding mine. The pressure of his fingers, the smell of his sweatshirt, his presence, each comforting. Wavering candlelight flickers on his face, so familiar to me that it’s like I’m
glancing in the mirror. Looking at each other, at the candle, at each other again. I’m still
crying, wishing the hurt in my heart would go away, needing a push toward the path. It
hurts Eddie to discover that I’m this way, that I don’t like me.

Eddie says, “Look at your candle. Look how beautiful it is, Carolyn; when it’s all
lit up it shines through the pieces of darkness, and dances. You can see all the colors and
happiness of it. Look at it. Isn’t it beautiful?”

Is it? The hardest question to answer, and answer honestly. Deep breath. I have
to meet his eyes to respond. His are filled with tears and redness like mine, and he’s
reached me.

“Yes,” I manage. “It’s beautiful.”

Heroes offer me a hand without knowing it. Scattered people along the way of my
days, who don’t know that the two sentences they speak to me keep me from pulling out
in front of oncoming trucks on Highway 12 to Townsend. During the hard times of
learning to affirm myself from the inside, they each call me back from the edge of the black
void I wander towards.

Jessica thinks I have beautiful hair. Merry calls me the epitome of cute. Suzy
admires my writing. To Ryan I am especially beautiful inside. Vanessa says I’m the only
one she knows who can wear orange. Matt finds me intimidating. Jen cheers up when I
wear the happiest brightest colors. Jamie brought me inspirational books after I cried in
class. Candice thinks it would have been a waste if I hadn’t picked up English as a second
major. Rhonna can throw a frisbee because of me. Johanna misses me if she goes six
hours without seeing me. Tiff wishes she had the power to heal my hurts.
When I need something, even the littlest thing, to somehow make the day seem bearable, it's the random people and random comments that make me see myself, fleetingly, in a different light. They see it. Why can't I?
This is it. Last mile. People crowd the street, catching glimpses of their racers, screaming encouragement. I scan the faces for a familiar one. Dad is waiting for me—a willing chauffeur, he'll speed me down to Denver as I change in the car for a friend's wedding. Three weeks ago I had decided I couldn't participate in this race, as the wedding had been scheduled for the same day, at an hour too near to my estimated finish time. But sitting on the deck one night as the melting sun crowned the mountains, I pictured myself in the pews witnessing awesome vows to love and cherish, and knew that I had no right to be there if I can't even make those vows to myself. I couldn't sit there and think of the one goal I had set, regretting that I hadn't even tried. Considering the purple light that had risen behind the mountains, I realized that if I'm going to get to where I need to be, then I needed to run. And if I'm fast, I might even make it to the wedding.

Even though he'll be closer to the finish line, I look for Dad. He knows to watch for me at 2 hours 5 minutes. Turning the corner for the last tenth of a mile, I see the finish line, just sixty seconds ahead. Almost there, the pain evaporates from my knees and thighs. My arms shed their heaviness, and I arise.

It's divinely beautiful today, blue sky rebirth, contrails cutting up, freedom on the wind, green pleasures in the grass.
She tries to step in front of me as I walk, the part of me I always push behind and never let speak. But someone told me *God doesn't make junk*, so she has the courage this time to shove back, and she manages to face me. She ignores passers-by, just stands there with a look of anger and hatred on her face. She tells me I'm wrong, unfair. I have no right to race past her, deny her existence for seven years. She despises me for this, absolutely hates me, wants to slay me for it. She’s right. I deserve to hear this, have to hear this if I want to live. She tells me she’s strong. Smart. Whimsical. Beautiful. Confident. Someone I should get to know, someone I should acknowledge, someone I should help to grow. She’s crying now, great, huge sobs she doesn’t even try to hold back. I look away. Can’t bear to make eye contact, connect with an identity so distant. Don’t want to think about, realize, what I’ve done to her, how I’ve neglected her, turned her into some monster of myself. Over her shoulder, people walk by, make embarrassed glances in my direction, hastily avert their eyes and hurry on.

She grabs my arms and shakes me, makes me listen, makes me feel what she says. *Dammit look at me*, and I do, angry too, because I know. I know the truth. I know what I’ve been doing. I’ve felt the pain, too. Awkwardness of adolescence causes self-doubt, kills if it never becomes confidence.

I hug her, and much passes between us, but I don’t know how to live with her.

It’s a step, though, to embrace her. Can I let her out in front, let her speak, let her live? I wish I had Miss Parrish’s question box. I’d add a folded-up piece of paper that asks, “When will I believe in Carolyn?”

* * *
The sadness persists. Two days in a row is possible, but three makes me wonder if I’m clinically depressed. This time, to escape, I drive out towards Lincoln. The sky is yellow, the mountains through the windshield, purple. Above it all, a contrail. The tail is long and strong, perpendicular to the road. I think of black cats, know that I am blessed if a contrail crosses my path. I laugh out loud with the wind jumping in my rolled-down window and sing.

Someday. I will fly again.

Thirty feet before the finish line I hear “Pudge!” and see Dad waving. I smile. My college friends know me as Pudge, and Dad and I agreed it’s easier to shout than Carolyn. I bear down on the finish line, stretching out the last glorious strides of my descent. Soaring through the chutes I touch down behind the finish line, look to the giant clock for my time. 2:13:02. That’s like Denver to Chicago, or the time it takes to watch *Top Gun.*

I catch my breath, and yet it’s hard to stop after coming this far, running this long. I want to go on forever. Cha’s dad asked her once, if you sprint at the end of a race, faster than your pace throughout, does that mean you weren’t performing at your best the rest of the time? It’s obvious, but integral—a simple matter of conservation, sometimes survival. When you’re unsure and doubt your arrival, you hold back. Why run it out, waste your energy, if you can’t make it, if you’ll fall short? But when you finish, and you know you can keep going, *why not* keep going?

Birds can’t ride the wind indefinitely, planes need to refuel. Nothing remains airborne, and I know I can’t run forever. But there’s no time to think as I fight the line for
my T-shirt and dash with Dad to the car. We jet down out of the mountains, maneuvering slyly through traffic, leaving the finish line miles behind.

Thinking it will bring me some kind of closure, I go to Dr. Cauldwell’s office with Dad. Passing through the doorway as we approach are two big happy dogs, wagging their tails as their owner leads them to his car.

The technician leads us into the room where Claude died, says Dr. Cauldwell will be in in a few minutes. The room is bright, warm, lit by a sunroof. Dad stands in front of the table, looks at me, mumbles, “I stood here, Mom over there. I held her here, she faced your direction.” I can only nod.

Dr. Cauldwell comes in, looks at me sympathetically. She describes exactly why Claude had to be put down, the poison in her body, her pain. Her voice is gentle, comforting—like when she’s trying to make her nervous animal patients relax. It’s awfully hot in here as I lean up against the wall, the summer sunshine shuttling down onto the shiny metal vet table. She describes how the injection works, how it’s an overdose of painkiller. My legs tremble, stomach heaves. Little beads of sweat rise on my face and arms, the chill shocks me, Dr. Cauldwell begins to blur. Oh God.

I sit down quickly on the floor, focus on my breathing. Dr. Cauldwell asks if I’m okay, if I have any questions. Dad asks if he can donate our unused cans of special diet dog food. I thank Dr. Cauldwell and she gives me her card, just in case I have any questions later.

I decide I want to read Dad’s journal of Claude’s illness. I think I’m ready for it, for the finality I think it will bring. But I read how she was unresponsive, how she’d
hardly move, how she wouldn’t eat, and my father’s pain was implicit in his abrupt sentences, the pointed words he used. Tucked in a pocket at the back are two photos; one picture is of Claude near the garden, her head low, her little ribs sticking out underneath her black fur. The other is an extreme close-up, as if Claude came right up to the camera, pleading to die. Her eyes say she’s tired, that she’s tried to keep going, but she can’t do it any longer. Her desperate look lingers, and I feel I’m to blame. I cry again. And again and again, but the pain does not ease.

I run barefoot across the dry grass of our front yard to the mailbox. I stand in the gutter, flipping through the stack of bills and catalogs. Two months after finals there is no word from Eddie, but another envelope from school is on the top; my hands shake as I finish perusing the pile, and walk calmly back to the house.

Before parting for summer Eddie promised he’d write. Not the sometimes tedious keeping-in-touch kind of summer writing, but a single letter that would tell me exactly what I meant to him—in his life, as a friend, as an individual. During the retreat he didn’t write me, as is customary, and he kept saying he’d write me later. But as summer melts away I’ve stopped looking for his letter, and I know that I deserve more than anything he could possibly have to offer me at this point. He doesn’t get it, doesn’t understand. He wasn’t ready for someone like me.

I finger the official college envelope. Rolling the mail opener in my palm I know what will be on this transcript—the evidence of my incompetence, the marks of a mind in conflict, the grades of a failure. I slice the lip of the envelope, remove and unfold the transcript, scan semesters worth of credits to find what I’m looking for. In print, at the
bottom of the page, is my judgement. *Wait... what is this?* My belly twists. Lined up in a neat row next to the course name are five A’s, a B, and a D. There must be some mistake—there’s no way I legitimately earned an A in most of my classes. There’s no way...

I can’t believe this is right, that I deserve these grades. I know the papers I wrote weren’t good enough to warrant this. That final month of school, distracted by intense self and academic doubts, the break with Eddie, and Claude’s death, I did the best I could which, at the time, wasn’t near half of my potential.

I think of Carroll, and its small community of students where gossip runs rampant and secrets are never sacred. This school is so small that the faculty and administrators know more about my life than my parents do. I wonder if I passed these classes because the professors felt sorry for me, the depressed girl who cried everyday. I wonder if they passed me, believing an inadequate grade would push the suicidal perfectionist over the edge. I’ve never been sure what I’m capable of achieving, relying on grades to give me an estimate, keep me on a particular path. But with this transcript, how can I ever trust grades or my professors again? I have nothing to go by.

Hours after the race, after the wedding, I soak the rawness from my muscles in the bath tub. As the hot water pours in, the lemony suds billow a cocoon. The chaos of the day extinguished, I realize what I’ve done. I did it. *I did it! I finished!* My eyes blur with jubilant tears, the pride I’ve never felt pulls sobs from the corners of my mind. Despite the doubt and agony, I did it. I was convinced I didn’t have it in me.
My legs, through the water, are pink. Kneading my muscles with my fingers, I trace over a freckle, a stretch mark, a scar. But digging the knuckles deep into my skin, familiar disgust abruptly replaces my wonder, putting the sadness back in my crying. *What does it matter?* It’s just a race. I’m still stupid Carolyn. I ran thirteen miles, but that doesn’t make me the person I want to be.

Why do I do this, believe that a single event will make me love myself? No goal I’ve ever set has done that, but I never learn. I can’t change. She shouldn’t have to do anything to prove she deserves to be loved. And every time I challenge her, she always comes through—and still, I can’t accept her. But she keeps trying. What disturbs me is the thought of what she’d do if she really failed—if she failed a class, if she didn’t finish the race... My god. She’d die. Why can’t I just like her?

Doubled-over in fetal position, I grieve violently, realizing I still haven’t arrived. I’ll never arrive. After each magnificent flight, I am reduced to ashes. Yet, sifting through the cinders, the remains still warm in my hands, I look towards the vault of heaven, and I’m suddenly more determined than ever to fly again.

With the water lapping up over my belly, in a womb of languishing suds, I know. In the faucet I see my face, distorted in the gentle curve of chrome, the blank lines of my features morph, and I know. Leaning closer, my slicked-back hair domes aerodynamically, my nose slopes over into a hooked beak. The glorious phoenix grins secretly, winks an enigmatic eye, and in triumph tells me what’s taken years to begin to understand on my own. I’m not done. Complete content with myself is an impossibility, but nothing’s ever stopped me and nothing will ever stop me from trying to get there.
What a remarkable thing—to never be perfect, to have infinite opportunities to keep trying.

Arising from the tub, I feel again the tickle of feathers, hear the whisper of wings, know that this flight, like the others, will end in flames. I acknowledge them. These last tears tighten my cheeks and I face the mounting breeze.
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