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Here Comes The Rain: A Compilation Of Poems And Short Stories By Isabella Minudri

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SIGNATURE PAGE

This thesis for honors recognition has been approved for the
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HERE COMES THE RAIN

A Compilation of Poems and Short Stories by
Isabella Minudri

Carroll College
May 2019
Abstract

My thesis, titled “Here Comes the Rain,” is a collection of four short stories and thirteen poems that speak to the beauty that can be found in the midst of life’s most painful moments. From the loss of romance and of family members to mental illness and the search for identity and lasting love, these pieces are emotionally charged and satisfyingly raw. I hope that readers find within these pages an opportunity to recognize their own rainstorms and to choose to rejoice in what they discover there.
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Introduction

We always look forward to when the rain will end. Rain means darkness, wet shoes, staring at the sidewalk and never at the sky. Rain means windshield wipers and ruined hair and cold hands. Gloom. So we wait. We watch the clouds from closed windows and urge them to break into wisps once again, because for most of us, the sun and happiness are two things that can rarely be separated. Here comes the sun, little darling. Here comes the joy.

What if we found happiness in both the sun and the rain? What if we looked up once in a while to see the beauty in the wetness? And not just an appreciation for the consequences of rain, like flora and glittering roads, but a true excitement for what comes with the rain. What if we loved the feeling of each round droplet on our skin or the way the clouds come together and create a song? I’d like to think that maybe, just maybe, we would begin to approach life from an entirely new perspective.

For an audience, the tangible side of a piece they have read is often the writing process—the events, thoughts, and procedures used by a writer to trigger development of words on a page. My own process, for both stories and poetry, cannot be filed down into a simple step-by-step; my writing usually stems from an emotion that I must release, and the medium happens to be paper. Looking back on the last few years, I have realized that the stories I tell come in phases. Many of my earliest pieces were the result of the angst and restlessness that come after an emotionally abusive relationship, others were brought to life by sheer will power and endless hours of editing and blank-page staring, and a considerable number of my short stories focus on the death of a loved one. The latter is surprising, even to me, due to the fact that I have never experienced the loss of someone close to me. Thus, it seems these stories are born of something subconscious, and I pray the shift to conscious emotion is delayed as long as possible.

The Table of Contents illustrates how these seventeen pieces are grouped together. The first five, beginning with “Burn” and ending with “Bad Habit,” demonstrate various struggles with identity. “Burn” and “Tell Me About Yourself” are very personal poems, as I wrote them during a time when I was feeling both confident in my writing identity and insecure in most other areas of my life. “Grief on the Rails,” “Cemetery Reminiscence,” and “Bad Habit” were more experimental pieces, but lend themselves
well to the theme of identity crisis: “Grief on the Rails,” my first real story of death, focuses on a young girl who grieves her deceased mother; the narrator of “Cemetery Reminiscence” feels confused and angry as she remembers her mother’s drug addiction; at the center of “Bad Habit” is the theme of identity in relation to possessions.

The second grouping, “To Him” through “Daylight Dreaming,” is perhaps a bit more finely focused. It is organized as a progression of emotions through romantic relationships. “To Him” and “Pretending” demonstrate the frustration and wild energy in the aftermath of a falsely-perfect relationship, both of which culminate in the namesake center piece, “Here Comes the Rain.” This poem clearly captures the idea that rain is just as powerful as the sun, and the emotions involved are integral themes of this collection as a whole. “Babies” and “Melt” represent a phase of regret after a terminated romance through tones of masked insecurity and waverig confidence. The theme then transitions into new beginnings with “Better This Way,” and the peaceful imagery and blissful tone of “Daylight Dreaming” create the honeymoon phase, in which the absence of conflict or of questioning is intentional.

Finally, the third grouping deals with a bit of identity as in the first grouping and added to it is the theme of mental illness—specifically, depression and anxiety. “Much Ado About Frosting” is a story of an older couple who mourn the loss of their only son many years after his death and find themselves at odds with each other and with themselves. The poem “When the Light Hurts” describes what it feels like to be overpowered by negative emotion—specifically, depression in conjunction with a broken heart. “Visions of Survival” is a short story about a man who hallucinates images of his parents after a nearly-fatal motorcycle accident and chooses to allow those hallucinations to guide him to safety. The last two poems in this collection, “Rescuer” and “Tattoo”, sum up the themes of love, identity, and strength as they each speak to the acceptance of my flaws.

These pieces are a tribute to discovering beauty when life hurts the most, rather than after the pain ends. They’re about deliberately splashing in the puddles even if your toes are cold. Sunshine will have its moment. So put on your jacket, please, and prepare to get your shoes wet.
Burn

I am not sunshine.

I am not sunshine, but I’d like to say that I am the moon. Still, I am not the moon, because to be the moon I would need enough strength to outshine the darkness, the darkest blue, even to overcome an expanse of flickering stars and my own half-lightless face.

But I am not the moon.

Am I a star, then? No, no, I cannot be a star because stars entice dreamers and pull children’s hands toward the sky and catch dandelion seeds and I am not big enough to hold it all in my soft hands, I am not strong enough to burn bright despite a wish on the breath of another year against a candle’s flame.

I cannot be a star.

Sun, moon, stars, and still—I sit here striking a match to burn the words that push against my tongue, to burn them into pictures striking enough to inspire the dreams that children throw towards those stars, raw enough to draw tears from the eyes that analyze the phases of the moon,

bright enough to be a light, hot enough to hurt just a little.
Grief on the Rails

The train tracks are warm today. My car is parked in the field a few miles down, and I’m walking along the glittering, rusted rails, allowing the heat to soak through my shoes. Sunlight reaches me from just above the line of trees I’m approaching, gently warning me of its departure. I’m not concerned about the disappearing light; the tracks will provide an hour or so of warmth, and I’ve walked this path countless times.

For now, I leave my coat open over a light t-shirt and jeans, hopping up to balance on the metal and jumping down again onto weathered ties spiked into the gravel rising up from the grass. It’s quiet, peaceful—something about the green and the whisper of fall on the wind and the chickadees falling into the trees from the sky.

Walking here opens the door to a hundred memories—the sound of racing footsteps and wild giggles, a sun-spotted hand closed around mine, a gentle smile—but I don’t chase them down; I allow them to gather, acknowledge their presence, and then let them be. I have something to say today, so the memories will have to wait.

I follow the tracks into the edge of the forest, zipping my coat up a little as the branches filter the heat of the sun. Thick rows of trees slope downhill on my right, ending abruptly to make room for the tracks and then continuing on flat ground to the left. The wooden ties aren’t as faded here, protected from the sun by decades-old evergreens, but the rust has built up in the moisture. Ferns and stalks of alfalfa grow sporadically amid moss and rainbows of fallen leaves blown in from the fields. Ahead of me is a curve in the rails, hidden by overgrown brush. It’s my favorite spot on this walk; there my Mom sits, on a stump just before the tracks disappear, waiting for me. With her hair pulled back out of her face and a light jacket, she wears a smile that I miss more than anything.

“Hi, Mom.”

She turns her gaze to me and stands gracefully, her hand reached out for me to take hold of. The last few steps to her make my heart race, but as soon as her hand is in mine the whole world is alright. I inhale and close my eyes—for a second, it’s like I can feel the calluses on her palm. I meet her eyes for a moment, drinking her in, and then we turn and continue down the rails.
Mom walks softly in the middle of the tracks while I use her strength to keep my footing on top of them. Every few seconds I look over at her, at the contented way she watches the horizon and the soft light that sits on her skin, a muted glow. The memories I had held at bay come forward now: Mom laughing as we raced each other down the rails, the way she’d drape her arm across my shoulders like I was her best friend in the world, the secrets we told the birds and the hollers we sent tumbling into the wind. I wonder for the millionth time if I’ll look like her, if I’ll have that same excitement in my eyes when I’m grown.

I want to walk with her straight into forever, but soon the shadows beneath the trees stretch out their arms and remind me of what I came to say.

“Mom,” I sigh, stepping off the rails again. She shows me her sweet smile, encouraging me. “I don’t want to like her, Mom. Dad is so happy with her.” I swallow hard. “Just not the way he was with you. But it’s like he’s forgotten you already. He’s already moving on. How can he just let go like that? How can he love someone else so quickly?”

I press my lips together and watch the planks move by under my feet. “It’s not like we don’t talk about you. We do. I would talk about you all the time if it didn’t hurt so much.”

Taking a deep breath, I lift my head and look up at the trees accepting the golden red colors of the sunset, like the flowers at the funeral, like Mom’s prettiest dress still hanging in her closet. “I don’t understand it. You were the most important part of the world to him two years ago, and now he’s replacing you.” My throat closes, and we walk in silence for a little while longer.

Mom never actually speaks when I come to see her, but she responds to me in her own way. My worries are often put to rest simply because she listens while I talk, or she looks right into my eyes, reminding me that I already know what to do. She guides me in her silence.

The trees open up to reveal a rock bridge that the train tracks travel over for a few hundred feet, a broad expanse of darkening sky and quiet water in the river below. Most people would balk at the idea of moving over such a narrow, uneven path, but Mom and I used to walk along these tracks every day.
The two of us sit down on the edge of the bridge and let our legs hang out over the depths. I hold her hand in my lap, pretending I can feel her pulse in her fingertips. With my gaze fixed on the horizon, my eyes fill up and spill onto my cooling cheeks, and I make no attempt to dry them. Mom removes her hand from mine and brushes my hair back behind my ear, like a breeze on a summer day. She runs a finger across my jaw, drawing my attention her way. Cradling my face in her hands, she tilts her head slightly as she looks at me. Her eyes say everything she cannot, and so I say those things out loud, listening to their truth as they come out of my own mouth.

“She’s good for him. I know. He hasn’t been happy in so long.” I clench my fists tightly enough to feel my nails jab into my skin, not ready to let go just yet. “But she’s not you.” The corner of Mom’s lips raises slightly, understanding sketched across her face.

She doesn’t understand, though. She’s gone. She isn’t really here to understand. Chest heaving, I shake my head at her, unable to make sense of my thoughts any longer.

“She’s not you,” I scream out into the open air. I’m crying in earnest now, sobs flinging themselves out of me and echoing through the trees, wracking my body. The forest behind me, the sinking light, the colors and the cold and the wooden ties beneath me quickly soaking in my tears—it’s all too much. “She’ll never be you.”

By the time my tears have dried in streaks down my skin and my eyes are sticky with salt, the sun has disappeared entirely. An owl coos somewhere down along the river bank. Mom plays gently with her necklace, a gold leaf on a delicate chain that Dad gave her for their fifth anniversary. They used to hike together, and whenever Mom saw a pile of leaves she’d pull my dad into it with her. I have shoeboxes full of photos of them, mouths stretched wide with laughter and Dad’s eyes always on Mom.

“I know you have to go,” I whisper.

She lets her necklace fall back into place and turns to me. A small, sad smile plays with the edges of her lips, acknowledging that our time is almost up. We stand together. Mom tugs my hand from my pocket to lace her fingers in mine, and we lean against each other as if weak from a fight.

As I watch our feet land evenly on each railroad tie, something comes apart in my chest. I recognize it, mourn it, embrace it all at once: these are my very last moments with
my mother. I suddenly know in my core, in the very depths of my bones, I will never return to this forest, to these rails that have held my mother’s presence for so long.

This time, I don’t feel the need to cry. I speak softly to the ghost beside me, tell her jokes that Dad comes up with some mornings, and breathe in her smile. The anger that brought me to the tracks seeps out of my fingertips where they are joined with Mom’s; peace does not replace it, nor relief, but simply a silence, pure and full.

The tracks begin to bend much too soon. I see Mom’s tree stump surrounded by brush darkening beneath the stars, and as we approach it, Mom releases my hand. Stopping for a moment, I face her, unsure. Then I lurch forward and fall into her open arms, her warmth barely-there, and squeeze my eyes shut.

For just a second, nothing exists but her embrace and the cool night air and my heartbeat slowing.

Neither of us says goodbye. Instead, I let go of her and step away, and then I turn toward the edge of the forest, my eyes on the wide-open valley ahead. I think about looking back, but Mom wouldn’t want me to. She’d tell me to be strong, so strong is what I’ll be.

When I finally bring my eyes up from the ground, I’ve already made it back to my car. I zip my coat a little tighter and fish my keys from my pocket. My hands are cold—something I hadn’t noticed earlier, like my mother’s touch was a furnace within me. Unlocking the door, I slip into the front seat and start the engine. As it rattles to life, there is movement in my periphery. In the passenger seat next to me, a small pile of yellow-gold maple leaves shivers slightly beneath the closed window. I pick one up and hold it between my fingers.
Tell Me About Yourself

I would, but how to begin?
Do I have time to explain that I am scraps
of memory tied in a pretty bow
with an old dog’s leash?

That the pink lines of raw tissue patterned
across my skin whisper tribute
to childhood scrapes on gravel drives,
to escaping cancer, that sometimes

I feel them pulsing momentarily
as if to remind me of my humanity? Should I recite
to you my insecurities, sweat-soaked
anxieties that keep me awake at night?

Or should I tell you, quite simply,
about vaguely titled passions or the number
of stamps on my passport, maybe
that old dog’s name,

the one that slept by my side for a week
when I was sick? Do you want to know
that I am entirely made up
of words boiled softer in emotion,

wrapped tightly around
bones, if only for some semblance
of structure? If you ask me
about myself, is that too much,

or is it far from enough?
Cemetry Reminiscence

On my dashboard, a single poppy
dries gracefully, patiently, orange
ges curling, purpling
into something more touchable,
rough against the skin yet skin-
soft beneath each brittle casing.

My mother—ageless, vibrant—
slipped the bouquet into a slender vase
and told me in her conspiratorial way
that she used to dry poppies with her friends,
the fragrance lingering between scrap-
book pages, in dusty car seats where petals fell
from the rear mirror’s bundle.

A blue Styrofoam tree hangs
from my own rearview, peppermint
overwhelming the poppy’s scent
entirely. I drive, watch the flower
dry slowly, and my fingers itch to peel
each petal back, stain
my palms orange, to let them float from the window
to the road beneath my tires.

The purpling crevices beneath father’s eyes
painted his aging face while mother swung
from high to low, their patterns mirrored—
she in hostility to giggles
and back again, he in exhausted anticipation
to burnout, always pushing me
into my bedroom while she screamed at him,
out of the hospital
while she cursed at the doctor, away from harm

while she raged. Poppy seeds roll
across my dash and onto the floorboards,
scattered like the pills my mother spilled,
sobbed over, swallowed, craved,
opium in her blood before we buried her
skin cold and soft, eyes closed
beneath the casket’s casing, like her brittle
disposition was a drugged-up dream…

I leave my car. The poppy spins
between my fingers, and then I lay it on her grave.
**Bad Habit**

The phone is ringing off the hook again. That damned old neighbor man won’t leave me be, what with his calling me every few hours or so about the cows on his property, but I never bother to pick up anymore. I finish off drying the porcelain bowl in my hands and hang up my apron by the sink. I need another cigarette. My pack is in my coat pocket by the door, so I shake one out and light it, letting the screen door slam shut and rattle behind me.

I sit down on the steps, taking a long drag and closing my eyes with content for a moment. The porch swing behind me creaks wearily as the breeze flings strands of hair from my braid into my eyes. Sunlight glints off of the newly painted barn doors across the gravel drive, and a lone hen aimlessly pecks at the dirt in front of them. Stalks of wheat rustle gently in the endless Tennessee fields surrounding the house and beyond the barn; they won’t be harvested this year. It’s finally peaceful here—no deafening voices of men all around me, no rumbling tractors or cruel sneers or filthy, rough hands demanding that food be made. Cigarette butts roll around at the bottom of the porch steps, just memories there in the rocks. I don’t care about much anymore. I’ll just sit here in the sun, in the unfamiliar quiet, and hope to God it never goes away.

But of course, quiet never comes to stay. A dark, small car turns into the driveway, much too low to the ground to be from any place around here. Dust flies up behind the wheels—moving too fast, I might add—and the car rolls in and stops next to my old truck to the right of the house underneath the willow tree. One of the backlights is gone, and the shotgun door looks newly painted in comparison to the rest of the weatherworn vehicle. It rattles as the engine turns off, stuttering and gasping like a man with lung cancer. I push my hair out of my face and watch as a young man with light hair and a ratty flannel shirt steps out of the driver’s side and tugs at his collar. He walks purposefully over to the house, smiling broadly when he notices me on the front steps. I look him up and down, noticing his worn leather shoes and clean-shaven jaw, and take another drag.

“Hello, ma’am,” he nods enthusiastically to me. “How are you on this fine day?”
Clearly not as great as you are, I think sarcastically. But I just look up at him and blow smoke. His brow lowers momentarily over green eyes, and then he glances above my head at the door.

“Alright then. Is Mr. Renton home?”

I chuckle and shake my head. “No, Mr. Renton isn’t home. Hasn’t been for a while now.”

“Well, do you know where I can find him? I’m afraid this is quite an urgent matter.”

“He’s dead.”

“Ah, I— ” he begins. Then he blinks rapidly, confusion washing over his face.

“Did you say he was dead?”

“Sure did.”

“Dead? But I just received a letter from him not two weeks ago.”

“Right about the time he keeled over, sounds like.” I exhale another cloud of smoke in his direction. The man paces away from me, muttering frantically and holding his head in his hands. I sigh and look up at the sky. The breeze has let up and now it’s just hot; sweat forms at the base of my neck and back. Time to head inside. I stand and stomp out the remainder of my bad habit before walking inside the house without a backwards glance.

As soon as the flimsy old door bangs against the frame again, he yells out, “Hey, wait!” and runs up the steps, practically pressing his face against the screen.

“May I come in?”

Well, he’s got manners. I nod and wave him in, turning toward the cupboard for some bread. He walks in, moving to the table and pulling out a chair. He goes to sit down and immediately stands back up. “I apologize,” he says, approaching me with his callused hand outstretched. “My name is Oliver Ferguson. My mother was Mr. Renton’s sister.”

I look at him and laugh, extending my arm to shake his hand. “His sister! Well isn’t that a laugh. Darrel didn’t have a sister, kid.” I return to making sandwiches, chuckling to myself. The chair squeaks behind me as he sits.

“See, that’s what he told everyone, Mrs. Rent—”

“It’s Pam.”
“Sorry. Pam. It’s just—even though Mr. Renton might have told you he didn’t have any siblings, he actually does have one sister. I have pictures and birth certificates in the car if you’d like some proof.”

I bring the sandwiches to the table and sit down with a sigh. “Alright.” He scampers outside. I guess it isn’t totally improbable that Darrel had a sister—he had lied to me before about seemingly important matters like this, but if I questioned him, things got ugly.

Oliver returns with the papers and sits down hurriedly, devouring a sandwich in a matter of seconds; his etiquette is impressive.

“Well, there’s proof alright. Guess he had a sister,” I admit, glancing at the numerous pages of official-looking paper and picking at my own sandwich. “Sorry you missed the funeral.”

“Oh, it’s fine, Miss Pam,” he waves me off. “I never really knew him anyway. The reason I’m here is because your husband came to see me a few years back to talk about the property.”

The property? I glance up sharply at Oliver. “As in, this property?”

Oliver’s green-eyed expression turns a bit mortified. “He didn’t tell you?”

“Well, I don’t remember,” I lie, becoming angry.

Oliver looks at me for a moment, unsure of himself, and then continues cautiously: “When he came to visit, I was young—maybe fourteen or fifteen. He told me that when I was older, he’d pass the farm on to me, since I’m the closest thing he had to a son.” I watch Oliver’s face as he talks, looking for signs of dishonesty. But his eyes are clear and focused, and humility holds his posture. “In the letter he sent me,” he continues, “he asked me to come out here so he could show me around the property. But I guess he can’t do that now.” His shoulders slump. I look at him in disgust, unable to conceal the anger I feel. Together for twenty-four years and the bastard didn’t care to think of me before giving the property to some kid. I live here!

“I’m sorry, Miss Pam. I didn’t mean to come out here and ask this of you, but I really need this farm. The money from the wheat fields could help my mother live comfortably for a while, and I—”

“Excuse me?” I interrupt, suddenly on guard. “What are you asking me, exactly?”
Oliver hesitantly meets my eyes. “I—Well, I guess I’m asking if you’d consider handing over the farm. You’d still have a place to stay here, of course…” But I’m already on my way out the door, cigarette in hand. I need a smoke.

I light up and sit silently on the steps, enraged at the audacity of the young man sitting in my kitchen. There’s no way I’m giving him this place. It’s mine now, and I plan on it staying that way. How dare he come out here and disturb the peace I craved for twenty-odd years? You’d still have a place to stay? Damn straight I would—as the only person living here! I stand up and shake the ash off of the end of my cigarette, too angry to sit still. I need to move. I pace the gravel drive and marinate in my indignation, only pausing my furious tread when I hear Oliver come outside. Fourth cigarette halfway to my lips, I wait for him to say something. But he just gently closes the screen door and stands at the edge of the porch with his hands shoved in his pockets and watches me. Who does he think he is? I march over to the steps and spit out, “Look kid, you can’t show up at someone’s front door and demand they hand the place over. You just don’t do that to people! Darrel might have made you some kind of idiotic promises, but I sure as hell didn’t. Now get off my property.”

Oliver meets my gaze for a moment and says, “I understand.” Then he walks down the steps and over to his car, yelling, “Thanks for your time!” before ducking into the driver’s seat and driving away.

Darrel’s grave sits at the edge of the property back behind the house. I didn’t want any kind of headstone (too expensive) or really a proper funeral (also too expensive), so I buried him myself in the corner of the wheat field, with a crudely carved white cross staked into the ground beside the mound. The dirt still looks fresh; I crouch down and grab a handful, letting it fall gently through my fingers. The smell of the earth somehow reminds me of that gloomy morning a few weeks ago when I had gone into town for my regular check-up with Dr. Harris. Darrel always made me go. “Don’t have time for no sick woman,” he’d gritted out, shoving me through the door when I refused to comply. “Go see that doctor-man. And tell him not to get too handsy or I’ll set my boys on him.” The slam of the screen wasn’t enough to mask the sound of his chuckle.
So I went, and Dr. Harris poked and prodded me and then, just when I thought it might never end, he got up and left the room with a concerned shadow over his brow. I’d waited uncomfortably in my paper dress for fifteen minutes, staring at the wall, at the ceiling, at my nails, until he finally came in and pulled his stool up right next to me. He blew out a breath and then met my eyes. “Pam,” he’d said. “I have some bad news. Your lungs are deteriorating fairly quickly due to the amount of smoke you inhale and won’t be able to carry on a lot longer.” His eyes searched my face, but I was unmoved.

“Get to the point, Doc.”

“Well, I don’t have a very good estimate as of now, but it looks to me like you have just a few years.” He was quiet for a moment, watching me absorb the news. “I’m sorry.”

When I came home, I didn’t bother to tell Darrel. He would’ve laughed in my face or shot me right then and there, and I planned on being alive for those last years if I had anything to say about it. Lung cancer might kill me, but Darrel would never get the chance.

I sigh, relinquish my grip on the soft dirt in my hand, and stand back up. I don’t miss the man. He was fat and unkind, and I can’t say he didn’t deserve that heart attack. Sure, I’d been a little shocked at first, but who was I kidding? I couldn’t wait to be free of him. His friends were just as bad. I watch the hills of golden grass sway and reflect the sun as I remember their hungry stares and bad breath, always too close for comfort. Darrel just laughed at their antics. But he lied to them too. None of us knew him, not really. He was a lying son of a bitch and no one called his bluff. I look down and stub out my last cigarette on his grave, throwing my braid over my shoulder and climbing back up to the house.

The wheat stalks rub against my legs as tiny white insects flutter up into the open with every step I take. The hill is steep, and my lungs heave painfully as I curse my addiction. Nicotine may have been a convenient escape from the controlling monster that was my husband, but I’m sure as hell paying for it now. Wheezing and huffing, I finally see the back door and make my way up to it, leaning against the door frame to catch my breath before pulling the door open and stepping into the cool atmosphere of my kitchen. I grab the pitcher of iced tea from the fridge and pour a glass. As I turn to the table and
pull out a chair, I notice a small, torn piece of paper lying in the center. I pick it up and read the shaky scrawl: “If you change your mind or want to talk, I’m at Newman’s every day from nine to twelve.” Newman’s was a coffee shop on the corner of 2nd and Main, about a half hour from the farm. I snort and throw away the note. My mind won’t be changed anytime soon, that is for damn sure.

The phone starts ringing again, right on cue. Exasperated, I pick up the receiver, figuring I better answer that pesky neighbor before I ripped the cord straight out of the wall. “What do you want, Patrick?”

“Well hello to you too, Pam. Took you long enough.”

“Look Patrick, now’s not a good time to bother me.”

“Is it ever?”

I chuckle at his sarcasm. As much as he annoys me, he always manages to make me laugh. “Alright, alright. What can I do for you today? Those cows wandered over again?”

“Nah, they’ve been stayin’ on your side of the fence for the most part. I was calling because some snooty-lookin’ men came by the other day thinkin’ this was your place and askin’ ‘bout taxes and such. I slammed the door real hard in their faces, o’ course, but I figured you should know so you’re prepared when they figure out where you really live.”

“What do you mean, taxes?”

“Oh y’know, since Darrel died they likely want ta see the papers that say you’re his wife and all that so they don’t get ta sell it.”

“Sell it? They can do that?”

“Guess so.”

“But Darrel’s only been dead two weeks!”

“Well…was he behind on taxes for the house?”

I pause, my heartbeat quickening. He’d never been very good with money. I could be in serious debt here. Choosing not to answer the question, I rush, “Thank you much, Patrick. I’ve got to go,” and hang up the phone.

Chewing my thumbnail, I pace the tiles of the kitchen floor. I have no idea where Darrel would have kept tax forms, and the fact that I never once saw them probably
means he didn’t bother with them much either. The farm could be taken away from me altogether—and where would I go? I don’t have a job or family that could take me in; this farm is quite literally all I have. Unless... I stop pacing. I turn and wrench open the cupboard under the sink, reaching into the trash and grabbing the tiny piece of paper lying on top. There is one option.

Newman’s opens at nine, but I’m waiting outside in my truck by eight-thirty. The town is small and quiet; my rusty old flatbed sticks out like a sore thumb. I sit and watch the pigeons hop impatiently around on the corner of the café roof, and when the sun starts to glare, I grab a cigarette and step out of the truck, moving to stand on the curb and face the opposite side of the street. It’s already warm out here, so the smoke just hangs in the air and dissipates slowly. Closing my eyes, I take another drag and exhale, allowing the nicotine to calm my mind.

“Smoking isn’t good for you, you know,” a gentle voice says. I jump and spin around. It’s Oliver, standing there with a little half-smile and an apron over his shoulder. I give him a look, angry that he snuck up on me. He grins and says, “C’mon, I’ll unlock and get you some coffee.” I roll my eyes and throw the butt on the ground, stomping on it before approaching the door Oliver holds open.

The inside of the café is dark, lit only by the sun coming through the big windows on the east side. Oliver leaves the lights off and goes behind the counter, starting up the machines and wiping off surfaces. I wander around, looking at pictures up on the cream-colored walls and watching dust float to the floor in the sun’s rays. It’s quaint and warm, with mismatched couches in the back corner and old barstools that squeak. I sit down on one of them, accepting the steaming mug of coffee that Oliver hands to me.

“So I guess you saw the note I left you,” he begins.

“I ain’t changing my mind,” I retort stubbornly.

He holds up his hands in surrender. “Didn’t say you were. Just figured you were here to talk.”

I eye him defensively as I take a sip of coffee. “Alright kid, listen. The farm is all I have in this world. I don’t want to give it to you.”
Oliver blows out a breath and braces himself against the counter behind the bar. “It’s okay, Miss Pam. I knew you wouldn’t—“

“I’m not finished talkin’! I don’t want to give it to you. But it sounds like if I don’t, it might get taken away from me, and I can’t have that either.” I sigh in defeat, preparing to say the words I wished I didn’t have to. “Oliver, how would you like to co-run the farm with me? I know the house is small, but I’m sure we can find room to put another bed so that you and your mother can be comfortable, and this way we’d both be getting some money out of it.”

Oliver stares. “But how does this prevent it from getting taken away?”

“Well, I figure if I can get a job for the next month or so, just long enough to make few hundred bucks, I can pay off the banks while you get the farm running again. Once we can get some wheat sold, we can start putting away money for you and your mother to live off of once you move back out.”

Oliver watches me silently for a moment and then says slowly, “So you’re saying my ma and I could live in your house for a couple of months and then move out again when we have some money.”

“Yeah.” I take another sip of scalding coffee.

Oliver chuckles dryly and shakes his head. “I think you need to see something, Miss Pam. Hope you’re up for a drive.” He paces to the window and flips the sign to Closed again, locks the door, and grabs his keys.

“Where are we going?” I ask, slipping carefully off the barstool.

“Out to my place.”

Oliver drives quietly, and I don’t bother to try and start a conversation. We pass the orchards just outside the edge of town and turn off onto a dirt road that goes straight through a forest, making me question my readiness to go with him. But the forest turns out to be about a mile long and bright with sunlight, and when we come out on the other side, it’s nothing but dry grass fields. And then I see it. Clearly dilapidated and poorly built, a small A-frame house sits in the middle of the field to the right of the road. Oliver glances over at me as if to see my reaction as he pulls into the driveway, stopping right in
front of the door. He turns off the ignition and looks down at his hands before saying blandly, “This is where I live, Miss Pam.”

“I—well. It’s very…old,” I stutter out, unsure what to say. He nods and abruptly gets out of the car, walking up to the door and slipping inside. I take a deep breath and then follow him, standing for a moment just inside the door, allowing my eyes to adjust to the dark and musty-smelling interior. When I can make out the furniture and the lay of the space, I see that I am standing in an open living room; sparse furniture lies here and there in front of a brick fireplace that looks like it hasn’t been used in years. On my left is a doorway to the kitchen, which looks small from where I’m standing. Oliver is nowhere to be seen. I pace to the end of the living room and into the hall, pausing when I hear Oliver’s gentle voice coming from a room a few doors down. An even softer voice responds, and I hear laughter. Approaching the room, I push open the door and see Oliver sitting at the edge of a bed, holding the hand of a woman who looks about my age, but sickly and pale. She smiles at me and Oliver looks up. “Ma, this is Pam. She was Uncle Darrel’s wife. Pam, this is my mother, Lucy.”

I clear my throat. “Nice to meet you,” I say, uncomfortable. “And I wasn’t really his wife. We never married.”

“It’s so good to finally see you, Pam,” Lucy croaks. “Oliver was telling me just the other day that he went out to see the property! It’s so kind of you to let him take over the farm for a while.”

“But I didn’t—“

Oliver cuts me off, grabbing my arm and tugging me towards the door. “Miss Pam hasn’t seen the house yet, Ma!” He says over his shoulder before gently closing the door. In the hallway, I pull away from his grip and cross my arms, glaring.

“She thinks I’m giving it to you?”

He rubs his face with his hand. “I’m sorry. I really am. It’s just…She doesn’t have much longer. She got real sick a few years back—right before Uncle Darrel came out. She’s out here all by herself in this house every day and I thought she could use something to look forward to.”

“And what the hell were you going to tell her if I said no?”

“I guess I’d just keep telling her you hadn’t made up your mind until she—“
“Until she what?” I was so angry I couldn’t see straight.
“Until she passed.”

I inhale sharply, mortified. Oliver leans against the wall, sliding down to the floor and burying his face in his hands.

“What am I going to do? I don’t have enough money to keep paying for her medical bills, let alone this piece of crap house.” He looks at the ceiling, chuckling remorsefully. “I’ve tried to get another job, but no one is hiring. I don’t have any family left that could lend us money. Please,” He turns to me. “Please help us. Let me run the farm. And not just for a few months. I don’t know if she’ll make it that long, and besides, the stress of moving so much would be hard on her. I need to have the farm. I’m begging.”

I meet his desperate green eyes, thinking about the woman just behind the door, too sick to get out of bed. I think of Darrel’s promise to give Oliver the land, and of Oliver’s hopeful, happy face when he came to see me. I remember the doctor’s prediction that I didn’t have long, Darrel’s selfish nature, fields of perfectly good wheat that would go to waste. I could give it to him. I could. I’d be fine, living there and showing Oliver the ropes. I wouldn’t need to get a job or move away or start over. I could do it.

But Darrel’s face keeps coming to mind. The way he took everything from me, the way he pushed me around. The farm was mine now, finally. Something I could hold onto if I got some money saved up. Giving it to Oliver would mean giving up on the life I wanted.

“No,” I say, softly. Oliver stares. “No,” again, louder this time. “I can’t give it to you. It’s all I have.” I look away from his sad gaze, spinning around and heading down the hall. I walk through the dark living room and back out the open door, reaching into my pocket for a cigarette. “It’s all I have.”
To Him

Maybe I’m not her. Maybe
I don’t fit into the same size
jeans, maybe my eyes don’t contain
the blue of the ocean, the night sky,
and a blue jay’s crest
    all at once.

Maybe I don’t tilt my head
the way she does, making you
believe she has you memorized,
and maybe her favorite 80s song
is catchier
    than mine.

Maybe I don’t laugh as easily, maybe
I have too many faults
and maybe she’s perfectly flawed.
Maybe she knows you better
after six months than I did
    after four years.

But, maybe, I like my curves.
Maybe I like that my eyes are brown
and for that there are a hundred
more comparisons to make
    than just the ocean
        and the sky.

And maybe I know all the words
to every song I’ve heard, maybe
I love the way I dance and the rhythm
of words and the fact that I can write
a (shitty) poem
    in three minutes.

Maybe, the most important maybe, is
that I like the fact that I am not her,
and that I am not you, because maybe
that would mean I would leave a girl like me
behind, and,
    maybe,
        I’d regret it.
Pretending

While you were in the bathroom, I admit,
I contemplated leaving.
The restaurant was overcrowded,
the napkins too starched,
and wine filled my glass instead of beer.
I really wanted beer,
but you insisted that ladies drink wine.
So I put on a dress and the bitter perfume you got me,
and spent the first hour pretending
that I loved the wine and the food and your tie,
but the wine tasted like chemicals,
and I begged God to let your tie choke you.
It didn’t, which was disappointing.
You made a show of holding my hand across the table,
smiling at me and laughing at something I never said,
but your gaze felt cold,
just like the hand that left bruises on my palm
when I spilled my glass of chemicals.

While you were in the bathroom, I confess,
I almost laughed.
Your boss made eyes at me,
my dress crushed my lungs,
and the salad you ordered for me hung limp from my fork.
I detest salad.
But you insisted that ladies eat salad.
So I shoved it down my throat and watched
as the gluttonous man to my left
and the busty woman on my right
flirted obtrusively while their spouses, poor souls,
pretended not to notice.
I didn’t laugh, and I’m glad I didn’t,
because the situation wasn’t funny,
and I might have cried instead.

While you were in the bathroom—I plead guilty—I left.
I decked the guy beside me for being an ass,
handed my wine to his sullen wife,
and flung myself out the door with bare feet.
I never liked heels.
But you insisted that ladies wear heels.
So I crammed into the heels and choked down the wine,
I suffocated in the dress and smiled shyly at your boss,
the way you told me to.
But you never asked if that was what I wanted,
and now you’ll never get the chance.

While you were in the bathroom, I admit,
I ran away.
The taxi smelled of weed,
my feet were sore,
and I still couldn’t breathe,
but that was when I realized everyone
was only pretending.
Not me. Not anymore. No more pretending.
Enjoy your glass of chemicals.
Here Comes the Rain

Crowbar to the dusty rafters—
crack, splinter, split—
dry wall floating
up in clouds, covering broken beams, coloring
the inside of my mouth,
my nostrils, filling the wrinkles
in my hands. Cold metal
and strong, step into each swing, revel
in the shuddering creak-snap! that pierces,
the boom that rolls in sky.

I picture his smile against each wall
and put a hole through it.

Laughter bubbles against the tears
salt water dripping, slipping
between my hands, grip
the crowbar tighter and swing again,
feeling it shiver as it breaks
through the staircase railing, the creaking
floor boards, boarded up windows. Peel
yellowing bathroom tiles
away with bleeding fingernails, porcelain
shards and water pools, piping
spray like rain slithering through my hair.

I run down hallways, throw matches,
and tear curtains
down from castle windows,
no sun yet, and it smells
like thunder. Glass-covered frames
and old photos of him curl in the blaze
to which I feed them. The last beam
disintegrates beneath my hammering
feet and now I stand
atop the ruins, let the breeze touch
my crumbling skin
and feel my bones shatter in the sun.
Babies

She’s already got a ring weighing down her left hand and she says if she got pregnant now Marc would really man up and buy that piece of land she’s been dreaming of since she got promoted to manager of that little café on Jefferson. She looks at me over the bouquet she’s fingering on the island in her kitchen and she asks me, she says, “Don’t you want a baby?”

There’s her ring again, catching sunlight and she looks pretty ridiculous with her hair pulled back like her sights are set on forty-five while she’s still twenty-one and drinks Bud Light because she can’t afford vodka and Marc doesn’t drink liquor. I laugh, “No, I don’t,” and she’s horrified but under her lipliner I know she’s jealous that I’m free and single and I don’t think about babies unless I must.

She’s staring at that ring when Marc arrives, black suit and tie, dress shoes, his briefcase thudding on the island between us, “Sorry I’m late,” he says and blows a kiss to his wife as he opens the fridge and he’s balding a little already. She nods at the door like its time for me to leave when Marc says, “Baby, this shit is bad for you,” and tosses a can of beer into the trash. I slip out the door and feel the wind in my hair and think about islands in the Caribbean.
Melt

Breathe gently on me,
mist over the windows I’ve pushed
up and locked against the cold.
Press your face against the glass,
carve hearts into the fog with your tongue,
beckon me outside with you—
and someday when the cold has left and my eyes
have cleared, when I’ve already gone—
if your fingerprints remain, I’ll know
I left too soon.
Better This Way

I used to believe that falling in love
meant seeing poetry in someone’s eyes
meant making lyrics out of fingerprints
verses out of all the ways we’d kiss

I used to think that being in love
was easy like Seattle rain
was green leaves and flowers every week
knees crooked together in sleep

With him it doesn’t feel like free falling
more like maple seeds    helicopter spinning
more like a child from a bike    wobbling
vertigo in the Ferris wheel car

With him it’s more laughter than gazing
more drunken choruses than one special song
more French fries than picnic baskets
backs pressed together in sleep

love in the off-beat rhythm of our breaths
Daylight Dreaming

I wake to see him sun-soaked, glowing through the sheets, eyes on me.
We drag a quilt through the bathroom window and watch the morning rise,
whispering white-misted dreams to each other as we sit on the roof,
breath drenched in coffee and too much sleep.
I keep the mug between my little hands and I rest my heart in his.
Much Ado About Frosting

The screen door hammered shut in the mudroom, the sound vibrating through the house. Marlene glanced up from the towel she was folding meticulously and smiled to herself, hearing her husband’s muttered curses.

“Hi, honey,” she called, setting the towel on top of the dryer.

“Hey, Mar.”

She shuffled into the kitchen to see Henry, Dodgers baseball cap low over his eyes, piling overfilled grocery bags onto the counter. He immediately turned and went back into the mudroom to fidget with the door hinges, opening and closing the screen several times before throwing up his hands and letting it slam into the doorjamb once more.

“Damn that door,” Henry said as he walked back into the kitchen. “It rattles the windows of every house in the goddamn neighborhood.”

Marlene laughed and pulled a carton of milk from a bag. “Maybe you should actually do something about it, Henry. It’s not goi—”

“To fix itself, yeah, yeah, I know,” Henry finished, grinning at his wife. He took the milk from her and pulled open the refrigerator door. “You’ve said it before.”

“Well, I don’t know what else you want me to say, honey. You complain about the door every time you come into the house.” Marlene shrugged a little and reached for some cans of tomatoes. She placed them in a cupboard next to the oven, adjusting them so that all of the labels faced the same direction. She turned to see Henry still standing in the light of the refrigerator, the milk in his hand hovering awkwardly in the air like he couldn’t decide where to put it. Marlene gently pushed him aside and took the milk, set it on its designated shelf, and then moved away to unload more groceries.

“We have some WD-40 in the garage, don’t we?” Marlene asked over her shoulder. “Maybe that would help with the squeaking, at least.”

She paused, dug her hands into a few of the remaining bags, and said slowly, “Henry, I thought I asked you to get frosting.”

Hearing no response, she turned to see Henry sitting at the island in the middle of the kitchen, already absorbed in the front page of the newspaper.

“Henry.”
“Hmm.”

Marlene stepped forward and flattened her hands on the island. “I specifically asked you to get frosting. Did you leave it in the car?”

“Hmm?”

“Henry, would you look at me for one second?” Her voice began to rise. Henry finally looked up from his paper and sighed. “What now, Mar?”

Her eyes narrowed. “Frosting, Henry. Where is the frosting?”

Henry met her gaze for a second, and then cleared his throat and tugged his ball cap lower over his eyes. “I didn’t buy any frosting. Gotta put it on the list, Marlene.”

He scratched his neck and went back to his paper, while his wife glared at him across the marble. After a minute, she went back to the grocery bags, emptying them of their contents. On the counter, she left a box of chocolate cake mix, a packet of candles, and a lighter, and then turned to look back at Henry.

“You look so much like him in that hat, Henry,” she murmured. “I thought maybe it would help you remember.” With that, she walked stiffly into the living room and out of Henry’s sight.

Henry sat still, staring after his wife with guilt clouding his vision. The paper in his hands fell limp, so he folded it up and set it in front of him to rest his elbows on while he pressed his face into his palms. After a moment, he rose from the counter and approached the living room, holding his breath.

Two large, glass doors overlooking a small garden allowed sunlight to warm the carpeted floor where Marlene stood barefoot, watching birds in the yard and rolling an old baseball between her hands. If she heard Henry enter the room, she made no indication, except to rotate her hands a little faster.

Henry chose to stand near the doorway—comfortably, with his hands shoved into his pockets, but under the brim of his hat the skin around his eyes tightened.

“I’m not perfect, Marlene.”

Silence. The tension in Marlene’s arms was enough to pull her skin taut.

“You can’t expect me to remember every little thing that goes on around here—my brain’s gonna fry.”

The baseball rolled around and around.
“I swear I’m trying—would you say somethin’ so I can stop feelin’ bad about this?”

Marlene whipped around, her jaw clenched and her nails digging into the ball’s stitching. Her arms began to shake.

“You aren’t. You aren’t trying, Henry.” She said carefully through gritted teeth. “I don’t care if you don’t remember every little thing, just as long as you remember the big things!”

“How the hell am I supposed to know the difference between the big things and the small things?”

“Oh, for Pete’s sake, Henry. Listen to yourself! The door is a small thing, because the only person it’s bothering is you!”

She suddenly stopped mid-rant, eyes glued to her husband like she would strangle him if he moved any closer. Then she pulled her arm back and launched the baseball at the wall near Henry’s head. Henry ducked, and the ball thudded into the paint, dropping to the floor in a flurry of white dust.

Henry looked at the ball and then at his wife, his mouth open. “What the he—”

“You only care about you, Henry! The stupid door could bang itself into the next century and I wouldn’t care! But you know what I do care about? You know what really matters to me right now?”

“Well, I think—”

“Don’t think, Henry! You know the answer!” Her voice rose by an octave as she moved toward Henry in her anger. “This day comes around every single goddamned year and you pretend to forget every single time! What, do you just hope that Bobby’s birthday will magically not occur if you don’t acknowledge it? Do you think maybe I’ll just not say anything about it?” She was so close to him their noses almost touched.

Henry gave up trying to answer her questions and kept his eyes on the floor. Marlene took a shaky breath and a step backward, settling her hands on her hips. She watched as her husband reached up to adjust his hat again, still not looking at her.

“That’s it, isn’t it,” she said, her voice suddenly gentle. “You’re hoping I’ll forget too.”
Defeated, Marlene dropped onto the couch as tears began to catch in her eyelashes. Before long, she was sobbing into her hands, as if the tears had been evasive far too long.

Henry finally released the spot on the carpet from his gaze and sighed before moving to sit next to the blubbering woman on the couch and pull her into his chest.

“I’m sorry, Mar, I really am,” he murmured, his hand stroking her hair. He didn’t say anything more for a long while, allowing his shirt to soak with her tears until she had cried herself out. When she eventually sat up, the two of them looked at each other and smiled a little.

“I miss him too, honey. I miss him every day, you gotta believe me.” Henry tucked a strand of Marlene’s hair back and took off his hat for both of them to look at. “I only wear this stupid thing because it’s how I feel closest to him.” He fingered the fraying threads on the bill of the hat and chuckled. “The Dodgers. Of all the baseball teams our kid coulda picked—”

Marlene began to laugh a little too. “It really is strange, isn’t it.”

“We didn’t even like baseball!”

“Never took him to a game, never put him in T-ball—”

“The Dodgers, Marlene!” Their laughter bubbled over, husband and wife letting out cries of mirth and wiping tears from their cheeks. Gasping for breath, Henry grabbed Marlene’s hand and quickly sobered. “I promise not to forget Bobby’s birthday again, okay? Maybe eight years of pretending it’s just a regular day is long enough.”

Marlene leaned in and pressed a kiss to his cheek, and then stood up from the couch, smoothing her skirt. “I think maybe we have some powdered sugar in the cupboard and a little food coloring. I’ll just make frosting from scratch. Care to join?”

Henry rested his head on the back cushions and gave her a gentle smile. “I’ll be there in a minute,” he said, glancing at the hat in his hands. His wife nodded and made her way into the kitchen once more. Henry let out a long sigh.

In the pantry, Marlene found the last of her powdered sugar and blue dye, and as she mixed them together with the milk and butter that Henry had bought, she thought she heard the shudder of a glass door closing. Curious, Marlene wiped her hands and peeked around the corner into the living room.
Henry was no longer on the couch, so Marlene walked softly over to the double doors. Just outside, Henry sat on the wooden porch step, face in his hands. His shoulders heaved with sobs, and the old Dodgers hat was lying upside down on the lawn.

Marlene moved to open the door, but hesitated, watching her husband’s pain. She splayed her fingers and pressed her palm into the glass, and the two of them stayed like that for a long while.
When the Light Hurts

Flattery, happiness, headaches,
dopamine pricking holes in the canals
of my brain for little flashes
of fluorescence to shine through.
Empty compliments dissipate with the light.
My temples pound.

A pretty picture—a new boy, eyes
alight with anticipation, asking
to take me out.
Kind-hearted rejection, but somehow
I’m in the wrong.
How is that right?

He doesn’t understand the ache
I’m sparing him, the ache
you should’ve spared me. Pain
wrenches through my head,
my intestines, the tips of my fingers
as I light up to smoke you out.

I hate you. I don’t hate you.
I wish I’d never met you, never sworn
to be by your side no matter what.
Now I’m a bird, caught between the lion
and the barbed wire, a moth between
the fire and the lamp.
Visions of Survival

His face was broken. He was sure of it. Peeling his eyes open, the man discovered that he was lying prostrate with one arm caught beneath his body and something ripping into his cheek. Moving seemed out of the question, and a groan echoed from his throat. He was facing away from the sun but judging from the chill he could feel crawling over him, he’d already been lying there for several hours. With a deep breath and gritted teeth, the man rolled onto his back. His neck felt fine, and his back was sore but in one piece, so he sat up gingerly to assess the damage.

The arm he’d landed on was still bent awkwardly. He lifted it, pushed out in an attempt to straighten it, and doubled over, cradling it. “Fuck!” he screamed to the valley. Holding his arm was painful, but letting it go was worse, and the burning sensation throbbed like it needed to escape the confines of his skin. He sat there for a long while, clenching his eyes shut. The burning slowly turned white and numb, giving way just enough to remind him of his other injuries. Blood was still streaming down his cheek and soaking into his shirt from the rock that his face had landed on, and the seam of his jeans was ripped just enough to show where bone had detached from his ankle. Broken ribs for sure, at least a couple.

A little at a time, pieces of the accident found their way through the murky fog in his brain. He’d been on his motorcycle. There was frost on the road, and he’d been speeding—no. He almost never went more than five over the limit. He rubbed his forehead gingerly. A red-tailed hawk soared through his memory for a split second, but its relevance to the accident, he couldn’t remember. He’d fallen over the side of a steep hill, that much he knew for sure. He shook his head. His body creaked in the cold, and his mouth was dry. Nausea clogged his throat. He needed to find water, and soon.

Turning his head as far as he could without moving anything else, the man gazed up at the darkening sky and the hill behind him, calculating. It would take at least seventy steps to reach the top of the hill with no broken bones, but in his condition? Maybe two hundred. If he could make it to the road before the sun was gone, he might survive this. Without the sun, he might as well throw himself down the hill again.

The man moved his uninjured arm behind him, placing his hand against a sturdy rock, and flattened his shoes on the ground as best he could. Biting his tongue, he pushed
up from the ground in one forceful motion and found himself wobbling, but standing nonetheless. Pain ripped through his skull, his organs resentful of the movement. He closed his eyes and waited for the feeling to pass, and then took a shaky step up the hill.

His knee immediately buckled. The man collapsed in an awkward heap upon the rocks again, searing heat shivering through his left leg. He shoved his knuckles into his dry mouth and bit down hard. He didn’t have enough energy to scream. Even breathing seemed difficult, and he hadn’t made it a single step. He grabbed his injured leg and positioned it so that it was straight out in front of him, and when his hand came away from the back of his jeans, it was covered in dark, sticky blood. His breath coming in pants, he felt the back of his knee carefully, fingers prodding. There—a gash at the top of his calf, narrow but clearly very deep.

“Oh god,” he whispered, half-moaning. “Oh god.” Forcing calm into his thudding pulse, the man searched for something to bind his leg. He was too far from the road to scream for help—that much was obvious. He looked down at his leather jacket. He had a fleece-lined sweater beneath it, but nothing under that, and he was already freezing. The one time a cotton t-shirt really would have come in handy and he had decided not to wear one.

He kicked out with his good leg in frustration. Little rocks tumbled down the hill, the sound echoing around him like they were boulders. But then he remembered something—he’d put on two pairs of socks that morning since his feet were always unbearably cold when he was on his bike. With shaking hands, he unlaced his shoe and peeled off the top sock. The sock beneath it was soaked in sweat, so he shoved his foot back into the shoe in an effort to keep his toes from going numb too soon. The sock in his hands he stretched out as much as he could and then wrapped it tightly just below his knee, struggling to knot the ends together with his trembling fingers. It would be more effective under his jeans, but whatever he had cut himself on had ripped a pretty large hole in the fabric and the makeshift tourniquet doubled as a patch against the cold.

He had to get moving again. The sun was barely visible now, and he had a long way to go. He didn’t let himself think about what would happen once he made it to the road. In the time he had spent on the hillside, he hadn’t heard the rushing wind of a single car pass by above him.
The man blinked. His motorcycle. He hadn’t even thought about what had happened to it in his panic. Swiveling his head, he searched the hillside with squinted eyes, trying to distinguish metal from boulders and shrubbery in the dying light. Nothing below him seemed to resemble his bike. He struggled through his thoughts. When he’d awakened, he’d been lying sideways on the hill, and even the limbs that weren’t broken were still sore. He must’ve rolled…

Holding his breath, he shoved himself off of the ground once more, determined to stand. Once he’d caught his balance, he took small, ginger steps in a half-circle until he was facing uphill again. The air was silent. Slowly, the man moved his gaze across the landscape, afraid of what he would see. And then, there it was. About ten feet from the road his motorcycle lay atop a pile of rocks and dirt, as if it had slid down the hill and had been stopped by its own force. He shifted his gaze a little higher and saw the shimmering guardrail, curving gently along the highway, no sign of where he’d crashed into it and flipped the bike over the hill.

His pulse roared into his ears. He should be dead. “I should be dead,” he said to the boulders, as if to make sure they wouldn’t respond. “How am I not dead?”

“Don’t ask questions you can’t have the answers to,” came a deep, wavering voice from behind him. The man started, then froze. The inside of his head felt like it was filled with cotton. He clenched his eyes shut.

“Well? Are you going to lean on me and start gettin’ up this hill or what?”

His eyes snapped open. Someone was definitely speaking to him, and they were closer this time. He turned to his left. Sure enough, the speaker stood a few feet away in hiking boots and a flannel, eyebrows raised.

The man shuddered, opened his cracked lips, and whispered, “Dad?”

Huffing in annoyance, the older man climbed the last few steps uphill and ducked under his son’s arm, gripping him tightly to his side. “Quit gawking,” he muttered. “You ain’t gonna make it if you leave your mouth hangin’ open like that.”

Together, the two of them stepped gingerly around rocks and tumbleweeds, one beginning to shiver violently as the cold crept over the hillside, the other strong and silent and neither providing warmth for his son nor adding to the quickly falling temperatures.
With his ankle broken and pulsing, the injured man focused his breathing. Inhale, exhale. Inhale. Nausea threatened at the edges of his vision, and the cotton in his brain only seemed to be multiplying. Each labored step was more painful than the last. They’d only gained about ten feet before his legs gave out entirely and he felt himself collapsing, falling away from his support. Through blurry, darkening eyes he could see his father’s mouth moving, hands pulling at him helplessly, but the roaring in his ears grew and grew until it silenced the world.

When he came to, the only light still visible was peeking over the trees on the surrounding hills. His mouth was sandpaper and iron, bloody as if he’d bitten down on his tongue too hard. Thoughts entered his mind in slow motion, coupled with renewed pain. He must’ve passed out, but for how long? A minute? Thirty?

“Dad,” he croaked, “how long—” He squinted to the left, swiveled his head to the right. “How long have I—” He stopped, panic setting in. “Dad?”

The rocks were quiet once more. He swallowed hard, trying not to breathe too hard for the piercing discomfort of his broken ribs. Eyes clenched shut, the man searched his foggy memories. His dad had been there—he had to have been there. But he was going to have to get up and try again on his own.

He didn’t think about it this time. Rolling gently onto his stomach, he flattened his good hand on the dirt and shoved upwards, forcing himself onto his feet. He’d forgotten about his ankle, and a scream echoed down the face of the hill and ricocheted off the trees before he realized it was coming from his own mouth. Whimpering, he picked his bad leg off the ground and took a shaky hop forward. Then another. And another. When he wobbled, he gritted his teeth and set his injured foot on the ground for a moment to regain his balance, fighting tears.

Twenty feet this time—not much, but it was progress. He bent his knees and sat hard. “Just a few minutes,” he said aloud. “I’ll keep going, I promise.”

Something brushed past his ear. He blinked, then focused on the shape moving across the rocks toward him. The darkness revealed a large bird, intelligent eyes glimmering. She hopped closer and closer, then lifted one leg and continued, mimicking the man’s progress. Once she had sidled up next to him, she stopped and lay down.
The man stared, fascinated by the brown and red feathers tickling his pant leg. Then he scoffed. “First my dad, now a bird? Maybe you could send something helpful, like my mother,” he said to no one in particular. He reached down and stroked the bird once, lightly, and when she didn’t frighten, he let his palm rest on the bird’s back. Suddenly, she fluttered her wings and stood, facing him. The man watched as she hopped a few steps away, fluttered back and gently pecked his arm, and then hopped further away.

He rolled his eyes. “Shit. Fine. I’m coming.”

For what felt like the millionth time, he convinced his legs to straighten. Following the bird, he hopped forward on his good leg and allowed the broken one to drag just enough to keep him stable.

After a minute the bird took flight, floating in wide circles just over the man’s head. As night arrived, the only indication that she hadn’t left him was the whoosh as she passed above him again and again. The road was nearing, as was his damaged bike, which was losing its reflective gleam as it began to frost over. The man shivered and found that he was almost grateful for the cold as his broken bones numbed.

He talked to the bird as he stumbled along, knowing that if he stopped he would lie down on the freezing ground and never get up again.

“Motorcycle cost me… all of my savings on it. What good it did me? Cheaper than a car…If I take it in, they’d fix it, right? It’s prob’ly fiine. Just cold. I’m cold. If I wasn’ distracted by that hawk, I’d…I’d be in…I’d—”

His incoherent monologue slowed, as did his forward motion. He stared into the air, catching glimpses of the bird as it neared him and circled away. “The hawk. You’re a hawk, aren’t you? A red-tailed hawk. A fucking red-tailed….“ The man felt anger rising up in his throat, overpowering the nausea that had been sitting there for hours. He chased after his murky memories: the cold morning air, the quiet highway, the hawk flying above the hill, the guardrail, his hands leaving the handlebars—

“You’re the reason I’m in this mess! I could be dead right now, dead, and it would be your fault!”

Now he was breathing too hard, and his ears were beginning to roar with blood again. Gasping, he cradled his head in his uninjured hand, tremors starting in his neck and
rippling down his limbs. He’d been distracted by the hawk before the crash, but why? It was just a bird, he’d seen thousands of birds, he’d seen *millions* of birds, so why…

His head snapped up. Red-tailed hawks were his mother’s favorite bird. She always stopped to watch them, always gripped his arm excitedly when she saw the brief red flash in the air. They were the one thing she’d obsessed over in her last few months before cancer replaced what was left of her exhausted organs.

The hawk tightened her graceful circles and darted right over his shoulder, startling him as she nipped quickly at his ear. She was a gift, probably. The spirit of his mother in soft, dry feathers.

Salt water stained the man’s raw cheeks, slipped between his lips, coated his tongue. A red-tailed hawk. It was just like his mother to be so subtle in such an obvious way. She must’ve known it would take him a minute to understand. He let out a shallow sigh, which became a quiet laugh.

“Good one, Mom.”

Coming up behind him, the hawk flapped her wings and pressed her beak into the back of his head, nudging him further up the hill. He let the power in her little body propel him and stepped forward with determination, the guardrail almost within reach. Silently now, he focused on matching each exhale with the step-drag, comforted by his mother’s presence.

Lights. *Lights*, he realized excitedly. A car was coming around the bend in the road, the first one since he’d crashed. Quickening his steps, he reached out with his good hand, desperate to grip the railing. Step-drag, step-drag, step-drag, *almost there*, step—

Pain ripped through his leg and up into his brain as his foot caught on a rock and twisted. Blackness closed in and he fell forward, his chest hitting metal before his pain became a dream.

A face, fading into view—flannel. Dad? A woman’s voice. “Hi, yes, we’re on Highway 95 and there is a man here on the side of the road. Oh god… yes, he’s badly injured. Honey, is he bleeding—yes, YES, he’s bleeding, oh god please send someone, please hurry…”
“…two, three, lift!” White pain, white like sea foam, crashing in. “Get him in the ambulance, let’s MOVE people…” Grunting, faint beeping…then nothing.

Sleep.
Rescuer

I feel it—the tiny sharp blade, sadness piercing
my head just a little, like the lining of my happiness
is only thinly stretched skin
rip into it—
let the knife clean through—and there it is
the abyss beneath it all, dark waters bleeding
fingertips breaching the surface from below
begging to be lifted out
but I stand above with hands tied behind my back, helpless,
an observer of my own brain
the edges of the abyss thread cracks through my skin
veins of depression thread through my sanity
until I fall through
until I’m sucked under

I feel it—God’s tender touch, just a brush
of a fingertip on the rough edges of my brain
enough to remind me that no amount of happiness
can take His place;
He reaches in and lifts me out
I’m spitting up water, heaving, holding tied hands
out to Him. He brushes back my hair and shows me
his needles, a kit of my good memories, and smiles
with sticky sides stuffed into a box. Watch him wet the silver end
of a spool, thread it through the eye, pierce
the edges of the broken skin
gently, loop and tighten until it’s gone
until the abyss is gone
until the last stitch is tied off

I feel Him—the strength in my thoughts
my smile no longer a Band-Aid
no more bubbles of water in my lungs
no longer reaching for the sunlight above the surface
He took the stitches out and the skin held.
now when the knife threatens, pressing, pinching,
when the skin tears, when I see the darkness,
His hands plunge into the water
before I’ve sunk too deep
and hold on to me until I’m free
until I’m finally dry
until I can breathe again.
Tattoo

I’m one smile among thousands,
one pair of eyes
in the throng,
but if you step a little closer, come
just a little closer, my fingertips will leave
a patterned print of pretty words
on your skin
and you’ll feel the sting, the artist’s pen
lingering in the ink
as I dissipate into the crowds
once more.