WHAT DO YOU DO? A MEMOIR IN ESSAYS

Kristen A. Keckler, B.S., M.A.

Dissertation Prepared for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

August 2008

APPROVED:

Ann McCutchan, Major Professor
Barbara Rodman, Committee Member
John Tait, Committee Member
Jacqueline Vanhoutte, Committee Member
David Holdeman, Chair of the Department of English
Sandra L. Terrell, Dean of the Robert B. Toulouse School of Graduate Studies

These personal essays present a twenty-something’s evolving attitudes toward her occupations. Each essay explores a different job—from birthday party clown, to seitan-maker, to psychiatric den mother—while circling around sub-themes of addiction, disability, sex, love, nature, and nourishment (both food and otherwise). Through landscape, extended metaphor and symbol, and recurring characters, the collection addresses how a person’s work often defines how she sees the world. Each of the narrator’s jobs thrusts her into networks of people and places that both helps and impedes the process of self-discovery. As a whole, the essay collection functions as a memoir, tracking an often-universal journey, one that many undertake in order to discover a meaningful life, and sometimes, eventually, a career.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## PART I: PRESERVING MYSTERY IN THE NONFICTION NARRATIVE: SYMBOL, METAPHOR, IMAGERY, AND STRUCTURE IN *WHAT TO YOU DO?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Essay/Case Study</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Live Exhibit of Essays</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonfiction Book Structure: Practice, Theory, and Analysis</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third Man in The Ring: Memoir Vs. Essay</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case Study: Shapiro Vs. Grealy</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Mystery of Metaphor, Symbol, and Image</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objects in the Shadows: Animals, Vegetables, and Minerals</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## PART II: WHAT DO YOU DO? A MEMOIR IN ESSAYS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Essay</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Two Secrets to Clowning</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex in the Group Home</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drive Around the Lake</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer of Saturn</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devil’s Work</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PART I

PRESERVING MYSTERY IN THE NONFICTION NARRATIVE:

SYMBOL, METAPHOR, IMAGERY, AND STRUCTURE IN WHAT DO YOU DO?
Essays are like shadow boxes. Within the glass and frame, or the paragraphs and sentences, exists a world of objects, likenesses, and images. This is not my own idea nor is it a new one. Inspired by Joseph Cornell’s surrealist assemblages of found objects, Charles Simic composed *Dime Store Alchemy*, a collection of sixty prose poems (or for my purposes here, sixty short lyric essays.) These pieces sometimes respond directly to Cornell’s art, yet more often than not create a distinct and parallel world through language. Harrison Fletcher writes about the connection between the shadow box and the lyric essay in “Writing a Shadowbox: Joseph Cornell and the Lyric Essayists.” Fletcher explains: “A shadowbox, like a lyric essay, relies upon intuition, instinct, and leaps of faith. […] Keats believed it is the job of the artist to explore ideas, not find solutions. As such, it is not only acceptable, but essential for certain elements within works of art to remain unanswered, unexplained […] to be comfortable with multiple meanings or no clear meaning at all (52). While a shadowbox displays objects, it does not tell the viewer what and how to think about these objects—our eyes will take in what they want, and attempt to organize or interpret or not.

Before I discuss the nature of the lyric essay, let’s look at a shadow box I dug out from a crate shoved in the back of my laundry room. It’s a Pottery Barn shadow box, the size of a notebook, three inches deep, and surrounded by a faux black wood frame. It was a wedding gift that came months after the wedding from some belated relative. Here’s a brief description of what I filled it with: photos of my two deceased cats, Zack and Cleo, in similar sprawled, relaxed poses, cut along the outlines of their bodies, sitting in a bed
of wildflowers I cut out from various photos as well; also cut out from photos, myself on
a bench on the Coney Island boardwalk in late September, wearing the engagement ring
I’d just accepted earlier that day; my wedding cake, a Ferris Wheel, a waterfall in Ithaca,
a lake in Ithaca, a big yellow sunflower from a wedding card, a huge conch shell, my
(now ex) husband as a young boy in his baseball uniform, and my grandparents on a
street in the Bronx. There’s an Australian postage stamp, a Yankees Vs. Red Sox ticket
stub, a couple of small seashells from our honeymoon, a border created from photos of
tree leaves, and the dried yellow rose my groom wore on his tux. What does it all mean?
Surely the images of the wedding cake and the Ferris wheel would seem unrelated if I
hadn’t explained that we were at Coney Island the day we got engaged. You would have
no way of knowing that the cats were dead, though perhaps the way I layer them on the
flowers, at the top left hand corner of the box, above all the images of people, might
suggest that they were in “a different place,” a heaven of sorts. In a similar way, the
Ithaca images are in the background, like wallpaper, underneath the more present day
images of myself, the wedding cake, the sunflower, the conch shell. You might think, as I
do, that the seashells speak to the Australian postage stamp—if you’ve been to the
fabulous beaches “down under.” In Cornell’s shadow boxes, “the juxtaposition of objects
is often as crucial as the objects themselves. How they complement each other—or
clash—creates meanings that would not occur otherwise” (Fletcher 46). So perhaps there
are some things you cannot know for sure, and other things you can deduce from the
layers and positions.
Lyric essays, like shadow boxes, often operate through the layering of words, ideas, and images. Pulling his ideas from several sources, Fletcher attempts to boil the lyric essay and its function to the following definition:

The lyric essay partakes of the poetic in its density, its distillation of ideas, and its musicality of language. It partakes of the essay in its weight, its desire to engage with facts, and its allegiance with the actual. The lyric essay seeks answers but seldom finds them. It speaks more to the heart than to the head. It elucidates through the dance of its own delving, taking shape mosaically, and defining itself its own creation and its interaction with its audience (44).

Like Keats’ belief in exploration, and like the very discursive nature of the personal essay, Fletcher draws attention to the journey, the very search for answers. I would personally label three (or perhaps four) of the essays my collection, *What Do you Do*, as lyric essays (“Two Secrets to Clowning,” “Gates,” and “Lost and Found”) first due to their “poetic density” and “mosaic structure” (and by mosaic, I mean lack an overall consistent narrative in the form of scene and exposition) and second due to the fact that though they may seek, they never come to any clear answers. “Lost and Found,” particularly, stands up to Fletcher’s idea of “interaction with its audience” because of its second person point of view. But when I look at the collection at a whole, each of the essays, whether lyric or narrative, does a whole lot more seeking than finding. Though I’ll later explain why exactly I prefer this “searching” mode, along with its benefits and drawbacks, for now I first want to offer the idea of the shadow box as a way to understand my organizational method in general. Because the work as a whole is not a
traditional memoir but a series of linked essays, I need to rely on more than a consistent narrative voice, reoccurring characters, and common themes to give the book an aura of cohesion. Thus, I choose to employ more subtle devices such as metaphor, symbol, image, and place (both upstate New York and the natural world in general) and the juxtapositions both within and between essays. As a whole, the collection becomes a series of shadow boxes lined up along a shelf. If so, I can also assume that the work as a whole too operates as a lyric essay—searching. In the end, perhaps the collage can rise above my restraint in offering judgments and connections and point to something that the narrator finds in the process. Perhaps the overall accumulation of the “objects” can lead the reader to discern meaning, or perhaps just pleasure, from the whole.
Nonfiction Book Structure: Practice, Theory, and Analysis

A shelf of shadow boxes does not exclude the idea of order. As previously mentioned, a reader can achieve order through the repetition of symbol and metaphor as well as through a narrative structure and consistent characters and narrator. To put it simply, a reader can find order in the very arrangement of boxes along a shelf (perhaps, a shelf that dead ends next to a window.) I arrange the essays is chronologically, with the first essay finding the nineteen-year old narrator at the end of her first bizarre job, as a clown, and the last essay finding her, at age twenty-six or so, on the brink of leaving the final, and most heavily weighted job of the collection, the psychiatric home.

For the writer, a crucial part of the creative process is determining not only the structure of an individual chapter, or essay, but also that of the overall work. In “Some Thoughts on Nonfiction Book Structure” Douglass Whynott talks about how in the introduction to McPhee’s reader, McPhee describes the way he develops structures for both articles and books:

McPhee typed out his field notes and made copies. […] He then cut up those notes and placed them in file folders, each with its appropriate label (such as, say, ‘Snapping Turtle Eggs’). McPhee then created a stack of file cards corresponding to the categories—one card per folder. […] To come up with his narrative structures, McPhee laid the cards out in various sequences. When he decided upon a structure, he tacked the cards to a bulletin board in the proper order, and then stuck a steel dart under the
first card. [...] That card—and that corresponding folder—became the first days work, the first pages for an article or a book.

McPhee’s method helped Whynott, a young writer who saw “writing a book as a monumental task,” allowing him to see that “the folders allowed McPhee to break the work into parts and think of it in smaller components” (66). Coincidentally, I used a similar method as McPhee’s: I spent a summer drafting notes, putting those notes in file folders, slapping a name on each folder, and developing an order for those folders. Unlike McPhee, however, I did not tackle the folders in the order I’d laid out, and chose to compose the middle pieces first, the last pieces next, and the first pieces last. It was only when I knew what would the final piece would turn out to be that I could complete the first two essays in the collection.

Beyond examining the process of composing book length works, Whynott takes a theoretical stance about the finished products, explaining, “[t]here are no rules to book structures, other than that they must develop in satisfying or useful ways, and there are probably as many architectural layouts for books as there are for houses” (67). Within the almost endless possibilities and variations, Whynott explains a few standard structures he found in book length works of nonfiction ranging from memoir to literary journalism to essay collections, namely the three-part, five-part, and twelve part structures. He explains that “the three-part and five-part structures offer uneven patterns—diamond shaped narratives,” marked by “their inherent contrasts” (69). In terms of the five-part structure, Whynott points to the works of literary journalist Tracy Kidder, *House, Home Town*, and most recently, *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, as exemplifying the five-part structure (67). Whynott also examines the way the parts, or chapters, interact in a five-part structure. He
explains that “the fifth part usually speaks to the first, and Parts II and IV tend to have a low-and high opposition. Part II is almost always some sort of digression, while Part IV tends to reach the highest point of tension or some other form of climax” (67).

Though I didn’t consciously plan it this way, that is, thinking of the structure of the book in terms of three, five, or twelve movements, now looking at the finished product, I would argue that the collection most closely resembles the five-part structure Whynott outlines. My five-part structure is asymmetrical because the collection becomes skewed as I give more weight, and pages, to the group home jobs than to the other experiences. It makes me think of the collection as a star, five points radiating both inward and outward rather than a neatly closed system, say, of a square. Perhaps, then, my individual shadow boxes are lined along shelves of different heights, or perhaps, nailed to a wall in a progressing yet asymmetrical pattern. Specifically, I would label the parts of What Do You Do as follows: Part I, “Two Secrets to Clowning” and “Gates”; Part II, “Sex in the Group Home” and “Lost and Found”; Part III, “Drive Around the Lake,” “Summer of Saturn,” and “A Tea Party in Limbo”; Part IV, “Devil’s Work; and Part V, “One Big Happy” and “A Little Interaction.”

The fifth movement speaks to the first and vice versa in a number of ways. In “Two Secrets…,” the narrator, within her Barney costume, simmers with angst, releasing it in “mosh pits.” Her desire to be noticed finds her cramming her ears with “piercings” and painting her fingernails “black.” She wants to lose her virginity but longs for a real connection, “for the bookish lover who deserves” her. In “Gates” she finds this lover, (a Richard Brautigan fan), as she becomes a part of vast network composed of the community of “Commons people” and café workers. On her trip “Out West” she longs
for her own domestic space, and for the very interaction her patient, Bill, seeks in the final essay. Domesticity has reached its fullest potential in “A Little Interaction,” and it seems that the time is right for the narrator, satiated with interaction, with sex, with caregiving and putting the needs of others first, to look inward to find what she wants for herself. While the first two pieces offer the start of the narrator’s journey through the jobs through which she defines herself, the last essay ends it by implying both her ultimate resignation and the literal disintegration of the group home. “Gates” offers the end of the narrator’s college era as she enters gates both into the real world and into appreciating the natural word. “A Little Interaction” offers another type of graduation, one from the “school” of the group home, from which, though never stated, the reader might surmise that she’s learned more from the home than any classroom. By the fifth movement, the narrator holds up the idea of group home as family and also begins to examine her relationship with her biological family. In addition, while “Gates” puts the narrator on the road and offers the narrator’s journey out West as an adventure through the unknown, “A Little Interaction” primes the narrator for flight, to run “off to Australia,” then back to her “parents’ cloying nest” and ultimately to “Texas.” As both a physical place and state, Texas also figuratively captures the idea of the endless landscape of opportunities, which resonates with “The West” posed in “Gates.”

In addition, Part II offers Whynott’s “digression” in the lyric essay “Lost and Found.” Not only does the essay deviate from the strict narrative form of “Sex in the Group Home,” it turns away from the main path of the collection, which by this point seems to be focusing on the themes of work and interpersonal relationships. There is an abrupt switch in point-of-view here, from first to second, as the essay focuses on the “day
off.” Unlike the previous essay, during which the narrator attempts to clarify or explain her deteriorating relationship with Robbie, in “Lost” the narrator only hints at the problems, choosing to ignore them by burying herself in nature and busy work. While in “Sex” she says, “intimacy was starting to resemble the inside of a pizza box,” in “Lost” she simply throws the lingering “tombs” of pizza boxes away. The digression of “Lost” perhaps is a way for the narrator to disclose the death of the boyfriend’s mother, which happens outside the world of work, though she deals indirectly with these emotions, offering the reader a peach pie to hold her hope, fear, and grief. In opposition, part IV, through “Devil’s Work” offers a narrator who more directly confronts her feelings and insights and even a rare moment or two of reflection from the writer at her desk, who says, “Now I can see that Pammy, too, felt trapped by the seitan, and had seen me as a way out of a life married to physical labor.” While “Lost and Found” depicts the freedom of nature, a physically strong and active narrator hiking and walking and wandering, “Devil’s Work” finds the narrator trapped inside a kitchen and weakened physically by carpal tunnel syndrome. Section IV does provide a highpoint in tension, as the narrator leaves the group home for food service only to be plagued by a physical disability (which in turn induces emotional turmoil); in this near-dysfunctional state, she most closely resembles the group home clients she’s depicted. After the climax or crisis this chapter offers, the narrator finds herself back at the group home, and the reader can predict the falling action of the rest of collection, perhaps mimicking the motion of the waterfalls in the very next essay, to a finale. Knowing that she’s already quit the group home once, and that after the seitan disaster, she returns to the home almost out of convenience, the reader can assume that this second stint will be temporary as well.
Whether or not the final book that arises from this dissertation will retain a five-part structure remains to be seen. I intend to add four to six additional chapters, woven throughout, and I think given the work’s natural proclivity to a five-part structure, I may try to consciously keep this structure in tact. In addition, as an essay often must operate in a vacuum, and reestablish the narrator and her situation, I will need to consciously work through the book and omit the unnecessary repetition that exists in this draft of the book. But beyond talking about structure in technical terms, I’d like to more closely examine the idea of sub-genres of nonfiction. I would very much like to keep the overall work as a series of linked essays rather than try to iron it into a more traditional memoir, and in order to justify this choice, I will discuss the benefits and drawbacks of each method of presenting one’s life story.
I chose to present this work, the story of my life as a twenty-something, as a series of linked essays, first and foremost, for practical reasons. Going back to McPhee’s idea of working through a long project through compartmentalizing, I found it easier to tackle the project first through viewing each piece as a separate entity and second by thinking about how all these pieces would fit into a book. Also, I needed each essay to stand on its own in order to begin publishing them. I will address the distinction between essay and memoir that drives me to continue with the project in the form of essays.

Sometimes, when looking at a short piece of nonfiction, one that is the length say of an “article,” it can be difficult to discern whether the piece is indeed a short memoir or an essay. In Writing Memoir, Judith Barrington recalls that Philip Lopate defines memoir as a type of essay, that “memoir” resides under the broad umbrella of “‘informal or familiar’” essays. “It is not any particular form, he says, that distinguishes this kind of essay, but the author’s voice” (Barrington 20). I think Lopate makes a valid claim here, as in the memoir, the narrative voice, or the speaker, offers a consistent perspective on past events while offering up the information as “true.” Barrington attempts to elucidate what exactly makes these two forms, essay and memoir, distinct, as different as two people—a parent and a child, or two distant cousins, or two best friends—who happen to be sharing an umbrella on a rainy day. Pointing first to the essayist Montaigne’s claim that “‘in an essay, the track of a person’s thoughts struggling to achieve some understanding of a problem is the plot, is the adventure.’” Barrington concludes that “[r]ather than simply telling a story from her life, the memoirist both tells the story and muses upon it, trying to
unravel what it means in the light of her current knowledge. The contemporary memoir includes retrospection as an essential part of the story” (20). Barrington posits that though the modern literary memoir has its roots in the personal essay, that memoir has more in common with an ancestor in a completely different genre—fiction! More so than the essay, the memoir uses the fictional devices of scene and summary, of chronology, or moving backward and forward in time, of recreating dialogue and rendering realistic real-life characters, and of controlling the pace, the delivery of tension and conflict. Barrington sums up the similarities by claiming: “the memoirist keeps her reader engaged by being an adept storyteller” (22). Though this analogy is certainly appealing, I find that Barrington fails to follow through with what I consider an equally compelling equation: if memoir is like, and perhaps borrows from, fiction, then the essay, especially the lyric essay, is like, or borrows from, poetry, especially in terms of language, image, metaphor, symbol, and lyricism. A persona delivers a poem but the language and devices of language are what drive a poem, and in much the same way, in some forms of the essay, the story itself is revealed through and depends on language.

So with all these interesting overlaps, how do we ultimately know how to accurately label a work of nonfiction? Taking what I call the “essays” in this collection and examining them under Barrington’s theories, I can see that my essays, for the most part, do often function as memoir. First and foremost, I recreate dialogue, and I feel that the way I realistically render dialogue is perhaps one of my strengths as a writer. I also employ scene and summary, move back and forth through time, and pay attention to pacing, of when and where to deliver tension. I think that an essayist too can be “an adept storyteller.” Even though I fulfill these “qualities” of memoir, the main thing I don’t do is
offer retrospection. For the most part, I consciously hold back from musing on the events and offering the perspective of the present day writer at her desk. Going back to Montaigne’s idea, the essays here don’t neatly wrap up or explain the events to the reader because I feel that “thoughts struggling to achieve some understanding of a problem is the plot, is the adventure.”

Barrington does mention that each individual writer retains the authority to classify her work through the title she selects (or perhaps, the title she works out with the editor/publisher.) She explains:

Not every author chooses to label her work memoir, even if it has many of the characteristics of that genre. *The Night Gardener* by Marjorie Sandor and *Never in a Hurry* by Naomi Shihab Nye both contain stories that could be called memoirs. Nye’s book is subtitled ‘Essays on People and Places’ locating it the larger category of personal essay. *Dwellings* by Linda Hogan is subtitled, even more mysteriously, ‘A Spiritual History of the Living World’ but the jacket copy tells us that this is a work of nonfiction, and the personal storytelling certainly hints at memoir. (26)

Although there are countless other examples, a few that that come to mind are Anne Lamott’s *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* and Bill Roobach’s *Into Woods: Essays*, both which often read like memoir yet resist classification as such. Even in the title of my own collection: “What Do You Do: A Memoir in Essays” I attempt to suggest that my work borrows from both subgenres. How to classify one’s own work leads to interesting discussions that move beyond the writing and into the world of publishing and marketing.
Over recent years, several established writers have expressed to me that memoirs are hot, and everything else is not. Ro rbach himself recently said, “memoirs sell; essay collections don’t.” A look at the boom in the memoir over the past decade or two (climaxing, perhaps, with the Frey scandal) seems to confirm this idea. I think the memoir’s popular appeal has followed our interest in psychotherapy, or talking about therapy, in general; over the last two decades, having a therapist has become as chic and common as a little Chihuahua sticking its head out of an oversize purse. Though how exactly this “trend” will play out remains to be seen. After all, alongside the memoir, literary journalism is also a thriving sub-genre; Lawrence Wright’s The Looming Tower won the 2007 Pulitzer, and Sebastian Junger, Jon Krakauer, and Hampton Sides have captured mass markets with journalistic writing. And as I skim through my bookshelves, I find that perhaps Roorbach’s assessment about essay collections is really a sort of paradox. After all, David Sedaris seems to be doing fine. He writes book after book of essays, and though they all sort of sound the same, I keep buying them. When I pulled three of his collections off the shelf, (Me Talk Pretty One Day, Naked, and Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim), I had a sudden a-ha moment. Nowhere on the covers of any of these works lurks the word “essay.” Though that’s what they are—essays, barely linked by anything besides the essayist’s dry wit and family antics. There’s Augusten Burroughs’ Magical Thinking, another mish-mosh of humorous essays. On the snazzy cover, the words “TRUE STORIES” replace the insidious “essays.” That’s the same expression on the cover of Chuck Palahniuk’s Stranger than Fiction (essays, some personal, some with a journalistic bent.) Jo Ann Beard’s The Boys of My Youth, another fine collection of essays linked through the thin thread of the male species, offers no
explanation of the genre on the front cover, only the title and the headboard of a bed with a mussed, slept-on looking pillow. (If you can make it past the bed, the blurb on the back brands the book “a highly praised collection of autobiographical essays”). Perhaps it’s not that essay collections don’t sell, it’s just that the word “essay” is like a Sicilian kiss: certain death. Perhaps the mainstream Barnes and Noble goers, the people who actually buy books at full price, are afraid of the word as it reminds them of something stale, dry and moldy as week-old bread, and of the stupid five paragraph essays they had to write in comp class that their teachers always hated. I think I have just decided to rename my collection: “What Do You Do? True Stories.” It might work even better if I had the word “deranged” in there as well.

Regardless, the title is only a label, and what exists between the covers is the real issue. In order to defend my collection’s natural inclination toward linked essays, or perhaps come to some larger understanding about which genre, memoir or essay or both, this book belongs to, I will offer a brief case study of two authors who wrote about their experiences in both forms, memoir and essay.
Case Study: Shapiro vs. Grealy

Early on in the process of compiling my collection, I encountered the essay, "The Mistress" by Dani Shapiro in an anthology titled The Other Woman. The anthology’s subtitle reads: “Twenty-one Wives, Lovers, and Others Talk Openly about Sex, Deception, Love, and Betrayal.” In her essay, Shapiro writes about her early twenties, years she spent drinking, drugging and playing mistress, or kept woman, to Lenny, a rich and famous New York City trial lawyer (and also the step-father of one of her college roommates.) The essay progresses through a collage of vivid scenes: the narrator’s first date with Lenny, their frolics through Europe, and an especially long sequence with the narrator hosting a dinner party for her parents. In this scene, Shapiro writes:

I poured two glasses of Chardonnay for my parents and a large vodka for myself. I figured that if the vodka was in a water glass, they wouldn’t notice the difference, especially if I drank it like it was water. My drinking had taken on a new urgency in the past few months. It was no longer a question of desire but of need. […] I handed them their wine and directed them to the couch. On the coffee table, I had put out a plate of crudités and a bowl of olives.

‘Quite a place,’ my mother said brightly, her gaze darting around the room at the white brick fireplace with its wrought-iron tools, the glass wall overlooking the garden, the soaring ceiling. My father stared at the fringe of the rug, glassy-eyed. He needed to be numbed as I did to get through the night (71).
Here, Shapiro pairs her narrator’s discomfort with images: the crudités, the bowl of olives, the brick fireplace, the glass wall. These grown-up, refined objects provide a stark contrast to her inner turmoil, and offer her vulnerability to the reader as an appetizer and cocktail. Similarly, in a scene in Paris, Shapiro recalls in present tense:

I am hungover, floating on a wave of last night’s Puligny-Montrachet and a four star dinner that wound up in the toilet of the Hotel Ritz. Lenny’s arm is around me, thick and proprietary, and it reminds me of the sex we had that morning, the way he pinned me to the bed and didn’t let me move my arms until I came in spite of myself. In Paris, I am like an animal curled in a patch of sunlight, interested only in the beating of my own heart (63).

As she couches the reflection in the present tense scene, she binds it to the action and avoids interrupting the moment. She peppers other more directly reflective moments throughout the essay, such as: “Years later—now—I hold Lenny’s lies up to the light and examine my own reasons for believing what, in retrospect, seems preposterous.” But by dishing out this sort of retrospection sparingly, she allows the reader wallow in the past, with the troubled young woman and her shaky rationalizations. Towards the end, Shapiro writes, “This was it, I told myself. Absolutely, positively the end [of the relationship with Lenny]” (69). Then she contradicts her younger self to tell the reader that they do stay together for another year, on and off. In the final paragraphs of the essay, she is sitting in a spa “idly wonder[ing] what it would take to get me to leave him.” At this time, she received word that her parents were in a car crash that left her mother with “eighty broken bones” and her father “in a coma” (84). The essay ends with: “I prayed that my
father wouldn’t die disappointed in me, and I knew then what I had to do.” The strength of the essay, and perhaps, especially the last line, is not what Shapiro says, but what she suggests—that the physical car accident, a destructive force, is the catalyst for her finally to end her own cycle of self-destruction. We know from the reflection that this relationship will eventually come to an end, so the figurative shift here offers a more mysterious and dramatic close.

Which, unfortunately, is exactly the type of strategy she abandons in her memoir, *Slow Motion: A Memoir of a Life Rescued by Tragedy*. In the memoir (shards of the essay dispersed throughout), Shapiro adds the additional narrative arcs of her childhood and family history; details of the car accident and aftermath in hospitals; and family feuds reignited by her father’s death. In many ways, the memoir takes off where the essay ends: with the car accident. In many ways, the car accident is such an obvious metaphor for the debacle she calls her life that when she extends it into a motif, it loses its power and becomes a cliché. I was less propelled through the story because as the title plainly states, it is “A Memoir of a Life Rescued by Tragedy.” The book proclaims it is a story about survival, while the essay quietly details a downfall, where the survival is off stage. In her essay, Shapiro keeps the reader trapped uncomfortably in the young woman’s dilemma, which allows the reader to feel the tension and also develop sympathy for her. As a memoir, her voice is like a voiceover in a gruesome horror flick that pops in periodically to say—“Oh, this part is pretty horrific, but in the end everything’s basically ok, just wait and see!” Why, I ask, would we want to wait and see? Although the narrator struggles with her relationship with her mother and her father’s family, in the end, we watch her receive an MFA from Sarah Lawrence, one of the best degrees in the country. I thought
to myself, what if I ended my collection with completing my PhD and walking across the stage as she did? It sounds pretty cheesy, doesn’t it?

On the other hand, Lucy Grealy’s memoir, *Autobiography of a Face*, works beautifully because she does not over-dramatize nor capitalize on her personal tragedies; she treats her story not as one of survival but rather as a quest for identity. Shapiro’s memoir is about identity too, and if she fully engaged this theme, perhaps the work would read less like a privileged kid who had a rough four-year streak in her early twenties. But the quality of Shapiro’s reflection only offers her reader a cursory glance at identity issues. About the night of her father’s death, which Shapiro spent in the apartment of an out-of-town neighbor, she writes:

> I shudder at the memory of myself, hunched over her personal papers, letters from ex-boyfriends, family photos, tax returns. I desperately wanted to trade places with her. I thought of what she’d see if she looked through my desk drawers: unopened bills, undeposited residual checks, angry letters from Lenny, tiny jars of cocaine, an expired credit card I use to chop it up. In years to come, I will occasionally catch a glimpse of that red-haired in made-for-TV movies and realize where I know her from (147).

Here, all Shapiro can do is give us a “shudder”—that she is ashamed and perhaps afraid of her younger self. I’ll offer an example for comparison, from Grealy’s memoir:

> I’d rationalized my own desires for so long that I was genuinely perplexed as to whether this sudden and glorious sense of relief at the prospect of having my face fixed was valid. Was the love that I’d guarded against for
so long going to be the reward for my suffering? I had put a great deal of effort into accepting that my life would be without love and beauty in order to be comforted by Love and Beauty. Did my eager willingness to grasp the idea of “fixing” my face somehow invalidate all those years of toil? I did not trust the idea that happiness could be an option.

Grealy’s writing not only offers a more complex view into her thought processes, but also speaks to universal qualities. Though Grealy deals with an extreme degree of disfigurement, many of her readers will be able to relate to this feeling of ugliness, of being unlovable, of “happiness not being an option.” I should also mention that Grealy’s collection of essays, (or what the cover calls “Provocations” instead) As Seen on TV is, in my opinion, a dismal failure when placed against her memoir. In the essay “Mirrorings,” which deals her battle with reconstructive surgery and self image, Grealy’s language is flat and dull and the writing is largely expository, telling what the memoir often successfully shows. She summarizes events as a way to comment on them. Here’s an example:

Throughout all this, I was undergoing reconstructive surgery in an attempt to rebuild my jaw. It started when I was fifteen, two years after the chemo ended. I had known for years I would have operations to ‘fix’ my face, and at night I fantasized about how good my life would finally be then. One day I got a clue that maybe it wouldn’t be so easy (36).

The sentences here lack power, and perhaps what the essay lacks overall is the memoir’s keen use of metaphor and symbol to capture these experiences figuratively. While Shapiro relies of the motif of the accident, Grealy offers her face as a metaphor and
symbol while, at the same time, weaving in the subtler symbols of animals throughout the work. That she allows the “face” to be a symbol for any number of things: for identity, for beauty, for disease, for judgment, for fear, for time, to name just a few.

Perhaps these examples not only prove that the very sub-genre one chooses to tell one’s story through *does* matter, but that writers sometimes, for whatever reason, choose the least perfect fit. I believe Shapiro would have rendered her story more successfully as a series of essays. The essay “the Mistress” demonstrates both subtlety and restraint, thus offering readers more opportunities to make connections for themselves. That bowl of olives in the essay spoke to me more powerfully, more intuitively, than page after page spent wandering in and out of hospital rooms and Lenny’s bed. She could have had Lenny themed essays interspersed with essays about growing up in a Jewish Orthodox family—I can see one now, titled “Shabbos.” A Shabbos essay, with its discussion of the Sabbath’s forced dietary and other restraints, would work well juxtaposed with another about Lenny and their shared excesses. Thus she could utilize white space—the space between the essays—to give the reader breathing room from the self-serving sob story that drives the voice of the memoir. The linked essays could take on the jagged shape of a mangled car without having to offer that mangled car up to the reader on a silver platter.

On the other hand, I do believe that the memoir best suits Grealy’s material. One of the other reasons I bring up Grealy is to prove that perhaps, in terms of the retrospective musing that defines the memoir, the writer needs to either go all the way with it, elevating it to the universal and the philosophical, or do the direct opposite—weave it in so subtly that the reader barely notices it is there. A memoirist whose retrospection has such a light touch is Mary Karr. In *The Liar’s Club* the retrospective
moments are so consistent with the overall tone and the voice of the child narrator that they never jar the reader; in fact, I didn’t notice the reflection at all until I went back looking for it. Though sometimes the reason I don’t notice reflection in my own work is because it really isn’t there (not much anyway.) Retrospection is one of the major devices my own collection lacks. And in terms of my next revision of this book, this is exactly the component I need to look at most closely. As an essayist, I am not bound to offer the retrospective knowledge of a memoirist, and as Montaigne wrote, can make the very quest, the search, “the adventure.” One reason Grealy’s retrospection works is because she has two major working symbols, “the face” and “animals,” the former obvious, the later hidden, and her musings heighten these symbols without overly explaining them. When Grealy moves into musing mode, it is often as if she is taking us down a side street instead, one that allows her to explore beauty in terms of poets and poetry she’s discovered and not necessarily the face. As I have more than two extended symbols working throughout my pieces, the danger would be in offering too much explanation, I would inadvertently explain them to the reader, and they would lose their cumulative power. In his paper, “Responsible Viewing in Charles Simic’s Dime Store Alchemy” Daniel Morris offers the view that:

Creative understanding through reading involves ‘live-entering’ identification) and the ‘moment of separation’ (dis-identification) that establishes the reader’s imaginative horizon. The interaction between reader and writer produces what Bakhtin calls a ‘surplus of seeing,’ a perspective on the text that posits the reader’s stake in the creation of its
meaning, and, by implication, the reader's responsibility for sharing in the author’s construction of the cultural imaginary.

So as to not disrupt my reader’s “imaginative horizon” I would have to offer retrospection in an off-slain way. One idea is to carefully choose places I can add a brushstroke or two of “if I only knew then what I know now” type phrases to call attention some present voice directing the action. Another idea would be to offer a more retrospective narrator in some of the essays I have yet to compose, and work one essay into each of the five movements so that the “I” now is poking her head between the shadow boxes from time to time.

Currently, most of my insights are caged within my narrator’s insights in her day-to-day life rather than comments on these observations from a present day writer-at-her desk’s perspective. For example, in “Summer of Saturn” the narrator, after witnessing Frank nearly setting himself on fire while trying to light the grill, says: “I chided myself: You’re supposed to be the one in charge! Though I was always afraid that someone would hurt himself on my watch, the house created a guise of stability seeped in our daily routines. I often let my guard down, perhaps because it was easier than keeping it up: like standing on one foot” (92). I’d have to evaluate what my current perspective adds to, or changes, about my insights. In my life today, I often have similar doubts about my ability to control situations when I’m dealing with small children. In many ways, I’d take mental patients over children under five. Would that kind of information enhance or detract from what the essay’s getting at? Regardless, the ultimate danger of retrospective restraint is that the reader may feel he is working too hard, or that the present day writer, who has billed her work as truth, isn’t helping him enough to see the light.
Before I examine the common components of my shadow boxes, something I’ve been working towards all along, I’d like to offer a few working definitions of metaphor and symbol that I’ve borrowed from the critics and poets. Tony Hoagland urges us to look at metaphor as “a little engine of equivalence.” He quotes Stephen Dobyns, who posits, “Generally …[metaphors] are forms of comparison that exist to heighten the object of comparison…A metaphor consists of the object half and the image half […] since the object half of the metaphor attempts to provide a context for the image, the object itself should be easily discoverable” (Hoagland 23). In Perrine’s *Sound and Sense*, a guide to poetry and poetic devices, Perrine explains, “metaphor means something other than what it is.” Next, he explains that “Image, metaphor, and symbol shade into each other and are sometimes difficult to distinguish. In general, however, an image means only what it is” (91). Abrams qualifies that imagery includes not only visual sense qualities, but also qualities that are auditory, tactile, thermal, olfactory, gustatory, and kinesthetic (129).

Perrine pairs symbol with allegory in chapter six. Although many consider symbol a type of metaphor, (and Perrine mentions this too) I think it’s interesting for symbol to stand alongside allegory, or a way to “narrate one coherent set of circumstances which signify a second order of correlated meanings” (Abrams 5). With regards to symbol, Perrine explains it “means what it is and something more, too. A symbol, that is, functions literally and figuratively at the same time.” He offers the important exception of nonliterary symbols, such as the mathematical \( \infty \) for infinity, and then concludes, “The symbol is the richest and at the same time most difficult [of
devices]… both its richness and difficulty result from its imprecision” (91). Basically, although the writer might have one thing in mind for the symbol “more often the symbol is so general in its meaning that it can suggest a variety of specific meanings” (92). Thus, I prefer to use the term “metaphor” to speak of isolated figurative phrases and the term “symbol” to examine reoccurring objects—granting them validity as both real, tangible items while offering up figurative associations.
Remember those shadow boxes? I’ve got them screwed into a wall, perhaps progressing west to east in a slightly askew line. Let’s look inside. First, I want to examine metaphors, both in terms of how they fit with, or express, the tone and narrative situation of each piece and second, how they work to connect the essays into a whole. Using my first essay, “Two Secrets to Clowning” to start with, I’ve chosen the similes and metaphors to speak to the fact that the narrator is working for, and with, children, and that through Barney’s nostrils, she sees life as a child would. Some examples are: “in the sky, a few clouds pool like glue on crisp blue paper” and “the leather tongues are white, puffy wings.” The “object” of the cloud conveys the image of the “glue” and offers the sky as a child’s art project; wings, too, are common features in a child’s drawings and imaginations. I’ve encountered many boys who take their new “Air Jordan sneakers” literally, and try to prove that like the commercials suggest, they can fly. At other times, I offer figurative comparisons that convey the narrator’s concerns about her body image and virginity, namely “I’m fuchsia as a blooming cactus” and “high in a tree, two pink balloons knock together like breasts.” Here, the first object is a color, “fuchsia” (and the color itself should easily imply the Barney costume.) The image of the “blooming cactus” however, speaks to more than a color, but to a plant that survives and flourishes in harsh conditions, or the humiliating job of playing Barney at a summer fair. I hope that the blooming cactus image will resonate through the paragraph and echo the drought of her love life. The “balloons” are common objects at a carnival, but when compared to the
image of “breasts” also convey the narrator’s preoccupation with sex and her bloated physique (or “freshman fifteen”).

I also employ the idea of the body in “Devil’s Work.” The metaphorical “object” of the seitan—logs of wheat meat—conjures corporeal images. As the narrator struggles with the physical demands of food service, and develops carpal tunnel syndrome in both wrists, the figurative comparisons speak to the situation of the essay. In a scene where the narrator’s wrapped wheat gluten in foil, she says: “I showed her my logs and [Pammy] examined them carefully like a surgeon.” Pammy’s actions, the precise way she inspects the seitan, are the “object” of the simile, fitting with the latex gloves Pammy “flips off” few sentences earlier. That Pammy acts like a “surgeon” has the added effect of offering the seitan as a body part (and one, perhaps, that is sick). Later, the narrator notes, “the [deli] slicer became my nemesis, and as I fed in the two-pound logs, I imagined it was eating my very own limbs.” Here, “it,” the slicer, is the object, but instead of slicing the wheat meat, it is “eating” the “narrator’s limbs.” Implied, again, is that the logs are like the narrator’s limbs being consumed by her work. The word “eat” is a metaphor in itself, as the slicer doesn’t really consume the seitan, but simply divvies it into pieces. Finally, as she “picked up the lone log splayed on the floor, its edged charred, its flesh cracked like a wound” the reader can see the “log” as wounded. Though the wound is only the way it looks after it’s been burned and thrown to the ground, implied is that the log has suffered some sort of pain. If the reader substitutes “limb” for log, then he will see that the narrator’s physical pain has seeped into her observations.

Though each phrase is a metaphor or simile in itself, if we evaluate their accumulated presence in the piece, they might be considered an extended metaphor or a
conceit. I prefer, however, to think of the log of wheat meat, or seitan, a symbol: a real object that implies a number of things. I like thinking that the reader can take the logs of seitan simply for what they are, sculpted wheat, or choose to read into them figuratively. The surrealist painter Rene Magritte once said, referring to his own work, that “people who look for symbolic meanings fail to grasp the inherent poetry and mystery of the image.” Perhaps this assessment, especially the words “mystery of the image” capture why I don’t retrospectively analyze the seitan logs. The metaphors point to the fact that they are more and thus take the place of retrospection. If pushed to offer my own ideas about the symbol, I would say that the log could convey a number of things, such as the narrator’s physical pain, the very dead weight sitting between her and a successful career in food service, and the very obstacle preventing her from having a positive relationship with her boss, Pammy. Yet why I prefer the symbol is because it allows the reader to associate meanings that I perhaps haven’t thought of but are equally valid.

Before I move on to symbols and their overall function in the array of essays, I’ll mention that metaphors and similes offer linguistic and ideological consistency not only within a piece but throughout the overall collection. For example, I’ll often pair my “object” with a food-related image. I’ll list a few: in “Gates” the “stories we read together in bed are like fortune cookies to crack open” and “the anger… drain[s] out of me like the bitter juices of a sliced, salted eggplant”; in “Lost and Found” the snake plant’s “long dark green spears [are] speckled like the rings of watermelons” and a “head, wavy hair bobbed to his chin, shaved underneath, looks like a mushroom”; in “Sex in the Group Home,” Kate “deftly removed the condom with her big, pink hams”; in “Drive Around the Lake” the springtime “grass rolls beside us like a sea of peas”; in “Summer of Saturn”
the “parents paraded [babies] down the Commons like prize winning squashes”; in “One Big Happy,” goat island "looks less like a goat and more like a crown of broccoli,” and in “A Little Interaction” the narrator “throw[s] together outfits like omelets.”

These examples, among others, compare a person, place, thing, or feeling to an edible item, and often a vegetable. Overall, they speak to the narrator’s vegetarianism, her work in food service, and her relationship or preoccupation with food in general. I could compose an equally long list of metaphors that offer animals, bar paraphernalia, and astrological images in order to echo or seek out a thematic thread. Though the symbolic significance of the seitan log is easy to recognize because it grows organically from a series of stacked metaphors, overall, the symbol is a subtler device, creating a dialogue among the essays while hidden among common setting details and the action of the narrative.

The second essay, “Gates,” is where I first offer a model for viewing animals as symbols in the overall collection. The first two times I mention an animal are within a metaphorical context: “I am tan as a fawn, leggy too” and “when I try to picture our route through the United states, I see the profile of a moose.” The metaphors are simply a way to show a quality or characteristic, a color and a shape: there is no deer or moose actually present. But after these first two references, animals quickly shift the actual inhabitants of the narrator’s world and landscape: a snowshoe hare, elk, Canadian geese, a bison, sheep, a baby skunk, cows, a mountain lion, and California sea lions. Each of these animals inhabits the outdoors. Many exist in the landscape of the narrator’s camping adventure because they belong there—after all, the one of the very reasons people go camping is to view wildlife. As the narrator observes their behaviors, they take on symbolic
significance. Often I imply the shift to symbol through the scenes I juxtapose with the animal sightings, suggesting a relationship between the animal’s situation and the narrator’s. For example, let’s look at the snowshoe hare in section one of the essay. Because the hare only appears briefly, I employ a simile—that his white feet are “like a drawing being erased”—to bring the animal to a symbolic level. The snowshoe hare is starting to change color, to transform from brown to white. As Perrine states, “the symbol is so general in its meaning that it can suggest a variety of specific meanings.” I’ll suggest a few possible meanings for the rabbit. Previously, Richard Brautigan’s “scent” or presence in their landscape had been evaporating, disappearing much like the rabbit’s feet. The transformation of the rabbit could signal the changing of the seasons, confirmed by the snow and the yellow Aspen leaves. Winter is coming and these two vagabonds too will erase themselves from the landscape. Also, the hare could mark the shift that happens in the relationship, as the narrator begins to feel “invisible” or ignored by her boyfriend.

The bison that appears later in the piece, though wild, seems domesticated and tame. Though he could easily escape, he prefers to stay in the park where water and food have been provided for him. I chose to place the bison scene at the end of the section, after the narrator reveals she and her boyfriend are heading back home after four months “in the wild.” Like the bison, the narrator and Robbie could technically have traveled and settled anywhere in the infinite landscape of the West, put they chose the confinement and comfort of “home” with its stability and resources.

The baby skunk flashback also relies on juxtaposition to signal its significance as symbol. I place the scene directly after the narrator explains the difficulties with the café
customer and Commons fixture, Stanley. Here I work a little harder to point to the symbol by describing the baby skunk’s “off balanced gait” as reminiscent of the way Stanley walks. In an earlier version of the piece, I left this out and depended on the juxtaposition itself to imply this, adding the brief mention of Stanley at the suggestion of one of my readers. Perhaps now I’m second-guessing this move as while it helps the reader recognize my shift into symbolic mode, it might limit the possibilities for the interpretation of the symbol. The skunk, with its confused, almost obsessive behavior recalls an equally clueless Stanley, who seems ill suited to his environment. Yet the baby skunk could also represent the narrator herself, as she is about to graduate from college and be thrust, or sprung from her nest, from her safety net; she too is confused about what she should be doing, would rather follow Robbie’s lead.

The mountain lion is the only animal that appears as a suggestion rather than a direct observation. Here, the narrator directly addresses the mountain lion as a symbol when she suggests it represents her “fear” of the unknown. The reader can certainly go beyond this stated meaning to see that the mountain lion could also represent the narrator’s boyfriend Robbie, whose proclivity for nomadic wandering is encroached upon by the narrator’s desire for stability.

The mountain lion—a wild cat—also sets up the idea of cats as symbols when they appear throughout various pieces. Some might say that Harold, the cat the narrator encounters along her walk in “Lost and Found” is simply a friendly diversion on her day off. Yet, I mention that Harold is blind in one eye, information I could have easily left out. As the narrator comments on the cat’s eyes, one a “cloudy marble,” I further call attention to this idea of blindness. This opens up several symbolic possibilities for
Harold, including that the narrator herself is half-blind to her deteriorating relationship with her boyfriend. The eye is the window to the soul, and likewise, throughout the piece, the narrator can sometimes see a spiritual significance to her life and other times can not. Cats are obvious symbols perhaps of domesticity—plus, this one is friendly—which points to the narrator’s half-blind attention to her domestic routines as a way to avoid bigger issues. Several of the other pieces are populated with cats, namely the group home pet, Tabitha, who appears in “Sex in the Group Home,” “Drive Around the Lake,” and “One Big Happy.” The cat, like the residents she lives among, is at times cranky and disabled, “limp[ing] across the floor” other times bold and independent, “leap[ing] onto a bookshelf;” and other times a creature of habit, “making her rounds between food dish to table top to someone’s warm lap.” The cat represents the domestic qualities of the group home but not without hinting at its larger troubles. Just like the final cat I’ll mention, the narrator’s own cat, Cleo, who appears in “Devil’s Work.” The cat is crying, hungry, representing dependence and need. That she can’t open a can of cat food due to carpal tunnel syndrome makes the cat work towards showing the scope of her own physical disability.

There are several other examples of animals I’ve placed in my shadowboxes so let me take you along the wall and quickly point them out. In “Sex in the Group Home” there’s a “unicorn trapped in a round fence”; in “A Little Interaction” there are “albino deer” trapped on the army base; in “Summer of Saturn” there’s a “bee” perched on the straw of a coffee drink; in “Drive Around the Lake” there’s a hive of bees, the “queen… content in her majesty.”
The reoccurring mineral that I’ll focus on is the diamond, which I place in several essays and attempt to offer symbolic weight through the circumstance or the metaphor surrounding it. "In Lost and Found” the narrator discusses a diamond engagement ring she found in a supermarket parking lot and attempts to pawn. In “One Big Happy” the narrator notices the diamond ring worn by a newlywed at Niagara Falls. And in “A Little Interaction” the narrator recalls a diamond ring she once lost down the drain of her bathtub. In each case, the diamond becomes a way for the narrator to discuss, or hint at, something more, whether it be her feelings of inadequacy, her surprise at the daily offerings, the “found objects” of life, or the realms of salvation and disability.

Lastly, let’s take a moment to revisit Abrams’ definition of imagery, or “these images taken collectively to signify all of the objects and qualities of sense perceptions referred to in a poem or other work of literature, whether by literal description, by allusion, or in the vehicles of its similes and metaphors” (129). Though these images can be read as symbols or metaphors, for the most part they function simply as details to orient and place the reader in the landscape of each essay. As each of these details appears several times, they then serve to clarify, reiterate, and show the reader the overall world of the book. Some repeated objects include: dart boards and darts; cigarettes; meds; lottery scratch off tickets; coffee and coffee mugs; a living room recliner; a pull out bed; a GMC van; a Toyota; postcards; sunglasses; pumpkins; pies; soups; an upright piano; and bouquets of flowers. The natural world too provides continuity through the many waterfalls, lakes, gorges, trees, pastures, and gardens throughout. Features of the “manmade” landscape which reverberate include: cemeteries, the Ithaca Commons, the narrator’s apartments, the group home, the bar, the boyfriend’s restaurant, and the
Salvation Army. In addition to images, I have the sounds of waterfalls, the smells of cooking, and the sensations of hot and cold produced by the weather. In all, these images resonate simply because they are the things the narrator notices, thus becoming a part of her inner landscape as well.

I hope that by articulating the elements at work in my individual essays that I have made a case for how these essays are connected not only through a common narrator and themes of work, love, disability, and spirituality, but form an interactive ecosystem of animals, minerals, vegetables, and landscapes. In Section II, I offer evidence for a consistent five-part structure that also confirms the very way in which the parts of the collection speak to each other. In Section III, I prove that an author should choose the very subgenre—essay or memoir—that best suits the needs of both the subject matter and the narrative voice. In Section V, I continue the very thesis of Section III, and show that I attempt to replace the retrospection that defines the memoir with the very vehicles of language. Perhaps I don’t really avoid offering the perspective of the present day writer-at-the desk. The very symbols, images, and metaphors I employ are how I, the writer at my desk, choose to communicate with my readers. The narrator throughout her twenties certainly noticed the world, but she did not come up with the metaphors and devices of language to explore this world; she was too wrapped up in her jobs, her boyfriends, food, and sex. This writer at her desk today is reflecting on those observations and experiences through carefully filling a parade of shadowboxes and offering them to the reader to inhabit.
Works Cited


PART II

WHAT DO YOU DO?

A MEMOIR IN ESSAYS
Two Secrets to Clowning

Through Oreo cookie size nostrils, I stare into a blond, spiky head—a ten-year-old punk who’s gotten hold of some hair gel. He’s wearing a Michael Jordan jersey, #23. It’s my last gig of the summer, a street fair in Mamaroneck, New York. The kid, #23, he’s knocking on my hollow purple cheeks. “C’mon,” he goads. “I know you’re not Barney. Who’s in there?”

Though I’m fuchsia as a blooming cactus, and my head takes up its own seat, inside my furry, clawed feet I wear the steel toed Doc Martins that protect me in mosh pits. At nineteen, I still carry ten of my freshman fifteen in my brain, on my hips. I’m not in a sorority but have pledged to never again count the pubic hairs clinging to a fraternity toilet. I hate Calculus, the whole idea of infinity, but I love lesbian feminist poets with names like Chrystos. My 88-year-old Sicilian grandmother has recently broken her hip trying to change a light bulb. She comments that my black nail polish is “notta-nice” so I promptly remove it. My ears are crammed with piercings, but not my face—I’m not that brave. I don’t like kids, but think I do, or at least, that I should. I’m the babysitter you hire because I get good grades, am dependable, who your kids like because I let them win at video games before I snoop through your make-up and watch Beaches on your bed, sobbing into your pillows. I think kids should just say no to priests, boy bands, happy meals, the Army. Though I’m good at a few things, I’m not great at anything. I can resuscitate a mannequin and have a mean scissors kick. I live on pasta doused in fat-free dressing. I’m a Catholic in recovery, stuck on step six. I’m a virgin, waiting for the bookish lover who deserves me.
And now, I’m gazing at #23, at high-top sneakers too big for his body. The leather tongues are white, puffy wings. I’m sweltering. I’m stalling.

Over the summer, my boss, Lisa the Clown, who runs a children’s entertainment business, has taught me the two secrets to clowning. One, believe who you say you are, and if that doesn’t work, two, cultivate distraction.

Children have gathered in a half moon around me, and beyond them, senior citizens dip their horns in a G-rated rendition of “I Feel Good.” #23, he’s karate-chopping my snout. A girl in pink overalls looks on, confused. I block #23’s chop with a high five, place my furry heels together and shimmy.

“Yup. I am Barney,” I say.

But #23 has lost interest, wanders off in a pack armed with sno-cones.

I stumble around, a little bounce in my step. High in a tree, two pink balloons knock together like breasts. The air smells like hot dogs, relish and mustard. Mothers clomp around in cotton shorts with elastic waistbands, while high schoolers walk slow and close, almost touching.

A three-year-old feeds me popcorn. Yumyum, I grunt, shoveling kernels into my idiotic grin. On the pavement, seagulls wrestle for the pieces.

The littlest ones tell me they love me, and I love them back. I think about my boss, Lisa, about the first time she showed me her props, among them a bunny named Pinky. “He’s cute,” I said, because what else can you say to a clown about her bunny?

After the town fire truck sprays the kids, they leave me with wet hugs, my fur matting. Their faces bleed stars and hearts and baseballs into wands of cotton candy. I wander towards the marina, and through the holes of my nostrils, watch the Long Island
Sound, the masts of sailboats like steeples. In the sky, a few clouds pool like glue on crisp, blue paper. In the distance, I make out the fuzzy outline of New York City and feel a wave of hope, as if I’ve discovered something that’s been there all along. With the right attitude, it’s ridiculously simple to float through life as a dinosaur, a clown, as anybody else.

In two weeks, I’ll be back at school, dozing in a lecture hall among hundreds. But that day, I make the paper, a photo in the town weekly: “Barney Makes a Splash!” Behind me, water arcs in rainbows, and I hold my purple paws open to the children, as if they’ve asked a question, and I don’t know the answer. Because it’s still summer, and that’s all that matters.
Sex in the Group Home

Soon, a new resident would move in. The whole house was on edge, as if waiting for something to hatch. A sweet, yellow smell had begun to permeate our staff office, which was the size of side-by-side hearses. I fished around for the latest referral among grocery receipts, pharmaceutical fact sheets, camping trip photos, Camel cash, and paint samples (the smoking room needed several fresh coats). Meanwhile, Troy stood beside the med cabinet, working on his goal for “safer sex.” He was thirty-five years old. Scratching his scalp, he watched as my colleague, Kate, rolled a condom up a banana. At that moment, Troy seemed more troubled by the banana than by the prospect of a new roommate.

Kate was a tough yet nurturing lesbian, a gym-teacher-army-nurse cross. As she deftly removed the condom with her big, pink hams, I couldn’t help but wonder how she had gotten so good at this.

“Ok, buddy, your turn. Show me what you got.” Kate held the banana out like a gun. Troy accepted, grabbing the barrel.

Now that I’d stumbled upon this “lesson,” I was curious to see it play out. I was a product of Catholic education, where Sex Ed was all about a miracle: the Immaculate Conception. (Just in case good old faith and morality didn’t work, they showed us horrific video footage of a live childbirth). Besides which, I considered the condom to be a man’s domain, and I knew that when it came down to it, most guys weren’t in any position to argue with me.

So, the hope was that we could work the condom into Troy’s repertoire of obsessions, like his daily chore, which he completed promptly after dinner and before going to his friend’s apartment (holding up his house key, he always announced: “I’m
heading to Cheryl’s to watch TV”). Cheryl lived in the supported housing program, and we had learned through her counselor that Troy was getting a wiggle in, yet refusing to use protection. All this time, I’d thought he was really watching TV! I mean, his main hobby was punching numbers on an adding machine, the kind with a roll of register tape. But mentally ill people had the right to a sex life too, I knew.

Troy dangled the condom like a dirty tissue, and suddenly embarrassed by my presence, scowled. “Do you mind, Kris? This is kinda important.”

“Don’t get snippy,” Kate said.

He muttered an apology, and I patted his shoulder, found the paperwork, and closed the door behind me, stifling a big, fat giggle.

I admit, I’d always thought of a psychiatric group home as an asexual being, an amoeba of sorts. It was like living with your parents and both sets of grandparents. During my two 24-hour shifts a week, I worked from morning until evening, and slept on the futon in the TV room from 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. Once in a while a resident would wake me, like if the bathroom flooded, or if someone wanted to talk or needed a sleeping pill, which we kept locked up. At the home, the memory of sex became another symptom of what was wrong: a delusion, a hallucination, a loss. Mental health professionals preached med management, living skills, and talk therapy, but sometimes I thought what the patients really needed was a good lay. It’s what the world needed. People who had mutually satisfying sex were generally happier and typically less stressed.

I knew this simply because I was no longer one of those people.

At home, my pizza cook boyfriend of three years—a college boyfriend, though he never went to college—had gradually become more of a roommate than a lover, and to
me, intimacy was starting to resemble the inside of a pizza box. Pizza has its moments; it’s great when fresh, hot, lovingly spun and topped, and of course, when you don’t have to eat it every night. The problem was, I remembered how love was when it was new, when it was like an invitation inside someone’s soul: that first few months of hypersensitive pleasure, like a giant tooth submerged in ice cream. Robbie and I had been one of those sickeningly inseparable couples who seemed almost like twins. You know it’s nearly impossible to sustain this closeness, and perhaps that you shouldn’t even want to, though you try anyways. You confine it in a basement apartment, one with a single bay window flush with the sidewalk. The window’s the only place the plants can breathe, and so you pile them so high in front of it, you almost can’t see out.

Once, when I was throwing back a few beers with my boyfriend and his new sidekick (one of his restaurant cronies), Robbie told the story about how he hitchhiked home from a Rainbow Gathering. A VW bus with a bad alternator, two cops, five hippies, a toddler named Woodstock, and fourteen baby-food jars full of weed. A funny story, really. But as Robbie’s friend—a large freckled guy with an afro of red curls—laughed so hard he almost broke my favorite chair, I realized: I’ve heard all these stories. And though I was often okay with being one of the guys, it was annoying to have to compete with a giant leprechaun.

Robbie was like an old CD on repeat, another night at the bar, another shift at the group home. Maybe that’s why whenever we tried to have sex, it hurt, though I had gone to the gynecologist and there wasn’t anything physically wrong. He probably would have moved out, but his mother was dying of breast cancer, six months after she had cheerfully reported that the doctors had removed a malignant tumor the size of a pea.
*  

I had always considered flirting to be a shallow ritual, and one best performed with a buzz on. But in the group home, like in the real world, sometimes a fetching smile could go a long way. The same types of guys who had dubbed me “frog eyes” and “boobless” in junior high, now called me “exotic.” I guess I used this to my advantage, without fully realizing it. Take Frank, for example. When he was angry because he realized that he lived in a group home, but could not remember why, there was no use reminding him about his brain injury, about how he had tried to hang himself fifteen years before. He preferred when I batted my eyelashes and said, “Oh Frank, if you didn’t live here, who would keep me company?”

He’d laugh and say, “Oh, Krissy, you’re such a cute lil’ thing.” And we’d both feel good.

Flattery even helped to soften the women, especially Frank’s fifty-year old girlfriend, Maureen, who worked part-time as a hotel housekeeper and shopped in the same thrift stores I did. Once, at the smoking room table, I complimented her cute corduroy overalls, and she looked down at her lap and said, “Oh, this? Really, you like them?” Kate hunched over the daily crossword puzzle, and I went back to filling out our weekly menus. Susan sipped iced tea through a straw while reading an old People Magazine, her schizophrenia like a hidden, dormant gene, at least, for the moment.

“I don’t think I should have any more children,” Maureen said. “No siree, I have enough on my plate, thank-you-very-much.”
I couldn’t help smiling, though the way she half-sung her psychosis was really not funny.

“We have the paperwork in motion for a new resident, a young man,” I said, trying to change the subject.

“Well, that’s good. I hope he’s a nice fellow,” Susan said, tapping her Newport in the red ashtray that she always had in front of her. “Why, I’m sure he’ll be nice,” she added. “I’m going to miss Dwayne, though, he’s my best friend, you know.” Dwayne was, as Kate would say, gay as Ithaca, and had recently landed a decent job and a downtown apartment. He was one of our great success stories.

“We’ll all miss Dwayne,” I said. “But he’ll come by to visit,” I said, hoping he would.

Kate looked at me, running her hand through her short, spiky hair. Across the table, Maureen had been silently stared into her makeup compact, transfixed, bad sign. She hadn’t as much as twitched when I mentioned that our new resident would be a guy. (Maureen always had a hard time adjusting to young, female housemates; her paranoia kicked in double-time and she always thought they were after her boyfriend Frank.)

“I’m gonna get them tied. Yep, tie ’em in a pretty bow,” Maureen said.

Without even looking up from her puzzle, Kate was on it. “Now, Mo, we’ve been over this. That’s invasive surgery. You really should talk to your doctor about it.”

Maureen had been on this kick for two weeks, even though she and Frank didn’t have sex. According to Kate, because of his brain injury, Frank couldn’t even get it up for the magazines under their bed. Maureen ashed her cigarette, eyeing her smoke as if she had exhaled a ghost.
I watched particles of dust, luminescent in a stray sunbeam, rise up from a basket of fabric flowers on the old piano. “Well, there’s always birth control,” I said, because, what else could I say?

It was as if a big vagina had just pranced into the room and settled itself on the table, like those plastic mock-ups at Planned Parenthood: the vagina’s knowing, gummy smile at the egg-gripping uterus. Kathy gathered up her cigarettes and tea and retired to the porch to smoke in peace. I didn’t blame her.

Kate and I glanced at each other, then at Maureen, who had taken a penny to her Lucky 7 scratch-off tickets. Did Maureen’s psychosis make her believe that she could get pregnant? Or did she just fear getting older, the onset of menopause, the ways things changed? All I knew was that it was only noon, and I was ready for a stiff drink.

*

A few weeks later, Kate paced our office, cradling the cordless phone on her shoulder. “Put down the dick and pick up the phone!” she barked into Brenda’s answering machine. “And don’t forget my pie.”

I pictured our flakey co-worker on the other end, yanking on one of her tie-dye dresses, kissing her lover goodbye. Ever since she left her husband for a younger man, Brenda had, well, been making the most of her mornings.

It was Thursday, the day we locked ourselves in the TV room for a four-hour staff meeting. Brenda always brought an apple pie, and we’d take turns bringing bagels and cream cheese. We’d pig out. We’d vent. We’d prophesize.
And we needed this informality. In our reports, Medicaid required us to write about ourselves as if we were characters in a book: a collective, omniscient, third person narrator. So when my coworker Amy reported that she had witnessed David masturbating on the living room recliner, I asked, “How the hell do we write that one up? Staff prompts David to jerk off in his bedroom?” Amy had seen this through the crack between the double doors to our sleeping quarters.

“Maybe he likes you,” Kate said, punching Amy’s arm.

Amy rolled her puppy-brown eyes and shuddered. “I’m serious. It was really fucking creepy!” As our youngest staff—straight out of college—Amy was our weakest link.

“It’s his meds. It’s impossible for him to get off,” Kate assured her, but this did not comfort Amy.

David reminded me of a lion pacing a cage. He was a big guy, 6’2” and 280 pounds, and wore his unruly hair under a yarmulke. His schizophrenia had kept him in programs like ours for the past fifteen years. He often spent his afternoons speed-reading the Torah. He was impossible to engage in everyday conversation, so mostly, I just let him be.

“I’ll put in a call to his therapist,” Brenda said, marking her clipboard.

And we moved on. We had to schedule a dinner visit with our prospective resident: Kevin McGinnis, a local college kid, also diagnosed with schizophrenia. An empty bed for more than a month meant that we would lose beaucoup funding. Already, one false lead had cost us a couple weeks. We had started intake for a woman on the local ward for a suicide attempt. But when she somehow got hold of a really sharp pencil, and
tried to gouge her own eye out, we had to freeze her application, just as well. We didn’t have much choice in whom we got or where they came from: hospitals, other agencies, families, jail. Mental healthcare was a giant game of musical chairs, the players desperate and dosed. The winner was whoever got to the empty space first.

I’d been studying the blotter calendar, and suggested Monday or Tuesday for Kevin’s visit. “Oh, and his application said something about being a vegetarian,” I said. The lone herbivore in the herd, I thought I could use the moral support.

“Ah, another bean sprout. In that case, I’ll grill a couple T-bones,” Kate said, winking.

A dinner visit was the final lap, one chair standing. By introducing the client to the house in a non-threatening, social context, it allowed all the residents to meet him, and gave whichever staff happened to be working a taste of what we were in for. But as long a Kevin McGinnis didn’t physically, verbally, or otherwise threaten himself or anyone else, it didn’t matter if he showed up wearing American flag boxers on his head and yodeling the Star Spangled Banner out of his asshole. It didn’t matter if he smelled like a dumpster full of old hamburgers, or if he passionately debated C3PO’s sexual orientation with his voices. It didn’t matter if he had never used a can opener, or thought potholders kept Kind Bud fresh and tasty.

He would be ours.

*

49
Later, at my apartment, I heated up the pizza Robbie had brought home from work—Spinach Alfredo thin crust—opened a beer, and rummaged around his desk. He was master of the to-do list. Pay phone bill. Sell CDs. Bela Fleck Tix. Do laundry. Ask T. to switch shift. Guitar strings. I almost wished there were something about me on the list. I thought of the times we used to split a six-pack and talk about our jobs. I would tell him about how, on our outings to Elmira, Troy waved to the cows and called out, “Hello, Ladies!” Or how Frank had once shaved off his eyebrows. I wanted to entertain him. I wanted him to think I was a good person, to love me more. Really, I just wanted someone to know how afraid I was of messing up people’s lives any worse than they already were.

But he stopped asking, or maybe I stopped telling. Eventually, I kept my residents to myself, and Robbie didn’t seem to notice. He was obsessed with teaching himself to play guitar, his mouth and ears replaced by a crappy pawnshop six-string. At first, I swooned over his capo, electronic tuner, and various thick songbooks. I complimented the calluses burgeoning along his fingertips. But he played the same folk ditties over and over; I only knew they were different songs because he sang along. All night long a choir of crickets trapped inside a mirror. I found myself hanging out in graveyards and Laundromats just to get some quiet.

To fit with his vagabond persona, Robbie carried a paper bag, rolled at the top, a man purse of sorts. And though his socks covering our radiators, even when freshly washed, smelled like Parmesan cheese, there was still something infectious about him. Only Robbie could turn a Richard Brautigan story into an art project: we had once combed the streets after Christmas, snapping photos of discarded evergreens. But now, the filaments of our relationship were like a strand of tiny bulbs; when one goes out, there
is darkness. Like your father, you sit there, testing each one, until you find the culprit, replacing it.

That night, I didn’t feel like going to the bar or doing much of anything. I was fried. So I watched *X Files* on the only station the rabbit ears picked up. I had started to find real comfort in aliens.

*

When I arrived for my next shift, I found a redhead stranger at the smoking room table. Because of the way our schedules worked, we often had three or four days off in a row, during which a lot could and did happen.

“You must be Kevin,” I said, introducing myself. He politely shook my hand. His eyes matched his hair—a warm hazel—and I was struck by how clear they seemed. Like, un-medicated. He wore a slightly wrinkled white polo shirt; its two open buttons exposed a few curls of chest hair. He had longish sideburns, a trimmed goatee, and a band of musical notes tattooed around his wrist where a watch would be.

“Are you settling in?” I asked, nudging a cigarette out of my pack. He leaned toward me with a light.

“Pretty much. Troy was nice enough to show me how to work the TV,” he said. “Three remotes can be tricky.”

Troy blushed at the compliment, examining the receipt from his adding machine as if it held a top-secret formula. I thought Kevin’s comment was kind, demonstrated a certain savoir-faire. I’d been worried when I read through his paperwork. He was twenty-
two years old, with a smattering of college credits and several hospitalizations under his belt. And since the bizarre behavior of our youngest (and most troubled) residents was symptomatic not only of mental illness, but also of neglect, addiction, and adolescence, it was often impossible to discern what had caused what.

“Kate said I should see you about filling out a vegetarian menu?”

“Yeah, I’m psyched to have another veggie on board, though I’ll warn you, we’re a little outnumbered.”

“You can say that again, Kris,” Troy, who had been listening, piped in.

“We’re a little outnumbered,” I repeated, and they both laughed. “But really, are you, like, vegan?”

“God no,” he said. “I tried that for a couple months, but it was too hard. I love me some eggs and cheese.”

“I know, coffee with soymilk just doesn’t quite cut it,” I said.

“Yeah, my parents are a couple granolas.” He took a hearty drag from his cigarette. “But I couldn’t even rebel ‘cause they took me to McDonalds when I was ten, let me get whatever I wanted. Those McNuggtes had the texture of, like, knuckles.”

Kevin shook his pack of Marlboros—empty. “Do you know what I really hate?” he asked. “When people say, ‘oh, you’re a vegetarian, but look, you smoke.’”

I slid my pack down the table; he removed one, nodded thanks, and slid it back. “Like smoking has anything to do with bovine torture,” he added.

Troy looked intently at Kevin, and said, “You have a good point there, Kevin. I wouldn’t say that one really has anything to do with the other either.”

I stubbed out my butt. “I know exactly what you mean,” I said, because I did.
Later, after an unusually quiet dinner hour, Kevin offered to help me with dish duty, even though he had already finished his chore. I protested, but he insisted, so I let him dry. He was especially careful with the knives, holding the blades away from his body as he methodically dried them.

Afterwards, we sat at the smoking room table and talked. It was normal, even sweet, like new friends at a coffee shop. I knew that he attended my alma mater (a music major, anthropology minor) so I joked, “Go Badgers,” gesturing like we did at sporting events.

He returned my Badger, snickering, “Yeah, we’re not exactly known for our athletic prowess.”

“What do you want to do with your degree—teach?”

For a minute his eyes followed the path of his smoke, as if he hadn’t heard me. But he said, “Teaching? Hmm, maybe. My main thing is composing. Like, taking images and emotions and stuff and putting them to sound.”

Moonlight had begun to filter in through the sheer curtains. Simba, the house cat, jumped on the table, sniffing a cheesy elbow. She leapt onto the bookshelf and settled herself on the poster announcing the Halloween Ball.

“Do you like cats?” I asked, and immediately felt silly.

“I like the way they move,” he said. He opened the piano, perhaps the first time anyone had touched it in years. He played a few chords, then a beautiful crescendo, his pale hands like freckled crabs scuttling through sand.
Simba jumped to the ground, and the piano mimicked her. Spooked, she glared at Kevin, and flicking her raised tail, sauntered into the kitchen, a sprinkling of notes filling the space behind her.

*

I had never really been into Halloween. Thinking up an original costume was too much work, and anyway, I always wound up feeling more exposed as something or someone else. Despite this, I volunteered to take the residents to the Halloween Ball sponsored by our local mental health social club. I had even remembered to send in the registration form, checking off two “vegetarian entrees” for Kevin and me.

“You look so cute,” Maureen said as I pinned a devil’s tail to her jeans. She petted my furry cat ears and I purred, proud of my simple get-up: black shirt, fishnets, miniskirt, and plastic claws. Kevin sported a Superman T-shirt, and when Frank poked his ass with Maureen’s pitchfork, Kevin whipped his cape (a red blanket), pointing to his logo. Frank laughed and smoked.

“What are you supposed to be? A bum?” Kate asked Frank.

He appraised himself, and with mock indignation asked: “What?” He wore tattered jeans, fly unzipped, and an undershirt with a stain shaped like New Jersey. His thinning blond hair rose like feathers in a breeze.

“C’mon, hunny,” Maureen said, and marched him upstairs to change.

Later, at the Ball, I carried my vampire mystery meal (spaghetti and ??), to my house’s table, labeled with our nickname, “Lincoln Street,” in dripping red paint. I had to
admit, the atmosphere was pretty fucking festive. Plastic spiders crawled over the white
tablecloth, and orange and black crepe paper hung from the rafters. An overweight
woman with a brown sweatshirt and antlers paced the length of our table, muttering,
“You’re a bad girl!” until Wonder Woman swooped over and led her off. A flowered bed
sheet wandered from table to table, crying: “Boo!” Though it was a strange scene—
seventy-five mental health consumers and staff members—the fact that it was Halloween
normalized it.

“Who’s that?” Maureen asked, pointing to the bed sheet. I shrugged.

I overheard a staff member ask Frank what he was supposed to be. Frank
answered, “A bum!” Though he had limited short-term memory, certain things just stuck.

I felt guilty that I hadn’t pushed the whole costume thing. We were like the rough
kids in high school, the ones who loitered outside the prom, smoking joints. We came for
the free food, and well, because Kate had threatened that anyone who didn’t would be
helping her scrub the smoking room.

When the DJ kicked in, Maureen, who’d been forlornly picking spider webs out
of the plants, perked right up. Maureen loved to dance. Narrowing her eyes into a sexy
gaze, she led Frank to the dance floor. She waved me over, and I danced with them to
“Private Eyes” by Hall and Oates. (How creepy those lyrics must have been for the
paranoid schizophrenics!). Maureen shimmied, devil horns bouncing, and Frank did the
mummy. I twirled Maureen—she was so light!

Bodies swamped the dance floor for Michael Jackson’s “Thriller.” A group
formed a ring around Peter Pan and Tinkerbelle, and Kevin joined me, Frank and
Maureen. He was a cute dancer, did the moonwalk in his Doc Martin combat boots,
whispering to me, “You remember this video?” As the DJ mixed into “Wanna Be Starting Somethin’,” we kicked it up a few notches: fast disco moves, twisting hips, re-living junior high dances, the early days of MTV, and countless hours practicing in the privacy of bedroom mirrors. The others slowly faded, as if obscured by a fog machine, leaving just him and me. He leaned closer, told me I was a good dancer. I told him he wasn’t half bad himself, and we tried not to look at each other. My professional boundaries protected me: my body a piece of art, surrounded by a cage of lasers.

Until the inevitable slow dance when Kevin held out his hand. I scanned the floor—other staff were dancing with residents, residents with residents, and staff with staff. He smelled like Polo and cigarettes, and I rested my fingers on his shoulders, and he placed his lightly around my waist, and we got an inch too close, without touching, not even the width of a marble notebook between us. When Maureen tapped me, and asked me to dance with Frank while she used the bathroom, I was grateful for the cover of another resident. With my head near Frank’s shoulder, I watched Kevin duck outside to smoke.

When the DJ packed up, we went home, with a leftover pumpkin pie and a gallon of vanilla ice cream. The cool autumn air felt good, and everyone was tired. We sat around the smoking room, the floor freshly mopped and smelling of Pine-Sol, telling Kate about the night, as if she had missed Brad Pitt at the Oscars.

Later, I walked to my apartment through the cluster of old stone churches on Seneca Street, their steeples like masts of righteous ships. I continued past the historic theater, the head shop, and the corner bar with its reliable neon rooster. As if in a movie, I imagined the camera panning up the hill, pausing on the college, its gothic architecture lit
and glowing, then settling on Cayuga Lake’s watery shadow. This was what a new crush did: it made you see again. I felt like a hood ornament, a mustang in the act of leaping. So I let myself imagine that Kevin, with my support, would move on to the apartment program and finish his degree. We’d keep in touch. We’d eat tofu and drink wine by candlelight. He’d get a teaching job, I’d open my own café, and we’d get married and buy a cabin in the woods. On the right meds, his illness would be manageable, and he’d tell me that I was the only woman to ever really know him. He’d write songs for me, play the piano to our unborn child. It was completely ridiculous, I knew, but I didn’t give a shit.

Really, there’s something about nurse fantasies, something implanted in the female psyche during childhood. You play games with neighborhood boys and your toy stethoscope. Later, you deal with high school boyfriends and their boring problems. Caretaking relationships, too, are based on dichotomies; reverse the roles, and suddenly, the rejuvenated patient can serve his nurse in an emotional or sexual way. But really, these are lofty justifications for the nagging little voice that asks: what if we met under different circumstances?

Robbie was home, drunk and waiting for me, it seemed. I found him staring into space, listening to Johnny Cash and twirling a lock of hair round and round.

“My sister called, about Mom. Can you go to the hospital tomorrow?” he asked.

I hugged him and his body crumpled, his eyes wet, as if he had chopped an onion. I don’t know if thinking about another guy had made me more receptive, or if perhaps something inside me, like a rare orchid that lives among alligators, had suddenly opened up. I held on and he let me. Four months later, his mother would die, and he
would move out. Somehow we already knew that.

*

Two weeks later, Kevin was gone. He had admitted himself to North Two, the psych ward of the local hospital. Kate said that during her Tuesday shift, Kevin told her he wasn’t feeling safe.

“I noticed he hadn’t eaten much of anything for a couple days, so I called him into the office for a chat. He admitted that his voices told him that Troy was poisoning his food.”

Holy shit, I thought.

“It was weird, like, he knew logically that Troy wouldn’t do that, but he couldn’t get past it. He said that every time he tried to eat, it was like there was a brick sitting in the middle of his plate,” Kate said, running her hand through her hair, almost rubbing her head off.

“Is he just up there for an evaluation?” I asked.

Kate shook her head. “We packed all of his stuff.”

I pictured the state hospital, its cinderblock walls, slit windows. “Binghamton,” I said.

“Yeah, it sucks. He’s a nice kid,” she said.

I was sad, but kind of relieved as well. I knew I would probably never see him again, and I was right. For a moment, I blamed myself. It was my fault. I had been a part
of that brick. But then again, I knew better. Kevin’s illness was more than a brick; it was a bullet lodged in his head.

That night, after I handed out bedtime meds, and as I was dozing in my sleeping quarters, I heard a strange creaking, like a bookcase moving across a wood floor. Intuition stopped me from throwing open the double doors, and instead, I peered through the gap. In the living room, David sat on the recliner, the bulk of him half-lit from a single lamp. At first, I thought he was reading. He had a quilt over his lap. At first, I thought he was reading, but underneath the blanket, his hand moved as if pulling a stubborn root from the ground. His eyes appeared closed, or maybe I just hoped they were. I crept back to my bed and listened. I wasn’t about to be the tough cop. Maybe I was scared. Maybe I thought he wasn’t hurting anyone. I thought about how you could either be lonely, but not alone, or alone, but not lonely. Once in awhile, I heard a muffled grunt.

I was wide awake, my heart beating the way water boils to the surface, almost rumbling. I watched the clock. 12:07 a.m. I tried to think happy thoughts. When I was a kid and woke up from a nightmare, I pictured myself inside that famous tapestry my art teacher made us copy: a wildflower field with a white unicorn. I loved that unicorn, and was not at all disturbed by the fact that he was trapped inside a round fence. He was held captive for a reason—so I could look at him, talk to him, so that he wouldn’t run away. But lying there on the group home futon, I planned my next dinner party. My friend Jen and I would do a Thai night. I composed a shopping list in my head. *Rice noodles. Cilantro.* (A series rapid squeaks.) *Curry paste. Bean Sprouts.* (Heaving, breathing.) *Shrimp.*
I assembled spring rolls seasoned soup, oiled the wok.

Finally, seventy-two minutes after it started, the creaking stopped. I heard footsteps on the stairwell. I glanced into the dark, empty living room. I wondered if he came. Or if maybe he just gave up.
1.

“Some day they might have an operation to get my sight back,” Tim tells me. We are sitting in the smoking room in the psychiatric halfway house, waiting for the others. Tim has one glass eye, the other one glazed like my childhood friend’s ancient Golden Retriever. I am guilty of staring at his wandering eye for long periods of time, just because I can. His biological mother beat the sight out of him when he was three, leaving two detached retinas. The doctors say there is no hope. “Someday,” he repeats wistfully. “Hello?”

“Mmmhm,” I say, exhaling my smoke in rings while I fill out the wheel-of-chores. I believe in science. I believe in miracles.

Hunched over his ashtray, Tim smokes a cheap mini cigar. He inhales, feels for his ashtray.

“Your lungs are gonna turn to tar. You’re not supposed to inhale cigars,” I say for the fiftieth time, reminding him of his “better health” goal.

“You’re not?” A wild grin creeps across his face, and he inhales again. “Like tar. Like tar,” he repeats, putting it out.

The van takes up the whole driveway, and I unlock the passenger doors. Tim refuses to sit in the back of the van because he doesn’t trust his housemates.

“This way no one can ever say I touched them,” he explains to me. “I would never hurt anybody, or touch a lady.”

“I know you wouldn’t,” I say.
Tim calls the seatbelt a shit-head. It hangs down the side of the seat, and I hand it to him. “There you are,” he says, feeling its edges before buckling himself in. He puts on his large deejay style headphones, his fingers playing the edge of the open window. He has beautiful curly brown hair and light cocoa skin. He rocks in his seat. We inhale the van’s odor, a mix of ripe melon and gasoline.

She has no cute nicknames; we simply called her “the van”—an old blue ’86 GMC twelve-seater, spots of rust marking her like the dairy cows we pass so often on our Saturday trips around the Finger Lakes. She makes me feel brave and tough, like one of those flag women with yellow hard hats over blond ponytails. I have tamed her, can start her on the coldest day, foot seesawing the gas pedal as she coughs, then catches, roaring to life with a satisfying shudder. Sitting high above the road, her steering wheel loose and easy, I can see beyond the crest of trees to the next hill. I am in control of something much larger than myself. I have delusions of grandeur. I am no longer an underpaid Rehab Counselor; I am a trailblazer.

Route 89 climbs and dips, flecks of royal blue lake visible through the trees like skin under lace. In my head, I see the outline of a large hand, and the sharp, icy fingernails that dug out the lakes long ago. Today we circle Cayuga, the ring finger.

“Hey, I love this song. Can you turn it up please,” Kathy calls from behind me. “Leader of the pack, vroom vroom,” she sings, gripping her imaginary motorcycle. We get one station in the van: golden oldies.

I spot an Amish buggy along the road ahead of us and tap the brake, glimpsing men in black, ringlets framing their faces. Tim senses we’ve slowed down, puts his ear to the open window, listens to the clomp, clomp, clomp.
My mind sinks into soups and chowders, and my latest victory, homemade cream of tomato with sherry and shallots. My secret fantasy is to become a famous vegetarian chef, with my own cooking show on the Food Network. Tonight I will make Eggplant Parmesan, their favorite. I go over the process in my head: coating the eggplant rounds with flour, egg, breadcrumbs; frying them, then layering them with mozzarella and sauce. The trees look like great stalks of asparagus in the distance, and I want to cook them too, in crepes or quiche.

Later, when we pull back into town, we have forgotten why we are all together, and even the sight of the house doesn’t remind us. We are tired, windswept, and happy to be home. We will lounge around as afternoon slips to evening, watching Emeril, reading People magazine, smoking cigarettes. The house, hugging the corner of Baltic Avenue and Court Street, is slightly worn but quaint, like a pair of vintage Levi jeans. The white paint peels in places like flakes of dry skin; the black shutters hang down the sides of the windows like sideburns. A single turret gives the house a ship-like appearance; any minute it might float right past us.

2.

They come from trailer parks in Rochester, crack houses in Newark, and mansions in Roslyn; from farms in Romulus, foster homes in Lansing, and sometimes from as far as Alaska. Some families take them back on weekends, or bring them clothes, videos, fruit baskets. Other families give them away, as if they are junk at garage sales, the aluminum pots that have gone out of style, rumored to poison food. They are like strands of
Christmas lights that no longer work; it is easier to discard them rather than checking each individual bulb, trying to figure out which one burned out.

They are left on our stoop by parents, siblings, children, caseworkers. Sometimes, they are referred to us by the state hospitals they have been stationed in, so many wounded soldiers. It reminds me of musical chairs: a human shuffle, from hospital to group home, to supported apartment, back to hospital. Too many people, not enough beds.

3.

We can see the other side of the lake; the trees hug the shore like broccoli crowns, tight clusters of green. I eye a single smokestack in the distance, rising out of fields. Frank smokes a Winston, and Kathy lifts her face to the warm sun, eyes fluttering shut. Even Tim senses the shore.

We eat sandwiches at a picnic table. I made three kinds: turkey, tuna salad, and peanut butter and jelly. We watch the gulls take flight over the water like miniature white planes, gliding.

Afterwards, Frank walks through the grass, picking up other people’s trash, while Tim skips stones. I like the way he feels for the perfect rock, the flat ones with rounded edges. He concentrates, his eyebrows dipped together, left dimple showing; this is his “seeing” face.

He launches a stone into the water, listens for the places it breaks the surface.

“Three skips?” he asks.

“Yeah,” I say.
He feels another, flicks his wrist, and I watch it graze the surface, like a fast duck across the waves.

“How many, three?” he asks.

“Yep.”

“Ok, how many this time?”

I watch and count two.

“Four,” I say.

Tim lets out a whoop. “Wow, four. Wow.” Then, out of nowhere, he asks:

“Krissy, could I be Governor of New York State?”

I think about this. “Yes, technically, you could,” I say. “You’d have to get people to vote for you, though,” I add, for he is grinning like a madman.

“Oh,” he says. “Right.”

I think of my restaurant-owner boyfriend who sometimes, when he’s drunk, thinks he could be mayor of Ithaca. After a few bong hits in his dusty top floor apartment, overlooking the lights of the city, it even seems like a good idea to me. Sometimes it’s like he’s speaking in tongues, when his possessed political alter ego emerges, spouting his opinions about postering laws, parking variances, grandfather clauses, and lake-source cooling. His passion is adorable, and I can listen to him all night. He writes letters to the editor, obsessively. He always smells like soap. “Soapy Sam for mayor.” I can see his sleepy face on the posters under a crown of flyaway hair; though, he’s so shy it would have to be a profile. Maybe, when he stops drinking, I think. I would vote for him a thousand times, I think, to make up for everyone else.
4.

An old upright piano stays in tune in the corner of the smoking room, though no one plays it. A few plastic ashtrays sit on the closed lid. The group home is straight out of house beautiful—Salvation Army Style. It’s amazing what you can find for almost free, the things people give away. Colored glass bottles line the top of the old bookshelf, which contains the entire 1982 World Book encyclopedia collection. Baskets quickly get filled with fabric flowers, sewing kits, old postcards, decks of cards, costume jewelry. Dusty plants, donated by various green-thumbed staff over the years, line the window sills and plant stands. The orange and brown diamond wallpaper reminds me of the ties my father wore when I was a child, very 70s. The peach ruffle curtains sort of match. The pull out sofa bed is orange with small yellow flowers. The coffee table has a cracked leg from when someone thought it would be a good idea to stand on it to get a board game off the shelf. Someone else super-glued it back together. The house cat, Tiki, a gray tabby, limps across the floor. She, too, has been rescued.

5.

We are symbiotic parasites, feeding off each other. They need my youth, my energy. I need chore charts and med charts and quarterly and bi-annual reports; I need to subtract grocery receipts from our budget. I need to be needed. I need to quit. I need for people to not want me to quit. I am quietly irreplaceable. Others might take them on outings, but only I take them around the lake, like the hands of a clock, always around the lake, I think as I lean on the steering wheel, waiting for them to settle in. I catch a glimpse of
myself in the rearview mirror. Something about the way the sunlight hits my eyes makes them no longer brown, but a kaleidoscope of olive, rust, and chocolate. I admire my clear skin and the way my shaggy bob falls in wisps around my face. They must see someone pretty, I think. If only I felt this way ten years ago, would my life be any different?

There are parks with rocky shores, the grass salted with gulls. There are barns, silos, black and white cows, big as the junked cars sitting on cinderblocks. There are trailers and neat scallop trimmed houses, clothes billowing on lines. It is always a wonder to see a stranger’s laundry: sheets, jeans, striped boxers and white t-shirts, all exposing an intimate part of their owners.

6.
Two nights a week, I sleep on the pull out couch in the TV room; we call these overnight shifts. I sleep better here than I do on my own futon or my boyfriend’s mattress on the floor. There is a crack in the door a quarter inch wide, and a flimsy latch at the top; if one of the residents wanted to kick it in, he or she could. I am not afraid though.

My mother sends me newspaper clippings: a schizophrenic man pushes a young woman off a subway platform in Manhattan. She likes calling me at work, knowing where to find me. “This job of yours is not safe,” she says. “There are a lot of nuts out there.” Luckily she is four hours away.

“I know,” I say, but want to add, “They are my nuts.” I want to fix them. I wish it were as easy as adding a tablespoon of salt, or some milk to even out the texture.

I wonder if I work here because my mother doesn’t want me too. It is a satisfying form of procrastination. I avoid the jobs that other college graduates flock to, despise the
smart wool skirts, blazers and heels, the neat cubicles covered with photos of inspirational places. I am afraid of a different life, of male bosses and computer crashes, of being not good enough. I work here because it makes me feel saner, superior even. I am the one in charge; I am a functional adult. I am normal. I don’t want Tim and Kathy to move on to the apartment program. I want to keep them safe. I dread every time a new resident moves in. It’s like college again, getting a randomly assigned roommate, someone you don’t know. And Tim, he’s like the kid from Massachusetts in the double next door who never seemed to go to class. He sits in the smoking room all day, fuming. “Guns are not toys,” he repeats over and over. Last night, I caught him walking up the sidewalk with a very real looking toy pistol, waving it in the air, yelling, “Pow, you’re dead!”

After I confiscated the pistol and wrote up an incident report (which I read to him and we both signed) I’m still not sure if he realizes why waving a toy gun in public is not a good idea. Emotionally, he is twenty-six going on twelve.

“Lock ’em up and throw away the key,” Tim mutters. I roll my eyes.

I notice that someone has left a grease filled pan on the stove. “Who cooked the bacon?” I ask.

“Oh, I’ll clean it later, Krissy. I promise,” Kathy says.

I resist the urge to say, no, clean it now! Instead, I nod and light a cigarette, dragging hard. This is why I’m here, I repeat in my mind, my mantra. Sometimes the walls of the house feel oppressive, like I am in the doomed House of Usher. Because when you’re having a good time, you tend to forget.
A trip around the lake can burn a whole afternoon. I want this--to feel as if I am living, not working; for them to feel as if they are on vacation, not patients. We park in a field adjacent to the strawberry festival on Keuka Lake. It has been raining for a week, but today the sun is as clear and yellow as a lemon. Kathy and I browse the trinket stands: mood rings, beaded necklaces, and strawberry shaped hats. Frank watches a blue-grass band. I keep an eye on him, standing near the back of the crowd, tapping his foot. I buy two flats of ruby red strawberries. Tonight I will make pies.

Visibility out the back of the van is not good, so I ask Frank to double check. My biggest fear has always been hitting another being with a vehicle. I thought I hit a wild bunny when I was in high school. I was so sure I had that I called my old grandmother down to the driveway to check underneath my car, convinced the bunny was caught there. Peering under my car, Grandma had said, “There’s a nothing. You crazy.” I believed her. If there had been a bunny under my car, she probably would have cooked it.

Today, when I reverse, the tires spin and whine. I open my door. We are trapped in mud. I try to pull forward a little, then reverse, but only dig a deeper groove. Frank and I get out and survey the scene: mud halfway up the tires, splattered across her flanks.

“Shit,” I say, heat rising in my cheeks.

“It’s OK, Krissy.” Frank pats my arm. “We just need a plank of wood.” He is six feet tall, blond, and just turned forty, my boyfriend’s age. You wouldn’t know he has a brain injury by looking at him.

An old farmer comes over. “I’ve got a chain,” he says, motioning to the van. He hooks us up to his pickup. “You’re gonna need to push,” the farmer says. Frank and
Kathy and I take position at the front of the van, and when the farmer yells, “Go,” we push, the pickup hauling us to freedom. It’s feels as if we’ve moved a mountain. It’s really quite liberating.

“I didn’t know you guys were such talented van pushers,” I say, and they laugh.

Later, the strawberry pies are a big hit, especially with the cool whip I had hidden in the freezer. As we are sitting in the smoking room, I notice Kathy’s arms. They are covered with big pink welts. She scratches them. Her face is red, and looks, amazingly, like a strawberry.

“Oh, my,” she says. I try to stay calm, though scenarios from my First Aid class clog my brain; certain allergies can lead to respiratory arrest, to death. I clutch the phone, stroking the number pad.

“Are you allergic to strawberries?” I ask.

The pharmacy tells me to use calamine lotion. Swelling should go down in a few hours, as the berries are digested. An hour later, the rash has subsided a bit, but Kathy is frantic. “What if it’s the Zyprexa, not the strawberries?” she asks. She chain smokes her Newports, lighting a new one off the last.

“But you’ve been on the Zyprexa for over a week,” I remind her. Even after I consult the information sheet for side effects, she is not convinced. It has taken us, along with her psychiatrist and her friend Peter, over a year to convince her to discontinue her antiquated Thioridazine in exchange for the wonder drug Zyprexa.

“It’s probably just the strawberries,” she says, scratching her arm.

The next day, she takes a bus to the clinic and demands to be taken off Zyprexa. I flush the remaining pills down the toilet, back to square one.
We circle the lakes, traveling like the merry go rounds of youth, like flocks of birds, horses on tracks. We orbit like the moon, the earth, and the rings around Saturn. Some days it is an uneasy tranquility, a beautiful autumn day, a few pot-bellied clouds following us.

Kathy hasn’t left the house in two months. I think it’s partly my fault: the strawberries, the Zyprexa. Her sandy hair, usually pulled into a simple ponytail, is wild around her face. Yet, when I arrive, she is sitting at the smoking room table waiting for me, ready for our drive. She has rolled her skirt at the waist. It falls just below her generous ass, and I can see the thigh lines of her control top pantyhose.

“Are you sure those shoes are going to be comfortable?” I ask, pointing at her three inch black pumps.

“Oh yes,” she says.

I don’t want her to do anything crazy, and I don’t want to have to stop her from doing something crazy. I know the worst things she’s done when she slipped into a psychosis were trying to cook a television on a stove and walking through town at midnight, barefoot in her nightgown. The worst she will do today is start a dialogue with her French fries, followed by an eerie giggle, like a hundred balloons popped with a needle, one by one. I just want the old Kathy back, I think, as I spy her in the rearview mirror, playing with two small plastic figurine children, mouthing secret words between them. Today, Kathy is nowhere to be found, unreachable, as if she is floating on a raft in the middle of the lake, alone. Today, I know how alone feels.
I think about the night before, how I found my boyfriend passed out on the floor in the basement of his restaurant. His employee, a college girl with blond dreadlocks, pretended not to notice as she stepped around him to empty the redeemable bottles. I shook him lightly and he grumbled. “Let’s get you home,” I said. But he resisted, his body heavy with alcohol, and I could only get him over to the old moth-eaten couch. I knew he would wake up eventually, remove the money from the register, and stumble home. He often binged when running the restaurant got too overwhelming; when workers quit, when the dishwasher broke, and when he got stuck doing sound for some shitty band.

My heart smoldered in the ashtray beside him. “I’m just trying to help you,” I said, but if he heard me, he didn’t let on. His forehead was frowning, puckered.

I grabbed the last six pack of his favorite beer, Saranac, from the walk-in out of spite, and went home. I thought about the time Sam told me that his drinking had nothing to do with me, how he feels about me. I believed him, but now I’m not so sure. Maybe I’m enabling him. Maybe if he really loves me, like he says, he would stop. Maybe it’s killing us. The six-pack weighed down my arm, my tears mixing with tracks of snot. Why do I have to take care of everybody? Why can’t anyone take care of me?

My cat meowed twice, as if to say, “Where is he?” I settled on the couch, popping Cinema Paradiso into the VCR. There was a pain in my throat where my tonsils once were, and I imagined that they had grown back that night. At least I had my cat, who settled herself into my lap, and didn’t seem to care that her fur was getting wet.
Tomorrow will be better. He will be sweet again, a Christmas orange. He will convince me that, “that person you saw last night isn’t really me.” But it is him, sometimes.

I pull the van into the U-Pick pumpkin patch, pushing him out of my mind. Suddenly, I’m aware of how pleasantly out of place we look: me, Kathy, Tim, and Frank, stumbling onto a farm. There they are: a runway of green leaves and orange pumpkins. Tim clutches my arm and I lead him to the patch. He sits cross legged, feeling around him.

“Wow,” he says. “This is a huuuuuuuge pumpkin.” He pats it gently.

Frank picks up a long face pumpkin, slightly flattened on one side. He balances it on his shoulder and says, “Sorta looks like me, don’t it?” I notice how the curved scar at its base is similar to the scar on Frank’s neck.

“Good-looking,” I say. “Pumpkin, that is.” Frank makes like he’s going to hurl it at me then doubles over in laughter.

Kathy stops at a perfectly round Charlie Brown head. Then suddenly, as if this is too much for her, she leaves the patch, her heels sinking into the dirt, then leans against a fence and lights a cigarette.

We only have enough petty cash for one pumpkin, but I want them each to have one, so I pay for the other two. I gather the one Kathy pointed out, cradling it in both arms. “I got the one you liked,” I tell her, but she ignores me, her hands busy with her little dolls.
Later, when we pull in the driveway, I notice a shadow in the house’s turret and it scares me. When I realize it is just our scarecrow, which someone hung from a noose up there, I make a mental note to take it down. It’s a bit much, I think.

Before she developed schizophrenia in her mid-twenties, Kathy was head secretary for the Cornell History department, and she can still type over ninety words per minute. She also traveled the world with her aunt. I remember watching a Paris segment on the Travel Channel with her.

“Oh, Paris in the spring, so lovely,” she said. “Oh, there’s the Louvre, and Versailles. Oh, Versailles is a magnificent castle. Louis the Fourteenth lived there,” she explained. Things you don’t expect from a crazy person.

Lilacs drip in clusters from their trees, releasing a powdery perfume. I ask them if they want to stop at Wixom’s, a country store specializing in honey. “They have homemade ice-cream,” I say, to a general murmur of approval. And bees, I think. It’s the bees I want to go for. Everything is alive today. The grass rolls beside us like a sea of peas. This morning, my boyfriend left a white daisy on the hood of my car, inside a Perrier bottle, the label carefully peeled off. He’s been sober for a week.

There is a hive in the middle of the store in a glass case, with tubes to the outside so the bees can come and go, and placards describing the lives and habits of honey bees. I am fascinated by the flickering motion of bees crawling over each other, crowded yet not the least bit claustrophobic. They are a lesson in community, in cooperation, I think. No one else is interested in the bees. They line up at the counter for their ice cream, except
for Frank, who humors me. Frank is a lumberjack at heart. He wears bright flannel shirts and his hair is feathery on the top where it is thinning. His unkempt beard is flecked with auburn. He has a weathered cuteness about him. If things had been different, he might have been handsome. He tried to hang himself twenty years ago so he has limited short term memory. We write appointments on his hands, the only method that works. I can see the faded black outline of “Fri, Dr. K, 9am” on his palm.

“So, they’re makin the honey in there,” he says, and I nod. Frank and I are buddies, though we’re told not to let the residents think of us as friends. When Frank asks me, “Are you my friend?” I always answer, “Yes, but only ‘cause they pay me.” He in turn, slaps his thigh and laughs.

It doesn’t take much to amuse us. When Frank gets depressed, it’s depressing for me too. He mopes around the house, his face grim, as if someone just gave him a swift kick to the kidney, muttering, “Why do I have to live in this God-damn house?”

Sometimes cheering him up is as easy as distracting a child who just bumped his knee. You give him a cookie or point to a dog, and the wound is instantly displaced. And sometimes it’s not so easy. Sometimes he weeps. The other day, he told me about his wife.

“I caught her with another man. That Cindy broke my heart,” he said. “That’s why I’m here.”

“You’ll be OK,” I said as he rubbed his eyes. I knew this was inadequate, but what can you really say to someone in pain? We sat there in silence for several long moments until I suggested going onto the porch for a smoke. Something about the porch calms people down. My boss, Wendy, had been eavesdropping from the office, and she
joined us outside. Later she told me, “I’ve been working with Frank for ten years and that’s the first time he’s ever mentioned his wife, ever even recalled what happened.” This may or may not be a small breakthrough. It’s hard to tell.

The hive hums like an Indian tambora, meditative. Frank’s finger moves along the glass, searching for the queen. If I squint my eyes, it looks like white noise, particles in motion. And then I see her, up to the left, still and peaceful, twice their size. We watch the soft flutter of her paper wings, as if she is stretching, content in her majesty.
Summer of Saturn

Sitting on the group home porch, we smoked and watched dogs chase through the park. Tim was blind and only listened, rocking his body like a small ship.

“Kiss the dog, kiss the dog,” he muttered.

“How you doing, Krissy?” Frank asked me for the tenth time.

“Splendid,” I said.

Frank turned to his girlfriend, Maureen, on the bench beside him. “How you doing?” Maureen inhaled her menthol 100, lowered her eyes and smiled. Her hair, in a ponytail, was bleached to white.

My co-worker Gina leaned against the chipped railing. “We’ve got to hit the garage this weekend, sort through all that crap,” she announced, pulling a hand through her short, spiked hair. No one seemed too interested, especially not me. It was way too nice out to clean.

Kathy, the house socialite, deftly changed the subject. “Aren’t you going to Enfield with your girlfriend?” She wore too much red lipstick, and it left a kiss on her plastic cup.

“So, how was work?” I asked Frank. Though I could predict his answer, I had to ask so we could bill Medicaid for “restorative services.”

“Good, I think. I mowed the lawn out there,” he said, waving toward the lake. We had gotten him seasonal landscaping work through Challenge Industries. Though he had no short-term memory, his flannel sleeves were rolled up and his fingernails dirty—good signs.

“Is that Keebler?” Tim asked from his step.
“Sure is.” I eyed the chocolate lab in the park, wondering how Tim could tell the dogs apart, since I hadn’t heard barking.

Tim unfolded his cane and made his way across the street. I always got nervous when he crossed, though he’d been doing it for most of his life. He sat smack in the middle of the path, and Keebler trotted up to him and licked his face. I looked at the sky—Cornflower blue, cloudless—and wondered about the random cosmic forces that brought us all together here.

“We’re watching the dogs next week,” Gina said, keeping an eye on Tim. Her girlfriend’s parents had two Italian greyhounds: delicate heather-colored creatures that reminded me of nervous old ladies. She often brought the dogs by the house.

“Tim’s gonna shit his pants,” she said.

*

Summer in upstate New York after the deep freeze was like sex after involuntary celibacy. All of a sudden, you wanted it all the time. You saw light, split avocados. You walked more slowly, loose arms and hips. Summer wakened the body, a frond tickling skin.

That winter I had felt particularly restless, and often paced the apartment I shared with my roommate Jen, cooking up schemes to escape the dead-end job I loved. It was my first “real” job after college, but hanging out with psychiatric patients didn’t exactly seem like a career. So I smoked cigarettes and made elaborate lists: Write a cookbook. Take a photography class. Be proactive! Start catering business w/Jen. Go to Thailand.

But by summer, these ideas waned, and I was content taking long hikes to Second Dam on Cascadilla Creek and reading books on the shore of Cayuga Lake. Minus the dirty mounds of snow, the shabby houses on Plain Street looked quaint; porch plants twirled below Tibetan prayer flags and flower tunnels grew along sidewalks. Plus, the college students, most of them, went home, leaving the streets, bars, and supermarkets to us. People I hadn’t seen in months materialized, stopping to chat outside the bookstore or the food co-op. And there were babies everywhere—suddenly, everyone had a baby—and parents paraded them down the Commons like little prize-winning squashes in miniature ball caps and floppy hats. Even the patients seemed like they’d been injected with a cure-all dose of something green. Even my boyfriend drank less in the summer. Business at his café slowed down, allowing him to take evenings off to spend with me.

*

I stood outside my boyfriend’s second floor apartment window on Buffalo Street, listening to him play guitar and sing. I imagined him perched on the edge of the couch we had found a few weeks earlier. It had a busy pattern of red roses and green leaves, was clean and soft, and even had matching armrest covers. I had sensed that he was thinking about it for the basement of his café, because he always thought about the café, even
though his apartment held only a futon mattress, slab-and-cinderblock shelves, and a small desk covered with guest checks.

“It would be a nice in your living room,” I had said.

He scratched his chin, circled it, and then tested it, bouncing on it a few times.

“Somewhere for us to sit,” he conceded.

We carried it to his apartment, and I sprayed the cushions with Lysol. Something was promising there, I thought: evidence of his domestic potential.

But that summer day, I simply listened to the guitar chords pedaling through the air as dandelion fuzzies floated between the trees. I remembered standing in the same spot on Valentine’s Day, looking up at his window and hating him. I’d sent fifty multi-colored daisies to the café, where he had been working brunch. Later, through his inebriated haze, he bragged, “I told the staff that my mother sent them.” The daisies were for the café as much as for him, and I was ashamed of my gesture, like I’d been once before in college, when I gave a sappy mix tape to a boy who didn’t like me that way.

But my boyfriend did like me that way. He told me so every day. My name and phone number were listed with his on the café fridge, and it was understood that I never paid for anything there, not a meal, not a drink. He was just shy and self-conscious, and the alcohol was like a black hole, an empty space even love couldn’t fill.

*

Kathy and I sipped iced cappuccinos out of large curvy glasses on the patio of the Friendly’s on Route 13. We held a one-on-one staff/resident outing, every Wednesday afternoon when the group home had double coverage. As always, we drank our first too
quickly, and lingered over our free refills. We were supposed to be working on her
“goals”— a paradox for a fifty-three-year-old suffering from schizophrenia. You couldn’t
predict a psychotic episode any more than you could an earthquake. Kathy wore a white
short-sleeved shirt tucked into a grey skirt, the way she had dressed when she had been
the head secretary for the university history department twenty years earlier. Her face was
puffy from years of medication. I tried to imagine how she looked before she got sick, if
she’d been pretty.

“Todd and I went shopping for his new apartment,” she told me. “He found a
black coffee table in the consignment shop. I thought it was good for a man’s apartment.”
Her gay friend, a former resident of the home, was moving from the apartment program
to supported housing, the final step in the wobbly pyramid of psychiatric rehabilitation.
“It was only fifty dollars,” she added. “I lent him the money until he gets his check.”

“You’re a good friend,” I said, as a breeze blew the napkins off our table. I
quickly snatched them.

“He’s going to have me over to watch movies,” she said. “He wanted me to be his
roommate, but I told him, no, I’d rather stay where I am.”

“Well, it’s something you could work towards, in the future,” I said.

“Oh, yes, of course,” she said, lighting another long Virginia Slim. “So, how’s
your boyfriend doing?”

“Oh, he’s fine. We went to Little Joe’s for dinner last night.” My straw snorted as
I sucked the last creamy drops.

“They have the best breadsticks, don’t they? I love their breadsticks,” she said.
Our coffee talk made me feel guilty; I was actually getting paid to socialize with Kathy. I’d just earned eight dollars, I thought, as the check came, and I treated her to the coffee. A bee buzzed over to our table, hovering above her empty glass.

“Oh! I hate bees.” Kathy waved it away with her hand, moving the glass to a neighboring table. The bee, unperturbed, balanced on the edge, then crawled down the straw—a chute to the good life.

*

“You have to see the babies,” my boyfriend said, excited, rubbing his hands together. He had dark eyes, long lashes, and a rock-star build: wiry with subtle arm muscles. He led me to his bedroom closet, an eclipse of light peeking under the door. Inside were trays of marijuana plants, three inches high, with cute little serrated leaves.

“The Tompkins-Skunk cross is real mellow,” he explained.

It turned me on to hear him explain genetics, crossing breeds, the whole process, males and females, budding. Subconsciously, I replaced the word “plant” with “child,” thought that maybe he’d be similarly invested in his own offspring. He was forty years old and assumed he would never have any children since the café sponged all of his time.

“Let’s go to our spot,” I suggested.

“Ok, Boss.” He giggled, kissing my neck, and switched off the grow light.

After a round of bong hits, we bagged a couple beers and made our way through the graveyard’s droopy pines. We settled in the grass behind two child graves, small flat stones with only their first names, and leaning back against the large headstone marking
their parents. Once in a while we heard the calls of Frisbee golfers, the snap of twigs. I took off my sandals and he touched my foot. We had been dating for a year but were still a little shy with each other.

“Starchild’s been hanging out on the stoop, trying to sell his magic stones again,” he said, referring to the homeless guy who walked around in a hemp diaper and told everyone he loved them.

“Well, Frank went to the florist yesterday instead of work,” I said. “Today, I wrote WORK on his hand in black marker.”

“You should start writing things on my hands,” he laughed, swigging his beer, squinting at the horizon. “Yup, business has been pretty steady. We did $3000 last week.”

I ran my hands through his hair, dark like Guinness, but thick and curly, and we kissed until the stars came out. He pointed out Ursa Major, Orion, reciting the biographies of the stars. He ran his rough kitchen hands gently up and down my back, as if touching me for the first time. I unzipped his pants and slipped him inside of me, and he moaned, “oh honey-babe,” like a Bob Dylan song. Afterwards, as we lay there, I imagined the dead couple beneath us, their bones stirring in a remembered lust.

*

Though Frank had almost lit himself on fire, he seemed unfazed, happy, even. We were about to grill hamburgers and hotdogs for dinner, and as Frank lifted the lid of the charcoal Weber, a flash surged upward. He had lit the charcoal and forgotten to open the little vent in the cover. Stunned, he laughed, blinking, as I examined his pink face. His
eyebrows, eyelashes and front locks of hair were all frizzed into tiny curlicues, and the air around him carried the scent of death. Maureen trimmed off the burnt hair, and took a cosmetic brush to his eyebrows, murmuring, “My poor honey.”

I should have supervised him more closely, and my body heaved in relief. I chided myself: You’re supposed to be the one in charge! Though I was always afraid that someone would hurt himself on my watch, the house created a guise of stability steeped in our daily routines. I often let my guard down, perhaps because it was both painful and exhausting to keep it up: like standing on one foot. When I called her in tears, my boss told me to skip the incident report, to quit beating myself up about it.

So we went about our normal routine. Dinner, clean up, a walk to the lake to watch the boats, then ice cream, meds, and TV. Me, Maureen, Frank, and Kathy watched a re-run of NYPD Blue, spread out on couches. Frank and Maureen shared a huge bowl of microwave popcorn drowned in butter.

“Popcorn, Krissy?” Frank asked, and I grabbed a handful.

On the television, a woman nervously considered each suspect in a police line-up.

“Oh, it’s the guy on the left,” Kathy cried. “That’s him, that’s the killer!”

Maureen picked up a fistful of popcorn, then dropped it back into the bowl. She stared at the TV screen, focusing on the bottom right-hand corner as if there were a secret hole through which she could see the tubes and wires coiled inside. “If you were in jail, you’d know it, right, Krissy?” she asked.

Kathy shot her a wary glance, while Frank chewed contentedly beside her.

“You’d know it,” I said. “It’s a TV show, make believe,” I added.

“Oh. I’m gonna have a cigarette. Guys, come have a cigarette?”
Frank shook his pack of Winston’s, empty, so I tossed him one of my Camels.

After turning off the stove circuit breaker (an OSHA safety requirement) and filling out the daily log, I locked the TV room door and settled on the pullout couch, feeling the cool fabric of my sleeping bag, listening to cicadas chirping through the open window. I thought about how there were some people you could protect, and others you couldn’t, and the hardest part was sorting them all out. As I drifted to sleep, I couldn’t help but picture Frank’s face, the whoosh of fire, and his look of pure surprise, as if the sun had just leapt out of a cake.

*

I decided to become a partner in my boyfriend’s farming project; it was my idea: he didn’t have a car, or even driver’s license, to tell the truth, and I thought it would be a nice way for us to spend daylight together. Maybe I could even get him to go on some hikes. I would drive the marijuana plants out to a secret spot, and water them every week, depending on the rain. Our other partner, his German handyman, would take care of the harvesting. I would get one third of the crop, which I could freeze like gourmet coffee and sample all year long. My boyfriend wasn’t a drug dealer—he saved most of it for himself, and gave the rest to the jazz musician who played at the café on Tuesday nights for free.

When the “babies” were ready, we drove out to the place that the handyman had scoped out in a wooded area owned by the university. We waited until after workers clearing a field with bulldozers had gone home for the day. I turned off the gravel road,
and drove through a small field in order to get close to the spot, about thirty feet off a hiking trail. My boyfriend worked quickly, tilling the soil, digging the holes, transferring the plants, while I lingered on the trail, the lookout.

We returned a few weeks later with a couple of five-gallon jugs of water. The plants, hidden by the heavy brush, were almost two feet tall. The pretty star-shaped leaves glittered in the late day sun.

“Nice and healthy,” my boyfriend said, examining the undersides of leaves. But when we got back to my car, it wouldn’t start. The lights worked, the radio too, so I figured it might not be the battery. I popped the hood and fished around in there, wiping the dipstick on a Dunkin’ Donuts napkin. My boyfriend paced; I dropped the hood, stumped.

“What if I need a tow? How am I going to explain that my car is in the middle of a field?”

“A romantic picnic?” He grabbed my hand as we walked past grazing horses in the near dark. The crescent between his eyebrows deepened; I could tell he was worried too. I could hear my heart thump; it sounded like “I love, I love.” Away from town, the stars were brighter, and he thought he saw Saturn flickering.

“Explain the Saturn return again?” I knew it was some sort of astrological phenomenon people experience in their late twenties.

“Saturn’s the taskmaster. It returns to its original position every 28 years, and that’s some major cosmic energy. It’s a time in your life when some major stuff happens, and you, like, choose your path.”

“That’s some heavy shit,” I said. Frightening, even.
We walked about two miles on Route 366, fields flanking either side of the road. When we got to a Mexican restaurant, we decided to treat ourselves to a nice meal and talk about pleasant things—movies and bands playing at the café rather than felonies and cars stuck in fields. Afterwards, my roommate picked us up, armed with her heavy-duty jumper cables. We found the car where we left it, a pearl in the darkness. When I tried to start it, just for kicks, the engine turned right over.

Later that night, we made love twice, with the urgency of criminals who had narrowly escaped catastrophe. Like snow angels superimposed, our bodies rubbed into each other’s, searching for comfort.

When I took my car to the mechanic the next day, they couldn’t find anything wrong with it. A mystery. Maybe it was Saturn communicating telepathically.

*

About a week after Princess Diana’s fatal accident, Kathy began to decompensate—slipping into a prolonged psychotic episode. A huge fan of the Princess, she watched the news religiously, remarking, “The poor Princess. They killed her! She didn’t deserve it.” The princess’s rags to riches story had somehow always given Kathy hope for her own recovery, and now that someone had cut that thread of faith, she spiraled toward mental collapse. She spent most of her days in her bathrobe, smoking, and when she did dress, she lost her former propriety, leaving her blouse unbuttoned, rolling her skirt at the waist. She demanded to see her grandmother’s silver, which we kept locked in a file cabinet at her request, then sold the teaspoons, one by one, to the pawnshop. She went through a
carton of cigarettes in three days, and spent her program money on barrettes, bacon, cheese doodles, and nail polish.

I offered to take Kathy to Friendly’s to discuss budgeting, among other things, but precisely at our agreed-upon meeting time, she always disappeared. Later I found out that she would ride the bus all day, circling the town, perhaps searching for her Princess among the people, in the trees.

I’d always believed that trouble came in multiples of three, so I wasn’t surprised when Maureen’s meds went missing. To make matters worse, she couldn’t remember whether she had taken her bedtime and morning pills. Unlike most of the residents, who got their meds from the double-locked cabinet, Maureen had moved up the med ladder; she kept a two-day supply in her room, administered them to herself, and we replenished her supply. There was nothing I enjoyed less than playing group-home sleuth: searching through piles of clothes in her bedroom, sorting through the lottery tickets in her purse, calling out, “Has anyone seen Maureen’s meds?” to shrugs and blank stares. The missing meds were mostly antipsychotics, and only the Perphenazine (like a Zanax) would appeal to a would-be thief. Yet, the other residents didn’t want to take their own medication because of the horrible side-effects, let alone take someone else’s.

As I searched, my patience peeled away, leaving the nerves raw and exposed. I left frantic messages for her psychiatrist and therapist: was it better to double up or miss a dose? I thought Maureen had lost her meds on purpose, to test me, make my life difficult, and get attention. I was getting more stressed out than I should. *Just solve the problem*, I told myself, but something inside me had hardened. I knew the home was like a fragile
ecosystem. When one person decompensated, others did too. I didn’t know how much longer I could hold this place—or myself—together.

But when she finally found the meds in the pocket of one of her jackets and said, “Sorry, Krissy, I must’ve put them in there,” she looked so pleased, so happy that I couldn’t be mad at her, or even muster a lecture.

“They were just hiding from you,” I said.

“They sure were. Pesky meds.”

*

Classes started up at the college, and my boyfriend started working late six nights a week. Sometimes I would find him passed out in a fetal position on the café’s basement floor, clutching an empty beer bottle the way a bird does a tree limb. Mostly he would let me wake him and take him home, but sometimes he resisted me, his eyes closed and face scrunched in an expression I didn’t recognize—pain? anger?—so I left him there. I felt Saturn’s rings, like magnets, pulling, unraveling me.

In order to entertain myself, I wasted countless hours at the bar, drinking Jameson’s on the rocks. I hurled darts at the board, seeing a mini solar system. On my days off, I drove to Cortland or Owego to rummage through their Salvation Armies, returning with coffee mugs, baskets, ceramic cats, ugly cardigan sweaters, and men’s Dickies that slouched at my hips. I knew I would wind up throwing it all in trash bags and lugging it to my next rented apartment, but I didn’t care. It felt good to throw, to
drive, to hoard. *Don’t confuse motion with action*, Saturn warned me, but I burrowed deep into my junk and ignored it.

Then, three weeks before harvest, my boyfriend showed up at my apartment unexpectedly.

“Someone found the spot,” he said. He and the handyman had gone to check on the plants, and they were gone.

“At first we thought it was just kids who thought they were ready. Then we found *the corpses*,” he paused, shaking his head, “scattered in the woods.” I gave him a beer, and he sunk into my couch, rambling on about Republicans and Right Wing fundamentalists trampling on our cultural and agricultural rights, while I half listened, thinking about what I would cook for dinner. When I leaned in and kissed him on the lips, he gave me a quick peck, pulling away so he could continue talking. To me, the failed project felt almost prophetic, as if our love, like the harvest, was similarly doomed. My boyfriend took it hard, but for a different reason. He felt cheated out of something he thought he deserved. He discussed various conspiracy theories for days, and once shook me in the middle of the night to exclaim: “A hiker!”

I rolled my eyes in the darkness, then slunk out of bed to pee.

*

When Frank’s landscaping job ended, he moped around the group home, thinking he had been fired, though I kept reminding him it had been a seasonal job. I begged the agency to give him more work, raking leaves or sweeping sidewalks or anything, but the city
didn’t need anyone. The full-time employees had it covered. (Meaning, the employees who weren’t disabled).

I tried to keep Frank busy in our garden. We trimmed the rose bushes, raked leaves into big piles, cleared out the dried-up coneflowers and daisies. He wore his back brace on the outside of his T-shirt, which looked funny, but I let him, and we took a smoke break on the porch, admiring our progress. Up the street, we heard frantic tapping, and saw Tim hurrying up the sidewalk, swinging his cane like a machete, probably on his way to the park. I wanted to call out, “slow down!” but said nothing, just studied his off-balance gait and his concentration, the way his lower lip swallowed his top. Just then, Tim cocked his head and slowed to a walk, wearing the smug smile of someone who knows he’s being watched.

Frank and I stubbed out our cigarettes and bagged up the leaves. A full moon was beginning to rise, bigger than the sun, orange and cheerful. I detected the scent of wood burning, the cool air an old hound nipping at my sleeve.

“You think we can take the boat out? I have a nice canoe over in the garage,” Frank said. We had taken the boat out once that summer, though I doubted we would have another opportunity before the seasons changed. Because of his memory problems, Frank couldn’t negotiate past and future—he did not see winter coming, just a vision of a boat on water. Though I knew that I might never row that canoe again, for a moment I wanted to believe, like Frank, that we could suddenly inhabit summer, drift among the placid waves.

“Maybe,” I said, looking toward the lake. “That would be sweet.”
Sometimes a new job promises the same thrill of possibility as falling in love again, with someone even better, sweeter, more suitable. Pammy Gomez’s rented kitchen was on the ground floor of an old mansion. A massage school occupied the top floors. A half-wall split the kitchen into two rooms—one for cooking, the other for assembly and packaging. As I manned the industrial deli slicer, I thought about how much I liked my new white apron. The twelve-burner stove. The two shiny silver fridges. Long aluminum prep tables. Shelves of exotic spices. A sink the size of a bathtub!

I liked Pammy, too. She was built like a boxer, compact and muscular. I liked the way she seemed to bounce, to roll between heel and toe. She wore her short black hair under a ball cap—white with a black Nike swoosh—and a white t-shirt with the sleeves rolled up. Her skin was naturally brown, like mine after tanning all summer. She dreamed of a world taken over by vegans, envisioned herself ruler of an extensive seitan empire. Her favorite mantra was: “Lift with your legs, not your back.”

On my first day managing Pammy’s seitan business, I found myself riding shotgun in her van, my astrological chart in the console between us. We were on our way to a food fair to hand out samples of her vegetarian deli slices to college kids. Seitan (pronounced “say-tan”) is wheat meat. We passed half-frozen, glassy lakes and fields of brown tassels—remnants of corn—poking through snow. A rainbow gay pride sticker stretched the length of the van’s bumper, the only hint of color in the landscape.

“I would have guessed Cancer moon ’cause you have that little worry crescent between your eyes. All Cancer moons have it,” she had said, looking at the road. My
finger instinctively felt for my crease, marveling at Pammy’s almost eerie psychic ability. I wondered if she had found something in my chart that had made her hire me.

I had just quit the psychiatric home where I had worked for three years, giving up health insurance and all my benefits. I realized that despite my best efforts, my clients, many of them diagnosed as schizophrenic, would never get better. In care-giving professions, when the stress starts to eat the caretaker alive, we called it “burnout.” But burnout is just a nicer way to say you no longer give a shit. It’s not like I wasn’t interested in psychology, or the mind’s bent corners. I just took more pride in being known for my eggplant Parmesan than for my counseling. Eager for the more predictable world of food, I found Pammy through a mutual friend. I wanted to work with my hands instead of my heart. I wanted to create, to eventually attend the Natural Cookery School in New York City. Maybe someday even open a restaurant. Host my own cooking show on the Food Network (which I had watched obsessively at the group home.)

My first morning in the kitchen, I followed Pammy around as she explained each processes thoroughly. I asked a lot of questions. What’s “liquid smoke” made of? How do they separate gluten from the wheat? Bosses, like teachers, liked questions.

Soon after, we started each day by filling a dozen plastic tubs with the wheat gluten, spices, and wet ingredients, each for a different flavor (Szechwan, Original, Mexican, BBQ, Cuban, Bac-Un, Pepperoni). Wearing plastic gloves, we mixed with our hands, kneading the mélange like bread dough, the spices stinging our eyes and nostrils. She told me stories about growing up in Miami, of running with the fast crowd, of drinking and drugging her life away. I imagined a lesbian West Side story, the butches defending their lipsticked femmes, wielding knifes, dancing in lines. She played
astrology tapes, complex readings by her friend Shara in Florida. A sextile between Mercury and Venus is a rare astrological pearl. When the planets are this close to the sun, they move closer together as well. So look forward to a new harmony between your mind and body, your ideas and actions, she told us. We listened reverently, kneading the ingredients, then weighed gobs of the sticky mixture. We cupped our hands around it, forming long mounds, and wrapped these mounds in tin foil, tightly, making logs approximately two feet long and four inches in diameter.

There was a precise trick of the wrist, of folding the foil just right, of pressing in as you spun. If the logs were not wrapped precisely, I knew they would come undone while steaming. Be ruined. But I couldn’t quite get it. After my third try, Pammy sighed loudly and flipped off her gloves, wiping her hands dramatically on her apron as she stalked to her office. My hands trembled. I tried again, squeezing the soft gluten into the foil. Pluto is moving retrograde through Capricorn, Shara warned, soothingly, like my first grade teacher. I struggled along, wrapping some halfway decent logs.

Ten minutes later Pammy appeared. “Where were we?” she asked cheerfully. I showed her my logs and she examined them carefully, like a surgeon.

“Better,” she said. “I really need for you to get this, to be present,” she added.

“I’m trying,” I insisted, my voice squeaky and childlike.

She softened, punched me lightly on the shoulder. “It’ll take practice.”

Even when wrapped, each raw log had a gelatinous spine, and had to be delicately cradled. We steamed them in deep roasters, piling layers of three or four. Halfway through the cooking process, we had to rotate them. Holding a partially solidified five-
pound log in tongs was like picking up a piece of cake with tweezers. I breathed deeply, prayed. The windows had fogged with their mist.

Each task was a Russian doll, holding a mini-task inside it. A lapse in concentration could quickly undo jobs I had spent half the morning on: like the time I pasted “Pepperoni” labels on fifty packages of “Original Flavor” and had to re-vacuum pack them all. I stuffed the discarded packaging to the bottom of the trash, tied it up, and took it to the curb, thinking about precision. Kitchen work took mental toughness. What if one day when I’m an important chef, I spill a five-pound bag of rice? What if it is the only rice I have on hand?

Pammy did her best to instill in me her Zen of slicing: *Feel the motor vibrate in your hand, your wrist. Never look away, get out of your rhythm. Always be aware of the blade, humming and spinning. If it gets stuck, turn it off before fixing it.* She showed me how to disassemble it, clean it, and put it back together. I was amazed at my uniform discs of wheat meat. My eyes followed a chunk of Portobello mushroom baked in like a fossil in marble, a perfect cutout, getting smaller and smaller with each slice. I heard a table saw in a country barn, alongside fields of alfalfa and dandelions, and a horse named Seven. My log, the color of redwoods, flavored with anise.

On Tuesdays and Thursdays, I catered lunch for the massage students upstairs. I lived for these days. Pammy saw this as a way of making extra money as well as developing name recognition for her business. I scoured my cookbooks for innovative and inexpensive vegan recipes. As Pammy only gave me an hour to cook, I often went in early to prep. All morning, recipes ran through my mind like ticker tape. I made curried butternut squash soup with herbed crostini; BBQ-tofu over brown rice pilaf; lentil chili
with cornbread; broccoli-cashew-seitan stir-fry over basmati rice. The kitchen smelled of ginger and garlic and the starchy comfort of rice. I brought the lunch upstairs in a cart, and the students lined up to buy it. As I packed up, I secretly watched them eat, tried to gauge their reactions.

Then, Pammy and I would sit and eat the potions I had set aside for us on the picnic table outside the kitchen, overlooking Cayuga Lake.

One afternoon she told me, “You’re an amazing cook.”

I blushed. Nothing I made ever tasted as good to me. I perpetually feared something would backfire and was ecstatic when it didn’t. Pammy had taken off her apron, folded it into a neat square on the table. It was early spring, one of those warm days when the sun hints at the warmth yet to come. Pammy dreamed openly about someday owning the first ever vegan Cuban restaurant, where I could be her chef.

“I love hot, I love spicy,” she said, shimmying her shoulders. “The idea of centering meals around rice, beans, and peppers.”

I nodded. “And for dessert—pan fried plantains over coconut soy ice-cream, all drizzled in pure chocolate,” I said.

“Yum!” Pammy had a sweet tooth. “See, you’re a thinker.” She tapped her head. “It’s your Capricorn,” she said, as we imagined a day we could be free of the seitan, when the kitchen would magically run itself, or perhaps, just finance bigger and better ventures.

*
By the time I got off work in the late afternoon, I felt I deserved a beer or two. My body was exhausted but laced with endorphins. I felt effervescent, cocky, strong. I was sweaty with wheat meat lodged under my fingernails. I showered, then headed to the bar to hang out with my restaurant friends, who had just finished their shifts around town.

Stan bought a round of shots he called “woo woos,” or chilled citrus vodka with a hint of cranberry. I downed two, as Jake, a pizza cook, chanted “Satan! Satan!” while making devil horns with his fingers. Chris said, “Now, let’s be serious.” He swung his arm around me, pulling my head close, and asked conspiratorially, “So, what’s it like to work with Lucifer?” These were people who couldn’t understand the concept of wheat meat—people who had carefully reduced veal stock and stuffed pig intestines all morning. So I rolled my eyes and wrote 666 in place of my name on the dart scoreboard.

On my walk home, however, I wondered: what was I doing with my life? My parents thought I was crazy, in the way that I always had been—stubbornly idealistic and independent. That this was another phase. “Satan?” my father had asked. He didn’t get it, and wasn’t really that interested in my explanation. “Much snow?” he’d inquire instead. “How’s the car running?”

I’d been a proud and vigilant vegetarian for six years, had taught myself to cook to accommodate for the lack of options in restaurants and dining halls. I subscribed to Vegetarian Times. I did not want to eat what I was unwilling to kill. I believed (and still do) that animals had souls, perhaps different types of souls than humans, but ones that come with having consciousness, central nervous systems, and the ability to feel pain. The other issue was environmental, of course, the amount of land and water and oil we use to produce one pound of beef, that overgrazing leads to desertification. All of that.
But seitan, and the natural food industry, went beyond these beliefs. Producing seitan, I realized, was a life’s work. There was a step between believing in something and devoting your life to it. I was missing this step, and trying my best to swing myself to the next rung. Often, I felt I dangled in midair, reaching.

Then, I dreamt I was on fire. I was in my childhood bed and flames had ignited my bed ruffle in a glowing rectangle. They crept up my comforter, licking my hands, which flailed desperately like fly swatters. I woke robed in sweat, my hands numb with pain and whaling on my mattress. I shook myself awake. Then it hit me: carpal tunnel. I had experienced mild carpal tunnel syndrome while cooking at a restaurant several years earlier, but only after my prep shifts, and only in my right hand. I had rearranged my schedule so that I didn’t work two consecutive prep shifts, and loaded up on B vitamins, and the pain had abated. Somehow, when taking this job with Pammy, I had conveniently forgotten about my predisposition.

I popped three Advil, though I knew they wouldn’t help. Pain relievers, even anti-inflammatories, had never helped me before. I paced my apartment, shaking out my hands, their frozen veins of pain. The nerves inside them were like wires ripped apart in a storm, live and sparkling in the winter air. My cat Cleo followed me from room to room, meowing, as if to say, “What? What is it?”

* 

I hid the carpal tunnel from Pammy, hoping I could find some way to cure it. If I wanted to inhabit the world of food, I knew I had to pay my dues, which included long hours and
a little physical discomfort. Somewhere, though, deep in my psyche, I though I was being punished for some kind of karmic debt I owed, and that certainly, I deserved it. I visited an herbalist, who suggested Devil’s Claw and yoga. I tried to alter my routine, slicing for an hour, then vacuum packing, and then slicing for another hour. But soon, I began to hate the seitan. I even began to detest the taste of it. It had a certain… aftertaste. It seemed too… sweet, too acidic, like raw tomato paste. The slicer became my nemesis, and as I fed in the two-pound logs, I imagined it was eating my very own limbs. Consequently, I cut myself for the first time, while cleaning the blade, a painful gash in the odd crease where the thumb meets hand.

I thought about my Sicilian immigrant grandparents, long dead. My grandfather had been a bricklayer and my grandmother, a seamstress. They had worked with their hands their whole lives, day after day, so that I wouldn’t have to. What would they think of me, armed with my college diploma, descending into a life of manual labor? I considered it a mark of my generation to choose performative, physical work over a more intellectual career. But I realized that somewhere along the lines, my genes had been weakened, the hardy peasant stock of my ancestors given way to a slight American body not made for real work.

Vacuum packing was one of the few tasks that were easy on my wrists. All I had to do was close the lid of the large machine, push the button, and listen for the long hiss. I was working on putting together a twenty-case order for our distributor. Pammy was in the main kitchen, finishing the morning’s batch. Suddenly, I heard the crash of metal, like a cymbal in a drum kit. A normal kitchen sound. Followed by Pammy’s guttural growl:
“You fucking son-of-a-bitch.” Then the timber of tongs, followed by a solid whump, like a deflated basketball hitting the floor. I stifled an involuntary stress-giggle.

Pammy muttered, “Can’t get ahead, can’t get any help around here,” and I saw her shadow stalk out the door, pointy red tail trailing behind her. The water, I realized. She had forgotten to check the water levels on the pans so the bottom logs had burned. And she was mad at me for not checking them either, even though I was just as busy as she was. The kitchen was silent, except for Shara, advising: After slogging through Capricorn, when Pluto squares with Venus, she will be in crisis! We know our own weaknesses—sugar, coffee, bad relationships. Beware of codependency. I sighed, picked up the lone log splayed on the floor, its edges charred, its flesh cracked like a wound.

*

Each passing day was like a photo slide, flashing color on a white wall, then gone. I began to stay later at the bar, having discovered that a few shots of Irish whisky helped me to sleep longer before I would inevitably wake up to the highway of pain stretching from my fingertips to elbows. Carpal tunnel, like a functional drunk, only reared its ugly head at night, when my body was relaxed, lying flat. I would pace my apartment, shake them out, in order to dull the pain enough to sleep. But, I woke to hands as stiff as my half-frozen steering wheel. I drove to work with my pinkies (the only fingers not controlled by the median nerve). Hung-over, the smells of the spices I mixed into the gluten made my stomach lurch. While scrubbing the caked pans, I watched the massage students out the window, sitting at the picnic table, joking and rubbing each other’s
shoulders. They looked happy. Sleep deprived, I nodded off at the sink, lulled by the rushing water, the steam.

I finally broke down and paid $75 to see a doctor. He performed a Tinel test on me by tapping on the median nerve in my wrist. My fingers tingled, grew numb. He told me I would need to have to have surgery if I kept it up. That I risked wasting away the muscles at the base of my thumb. Risked not being able to feel hot and cold. Risked being unable to hold a spoon, make a fist. “You’ll have to find another job,” he told me. “And of course, another line of work.” In the meantime, he patted my back and gave me two wrist splints.

I didn’t want to quit. But I didn’t want to stay, either. I was relieved that someone else had made the decision for me.

One April morning, my hands were too stiff to open a can of cat food. Cleo circled me, crying hungrily as I tried to pull the flimsy tab with my teeth. I threw down the can, filled up her dry food instead, spilling kibbles over the linoleum. I thought about Pammy, how she acted like she was paying me so much money ($7.50 an hour). How the seitan had bought her a modest house, at least. How the seitan was paying for her girlfriend to go to law school. How the seitan provided their occasional weekend trips to Provincetown, Mass, and how I walked and fed their dogs while they were gone. What would make sense, I thought, would be to invest in an automatic slicer and an industrial sized mixer. Why did I have to be her damn equipment?

Armed with my fury and the wrist braces, I told Pammy everything: the pain, the herbalist, the doctor, my hungry cat.
She looked at me skeptically. “Did you take some Advil?” she asked. Then she buried herself in the silver fridge, marking inventory on her clipboard.

Now I can see that Pammy, too, felt trapped by the seitan, and had seen me as a way out of a life married to physical labor. She wanted to concentrate on marketing, introducing her product to new customers, and inventing other vegan recipes to complement the seitan. She had put nearly three months into training me essentially, for nothing. She had to start over with someone else.

After letting the information sink in, and after a pow-wow with her girlfriend, she came around. She told me she understood and was sorry to lose me. We made an uneasy peace. I continued to cook lunches for the massage students until their six-month term was over and Pammy found a stout Chinese woman to take over the rest. She and her girlfriend invited me to their commitment ceremony later than spring. I bought them a pretty teapot.

The psychiatric home had not hired anyone to replace me, so I was able to slip into my old job, gratefully. Though I quickly got my clients on a regime of fresh vegetables, my life with food slowly faded to the background, like music does when you’re thinking about something else. It was a relief to hear the chatter of real voices again (even my client’s bizarre ponderings about the devil speaking through Beatles lyrics). I guessed it was just in my stars to work with people instead of wheat.