

## Introduction

“I would define, in brief, the poetry of words as the rhythmical creation of Beauty.”

Edgar Allen Poe

I had never put so much effort into something that came together so simply. The collection of creative fiction and poetry you have before is a part of me. I am entwined in the words that I have let spill forth from the keys on my computer. I have left details of my life, and lives of strangers on these pages, because life around me forms the basis for my portfolio. I always hated poetry in school, I think that when you are taught poetry in school, teacher's don't express how important the emotional connections. I have had an amazing experience throughout college because I had teacher's who made me dig deep to find the emotional connection in my work. I have pulled from the dark places in my life, and from painful memories of others, but I've also used the highlights as well.

I can't believe that I finally found the courage to write from my heart and release into the world, and I'd like to thank Catherine Wing and Katherine Orr for that. These two women has fixed my grammar, eliminated my comma use, and drove me to be a much better writer. I was honored to have two amazing poets as my mentors for the experience, and I think my work has finally found it's space because of their guidance. I'd also like to mention Chad Ries, my high school Honors English teacher who gave me the drive to pursue my writing, and was always there to give me an honest critique. I appreciate the impact you've had on my life, and hope you know, that this would never have been possible without you.

I have tried to tell the truth in my words, and to show the reality of being alive. I hope you enjoy the words on these pages.

## Details

My small town,  
closed and for rent signs,  
friends and family out of jobs,  
trying to get by.

Semi safe town,  
between Youngstown and Warren,  
one family that splintered into three.

The mother who loved me,  
despite mental tower she trapped herself in,  
the father who didn't have the time,  
but always kept space in his heart,  
and my aunt and uncle who raised me,  
from the pieces that ended up on their doorstep.

I am the brightest hope for a family,  
whose members have all but burned out  
The little sister that has yet to disappoint,  
the way her older brother already has.

I am just trying to find my place.

How far does the apple tumble down from the family tree?

I see many reflections of myself,

writer,

friend.

Trying to put down roots of my own,

frozen,

still.

Worrying that those roots would rot in the ground,

barren,

terrified.

Sprouting from my roots, twisted reflection of the mother I had,

embodiment,

recreation.

Tip toeing steps in my own life, catching my shadow's reflection,

who I am,

different.

Glimpses caught of something I'd rather not be,

shoved away,

by light switch

which drives all shadowy forms from constant taunting.

## Shadow

I wince at memories  
as young child, hidden in a closet,  
among dusty books.  
hours upon hours,  
ignoring grumbling tummies,  
making up stories,  
having discussions with the stuffed animals,  
while the world went on without me.  
In my Mother's shadow, I grew carefully.

I see flashes much more frequently as I grow up.  
I've shed the veil of childhood acceptance,  
starting seeing my life as I lived it.  
Memories of how if you shut the door tight enough,  
the yelling seemed less frightening,  
less threatening, less dangerous,  
more like sound from a T.V some distance away.  
In my Mother's shadow, I walked carefully.

Trust isn't a luxury,  
growing up, fiercely independent,  
sick parent creates a watchdog child.  
washing clothes at age seven,  
cooking dinner at age nine.  
Being an adult doesn't make you a parent,  
life will make you the child.  
In my Mother's shadow, I learned carefully.

## Moments

The alarm went off on my bedside table, I groan and try to hit the snooze button, but just end up turning on the radio. This new alarm clock is going to take some breaking in, I can tell. I look at the glowing green face, 4:30. I usually start around 5 in the morning, trying to figure out some story, something to photograph, anything just to give me a paycheck. Rent was due in about a week, so at this point I'd shoot pictures of anything that would sell, celebrities, protests, anything. Rent is expensive and I'd like to keep my place. I listen as the radio tells me the weather for today... mid 60's, a bit cloudy, low chance of rain. I am amazed that it's not colder, New York in the fall isn't the warmest.

After a quick shower, I poured what was left of the coffee I brewed yesterday into a mug, pop it in the microwave and go grab my bag. I have trouble deciding which coat to wear, even though I only have three, but I finally pick the one my mother bought me last Christmas, it's light blue, and has a hood, so it'll help if it rains on me. The microwave beeps and I grab the coffee and head out the door. I have to take two subway trains to get to the area that I usually travel around for work. Today, I decided to only take one subway and walk the rest of the way. It was about 5 blocks, but I walked unhurriedly, taking notice of everything around me. Seemed like a slow day in

the busy city. Just my luck. I had scanned yesterday's paper for any indication of big events, listened to NPR online, and even scanned some blogs by some of the local activists, or crazy people as I call them. No one had any leads on anything worth photographing. Man, I really need something good today.

About a half hour later, I open the door of the small bagel place that I stopped into every day. It's a hole in the wall kind of place, but the owner is interesting and they always open at 6 am every day with fresh bagels. Joe, the owner, hands me my bagel and smiles. I've been coming here since the day I accidentally stumbled in looking for a bookstore, two weeks after I moved. He sees the look on my face today, so he throws in a chocolate chip scone for free. I grab my order and set some money down.

"Cheer up kid, it's still early!"

Joe's seen me almost every day, trying to find something worthwhile in my section of the big city. Photographers are really territorial about their sections, especially the better ones. I ended up in the area of North Street and Vessy Street, nothing special, mainly giant office buildings obscuring the sky, which means I'm lucky enough to walk around in horrible light all day looking for photographs, but at least I'm always right around where Joe's shop is every morning.

“I hope you’re right, Joe... Just hoping today gives me something good, my landlord isn’t going to wait much longer.”

“Air seems tense today... Maybe that means something will happen, just keep looking...” Joe trails off and looks out the window, trying to see the sky. Today the sky is a striking clear blue, a few puffy clouds float by, but not many. It would be a perfect backdrop for an aerial shot, if there were something to shoot besides some pigeons. It’s rather warm for fall and I’m only wearing a light jacket which I’m glad for. The cold can hold off completely in my opinion. I smile at Joe, every day he tells me the same variety of cheerful sentiment. He is one of the colorful characters you’ve heard about in big cities; he thinks he can tell when big events will happen, just by standing outside listening. When I listen in New York City, all I hear is people talking, horns honking, breaks squealing, and occasional music depending on where I am. I always wished it were true though, just so I still wouldn’t be freelancing off and on 6 years after graduation.

“Let’s hope you’re finally right this time, Joe!” I holler back as I head down North Street towards the group of tall office buildings. Maybe picketers will be outside of one of them today. There are about 7 office buildings in this area, varying sizes. My father always said, the taller the building the more likely there’s someone hiding out

on a top floor doing something unethical. I casually stroll down the street, eating my bagel, looking around. I'm so distracted with my own mental commentary that I don't notice I bump into someone, but rather that I had dropped my bagel. Sadly, I look up, and see a similarly distracted person bending down to grab his papers.

"I'm so sorry..." We both say in unison, and then laugh.

"It's so corny when people say things in unison in movies, I never think it's actually going to happen ya know?" The guy smiles, he seems genuinely amused, and I'm caught off guard. When someone bumps into you in New York City, you usually prepare for a stream of curse words.

"Yeah, it's my fault completely; I'm so distracted today with my own issues that I can hardly pay attention to where I'm going. I'm Allison by the way"

"I'm Bradley. Believe me, I know how you feel... I've got this major interview at Marsh & McLennan at 8:30, and I need this job desperately."

"Oh yeah, that's one heck of a job... Well, good luck to you. I hope all goes well!"

I turn to continue walking down the street when Bradley catches my arm.

"Hey, I know we just met, but can I ask a favor? I just I flew in this morning and the airport lost my baggage and I don't have anything remotely professional enough for this interview. All I have is what I'm wearing now," I look him over, he's dressed in

causal jeans, and a University of Iowa hoodie. I noted it's definitely not interview attire while he continued. "I've been running around the city in search of a good looking, but not bank breakingly expensive suit."

He laughed and shrugged his shoulders, I could tell he was in rough shape, but he wasn't being snippy or rude and so I appreciated it.

"Well, did you look over at Century 21? They usually have decent prices, though for a suit worthy of Marsh & McLennan, it's not going to be that cheap. They are about a block up from Marsh & McLennan's offices. I can walk there with you, if you haven't been there."

"No, I haven't, I have yet to go anywhere in New York but my hotel and here."

He laughs, and I smile. You can always point out a non-resident of New York City. They are usually cheerful, helpful and friendly, that's what I was told when I moved here from Ohio anyway.

"It's a good thing I have a lot of extra time today then." I smiled at him, and his startling green eyes, and started to walk towards Century 21.

I figured I should probably should be looking for something to photograph instead of walking a very charming out-of-towner to my favorite discount store, but I

felt like life owed me one nice walk with an attractive man, especially with my recent dating history. It's hard to meet guys in this city; most of the guys I meet are assholes, beatniks, or not interested in women. Maybe I'm just picky, but I would just like a guy in my life who wasn't trying to control it, or sponge off of it. Bradley may only be in town today, but at this point, I just didn't care. I'm a nervous talker, I have to fill all silence with word vomit. I kept up a constant stream of chatter and questions about homes, families, where we were from and how we ended up where we were.

“I don't think my parents ever wanted me to get into photography, and, as I'm reminded by weekly phone calls, they didn't want me to move to New York City on my own. I always wanted to do something creative, but I'm horrible with words. In high school we were required to take an art class, so I decided to give photography a shot, and from that moment on, I knew I wanted to try to capture something that would change lives, or at least broaden people's minds like though National Geographic photos, you know? So, after college, I couldn't afford to go to Africa, so I came here. New York seemed be the closest I'd get to life changing events on my budget, and I never really looked back.”

“Does it pay enough? I had friends in the arts at school, but it just didn’t seem like a practical job...” Bradley smiled at me, and I was surprised to see he was genuinely interested in my ramblings.

“I never cared about the money, I saved up for my move by working two jobs through college but then reality hit and I realized living in this city wasn’t as easy as living in Ohio, everything is ten times more expensive, so money is completely necessary. I’ve kinda pushed my artistic ambitions aside.” I hated that I hadn’t done more, it made me feel like a failure in a lot of ways. I’ve been out of school six years, and most of my friends had stable jobs, houses, and families by now.

“It’s ironically the opposite in my life, somewhat. Both my parents are heavily into the arts, but I never found the passion in it. My parents both went to Berkley, but ended up in Iowa, teaching. My father is a photography professor at the local community college, and my mom teaches art to eighth graders. I just like working with solid things, and the idea of financial planning just kind of fell into my lap after I got my degree. I am about to apply for the perfect job for me, and I haven’t gotten one “Good Luck” call from my family. It’s a steady job, with a great health plan, and is in the most exciting city in the country. You’d think for people who want to be grandparents so badly, they’d be excited by my white collar career, but I guess they

were just hoping the apple would have fallen closer to the tree, you know?” He shrugged again, and then smiled.

His smile was disarming, it was almost perfect and held a warmth in it, and I welcomed that. Living in this city, you always feel a bit disconnected with people. I had friends, but they were all on different schedules and we never seem to find time to get together. I was lonely, and in a small way, his smile made me feel a bit better. We reached the front door of Century 21, and I stopped.

“Well, I got you here, safe and sound,” I laugh as I say it. We’re in the business area of New York, it’s probably one of the safest areas we have, but he wouldn’t know that.

“I really appreciate it. It seems so hard to find anyone in this city to help a tourist out. You New Yorkers aren’t really big on giving directions, ya know...”

“Yeah, we usually assume everyone knows where they’re going, and we’re usually too busy to care anyway.”

I take out my business card, I had 100 of them printed when I moved out here five years ago, and I’ve maybe handed out half of them.

“Here, my card has my cell phone and email on it. If you ever want to get dinner or something, just lemme know. It’s good to have a friend who knows where the best places to eat in this city are,” I laugh and hand him my card. I’m hoping for his call.

“Definitely! Thanks for all your help Allison. Good luck finding a story today! It might be the day your photographs finally change the world,” He laughs and pulls open the door. It’s about 7:45, so the store is still relatively empty, but I remembered they open at 7 am during the week to cater to the Wall Street crowd.

“Good luck at your interview,” I call after him, but I can’t tell if he heard me or not. I wonder if he’ll get the job. Marsh & McLennan is a big deal in financial investing, and they rarely have job openings. Maybe it’s a good sign for all of us today. Bradley was grounded, sweet, charming, and has a stable life ahead of him. Plus, he is the best shot at a Thanksgiving date I have.

I kept walking to the main two buildings in this business district. Men in suits are walking up and down the street carrying briefcases. There are families walking around the street, getting an early start on their sightseeing. My family was never big on taking family trips. The furthest we went was Cleveland to visit the Indoor Amusement Park, which when I look back was the biggest waste of money ever. It smelled bad, and the rides were quite lame.

Time passed quickly, I made my rounds, walking by all my major buildings. No protests, no sign of anything worth taking a picture of. I took some pictures of a few homeless people holding signs. Nothing that I'm going to get paid for. I looked at my cellphone. It was about 8:40. I was standing near to the building that held Marsh & McLennan and I looked up and hoped that Bradley's interview was going well. The sky was still clear, but now almost cloudless, and very still. There wasn't even a single stupid pigeon flying about.

It was then I noticed it. A plane, like one you would take to head to Florida and it was so low I was worried it was going to hit something. I always thought that as a child, and my parents kept reminding me, it just seemed that way. In the next moment, my world halted. I heard the plane, loud. I knew I shouldn't have been able to hear it. I grabbed my camera. I was hoping to just take a picture of this low flying plane, but after I snapped a few pictures, I realized the plane was getting lower. Then I looked around me, everyone was stopped, looking up. No one sees a plane this low in Manhattan.

I realized that the plane wasn't going to clear the tower. I didn't know what to do; I kept snapping pictures. I heard the noise first, an ear shattering explosion. I had never heard anything like it before in my life. I ran as far back as I could. There was

smoke filling the air. The plane had crashed into the tower. Even from where I was, about half a block away from the tower, I knew that this was news. I was holding my camera but I couldn't seem to take any more pictures. All I could think of was Bradley, and the fact that Marsh & McLennan was located on the 94th floor of the building that was hit. His interview was at 8:30, and it was now about 8:50. He would've been wrapping up his interview as the plane hit the tower. I let my camera hang limply around my neck.

## Bruises and Maps

Red brown stain her arms  
lasting reminders of  
a war waged behind closed doors,  
damage too close to home,  
she's been fighting too long.  
lines on her face create  
a map of where she's been  
she hopes it's being read right,  
she doesn't wanna back  
down any of those roads.  
Books pile on the table,  
make lists of places she's never been.  
Every night, she puts a few dollars in a jar,  
"I'm gonna put this place in my rearview mirror"  
Cliche'd songs of life being a highway don't ring true.  
Her life's not a highway -  
but a single line, full of potholes,  
going straight through the ghetto at midnight.

She's going somewhere.

### Slow Dancing in a Burning Room

As I was pulling into the driveway, I stopped and looked in my rearview mirror at the sunset behind me. The reds and oranges were slowly blending into a dark blue; in a way it was comforting, for a moment, I didn't want to get out of my car. Work was tough, and I haven't heard anything from Georgia all day, but it looks like we have company again. Georgia has a personality that lures people, like moths to a flame. Georgia blazes brightly; people can't help but want to be around her. The blaze drew me in, as she danced around the detention room and all the eyes were on her.

There were a few cars I didn't recognize. Each one shared similar characteristics, a bumper stick reading "Coexist" and "Honk if you support the Arts," and from that, and the rust holding the car together, I assumed these were some of Georgia's new "art" pals. She had started taking an art class at a local college, and I was supportive of all the supply fees because I thought the class would be good for her. Georgia had been mulling around the house after she was laid off from the only job she ever wanted; she had her own column in *Alternative Times*, an indie music magazine, and she had worked her butt off through high school and her four years of college at Ohio University to get it. She was able to write from home, fly to a few interviews, and send in her columns, which was perfect for her. She loved her

hometown. I never really understood it but I accepted it, for her. Just like I accepted going to Ohio University for my business and accounting degree, just to be with her.

It's always been about her, and being with her. We had an exceptional first date, because she threw everything I planned in the trash. She changed the restaurant from Cheesecake Factory to a little tea shop down the road. She gave the roses to the little girl passing us as we walked in, and had us walk along the river. I wouldn't have changed a damn thing. That's the moment I knew I could love her, if she'd let me. The battle was always going to be getting her to let me. But, it's been years now, and we have our own place. I think we have finally made it, but you never know with Georgia. She always been dancing around the truth, she couldn't seem to stay still in the reality.

As I unlocked the door, I could hear the music playing. Her new obsession was The Beatles, she's been playing the White Album nonstop for the last two weeks and it was starting to drive me crazy. It's not that I don't appreciate the Beatles, but there's only so much a guy can take. I slowly opened the door, and the thick smoke hit me. It had been filling up my house for more than 2 hours now, because it was all you could breathe. I walked over to the kitchen and turned on the fan. I didn't know what else to do, but the smell was already getting to me, her new habit made my allergies go haywire.

“Baby! You’re home late!,” Georgia squealed as she struggled to get up from the couch.

Georgia was wearing a bathing suit for some odd reason. I look at the clock, it’s only four o’clock. My normal work day doesn’t even end till at least five on a good day. She was clearly out of it. Just wonderful.

“Nice outfit babe, umm.. have you been home all day?” I gently approach the topic of her new unemployed life.

I take in the state of the living room: there’s empty Chinese containers, sketch books, empty beer bottles and the ashtray is a total mess. I look at her, her eyes shine and her smile is a bit confused. Finally, I take in the surrounding people... Three other guys sit around, and they have sketch pads, and I finally notice they are drawing her. I shake my head, partially because this scene is so ludicrous, and partly because I just want to get it out of my head.

“Yeah, class ended early so we decided to get food and come back here and hang out. This is Steven, Tyler, and Greg,” Georgia points to each of the guys, and in

turn they nod at me. I look at the guy closest to me, Tyler, and ask if I can see his sketchbook.

“Sure man,” he drawls and he hands it over to me. I flip through the basic pictures of fruit in a bowl, the guy actually had some decent talent, but then I get to pictures of people, and I realize it’s Georgia with another guy. They are sitting close together, heads bent down. Oh well, It’s probably a class assignment. It isn’t until I get to the picture of the tattoo Georgia has on her lower back, that sketches started to bother me. There is half the sketchbook filled with pictures of Georgia’s naked body, laying on what appears to be our couch. She’s laying on her stomach, with her legs up in the air. In the drawing, two men sit on the floor appearing naked as well, gazing at her. I froze.

“What the fuck is this, Georgia?!”

I throw down the sketchbook. At that, Tyler, Greg and Steven are jarred out of their drug induced haze and immediately get up. There’s a chorus of things about “See you later” and “Great time,”and “Bye Dude;” They are immediately gone from the

living room and the house. Georgia has yet to respond to my outburst, she just sits there staring at me.

“Is this something you think is acceptable? Honestly, Georgia, what else are you doing? Drinking, drugs, and now nude modeling?! What’s gotten into you?”

I’ve never raised my voice to Georgia, or voiced any opposing viewpoint to her, but lately, it’s just been a downhill slide. I’ve been watching her self destruct right before my eyes. I can’t handle it much longer; I don’t know if our relationship can handle it. Georgia looks up at me, her eyes are damp, but other than that she’s still together. I’m not sure I’ve ever seen Georgia cry.

“John, I’m sorry, but I’m not even sure why I did it, ok? It sounded like a good idea, I’m confused, all love has ever taught me is to lie, to myself or to you, happiness isn’t easy for me, I don’t know how to be happy, John!!” She looks at me. Her face isn’t sad or angry, just lost. I don’t think she knows what’s even been going on.

“Are you even with me anymore, Georgia? You’ve been coming home at four in the morning every night, drunk beyond belief. I don’t know what you’ve been doing every night, or better yet, with whom? I see all the number’s written on your hands

when you get home. You can't even fucking remember how you got home. I'm tired of seeing you destroy yourself Georgia, and frankly I'm tired of letting you destroy us!" I know I'm yelling now, but I just can't believe that it's taken me so long to realize it. The Georgia I loved, the one I rearranged my whole life for, she's fading fast. I can't see the glow around her, that shine that got me to notice her in the first place.

"I'm sorry John, I haven't been faithful to you, I tried, but this relationship got so serious." I could hear the emotion building in her voice, "I never asked for serious, or steady, or even for you to follow me around like a fucking dog since high school!" She yelled this time.

I'm literally in shock now, not because she hadn't been faithful because honestly, I knew that. I've seen phone numbers fall out of her pockets when I help undress her at night, and the fact that her clothes smell like cologne I have never owned, but mainly because I just didn't want to accept it, or mainly I had just been too blindly in love to see it. Did I build this up in my head? This perfect relationship, this love that I thought would last? I just didn't think it was possible.

"I can't do this every day, coming home to you John, not now... I haven't been able to tell you, but I thought if you never knew then we could continue to pretend

things were ok, but they haven't been, because honestly, I don't love you John, I don't think I ever have."

I looked up into Georgia's eyes and it confirmed what I feared all along, there wasn't love there, her eyes were empty and glazed. I am amazed because the magnetism I found in those eyes all those years ago is gone. I don't know the girl in front of me, and I sure as hell don't know myself. How did this all go on? Was Georgia ever how I remembered her? Or was she just some teenage fantasy I built up and never let go?

I stared at Georgia and around the home we have built together and I was still in shock. I started to blame myself, just like anyone in a break up does at first. Slowly, I sat down on the couch. I didn't really notice Georgia get up, or even move until I heard the front door close. I was thinking back on our whole lives together, every moment, each date, and every night we spent together. I realize now that our first date was far from perfect, I had planned the perfect date and she tore it apart. I realize never once did Georgia ever say, "I love you", she said variations of it, hints of it like "Love Ya", or "You Too Babe," but it has never been anything more. I just assumed she felt like I did. I built myself a life based only on a fantasy I had played out to myself.

Our perfect first date? It was all an illusion, and I think I always knew things would end up like this, this slow dance that Georgia's been doing, it just distracted me from the burning room around us. I stood up, walked to the fridge, and grabbed myself a beer. It's all I really could do.

Home

Home is:  
barren  
changing  
claustrophobic  
messy.

Home is:  
still house  
silent room  
dread  
moments.

Home is:  
guilt  
purpose driven  
regret  
timeless.

Home is:  
warm cookies  
new shoelaces  
first address  
last thoughts.

Safety

i.

I sit by the window and wait for the rays of sun to shine through. The hills roll endlessly on in front of me, a sea of green, without hope of shore. I tremble, as the orange streaks fade into night. It always seems as though the world around us is on fire. The wind whistles through the holes in the worn out wood of the small shed. I clasp my sister's dirt caked hands in mine as we sit side by side in the increasing darkness.

ii.

Our parents went to find food. They haven't returned and I fear they are laying cold by the side of the road. There's no work out there. I thought that they'd come back to us and we'd never be alone. I'm not sure they are ever coming back, there's a war waging outside our front door, in the cities and in the streets. I keep the hope alive only for my sister. I tell her, "I've heard people swear that on the other side of the valley there's a city that's thriving; that people aren't living on scraps day after day." It seems to calm her.

ii.

My sister whimpers as we lose the last bit of light. Our last candle is burnt to a stump, and without money, we won't be getting new ones. I squeeze her hand tightly as I promise, "You'll be all right, morning light will come soon. Just close your eyes." As she rests her head in my lap, she whispers, "Don't leave me here alone." I just brush her hair with my hand and stare out the window into the darkness, knowing that come morning light, nothing will have changed.

## Family History: Set of Three

I.

I dreaded seeing the reds and oranges,  
streak the horizon, staining it red.

I dreading knowing that I had to do  
what was prudent,  
what was honorable  
what my family was in need of,  
desperately.

I felt irresolute,  
being ordered away,  
Leaving the only place I'd ever known  
Across the vast, unconquered ocean  
another land, but not a home,  
Where I was to metamorphose into:  
A wife,  
A matriarch,  
An dutiful servant  
Of our Nation,  
my family,  
and my Lord.

I just celebrated my fourteenth year,  
now I must leave behind my quarters,  
My siblings and childhood possessions,  
I was told:  
pack one case of things I want,  
one case compiling my whole life.  
Mama says that he will provide for me.  
I don't even know the gentleman,

I came across him  
once  
over tea,  
I do not adore him,  
I do not wish to be entrapped  
miles away  
with only he, and the desolation.  
But it is my duty.

II.

As I rise along with the sun,  
looking out my window,  
across the estate I have kept for 2 years now.  
I feel my body shedding the final stages of change.  
I have been confined to my chamber,  
as the doctor says the exhaustion is dangerous,  
My pregnancy was rough.  
I've done what I was expected to do,  
as my mother explained in her letter.  
I wished she was present,  
travel costs have risen  
because of the war.  
My husband smiles at me now,  
I know it is because of Teddy.  
He has a son to carry on the family line.  
I wonder if his affection to grow,  
or if once the excitement wanes, he will as well.

I look into the eyes of my child,  
and know that I will never be alone.

Not anymore.

I lay back to rest

I will have a full day tomorrow,

Teddy has his baptism.

III.

I don't rise with the sun anymore,  
barely leave my bed.

The maid comes in every morning

to open the curtains,

to leave food by my bed.

My husband comes to visit once a day,

he sits with me

His voice is soothing.

he reads the bible.

I take comfort in the words.

The doctor confirmed my only fear,

I wouldn't see my eighteenth year.

I contracted a disease

after the pregnancy,

my body's weakness,

my sensitive condition.

I have to keep a kerchief by my bed

It's lightly stained,

I know the maid changes it each day

to keep me from worrying.

Teddy is almost two now  
he comes to visit me,  
and explains to me what he is being taught  
I enjoy seeing the world through his eyes  
I remember my youth.  
Maids have explained my condition,  
he has yet to understand.  
Everyday he asks me if I would like to come outside.  
I see him out my window,  
learning to fly a kite or visiting the horses.  
I have provided for him a stable life,  
without a struggle.  
He will not have to go hungry in the winter  
will be graced with prosperity and education.  
I have succeeded.

For Lisa

As they lowered the casket, I couldn't help but feel like if I had been there, made more of a presence in her life, she wouldn't be gone. I wouldn't have to wear the ridiculous black dress in the middle of July, and stand here next to all the family and friends who pretended not to know or feel what Lisa was struggling with. I knew. I'll always know, and I left. I shouldn't have gone. I could've gone to Pitt; I could've stayed at home, working my waitress gig at Pete's until I graduated. Who am I kidding? I could've stayed here my whole life, just like my parents did. Raise my kids in the town I was raised in. Continue the cycle of middle class living and high class drinking. I shook myself, and stepped back. Everyone was looking at me. The day was sunny and beautiful, nice seventy degree weather without a cloud in the sky. I felt the warmth on my back as I walked up to the casket. I could see Scott, Mom, and Dad all eyeing me, wondering what was taking me so long. They had said their goodbyes, I was the last to go. The grieving sister, that's what they called me. They had no idea how much I was grieving. I blamed myself, I blamed my father, my mother. I blamed the whole community. Lisa, my baby sister, is dead. She didn't get into a car crash, have a heart

attack, or drown. No, my little sister, the only sunshine in our whole family killed herself.

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I think that what mattered most was the fact that this college was not in the same state as my family. I was going to Ohio Wesleyan University, which was about 4 and a half hours away from my small town of Latrobe. I was beyond ready to run from the neighbors who have always known whenever anyone in my family got a cough, the kids who I have shared the same classrooms with since Kindergarten, and especially, my parents who couldn't stand to live in the same house anymore. I was the stadium crowd watching my parents play a championship football game against each other, every day, for the last 5 years. My older brother Scott, was usually the cheerleader, always pushing them, testing them, getting them psyched up for the game; I was silently watching from the stands, just hoping the game would get called off due to foul play. It was always Lisa, she was the referee, she would call the game off the minute it seemed too intense. All she had to do was walk in, smile, and offer to help out in some way, and my parents would drop the ball, and go back to making dinner. She may not have been perfect but she always found a way to calm the storm, and that

made her perfect in my eyes. I never knew how she did it; I was always too afraid to step in between my parents, like getting between two starving dogs fighting for scraps, they may not aim to bite you but they will by accident.

“Honestly, Alan, I just don’t know HOW many times I need to ask you to do the dishes before the DAMN dishes get done! 13 times? 40 times?” My mom was at it again, like usual, something small.

“I don’t know, Linda, maybe if I wasn’t working every day, plus overtime just to pay for the freaking remodel you just HAD to have, I’d have more time to wash some dishes.”

My dad was an accountant at a firm just outside of town; he’d been working there ever since I can remember. He had always been “just about to get that big promotion,” but now he’s three years away from retiring and has never made it any higher than a normal grade accountant. Dad usually had to work overtime, 4 out of the 6 days of the week, and when he wasn’t working overtime, he was out drinking overtime with his buddies from high school. My mom never quite realized we weren’t like our neighbors in this area who would buy things they never needed. Mom tried to

keep up with it, by the solarium out back. It was definitely a “keeping up with the Jones’s” kinda thing.

I had just gotten off work, and heard the yelling from the driveway, so I decided to go in the backdoor and avoid the fighting altogether, but as I snuck in the backdoor, I saw Lisa heading down the stairs, fourteen going on forty, Mom always said. I watch as Lisa walks into the kitchen, right in the middle of the yelling, and both Mom and Dad turn to her.

“I was just coming in to finish up the dishes, I promised to do them in exchange for being able to stay extra late at the library this Thursday, they are having a discussion of *The Di Vinci Code*, and I’d hate to miss it. My whole reading group is going to be there.”

Dad knew it was a lie, but he let Lisa continue. Lisa would just smile, and both my parents would melt. It would be useful if she ever chose to misbehave but she didn’t, Lisa was perfect. She was quiet, introverted. She wasn’t good at everything, but she was my little sister. Despite how she tried, she wasn’t outgoing, her only friends were her reading group, which consisted of mostly forty-something homemakers, but she loved it.

“Oh, it’s okay dear, the dishes can wait. While don’t you help your father set the table instead?” My mom smiles, and set down the plates.

The argument has ended, so I decide to venture into the kitchen before I head upstairs to change out of my uniform. You would have never known that there was a fight going on in there only minutes beforehand. My mother and father were working alongside each other effortlessly to prepare dinner for our family. Dad was humming, Mom was whistling. Each a different tune, I suppose that said a lot about them, never on the same page. I walked over to Lisa and helped her set the table. She smiled at me, which was quite a comfort after the day I’ve had. Dad always said her smiles could stop the world from ending; I believe it.

“How was work today? Busy?”

She knows I’ve been struggling to make tips because no one wants to go out to eat in a depressed economy. I needed to pay my car payment, buy my school books, and I still wanted to be able to go out with my friends sometimes.

“Better today, there was a sale on pizza so we had tons of take out, but a few of them did decided to eat in instead.” I had made over fifty dollars today, so I considered it a successful day.

We finished setting the table, and I decided to run upstairs and change my outfit before we ate. Scott wasn't home from basketball practice anyway, so I knew we had time. I walked upstairs and decided to hop in the shower. I gathered my clothes and walked into the bathroom. As I was starting the shower, I could hear Scott's car pull in the driveway through the open window, so I knew I had to hurry. I took a quick shower, passed on washing my hair and dried off. I threw on my clothes, and headed downstairs, just in time. Scott had just changed and Mom was putting the lasagna on the table.

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Lisa was beautiful, I envy her, even now, but she never really had a boyfriend. She was always too shy to talk to anyone. It was hard to love or hate a girl who never spoke. Her funeral was respectful. The church was full of people. Everyone from the neighborhood was there, since they had watched Lisa grow up, had bought lemonade from her at her yearly lemonade stand, and cookies from every band fundraiser. Almost every student from her graduating class was there, and all of the teachers from Latrobe Junior High School. This was a tragedy, and no one could fully understand the "why". I could overhear conversations, snip its of people discussing how this happened.

“I can’t believe Lisa died, do you know what happened?” A girl that I recognized from being in the flag line with Lisa

“I heard that it was suicide, she was depressed, something to do with a boy, I heard, such a shame,” A girl I had never seen before was comforting the flag line girl.

I couldn’t get over all these rumors that were flying about my baby sister. Her suicide had gotten out, and now the town gossip mill was churning with ideas about why it happened. If you live in a small town like this, you suffer from the fact that your business is everyone’s business. When our parents got separated, I remember Lisa telling me that teacher’s would pull her aside and ask if she was handling it okay. “I’m not sure why the teacher’s have to get involved, I’m sure they’ll work it out and get back together, if everyone could just let them be,” she told me on the phone. I had just started my first semester at school when the news spread like wildfire through our town.

I’m jarred from my thoughts by Jane, a friend of mine from high school

“How are you doing? I know this is tough.” with the same generic sentiment everyone has offered.

In my head, I tell her, *You don't understand a tenth of what I'm feeling, you with your whole family; fiancée, and college degree. You graduated early; and you're about to be married. Lisa will never be married, she'll never graduate college. She's gone.*

I respond with a "I'm doing all right, thank you," and let her move on to other people, feeling like she completed the duty of the stereotypical "high school friend," you know, one you were close with through those endless four years but as soon as you headed to college, you lost touch. It continues like that, everyone coming up to me with the same sentiments, and moving on to Scott and his family, then my parents. No one understands. Not Scott, who has been out of the house the longest. He has a family, a wife, children, a home away from us. Not Mom, she's been distracted with a string of unsuitable boyfriends. She is currently dating a younger man she met in the grocery store three weeks ago. They take weekend trips to visit wineries. Dad, he hasn't found anyone but the bottle of Jack that never leaves his side, except for today. Today, he's sober, for once, and somber. I can see he blames himself, finally. His abuse is what pushed me out of the house, and kept Lisa trapped, trying to fix a marriage and a family that was doomed from the start. When their marriage fell apart, so did Lisa. She lost the one place her voice mattered.

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I always remember the fear. *I look at the clock, 3:00, I hear the door slam. I know Dad is home, I get up, and brace myself. I know Lisa, next door to me, is doing the same thing, as is our Mom. We all sit on the edge of our beds, mirror images of each other, a true family resemblance. Tense, ready to spring at the first sign of trouble. We never knew what door he'll decide to open, thinking it's his room, and when he realizes it's not, then it becomes my fault, or Lisa's fault. If he does manage to find his own bedroom, Mom has to take the brunt of his drunk anger, but she holds strong. Some nights he just yells, but other nights result in bruises on her, on us, and on our souls.*

I can't remember when Dad started drinking like this. Growing up, he never did. He was always there at every football game, basketball game and baseball game of Scott's, and when Scott left, he tried to support Lisa in the band, but he missed being the father of the star player. It was never the same with two girls left. I think that's when he started drinking more, he felt purposeless, and outnumbered in a house full of women. He started spending "Guy's Nights" as he called them, down at the bar. First they were once a month, to every couple weeks, to once a week, and now we're lucky if he is sober at all anymore.

*Another door slams... It's not my door. I am safe for a second, and then I realize whose door it is. I wait, silent and still, trying to listen for the yelling, it's the sign of comfort. If Dad yells, there will be less bruises the next day. I pray silently to the God I had begun to question, Please, please, just let him yell at her, let him yell and stumble back to bed. Please, not Lisa, not tonight. I hold my breath, but then it starts, his deep voice, calling out through a silent house.*

*“What the fuck are you doing up? Were you planning on going out, you fucking slut, you are just like your mother, a bunch of fucking whores in this house. You are lucky I’m a good man, most people would kick a bitch like you out on the street where you belong. I do everything around here, provide for everyone, and I get fucking nothing in return. I should make you work all the time, see how you like it. Fuck this.”*

*I hear him stumble out into the hallway, Lisa got lucky. Dad stumbles down the stairs to his study. He’ll probably have a few more glasses of whiskey and pass out on his chair in front of the TV. When I hear him clearly slam his study door, I sneak out of my room and go to Lisa’s door. It is still open, she is sitting on her bed, curled into a ball, sobbing. I rush to comfort my baby sister. I hold her close until her tears dry.*

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Growing up, my father was a good man. He would take Scott and I to Pittsburgh Pirates games, and I think he took all of us once. We would have cookouts every Sunday in the summer, followed by a game of Monopoly. We were the perfect family, but I remember Dad having a few beers at the game, or the cookout. Maybe he was predisposed to addiction, maybe this is a disease he can’t fight, but I also couldn’t forgive him even if it was. I wasn’t going to give him a way out. But, just in case, I don’t drink.

It was always when I was alone that I always remember what Lisa and I went through growing up. The first few weeks of college I couldn't sleep right, every time a door slammed on my floor I was instantly jolted awake, and if you ever lived in a dorm, you know how often that happens. It was halfway into my freshman semester, and my phone rang at 3:30. I didn't need to look at the caller ID to know who it was. I answered immediately.

"Are you okay?" I talk quietly, but since I didn't have a roommate this semester, it didn't quite matter how loud I talked, but it was a habit for this conversation.

"Yes, he went into his own room, he's ignored me, mostly, since Mom left," Lisa is upset, but not crying. She's gotten tougher since I left. If Dad didn't do anything, then she must have something on her mind to keep her up this late, and she launched right into it. Lisa was never afraid to speak her mind with me.

"Do you ever wonder what the point of all of this is? Like is there a greater purpose for us?"

I think any one else would be caught off guard by a question like that at 3:30 in the morning, but I knew Lisa had always been a thinker. In school she mainly kept to herself and kept quiet but she had the highest GPA in the whole school. She always liked to learn, to think about new things, to understand the world around her. She

volunteered at the church, and ran the bible school every summer. I may not have held a strong belief in a higher power, but she always did. I didn't really have an answer for this new question she threw at me, but I fielded it the best I could.

“I dunno, Lis, I would guess there is, ya know? I don't think that we're just left here to ramble for 80 odd years and then get put in the ground. That just doesn't even seem like it's worth a life, but some of the stuff that happens to people seems too cruel to be planned.”

I didn't really think anything of this discussion, because Lisa always had some strange question on the brain. Once when she was 7 and I was 10, she asked me why the sky wasn't always blue like in pictures. She wanted a real answer, and since I didn't know, we spent the next day at the library figuring it out together, heads hunched over countless books about weather and space, trying to come with an actual answer. We were always a tag team on things like this, I may have been older, but she was always brighter.

“I just feel like I don't even know why I'm here anymore, Em, like I just don't see a point in all of this. Mom and Dad don't even speak to each other, they use me to pass messages, and Dad doesn't even look at me. He just works late when I'm at his

house, and goes in early. I just miss my family, Em. I miss you and I just don't know if I can handle this." She started to cry as she said this, and my heart broke for her.

We spent the next hour and half just talking about good times, family trips where Dad stayed sober, and movie nights when I was home, and how we couldn't decide on one movie, so we'd end up watching parts of five different movies, and our campout the night before I left for school.

I tried to keep her positive, we discussed colleges she might attend, even suggested she come to Ohio Wesleyan with me. We were sisters, we'd always be there for each other. I told Lisa I loved her, and we hung up.

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"Come on Lis!" I holler upstairs from the living room. I couldn't contain my excitement, Lisa and I were heading out camping, for my last night in Latrobe, and I wanted to get going.

"Hold up! I'm trying to find my slippers!" I could hear her shuffling around her room, tossing things, trying to find the slippers she isn't even going to be able to wear.

"You do know we're going camping, right Lis? As in, outside, in a tent? I'm pretty sure you won't have any use for slippers!" I couldn't help but laugh as I said

this, and finally Lisa comes out of her room with a duffle bag packed so full, I thought the seams my burst.

She plopped the bag down and smiled, “I’m ready!” and I didn’t have the urge to remind her we were only going camping for one night, so I picked up my bag, we hollered some “Love you’s” and “Goodbye’s”, and headed out the front door.

The camping site was only an hour away from home, so we made good time, and rocked out to some music from our childhood. We laughed about the bands we used to love, and the songs we knew the words to. Before we knew it, we reached the campground. We unpacked our stuff and headed over to the site I reserved a month ago in preparation. This was something we always wanted to do, but we never had the time. I made time now, partly because I still felt guilty leaving Lisa here with my broken family. I had watched YouTube videos about how to set up this tent for weeks and even practiced in the yard so it took us no time to get all set up. We settled in, and unpacked the food we have packed from home, and the portable DVD player Lisa insisted we needed, and we snuggled under blankets and watched “Beauty and The Beast” and ate our dinner. It was perfect.

Once we had eaten, gone hiking, made s'mores and finally tired ourselves out by telling campfire stories, we unrolled our sleeping bags and got ready for bed. As I was laying in my sleeping bag, trying to fall asleep, I hear Lisa turn over.

“Are you sure you have to go, Em?”

I could hear it in her voice, she was scared. She had never been without me, except the month I decided to go to camp, and even then I called Mom two weeks in, and demanded to come home. The three years that separated us didn't matter, we were like twins, inseparable. I knew this was going to be hard for both of us, and especially for Lisa, being left at home. Dad was getting worse, drinking every night after work and all day on the weekends, especially since they are tiptoeing around a divorce. She always had me to protect her, and if I couldn't do that, I cared for her afterwards.

“It'll be fine, Lis, I promise, just think, only a couple more years and you can head off to school wherever you want! Maybe somewhere near a beach? We all gotta step out into the world at some time, Yours will be coming up before you know it.”

Lisa smiled and rolled over. Within no time, she was sound asleep. I laid awake a bit longer, trying to remember as much as I could about this night. I knew I was going to miss my sister a whole heck of a lot in the coming weeks.

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They played my sister's favorite song, "God Gave Me You", it was a cover by a local artist we had gone to see when he came up this way from Georgia, and they lowered the casket.

It was then I started to cry. I cried for the sister I was never going to see again, and the part of myself that was locked in that casket with her. I cried for my family that had fallen to pieces. I knew that it wasn't my fault Lisa was gone, but my heart hurt thinking that if I had come home sooner, or if I had called more, or just texted her once a day, that it may have made a difference.

I don't think that anything changed after that day, I wish it would've. Dad kept drinking, and I cut off all contact with him. I haven't forgiven him for what he did to Lisa and I. Scott still never knew about what went on with Dad after he moved out, he's happy with his new life. Mom moved to Florida to live with her current boyfriend who plays minor league baseball down there, she may miss Lisa, but she's moved on. I am still in school, and will be for another 3 years, waiting to get my teaching degree. I wish I could say I was doing something more profound with my life in her honor, but I think the best honor would just be living my life the way I planned for both of us.

Sometimes, life just has to go on.

One in Twelve

Sea of black,  
swaying gently in the breeze,  
hug follows handshake,  
“She’s happier now,”  
“We all miss her so,”  
expressing feelings unfelt,  
returned with sentiments unmeant.  
You explain someone’s loss.

People who were never around  
come now,  
deadbeat parents  
distant friends,  
surreal,  
Death is for people who have lived a full life.

Pain isn’t all physical, she explained once.  
The pain is in my heart,  
it’s behind my eyes in the morning,  
and it’s in my feet when I try to go to bed.  
It follows me, and I can’t sleep.  
I don’t dream anymore.

Someone once told me  
one in twelve attempt suicide.