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## With Light

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WITH LIGHT

by

Emily Howell

B.A. December 2013, Columbia College Chicago

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## ABSTRACT

### WITH LIGHT

Emily Howell  
Old Dominion University, 2017  
Director: Prof. Michael Pearson

I am a photographer. I've spent years training myself to shut out 99.9% of the world, see things with one eye closed through the frame of my viewfinder and stop time for a single instant. *With Light* is a collection of lyrical nonfiction essays that explore those instants. Thematically, the essays focus largely on place, time and a search for a sense of belonging. In addition, they touch on grief, longing, fear, friendship, art and love. They are steeped in images. They are lyrical. In short, they are pieces from an album documenting my search for home.

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This thesis is dedicated to my grandpa Joseph Przybocki.  
For always taking the time to listen – you gave me the courage to tell stories.

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## CHAPTER I

### THE WORLD FROM ABOVE

Gray tray table, two creamers, napkin, stirrer, coffee and three blue packets of sugar. I fidget in the blue cushioned seat until I find a comfortable position, lift my now lukewarm Stroopwafel off the top of my coffee cup and break off a piece, plopping it into my mouth. It softens and melts and I swallow the sugary lump without chewing. The roar of the engines drown out all other noise and even though the airplane is filled with other people chatting, snoring and laughing I feel alone in my single seat row.

It's a quick flight to Burlington, Vermont, only an hour and change. I've never been to the northern state, but in a land of maple syrup, mountains and Bernie Sanders I'm sure I won't be disappointed. Besides, I'm going to visit a close friend and her family who moved there a few months ago when she took a job teaching at Norwich University. I'm excited to get there, but I'm even happier here – in the air.

I've been overcome, recently by this terrible need to move into the sky. To buy ticket after ticket and spend my life suspended above the world, never touching down long enough to plant seeds, grow roots and stay. Up here I can see more clearly, the way I've been trained to – when you're so high looking out the rectangular plane window is not unlike looking through the viewfinder of a camera. It blocks out my periphery and crops everything into a neat frame.

My Bachelors degree is in Photography and for four years I sat in workshops where we agonized and argued over the concept of truth. Is a photo real? Is it true? If you take a photograph of a chair, is it a true representation of that chair when it will never exist the same way it did during the millisecond you pressed your finger down and opened the shutter? Then there's the frame. Are you being true to life? Can anything – a war, documentary photographer

or photojournalist – be trusted when someone decides what we see? They choose what to crop out, what to include. How can we ever trust the images we see when a million decisions went into their construction – where to place the subject, what the depth of field is, the extent to which we freeze motion. A photographer's lens can turn dusk into daylight, create relationships between strangers, smooth rough edges, blur details and stop time. So, how do you represent the world? What is real? What is true? It's enough to drive anyone crazy. Enough to make you question whether there's even a point in creating.

Photographs, I decided, ultimately aren't about the truth. Photographs are about the truth we find in them and that is fluid and changing based on the eye and who it's attached to – their experiences, desires, actions, memories, feelings. So when I look at images I see an arrangement of light and shadow, the relationship between colors, a folding of lines into objects – the inexplicable splendor.

Right now, I see mountains thrown across the ground like a wrinkled sheet across an unmade bed. They're covered in oranges, reds, yellows, browns and greens. I see indigo blue water – a lake. The sharp edges of pines poking like stubble from the earth. White brush strokes suspended in the air, so thin they're transparent. Misshapen shadows blacking out portions of the ground. Click. Capture. Gone.

We're in a cloud, surrounded by blinding whiteness – droplets of moisture trapping thousands of shards of the sun.

The plane begins its descent and we start to zoom in. Patches of bare trees covered in white bark stand out against the dark forest like veins pumped with dye. There is a clearing dotted with cows that look immobile from this height, frozen. A white house sits alone on a hill with a blue-gray line snaking close by it could be gravel or water – it's hard to tell.

From this high, so much of the world is cut out. I like seeing in pieces. It makes me slow down, reminds me to focus, keeps me grounded and less overwhelmed with the vast whole.

We land, shakily and the scene outside my window rushes past in a blur of black green, blue and gray until the plane slows to a crawl and begins to taxi. Now framed I see pavement, runways, blue mountains in the distance, all separated by patches of quivering grass. The blades ripple together like sound waves in the wind.

## CHAPTER II

### COLLAGE OF ANGLES

The first time he had the surgery done I was much younger. Most of the memories I have of that time in my life have been blotted and smudged, but this stands out. I was so intrigued by the process; doing research and watching surgical videos, so when my mom brought him home from the procedure I was able to envision every step of the process as she recounted watching it on the monitor – the metal prongs hooked onto his eyelids, the red laser of light cutting a circular flap in my Dad's cornea, a thin, flat metal hook almost like the bent end of a paper clip sliding under the edges of the cut and pulling the thin layer of collagen fibers until it flopped, wrinkled and hanging over his bottom lid like the plastic covering on a half heated TV dinner.

I started by studying faces. In high school I photographed headshots for the school plays. I watching the way people I knew changed in front of my lens becoming eyes, noses, cheek bones, jaw lines – each one a collage of angles.

During the first weeks of his recovery I'd wake up during the silent suburban nights and tiptoe down the carpeted hallway with my parents bedroom door at the end. Cautiously, I'd open it only wide enough for half of my face to peek past the bedside lamp and examine my dad's face, illuminated by the glow of the numbers on his alarm clock. Glares of red reflected off the clear plastic domes he had tapped over each eye while he slept. Seeing they were still intact I'd release a sigh.

Next, I studied strangers. Captured them on film through windows, from behind clothing racks, through vacant spaces in a bookshelf. A sort of non-sexual voyeurism. Eventually, I mustered the courage to come out of hiding. I stopped people on the streets, took their portrait and then let them vanish back into the masses.

My sister and I would giggle and make fun of the ‘alien eyes’ my dad had to put on before bed. To quite our teasing he’d explain very solemnly how serious it all was, that the plastic domes were to protect him from rubbing his eyes in his sleep. Otherwise, he could dislodge the healing flaps of cornea. Neither of us registered his own teasing tone as our eyes widened in concern.

Then, there was the body. I set up a gray backdrop and eight continuous hot lights, hung fill cards and set up fake walls in the large fifth floor studio on Michigan Avenue. While the other people shooting arranged food and posed fashion models until they were in exactly the right position for the shot, I recruited dancers to leap and pose in front of my lens so I could freeze their motion mid-air. The lines of their bodies contorted, unnatural, phenomenal. Converted to black and white they looked like charcoal drawings – a blend of line and light and shadow.

In my sleep, an imaginary scene haunted me. My mom would shake us awake in the middle of the night and tell us we needed to rush my dad to the hospital. As we piled into the car I could see the space between his eyelids exposed a protruding clear crease. The folded flap would be squeezed between every blink. All the while droplets of blood slid down his paling

cheeks. These nightmarish images would wake me multiple times and force the twilight trips to his room to make sure the globes were still secure.

Then – the world. Endless landscapes that melted off the edge of the frame, mountains too large for my lens, the crumbling texture of century old buildings, streets paved with porcelain tiles, crashing waves, a spray of mist, droplets casting a rainbow into the air, and a red-roofed city sliced apart by thin streets bathed in a golden warmth until the sun dipped below the crest of a hill.

When I was in my early twenties, my dad underwent yet another eye surgery – PRK. In the weeks leading up to the procedure I was filled with a new fear I hadn't considered when I was young; that some terrible medical catastrophe would take place leaving him blind. He came through, once again, with crystal clear vision, but constantly complaining about the length of his recovery and his constant need for Restasis to moisten his dry eyes. I brimmed with annoyance and also, envy. Not of the surgery per say, but of his how easy it was for him to willingly have layers of his cornea removed without batting an eyelash.

I have my own business now. People pay me to take pictures of the moments they want permanently captured to frame and scrapbook and send out to everyone they've ever known. I shoot engagements, weddings, maternities, newborns, families, portraits and events. I shoot people's lives.

His vision wasn't even that bad before the second surgery. He was just annoyed that he couldn't see the golf ball as crisply as he had been able to in the preceding years. Meanwhile, here I am, unable to distinguish my own fingers from one another unless I hold them within a few inches from my face. Daily I place contact lenses in my eyes and watch as the mittens of flesh morph into five individual appendages.

Being a photographer – spending so much time watching the world, making images – has altered the way I live. I feel like I'm constantly moving toward moments I've already photographed – a glittering diamond ring, walking down the isle, a swelling stomach, newborn child, and a family of 5 with two dogs to print on the cover of a Christmas card. It's hard, sometimes. It makes me feel behind, like I've done something wrong because I don't have those moments, yet. I have different images – arm in arm with friends outside the Chicago Theater draped in graduation gowns, sitting on the grass with the Swiss Alps behind me, drink in hand in the streets of the French Quarter, Times Square on New Years Eve, a small, sparsely furnished apartment in Dublin, photo bombs of strangers at a festival in Porto, a first day of graduate school selfie, skylines and landscapes and countless group photos in bars celebrating promotions, acceptances, marathon finishes, moments. I have to constantly remind myself that these images are just as valid as the ones I don't have, just as important – the others can wait.

I got my first pair of wire-rimmed glasses in fourth grade and I remember being amazed that I could pick out the individual leaves on trees without being underneath the shade of their branches. Since then my vision has steadily declined and I've gotten used to massive eye doctor bills and the dull pain my frames leave behind my ears. A few months ago I got conjunctivitis a

few days before I was scheduled to shoot a wedding. I had to do the whole thing while wearing glasses and by the end of the day I had a pounding headache from the number of times I'd forgotten and tried to press the viewfinder to my eye. By the end of the day, I swore I'd look into Lasik. After all, all it took for my dad was a blurry golf ball.

We had a swing set in my backyard when I was a kid. I would kick off my shoes, pump myself high into the air and stare, through closed eyelids at the sun. Red. That's all I could see, blood spinning inside thin pieces of skin. Now, when I think back to the nightmares I'd had about my dad's surgery I think about my own eyes, the blood spinning in small veins. I know I'll never be able to risk my sight. Not being able to see the places I want to go, the faces of people I love, the scenes in the viewfinder of my camera, or the way that at this moment the light shining through the window in my living room catches on the fuzzy side of the houseplants leaf and makes the short fibers appear white like peach fuzz on a young boy's chin.



## CHAPTER III

### THE BAY

The Brewster Building, in Chicago, is located on the corner of North Pine Grove Avenue and Diversey. Built in 1893, the building was declared a Chicago Landmark in 1982. If you stand in the lobby of the Brewster and tilt your head skyward, a web of bridge walkways with cast iron rails are layered 9 stories high until you reach the massive skylight in the ceiling. The walkways are made of paved glass blocks and when the sun shines through the skylight starlets of light and rainbow prisms ricochet around the cavernous room. And in the basement of this ornate, century-old building lives a hole in the wall dive bar—the Galway Bay.

A set of concrete stairs leads to the double glass door entrance of The Bay from the sidewalk on Diversey Avenue. The walls are a patchwork of stone bricks, roughly mortared together. The floors are wooden, scuffed and covered in a layer of enduring grime. There are two bars in The Bay, the front bar—a large rounded spot accessible on all sides by patrons—and a smaller bar in the back. Strings of Christmas lights are stapled to the cabinets above the bar—their shelves are crowded with empty cans and bottles of beer people have drank, most of them there, but some brought back from overseas as gifts for their Irish bartenders. Behind the bar a basket sits, full of things customers left behind. The coatrack by the door is always full, even in the summer.

There are only two full-length windows in The Bay and they are covered fully by Ireland's flag and the Cubs Win flag. Even when the sun is shining brightly outside, the Bay relies on false light that makes the air look thick, hazy and amber as if it's been saturated in beer.

On one side of the front bar, there's an area with a couch and a large Lazy boy armchair where a flat screen is attached to an old-school play station. The wall it's mounted on is made of

shelves and on them there are 144 PlayStation games, ball caps that customers have lost and left, a large framed photo of the *Titanic*, and beaten up books, like *The Third Fireside Book of Baseball*, *The Kings Way*, and *Five Star Recipes*.

Right when you walk in the front door a Touch Tunes jukebox has been mounted to the wall—glaring, electronic, and alien compared to the old piano sitting nearby that no one ever plays. The top of the piano is used as a shelf for an old Royal typewriter, a red water pump, and a wooden James Buchanan Scotch box. Next to it, a grandfather clock towers, dusty with its ornate hands stuck on 3:11. Tabs are kept in spiral notebooks, the pages of which are filled with last names and tally marks.

The walls are covered with miscellaneous things: a framed copy of the Irish national anthem, a signed picture of the 1969 Cubs all star infield, framed rugby jerseys, vintage posters and tin signs advertising different beers and liquors, plaques with sentiments like “Irish Diplomacy: the ability to tell someone to go to hell so that they will look forward to the trip,” a lit up illustration of a sagging, bald old man being showered by a can of PBR, and an arrow labeled ‘fire extinguisher’ that points directly into the trashcan below.

Cockroaches have made their home among the empty cardboard beer boxes in the back room where the kegs are kept. Every time it rains or snows more than a few inches the bar floods, inevitably causing a temporary mold infestation and hours of extra work for the underpaid bar staff. The owner’s of the Galway Bay, Nolan and Jason, are middle-aged married men. Nolan, or Noly, moved to Chicago from Ireland over ten years ago and has two kids; he doesn’t wear a wedding ring and sleeps in the basement of his home. Both he and Jason rarely do anything that resembles work when it comes to the Bay, aside from stumbling in at late night hours with a throng of others and serving themselves from behind the bar. Most of the scheduling, ordering,

and administrative work falls on Chris, the general manager and Nolan's 28-year-old cousin, who's been in Chicago for almost 3 years. Nolan, Jason and Chris all bartend in shifts, along with Bill, Tony, Arturo, Keoki, Besco, and Aldon.

Most of the regulars call Chris "Sparkles," a stage name he drunkenly assigned himself one Sunday during the bar's weekly karaoke night, but whenever I use the nickname, I shorten it to Sparky. I never considered myself a bar fly until my roommate pointed it out to me one day.

"What did you do today?" she asked, lying across my bed in our third floor gray stone apartment in Wrigleyville.

I sat cross-legged on the hardwood floor in front of my full-length mirror brushing shadow across my eyelids. "I went to The Bay."

"Isn't that where you're going?"

"Yeah, I came home to eat dinner and change."

"What did you do all day?"

"No one was in, so Sparky and I watched a movie, drank, and ordered Yakzie's for lunch."

"You're turning into a bar fly," she said.

I turned away from the mirror to look at her, the hand holding my mascara brush hanging in mid air, and raised my eyebrows.

"Think about it. You spend your days and nights there at least five times a week, usually more like six or seven, and all the people you've started hanging out with since you finished school you've met there."

"That's not true."

"Uhhh. Greg, Rachel, Ryan, Jim, Colleen, Merry," she lists. "And Chris."

"Chris and I have been friends for almost two years."

“Yeah, well, you didn’t always live in the bar he works at.”

“What the hell else am I supposed to do?” I snapped. “The rest of you are in classes and have homework. So what if I’m spending a lot of time at the bar.”

“I just wish I saw you more,” she said quietly.

“Then start going out.”

\*\*\*

My sister and I called my dad’s father Grandpa Howell—I don’t think anything more endearing would have fit. I never heard anyone call him by his name, Ken. He was dad, grandpa, or the nickname given to him long before I was born—bighead. It fit; his head was massive along with the rest of his nearly 7-foot frame of thick muscle covered by calloused, sun-spotted skin. He lived in Prince George’s County, Maryland—a quick hour and change from where I grew up in Centreville, Virginia. There are only a few details I remember about his house—the contrast between dark wooden furniture/paneled walls and light carpet that was probably once white, a box set in the corner of his living room, the short back yard that ended in a drastically steep wooded ravine, and that the glass doors on a large wooden hutch in the kitchen as well as the exterior of the refrigerator were covered in cut out pictures of swim suit models—some yellowed and frayed with age, and others so fresh the scent of ink still lingered on their glossy surface. It was both cluttered and clean—the furthest thing from kid friendly—and I loved it.

We’d visit a few times a year, usually on the way home from my mom’s brother’s house or after making a trip to College Park so my dad could have a fix of his favorite Ledo Pizza. I’d sit on the steps leading down to his basement and watch him and my dad play darts for hours—beer bottles and peanuts littering the small wooden bar—full of odd trinkets: a lamp in the shape of a portly man wearing a top hat with a red light bulb for a nose, multiple pipes, ashtrays and an

assortment of flimsy coasters sporting different beer and liquor logos. Neither he nor my dad smoked, but the basement always seemed to take on that hazy after-hours feel of a bar at 4am, when your eyes are heavy, the lights are dim, and poor choices seem to snake along the surface of your skin.

\*\*\*

I turned 21 the November I moved back to Chicago after spending a semester in Dublin, Ireland. That spring, I started going to The Bay. My friend, Laura, who'd lived in Ireland with me, had already been to the bar and couldn't stop talking about the one Irish bartender, Sparky. We pre-gamed at my apartment; brilliantly, I drank a six-pack of Bud Light Platinum in half an hour, and by the time we walked into the dimly lit bar, it was spinning.

"Em!" my friend Evan's voice slid into my ear, and he materialized next to me.

"Ev!" I threw my arms around him. It'd been over a month since I'd seen him last. He still lived in the South Loop, close to campus where we all had gone to undergrad together.

"This place is great! How long have you been coming here?"

"This is my first time. Laura's been here before. I can't believe you actually came up."

"Yeah we haven't been up here in a while so--"

"We?" I narrowed my eyes.

"Baby girl!" Jones' voice yelled from across the bar. He had two drinks in hand as he walked over.

I glared at Evan, and he laughed and leaned into my ear to whisper, "What was I supposed to do, leave him home?" His roommate has been vying for my attention for months, which I probably could have dealt with if it weren't for his array of obnoxious traits.

“I’ll be right back,” I said, before Jones could get any closer. Barging my way clumsily through the bar, I saw Laura in the back talking to a bearded man wearing a blue and green plaid flannel shirt. Tattoos cover his freckled skin. My ability to judge my speed was slightly off, and before I could stop myself, I stumbled into him, steadying myself by grabbing his shoulder. “Are you Sparky?”

“Aye,” he said, and I saw two of his sideways smile. I sucked in my breath and tried to lock onto his eyes.

“I’m Emily.” With that I spun around, walked into the bathroom and spent the rest of the night sitting on the floor. My feet straddling both sides of the toilet with my back propped up against the graffiti clad door.

The next night, when I walked in, Chris was behind the bar. I sat on a stool, and he looked up smiling. “What’s up fucker? Welcome to the Galway Bay...I figured you might not recognize it since you spent the whole night in the bathroom.”

He teases me about that night and how our friendship began by me literally stumbling into him. “You just barged right into my life and now you’re the best friend I’ve ever had.”

\*\*\*

That fall, the last semester of my undergrad, I spent Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday nights at The Bay. All the bartenders knew me, so I rarely paid, and when I did it was always a \$10 credit card charge and I’d leave a \$10 tip. I fell in with the regulars. Chris and I would sit in the darkened bar after hours, our beers illuminated by stray passing headlight beams finding their way into the bar.

Some nights, Noly or Paddy Hammon would join us. Paddy was from Ireland too and he made his living playing gigs at all the Irish bars around the city. On the nights he came around I would sprawl on the couch and drift in and out of sleep, lulled by his soft Gaelic singing.

On others, always right around 3am, blue and red lights would bounce around the room and shut off before a banging at the door and a call of “Police, you fuckers!” Cassidy, the ginger-breaded cop would pound on the glass and embrace Chris, who always let him in followed by the newest set of busty women from out of town who were often southern and “tryin’ ta see the big city.” One would always sit and chat with us, while Cassidy led the other into the ‘office,’ always unbeknownst to his girlfriend, always out the door in time for the 4am patrol, when all the late night bars let out.

Most nights though, I’d help close up – wipe the bar down with a disinfectant drenched rag, pass pint glasses through the sink, and sweep up the popcorn pieces littering the floor while Chris counted out the cash register. Then we’d sit and talk, taking turns pouring shots until sunrise.

\*\*\*

Growing up, whenever I was argumentative or stubborn (which was often), and I still refused to listen after a wallop with the wooden spoon, the beat red anger would drain from my mom’s face, and before walking away, she’d resign herself and say, “you’re such a Howell.” Any time we’d get together with my dad’s old childhood friends, upon seeing me, they’d all turn to my dad and say, “Jeez Mike, she looks like you” or tell my mom, “Oh Judy, she is all Howell.” The handful of relatives I’ve met on my dad’s side all call me Little Virginia, after my dad’s mom, who died before I was born. A painting of her hangs in my parent’s living room – auburn

hair, fair skin, freckles, light eyes that are squinted into a squint as she smiles – the resemblance is undeniable.

Looking back, I realize I didn't only have the Howell looks. While my mom and sister scrapbooked, my dad and I threw the baseball in the yard. While they shopped at the mall, my dad and I sat on one of the benches and people-watched until they were done. Even though we were only a family of four, we'd often have both cars when we went out for dinner because my dad would meet us on his way home from work. As soon as the check was paid, I'd always rush to leave, "I'll ride with Dad!" In his car, we blasted Conway, Waylon, and Merle, both of us singing along. But best of all: I was allowed to roll the windows down—a forbidden concept when riding in my mom's AC chilled vehicle.

On weekends, when I was in college, and sometimes even still, my mom would call me on Saturday or Sunday morning, her voice laced with concerned probing about what I'd done the night before or if I had a hangover. Ever since she'd been diagnosed with a fatty liver she had a distaste for alcohol and had become notorious for slipping comments into conversation discouraging drinking in any capacity. The first time I went home to visit after I turned twenty-one, my dad picked me up at the airport. On the way home, he pulled into Eggspectations a local restaurant, so he could be 'the first one' to buy me a beer.

\*\*\*

During the day, The Bay is fresh and cool. The windows are open and wind rolls off Lake Michigan and into the bar from a few blocks away. Sometimes, before hours, when Chris, Bill and Keoki are milling around, repairing things to no visual difference, plugging in tips, and ordering inventory, they'll prop an empty keg in front of the double glass doors so the wind can run down the cement steps. It's days like these, I sat hunched over on the wooden stool next to



the door, holding whatever book I was reading at the time in my lap. An occasional passerby would walk down the stairs and peer into the bar. “Closed,” I’d say offhandedly, without looking up.

When I was there it before opened, Bill would usually sit and chat with me, every so often, taking off his baseball cap to scratch his buzzed, age-spotted scalp. Every time I see him he brings up when we drank all the champagne in The Bay, referring to the day of the Chicago Marathon. My friend and another regular, Rachel, had run and afterward a handful of us had come in to celebrate. Bill was stuck working because all the other staff was at Tony’s annual cook out and someone had to stay behind. We found him in a bitter mood and by the end of the day we’d finished off a garbage bag full of champagne and he was beaming and taking pictures with all of us to text to the rest of the bar staff gloating about his records sales.

“You know Bill is filthy rich?” Chris told me one day.

“You’re kidding?” I said, taking a frothy swallow of my freshly poured shandy. It was the beginning of summer, and they had just put my favorite Leinenkugel on tap for the season, per my request. “Why the hell does he work here?”

“Gives him something to do,” Chris shrugged. “He likes the regulars. Only way he has friends.”

\*\*\*

I finished undergrad in December, a semester earlier than all of my friends, so I started spending more time at The Bay. Despite my 3.8 GPA, lengthy list of internships/accolades, and overachiever attitude, my BA in Photography had left me feeling useless. I didn’t have any responsibilities besides going to my sporadic part-time nanny job. I was biding my time—

waiting until August, when I was supposed to move to Virginia for grad school. I was dreading it; I didn't want to leave, and despite the fact that I realized logically I couldn't spend the rest of my life drinking all night and day, I didn't care. I was happy, busy, distracted, and mostly, I was never sober long enough to think about the future. Sometimes, for days straight, I wouldn't see the light of day unless it was the red glow of the sunrise as I walked home at 7am. I'd pull my curtains shut and sleep, waking just in time to see the same glow setting and darkness blanketing the city. I'd shower and eat for the first time that day before setting out in darkness, back to The Bay.

The time I'd spent at Columbia had stamped out my desire to be a photographer—even the act of picking up my camera seemed daunting. I was burnt out, uninspired and broke. I'd decided I wanted to teach after working with the Museum of Contemporary Photography's educational outreach program, but didn't have the prerequisites (or funds) for a masters program in education. During undergrad I'd filled all of my electives with writing workshops—I'd enjoyed writing as long as I could remember, and one of my professors encouraged me to pursue it further. So, I'd applied to a handful of MFA programs for Creative Writing—hopeful that would at least be a baby step in the right direction.

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I remember these things about my Grandpa Howell: he always bought my sister and me 'boy' toys (to which she turned up her nose and I relished); he carried around a pocket knife; he was relentless in his teasing because it was the only way he knew how to show affection; he was always drinking beer or liquor; he always told stories that captured the room; there was custom made sticker on the passenger side window of his champagne colored Lincoln Town car of his

self-developed mantra ‘scart, say yer scart’ (scared say you’re scared); he was loud, crass, and his hands always shook. He was a Howell.

Late morning, on October 2, 2002, he was mowing his lawn, and a neighbor noticed that the mechanical hum of the mower had been on the other side of the house for an abnormally long amount of time. She went to check on him and found him crumpled on the ground next to the puttering machine, his gold rim glasses resting in the grass a few inches from his face. He was dead, but the ambulance still came and took him to Fort Washington Hospital.

My dad called my mom to give her the news and left work to go to the hospital alone. I was in fifth grade, and I remember walking into the house with my younger sister after the bus dropped us off on the corner of our street. My mom was standing behind the counter, both her hands grasping the ledge, leaning against it. She asked us how our days were, and we took turns rambling as we dumped the contents of our backpacks on the kitchen table and sat down to do our homework.

“I have some bad news,” she said.

We both looked up.

“Grandpa Howell died today.”

She looked at me when she said it. My sister, who’s always been quick to emotion, ran to my mom and sobbed into her pant leg.

“Where’s dad?” I asked.

“He’ll be home later.”

That night, around eight, the three of us were sitting around the kitchen table when the rumble of the garage door opening cut into our conversation. We sat in silence as my dad shoved the key into the lock, turned it, and walked into the room. He stood with his brief case in one

hand, his tie and jacket slung over his arm—his white shirt unbuttoned slightly and wrinkled. I stood up, “Is it true? Did he really die daddy? Is grandpa really gone?”

From their seats, my mom and sister started crying but my dad held my gaze. He walked over to me and steadied his shaking hand on my shoulder, “Yes, it’s true.”

Then, we all cried.

\*\*\*

Most of the days and nights I spent at The Bay blur together in my mind, but July third stands out. It was around 11am, and I was feeling particularly sorry for myself. I’d been consistently drunk or drinking for the past week. The next day, Rachel, Greg, Ryan, Blair and I were going to the Dave Matthews concert to celebrate the fourth, and the following morning, I was supposed to fly to Virginia before driving to the Outer Banks with my family for a week. I didn’t want to go, and I’d been bitching to my mom each time she called about how I didn’t want to spend an entire week of my last month in Chicago not *in* Chicago.

I sat lounging with my arms dangling off the rounded back of one wooden barstool and my feet propped up on another. Chris sat across the bar writing down inventory, a bud light open next to him. Without moving my arms I leaned toward the bar and sucked down the remains of my rum and coke before sliding back into my lazy lounge. I let my head fall backwards and my eyes registered the ceiling for the first time. How had I never looked at the ceiling before? It reminded me of a high school classroom, made of the same flimsy plaster panels. Cracks webbed between the beams, there were large chunks missing in places—openings to black cavernous spaces I could only assume were home to all kinds of dust and cockroach carcasses. “Jesus,” I said to Chris, lazily motioning toward the ceiling with a brief twitch of my wrist. “This place is falling apart.”

“You’re fucking telling me.”

\*\*\*

The morning after the Dave Matthews concert, I woke up 45 minutes before my 7:45am flight. Wearing the same clothes as the night before, I grabbed my half-packed suitcase off the floor, ordered an Uber, and ran down the three flights of stairs to the street while all the alcohol from the night before pounded against my head. Somehow, we made it to Midway airport in 20 minutes, and after throwing a convincing fake-panic attack on the phone, allowing me to skip straight to the front of the security line, I ran to my gate.

“Oh good!” the flight attendant said cheerily, “We were just about to call your name over the loudspeaker. Glad you made it.”

I puked three times on the flight to Dulles, thankfully I had an aisle seat near the bathroom. When my mom pulled up to curb at the airport, she got out and put my bag in the trunk, squeezing me into a hug before I slunk into the passenger seat. As soon as we pulled away she said, “Rough night?”

“You could say that,” I said, grinning at her.

She didn’t smile. “You reek.”

“Well, I didn’t exactly have time to shower this morning.”

“I mean you reek of alcohol. It’s coming out of your pores.” It’s coming out of your pores. That was her favorite line. She said the same thing to my dad every time he came back from a weekend golf trip or grabbed a few beers at the club on his way home from work.

“I’ll shower when we get home.”

“You better watch it,” she pushed. “You’re going to become an alcoholic. You know it runs in your dad’s side.”

“I’m not an alcoholic, Mom.” I rolled my eyes.

“Thank God you’re starting grad school soon. I can’t wait to get you out of Chicago.”

My stomach dropped. I turned and stared out the window at the dull Virginia landscape and began to count the seconds until that week was over. I clenched my hands shaking hands together in my lap.

\*\*\*

From above, Lake Michigan looks like crinkled contact paper with air bubbles trapped beneath the surface. Occasionally, a white cap appears—a slip of motion at the heart of so much stillness. I press my forehead against the oval window squinting in an attempt to see the skyline I know will appear any second. My foot hammers against the floor of the airplane and I twist the claddagh ring on my right ring finger—proof of my paternal Irish heritage. When I see it, the outline of Chicago at dusk, deep black with pinholes of light standing starkly against the surrounding deep blue, I feel the familiar tingling at the back of my scalp. Pressure builds behind my eyes and I breath out slowly through pursed lips—when I first moved I had traveled back every two months, but it’s been seven since my last trip.

I go to The Bay every time I’m back in the city. I organize a dinner with Greg, Laura, Rachel, Ryan, Jim, Colleen, Merry and Chris at the sushi place up the street where we can BYOB and afterward we all walk to the bar, playing rounds of pool for hours and drinking more than most of us have in months. Greg and Rachel have both started new jobs and rarely make it out anymore, Jim and Colleen moved in together and spend most nights at home on the couch, Ryan steers clear of the basement bar and the unrequited love he has for one of the bartender’s girlfriends, and Merry now works at a bar down town where she brings in a grand a night – on a bad day.

I watch all of us, laughing and happy, it looks the same as it did before I left—it even feels the same—but it's different. None of us can drink like we used to and we'll wake up in the morning hung over, we'll spend the day recuperating and then we'll go back to our routines and responsibilities. For a few weeks after I leave and go back to Virginia we'll be good about staying in touch, but it will peter out—until the next visit. We've all moved on, except Chris, who tells me over and over that he's sick of working there, that he's going to quit—but every day he continues to descend the gray concrete stairs and push through the grim-covered glass doors into The Bay.

## CHAPTER IV

## DEEP END

I can still feel myself grappling with the slick surface of the purple inner tube as my body slipped through its circular center and into the water. I was submerged and violated as the water rushed into my ears, my nose, my mouth, and my eyes. I remember seeing the black line painted along the bottom of the pool and feeling myself drift past it, into the deep end. My mom's one rule was 'Don't go past the black line.' I couldn't swim. I had drifted into the deep end. I was drowning. I remember knowing I was going to die, my panicked gulps and thrashing causing me to sink farther.

Then I was pulled upward, my head broke the surface and air replaced the water in my lungs. I coughed and blinked the chlorine from my stinging eyes as a mass of black curls lifted me out of the water and onto the concrete. Within minutes my parents were next to me fussing and thanking the man who'd pulled me to safety. My mom grabbed my hand and tried to coax me into sitting next to her sun-chair where my younger sister sat playing. To her displeasure I headed right back into the pool as if nothing had happened. I was five, *The Little Mermaid* was my idol; the water was where I belonged.

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My eyes are closed and I can feel the contour of miniature hills and valleys of sand underneath my stomach. A constant breeze glides over me, cooling my skin and rustling through my damp hair. I squeeze the warm sand between my toes. It's different here, moist, and stickier than the sand I've been exposed to my whole life. I keep my eyes closed and listen to the hum of a plane flying overhead. Seagulls chatter nearby and the water laps rhythmically against the shore.



It's a Wednesday morning in September; Lake Michigan stretches out before me vast and blue. Behind me Chicago's skyline creates a towering metallic forest. Laura lies on a towel beside me, white ear buds blocking out the noise of the world. My own are stuffed deep inside my bag, I don't need them here. The sound of the water lulls me into my memory and in an instant I'm no longer there.

On the back of my closed eyelids, images flash by throwing me into the ocean across the world. I'm in Dingle, the massive waves crashing against the rocky shoreline. I'm lying on the sand in Lisbon and then Barcelona. I'm building a sand castle in South Carolina and Cape Cod. I'm running into the water at La Jolla, touching the Pacific for the first time.

\*\*\*

The sky cries almost every day in Ireland. Water wets the earth turning the entire island a rich luscious green. For five months I scattered myself like rain across the landscape of that country but I never landed on him.

We didn't meet until over a year later at his dive bar in Lakeview. Before he spoke I knew how it would sound.

He turns to the tap to pour my beer and I drink him in. He is solid and strong, tattoos peek out from under the sleeves of his t-shirt. His dark hair is short and disheveled and brown scruff covers his freckled face. When he turns to give me my glass our hands brush and his green-blue eyes lock on mine.

After the bar closed we stayed and talked about all of the places we'd both been across the sea. He'd left Northern Ireland to come here and escape a life of war, conflict, and prejudice.

From the first second there was a spark. We both loved history and liked the same books; we both suffered great losses and listened to old country music. We made each other laugh, god, could he make me laugh.

I often wonder about how different things would have been if I'd met him a year earlier while I was living in Ireland. I wonder how many times our paths were moments away from crossing. Maybe things wouldn't have been as complicated. Maybe I wouldn't have been the other woman. Maybe, I wouldn't have had to stand in a scorching shower every time he left trying to scrub the guilt off my skin.

\*\*\*

The hot sun beats down on me, freckling the skin on my bare shoulders. The air is full of the smell of sweat and succulence. Wafts of the sizzling pizza sitting outside the small corner café fill my nostrils. My stomach growls underneath my sundress. Italy has a way of leaving you in a perpetual state of hunger.

I open my eyes and watch the clear water cascading over the smooth marble surface of the Trevi Fountain. One, two, or three, I keep asking myself as I finger the pennies tucked inside my pocket. What do I want the most? I turn so that the glistening water is behind me. Breathing slowly, I let my fingers close around 3 copper circles. My eyes shut and in one fluid motion my arm sails backwards. The pennies twirl in the air reflecting glints of sunlight before plopping into the water with a minuscule splash. I watch them sink to the bottom before turning back around. I close my eyes and repeat my backwards throw. A single penny flies through the air. I couldn't choose. Love, or the promise of return. To me they go hand in hand.

\*\*\*

A river curves through the small fairytale town. Sarah and I have just finished a lunch of pasta and wine on the patio of a restaurant at the waters edge. We have only a few more hours before our bus will leave taking us back North to Prague, where we are staying.

There are so many things to see and do; yet, we find ourselves sitting on a dock dipping our toes into the icy river. Houses line the bank and I watch a woman hanging clothes to dry, a man in his pajamas watering his grass, and a group of people on the peninsula upstream setting up rows of white chairs for a wedding. I feel a tear slide down my cheek. It's the moments like these, when I stop for a minute, that I realize it's almost the end. In a few days we'll fly back to Ireland and then I'll board a plane back to the United States after living in Dublin for the semester. I can't believe how fast it's gone by. There's not a fiber of my being that's ready to give this up.

\*\*\*

Shock. My body goes rigid. A cold piece of ice slides down my spine leaving a trail of water behind it. "Why?" I exclaim and spin around, "Ass."

He smiles at me mischievously and winks. I roll my eyes as he slips his thumb between my skin and the waist of my jeans. He pushes the piece of ice that's kissing the small of my back onto the wooden floor, and leans in to brush my cheek with his lips. For a single moment, it's only us in the bar.

He walks away and the room is crowded with people, his girlfriend sits out of view at the back bar. I'm forced to remember there is no us.

\*\*\*

The shower has always been my sanctuary, a place to think, to love, to grieve. The sound of each shard of water crashing into the shower floor lulls me to sleep. The feeling of warm

droplets falling onto my bare skin calms me and the pressure of each one sinks through my skin and warms my muscles, massaging pain away.

I started taking naps in the shower in high school. When the last soap and shampoo bubbles slid down the drain I'd turn up the heat and lower myself onto the wet acrylic surface. Lying in the fetal position, I'd close my eyes and listen to the water hit the space around me and feel it glide over my body.

I would wake to the sound of my mom pounding on the bathroom door, yelling that I'd been in long enough and was wasting water. My solitude slipped down the drain and I was forced to reenter the world.

\*\*\*

"I'm done waiting."

The bar is beginning to empty as the clock crawls past the 4 am last call. I sit rooted to the barstool. My tongue tastes bitter inside my mouth.

He is beside me, his shoulders sagging with the weight of my words. He picks up the glass of water in front of him, brings it to his lips and swallows. Slowly he turns and meets my eyes, they're drowning in panic. He's pleading with me to save him. My muscles ache as I fight the urge to reach out and touch him. I don't.

I look down at the clear contents of my own glass and forcefully press it to my lips; aside from the sweating ice cubes, there is no water there.

## CHAPTER V

## BLOOM

My mom used to have a small square garden that grew along the painted-white brick behind our house. Vines snaked through round metal cages supporting the weight of dangling cucumbers, multicolored peppers and plump red tomatoes. Sometimes, she would drag my sister and I to a nursery and fill the trunk of her car with potted geraniums, chrysanthemums, and marigolds to decorate our front stoop. Every few days she'd water them and then check on her small plot behind the house. She would tear a tomato off the vine while she worked and bite into it like an apple, pulpy red juice streaming down her chin. She'd bring her small harvest inside handfuls at a time, dropping it in a pile on the kitchen counter. There was always soil caked beneath her fingernails and grass stains on her jeans.

When I was a kid I'd drape a tattered blue blanket across the space between the couches in our basement and crawl inside. My small cave. Pinpricks of light shown through where the blanket was thin enough to tear. The shadow of my younger sister would fall across my sanctuary and we decided it was time to renovate. In place of wooden beams and nails we used chairs, tables, and stacks of pillows and enveloped them with more blankets – a pink floral comforter, knit afghan covered in silhouettes of woodland creatures, and the two blue and pink striped blankets we had been swaddled with right after our births. The fort would grow for days until our mom noticed the mess or our dad realized he no longer had room to stand in his workout room. So, we'd disassemble. Demolishing our creation piece by piece.

Some days I would run down the carpeted stairs to find my sister's curly hair haloed in light shining through the sliding glass doors. She sat assembling rows of stuffed animals and

baby dolls, placing a nametag on each one's imaginary desk. Sometimes she'd let me sit with the animals and call them my peers as she taught – scribbling all over our plastic chalkboard easel.

When we got a little older, I'd shut myself inside my room and spend hours sprawled out on my bed reading. My sister would knock softly and ask me to play. Often reluctantly I'd follow her to her room, her floor covered in hundreds of pieces of lined loose-leaf, cut into small strips. Each had a person drawn on one side and a name labeling the back – her dolls. I ran the 'clothing store' and each of these paper people would come order outfits for every occasion. So I would draw for hours while my sister sat cross-legged on the floor immersed in a paper-thin world.

On Saturday mornings I'd wake to the smell of vanilla and cinnamon and walk into the kitchen to find my dad, spatula in hand, dressed in sweats and a red Maryland Terrapin's sweatshirt. I loved to watch him cook – the sizzle of egg covered bread hitting the skillet, the beads of oil dancing around splattered flecks of egg, the gray wisps of smoke rising from cracks in the crust, the scrape of the spatula, flip of the wrist. My dad always whistled while he cooked, while he did anything really. Most evenings when he got home from work my sister and I would be seated at the kitchen table doing our homework, while our mom made dinner. Sitting there, we'd be able to hear him upstairs, down the hall, into the bedroom, through the bathroom and into the closet whistling while he changed out of his work clothes. Some days, he'd come home early and go outside to mow the lawn before we ate. When he was done he'd pull the red tractor into the garage, beat the grass clippings off with a grease covered towel and then throw the baseball with me in the yard until my mom called us in.

Every spring we kept the windows shut while the Bradford Pear trees bloomed – notorious for the rancid smell of their blossoms. Overnight the spindly branches of nearly every

tree in our neighborhood broke out in bursts of small white petals. Every spring, when my Dad got home from work he'd comment on their stench. He'd make silly faces at my sister and me; wrinkle his nose, gag and we'd laugh. We made it a game. We stayed inside, careful not to let the smell penetrate our nostrils.

That was before.

Now, when I go outside in the spring I feel unclean. I am ashamed of the smell of the trees like rotting fish, like semen, like the odor that rose from between my thighs the first time I pulled down underwear spotted red. I long for the days when I only associated that smell with springtime and memories of growing up in Northern Virginia.

Before blooming Bradford Pears trees reminded me that I am no longer a child.

## CHAPTER VI

### BODY GEOGRAPHY OF AN IRISH BARTENDER

#### **Knees. (Part I)**

In Country Tyrone, Northern Ireland, there is a village nestled in between the ridges of rolling hills called Pomeroy. The population hovers around 600 people. The main street is spotted with dingy storefronts, mostly locally owned, like Farhill Diner, Designs by Therese, Connelly's and of course (the most well kept) Murphy's Bar.

Like most villages in Northern Ireland there are two primary schools, one dominated by Catholic students and the other by Protestants. In Pomeroy these are St. Mary's Primary and Queen Elizabeth II Primary. The exterior of St. Mary's is a mostly brick with a blue awning over the front entry. A 7-foot fence surrounds the perimeter of the school. A mixture of cement and metal. It's eerily reminiscent of a prison yard. The houses closest to St. Mary's are vacant, their facades dirty, streaked and weather worn. On the opposite side of town, warm white walls, hanging potted plants, and sidewalk chalk drawings cover the drive of Queen Elizabeth II. Chris went to St. Mary's.

One of Chris's most vivid memories from his childhood occurred one morning just as he pulled the door to their house shut about to head to school. He stopped, noticing three men standing at the edge of the yard staring at him.

"Come here, Lad." One of them said. Chris, 7 at the time, stood his ground. "Where's your father?" They walked closer.

"We'd like to have a chat with him," the other said, inching forward.

"Ma!" Chris yelled, and in a swift motion he was forced onto his knees. The man closest to him had pulled his arms behind his back with one hand, pulled his head backward, by his hair



with the other and planted his body weight on his calves. Una opened the door and screamed falling to the ground.

“Let go of him, please. Seamus!” she bellowed into the house.

Chris’s dad’s tall, lanky frame appeared on the lawn. “Let the boy go,” he said steadily. “Your quarrel’s with me.” In a moment the two other men were on top of him, knocking him to the ground, thick-soled boots swinging like pendulums into his crumpled body.

Chris started to scream at them to stop, struggling to break away from the man who held him, panting. His mother rocked herself at the doorstep, moaning, praying and weeping.

“Christopher, close your eyes,” his dad yelled. “Close your eyes Christopher.”

“See what happens when you fight for the wrong side?” the man breathed onto his neck. He smelled sour. Chris stopped struggling against the man’s restraint. “That’s a good lad. Don’t want to end up like your daddy, do you? Learn when to walk away from a fight.”

The men spit on his dad’s dirt and blood covered body as he left.

Chris helped his mother support his barely conscious father into bed. It took over a month for him to recover.

By age 11 Chris had joined the IRA.

### **Knuckles.**

Dark blue and purple bruises bloomed across his raw flesh. I glared at him over the bar as he rinsed his knuckles, the diluted blood making the water run pink.

“What the hell?” I said.

He sucked in his breath as he dabbed his hand dry with a towel. “Fuck, I think I broke my pinky.”

“Serves you right.”

“He wouldn’t leave you alone. Fucking wanker.”

“He was leaving. You didn’t have to chase him down the street.”

“Now he won’t come back,” he said, smirking at me.

“Isn’t that part of why you moved here. To get away from fighting.” I spit at him. He glared at me and turned to pull a bottle of vodka off the shelf, filled the pint glass in front of him, splashed the top with Sprite, took a long swing and held up his bruised middle finger.

### **Eyes, blue-gray.**

They welled as he looked at his cousin Nolan across the bar. Pint glasses full of vodka sat in front of them. It was after hours and the only light came from the half burnt out string of Christmas lights overhead. The smoke from Nolan’s cigarette made the room hazy, and I sat a few barstools away looking at them through the fog. Nolan had moved to the states 10 years ago and Chris had followed 7 years later. They grasped hands as Nolan’s head shook back and forth; with his eyes closed he started to hum. Then he cleared his throat and started to sing:

*I sat within a valley green, sat there with my true love*

*My heart strove to choose between, me old love and the new love*

*The old for her, the new that made, me think on Ireland dearly*

*While soft wind blew down the glade, and shook the golden barley*

Chris joined him and they both sang with their hands still clasped over the bar.

*Twass hard the mournful words to frame, to break the ties that bound us*

*But harder still to bear the shame, Of foreign chains around us*

*And so I said, “The mountain glen, I’ll seek at morning early*

*And join the brave united men”, While soft wind shook the barley*

Their voices faded. Nolan lumbered out of his chair and around the bar, wrapping Chris in a hug, his massive frame engulfing him as he pulled him to his chest. Large tears fell slid from the corners of his eyes.

“You’re my brother, Araby,” he said, using the nickname they both called each other. “All of my brothers died. You’re the only one I have left.”

Chris looked over at me, his own cheeks wet. “Get in here, Em. They were probably your brothers too.”

And just like that I was wrapped up with Nolan and Chris, crying too. I mourned my family—a family, a history, and a heritage I knew so little about and was trying so hard to uncover. Within myself I felt this inexplicable pull toward Ireland. Despite the abundance of relatives on my Polish side, the customs and traditions we’d upheld, I didn’t feel a connection to any of it. I looked like my Dad’s mom. I got along with my Dad. Liked to drink like my Dad. My Dad—an only child who didn’t keep in touch with any of his small extended family; who knew nothing about our history other than we’re Irish.

For some reason that was the part of myself that shaped my identity. I had a desperate need to know what being Irish meant, to see the country where my family came from and to know the people there. Looking back, I think what attracted me to my Irish heritage wasn’t actually the need to know more; it was the absence of knowledge. Irish could mean whatever I wanted it to and as a kid who felt disconnected from a majority of my family that was what I needed – just the right amount of unknown to create a place I belonged.

**Right wrist.**

“Hey man,” the tattoo artist said. “This bracelet is going to be in the way. Can I cut it off?”

Chris looked down at the braided thread tied around his wrist. The threads were so worn and frayed they looked like the force of a flyby flea would cause them to unravel. It was so dirty from washing dishes behind the bar that the original colors—orange, green and white—had faded and turned a singular gray. His cousin Nolan’s daughter Cassie had made it for him and tied it on his wrist over a year ago.

“Sorry, mate. You’re going to have to work around it.”

**Tattoo, down the side of right hand and onto wrist. Pinup girl.**

It was after 1 a.m. we sat on two of the wooden barstools at Drink & Ink. Each stool was upholstered with a leather cushion embossed with a design drawn by the tattoo artists that worked next door. I’d moved to Virginia over the summer and was visiting for New Years Eve.

Behind the bar the yellowed microwave buzzed as the bulb flickered, illuminating our rotating plate of pepperoni pizza rolls. When the buzzer went off the tattoo-covered bartender slid them across the bar toward us. Bubbling browned cheese oozed out of the seams of each pocket. With two fingers I plucked one off the plate and plopped it into my mouth.

Next to me, Chris shoveled 3 rolls into his mouth at once, his eyes never shifting away from the flat screen TV behind the bar. I looked up at the monitor, which was split into four smaller screens, each one attached to a camera angled at a different tattooing station next door. Two were empty, but in one chair a large balding man was getting work done on his half sleeve—a large coiled, open mouthed snake, and in another a woman was lying shirtless on her stomach having a patchwork of flowers colored in across her back.

“Lets go get new tats,” Chris said, suddenly. He hopped off the barstool and fisted the rest of the pizza rolls into his mouth.

“Right now?” I asked.

“Yeah, I’ll buy.”

“No way,” I said. “I don’t know what I’d get.” I had 3 tattoos, but at the time I was still operating under the idea that if I was going to let a needle embed ink underneath my skin it needed to be filled with some sort of deep personal meaning.

“You’re still coming with me.”

I stood. “What’re you gonna get?”

His bloodshot eyes darted around the bar and landed on the cushion of the barstool I’d just vacated. On it a pin-up girl in a bikini with a short black bob was bent over and looked at me with seductive eyes.

“Eh, I’ve always wanted a pin-up girl. Lets go.”

We walked next door and a gray haired man looked up from the counter. “Hey Chris, how’s it going?”

“Hiya, Thrash. Come to get some ink.”

“What are you thinking?”

“Pin-up girl.” Thrash pulled a binder out from behind the counter and Chris started flipping through the pages. I inched up behind him to look over his shoulders. “Oh, Thrash this is Emily. Emily this is Jerry Thrash.”

“Anything for you?” he asked as he stuck his hand over the counter and shook mine.

“Nah,” I said. “I’m just with him.”

Chris picked out a curvaceous woman standing with both hands behind her head and her hip popped dramatically to one side, protruding from a dramatic slit in her knee length dress. Wavy hair fell to her shoulders.

We went back to Thrash's chair and sat while Trash printed out a copy to judge sizing. "Where you want it?"

"Here," Chris said. Motioning to the outside of his right hand, below his pinky and down his wrist.

"So about 7 inches?"

"Sounds right."

We sat and talked while Thrash outlined the woman in black on Chris's skin. He winced and grit his teeth.

"Hurt?" I asked.

"A bit. Think this is the worst actually."

Thrash finished the outline and asked what colors he wanted to fill in her dress.

"Blue and purple," he said.

"What about her hair?" Thrash asked.

"What do you think, darlin'?" he turned to me.

"Red," I said staring him in the eyes smirking. "Then she'll remind you of me." I held his gaze daring him to say no. Thrash looked between the two of us.

"You heard the woman," Chris said looking at me and shaking his head smiling. "Red."

When she was finished Thrash covered her in a bandage. We pulled on our jackets and walked outside into the biting January air, swirled with snow. "Bet you didn't think you'd be getting a tattoo of me, tonight," I said shoving his shoulder with mine.

“Nope,” he said laughing. “For fuck’s sake how am I going to explain this to Erin. A ginger pinup girl when she’s brunette.”

I shrugged, knowing she’d never ask, writing it off as another one of his drunken late-night tattoos.

There was a cab coming toward us in the distance with it’s light on.

“All right, I’m going home,” I said. I stepped out onto the curb and threw my gloved hand into the air and the cab slowed beside me. I crawled across the black leather seat. “Roscoe an--”

“Clark and Leland, please,” Chris’s voice interrupted mine as he shoved his way into the seat next to me. I glared at him, annoyed.

“I want to go to bed. My flight leaves tomorrow.”

“Stop your whining, woman. It’s Saturday. Carrols is open ‘til 5.” He grabbed my knee in a vice grip and started chatting with the cabbie before I had a chance to argue. I stared out the window at the snow-covered roads. They reflected the glow of the passing streetlights and bar signs and softened my mood. It was just past 3 am.

**Tattoo, right shoulder and upper arm. Three angels flying over the sheet music to Rusted Roots “Send Me on My Way.”**

I met Chris in the spring of my junior year of undergrad, a year after I’d studied abroad in Ireland for 6 months and only a month after he’d moved here. A friend of mine, Laura, who studied in Ireland with me, had stumbled across the bar he worked at one night and immediately brought me there—saying it was the closest thing to the pubs we’d frequented in Dublin. She

was right, and The Galway Bay became my home away from Ireland. It was perfect. In the midst of my homesickness for the country I'd found a connection to it.

Chris and I warmed to each other quickly and when I went home to Virginia for the summer we kept in touch and talked often. In August, when I came back to Chicago I found myself with him daily. The boundaries of our friendship blurred into something else. I knew he was seeing other people casually, but I had it in my head that eventually they'd all fall away. I've never been one for waiting and I like to think I have a relatively healthy outlook on romantic relationships, but Chris was my outlier. I don't think I ever really loved him – what I loved was the idea that he could take me back to Ireland. And, in a way, he did. So many nights when it was only the two of us in the bar I forgot where I was and I could pretend for a while that time had stopped two years prior – we could have been seated in a grungy alcove at the Bleeding Horse in Dublin. He was an escape; a gateway to memories I was desperately trying to turn into the present reality.

One night in September we lay across my bed and I traced the angels on his bare right shoulder with my fingertips. "What's this one mean?" I asked.

"It's the sheet music for 'Send Me on My Way'."

"What about the angels?"

"They're for my sisters."

"I thought you were an only child."

"Am," he said, as he turned to look at me. "They died before I was born. Two of them were stillborn and the last one died right after."

"Jeez," I whispered. "I bet your mom is thankful for you." He threw his head back and laughed deep in his chest. "What's funny?" I asked.



“I’ve broken her heart more than the three of them combined.” With that he rolled on top of me and pressed his lips into mine.

That night we had sex for the first and only time. Soon after I found out that he lived with his girlfriend Erin. He assured me he planned to leave her and I believed him for a while. Then I stayed away for a while. Then unable to quit my fix of Ireland, I gave an ultimatum and we became friends.

### **Knees. (Part II)**

The nine of us fell out of the cab in front of Drop Night club. I steadied myself on Laura’s shoulder for support and she looked at me grinning, the Blackhawks hat she’d found on the street sat lopsided on her head. In turn, Grace steadied herself on my arm, her face scrunched up and twisted somewhere in the range of about to puke or completely blacked out. “You okay?” I asked her.

“Yeah!” she said and flounced toward the door. Blacked out it was.

Chris stumbled, fell and landed in a puddle of dirty melted snow water. “Who the fuck’s idea was it to go dancing?” he asked.

“Get up Araby,” Nolan said. He slapped him on the back. “The lads are in town!”

“Yeah the lads are in town,” said Harte over his shoulder. “We didn’t fly across the fucking ocean to sit around and twiddle our thumbs.”

“It’ll be good Craic,” Nugent said and put his arm around Rachel’s shoulders, ushering her into the club.

“We just got back from Vegas! Was that twiddlin’ our thumbs?” Chris growled.

“Come on Beggs,” Gareth said, laughing. “Don’t go soft on us.”

Inside Drop the lights cast everything in dark blue. The bar pulsed. I lost count of the number of shots we took. Laura, Rachel, Grace and I danced on chairs, tables and each other.

“Jesus Christ,” Chris yelled watching all of us. “I need to pray.” And just like that he knelt on the floor of the club, his elbows resting on the seat of a bench next to the bathroom, his bowed head pressed against his grasped hands and his eyes squeezed shut—tuning out Carly Rae Jepsen’s “Call Me Maybe.”

Other club goers gave him weird looks. We each took turns trying to pry him off of the floor. He shrugged all of us off. “Leave me alone I’m praying!” he yelled.

One of the bartenders leaned over to Nolan, “Man, you need to get your friend out of here. People are complaining.”

“Let’s go Araby,” Nolan said to Chris, pulling him up. “Back to the Bay.”

As we walked toward the exit Whitney Houston came on over the speakers. Chris stopped mid-step, raised both of his hands in the air, threw his head back and bellowed at the ceiling, “I DON’T WANT TO DANCE WITH SOMEBODY!” We all stared at him along with a dozen strangers that were within earshot. He pointed a finger at a group of scantily clad women next to us and spit, “You should all go home and pray.” One of the bartenders started to walk toward us.

“Let’s go, mates!” Nolan said herding us all out the door. We hit the pavement laughing. There was a chorus of ‘what the fucks’ directed at Chris.

He stumbled to the curb and threw his hand in the air to signal a cab. “Bunch of heathens...” he mumbled. “Hate dance clubs...abomination.” A cab pulled to a stop next to him and he crawled into the front seat.

“Where are you going?” Nolan asked, laughing.

He poked his head out of the window, “Titty bar. Who’s coming?”

**Tattoo, left inside wrist. Roman numerals that spell the date 9.13.13**

“You know what this tattoo is for?” he asked. The Bay was closed and he sat hunched over the bar as if all of his 27 years had found their tomorrows on his shoulders. Chris was always drunk, but that night he’d reached a new level. He’d passed in and out of consciousness over the past hour and spoke nonsense every time he came to.

“Hmm?” I muttered not looking up. I was staring at my phone screen trying to see if an uber was close enough to get there before his coherent moment passed.

“That’s the day our baby died.”

My head snapped up and for a moment I couldn’t breath. He stared at me, his eyes watering, but suddenly clear. “What?”

“Erin was pregnant,” he said. “She didn’t want kids yet.”

I reached over to him, grabbed his wrist and brushed my thumb across the roman numerals, not knowing what to say. Then he cried, not the small silent tears I’d seen him shed before. His whole body wrenched, and a mixture of moans and sobs poured from his mouth. He rattled off a string of sentences that garbled in his throat, but I caught enough to understand.

“Didn’t know...my kid...my baby...didn’t tell me...too late.” I sat in silence and held his hand. Minutes or hours later he looked up at me with clear eyes, “I never want to talk about this again. Don’t ever bring it up.”

“Okay,” I said. I ordered an uber and told him it was time to for him to go home. He let me pull his sweatshirt over his slack arms. I supported his weight as we walked up the stairs and

out onto the sidewalk. Before he got into the cab he put a hand on my cheek and looked at me, his eyes darted back and forth as they stared at mine.

“I’m sorry,” he said. He kissed my forehead and brushed his thumb across my cheek. He got into the cab, but before I closed the door he grabbed my hand and looked up like a scared little boy. “I would have been a good dad.”

“I know,” I said.

### **Ring finger. Left Hand.**

November 19, 2013. Chris married Erin.

Since then, he’s worn a wedding band. Whenever we talk he confides how unhappy he is. How his green card should go through soon. How once it does he can get divorced and end the facade. How he can’t wait to be able to go see his family back in Ireland.

For a while I think he took it seriously...the ring: the marriage. Now, when he calls me to unload a few months worth of pent up problems he tells me about how he was sleeping with Merry, but then she found out that he was also sleeping with Rachel. Merry got mad and threatened to tell Erin everything and get him deported. Things calm down and he starts the cycle over again and I listen to it over and over again, giving the same advice even though I know he wont listen.

### **Fingers.**

Plucked at the keyboard. *An Anthology of Modern Irish Poetry.*

Clicked: “Add to Cart.”

Clicked: “Gift Wrap.”

Typed: *Emily Howell 977 Gas Light Lane, Virginia Beach, VA 23462.*

Would you like to send a message with your gift?

Typed in the message box.

Clicked: “Place your Order.”

I’d decided to turn down a full-ride to a self-designed, yearlong Masters program in Ireland. I’d just finished the first year of a three-year program I was enrolled in at Old Dominion University in Virginia. It was an impossible choice, but I guess it signaled some new maturity on my part—the understanding that Ireland would still be there waiting for me after I’d finished my degree. Still, it wasn’t an easy pill to swallow.

Around the same time, the processing of Chris’s green card was delayed again. He was used to this, but this time stung a little more than usual. His grandpa had just been diagnosed with cancer, so he was even more eager than usual to visit. We mourned together.

A few days later he told me he had sent me a gift, to tide me over until I had the chance to go back.

My scissors slid easily through the tape of the box that arrived on my doorstep. I pulled out the book, laughed, and flipped through the 900+ pages of poetry. A square piece of cardstock fell onto the floor and I picked it up. My eyes scanned the words:

*Tiocfaidh ar la mo chara*

I had to ask him what it meant.

*Our day will come my friend*

## CHAPTER VII

## AIR

I've never been able to sleep without the mechanical hum of fan blades beside my bed. It lulls me to sleep. Then again maybe I'm not comforted by the blades—maybe, it's the air ebbing and flowing across the shores of my skin.

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I gravitate toward open windows and sliding glass doors. The screen door at my grandparent's house was forever letting in the outside air. As a kid, before joining my sister outside on the cement porch to shuck corn from the garden, I'd stand inside, inches away from the woven squares, letting the breeze brush over my freckled shoulders. I'd let the succulent scent of the burgers and hotdogs my grandpa was grilling outside waft into my nose while the sizzle and pop of frying grease flirted with my eardrums from where my grandma stood making french-fries in the kitchen.

I love their house in Gordonsville, Virginia—I never mind the hour and a half of winding roads even when stuck behind a mammoth sized tractor (going at least 20 miles under the speed limit). There's something sacred about turning onto the gravel road that leads to their house—the left side lined by an old wooden fence marking the boundaries of Helmet, the German horse farmer's, pastures and the right, a forest of trees interrupted by four clearings, each holding a house my grandpa and his brother built with their bare. It was back breaking work – before the stairs were put in between the finished main level of my grandparents house and the unfinished basement, my grandpa fell backwards through the door frame and landed on the cement floor below. He was lucky, only some broken ribs and a fractured spine, but no permanent damage.

When my sister and I were younger we'd spend weeks there in the summer—going to horse shows, fighting over who would get to accompany my grandpa in his dilapidated 1975 Chevy Silverado to take a load of garbage to the dump and running barefoot in our bathing suits around the driveway when it rained – the wet blacktop glowed silver in the storm reflecting the clouds above.

As I've gotten older their house provides new appeal—whenever I find time to visit for a few days I find solace in their world of no Internet connection and spotty cell phone service. I spend my time reading, playing card games, rummaging through boxes of yellowed photographs, and watching wheel of fortune/jeopardy every night on the old box set—all the while enjoying the breeze that dances into the house through that old screen door.

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My chubby fingers reach skyward and grasp two fat cylinders of flesh. I hold them to support my weight as I toddle across the linoleum floor, one foot in front of the other. They hold me up as my socked feet trip over each other. I cling to them for dear life sure that the few inches between my diaper-padded butt and the floor would be the end. I use them to hold me up—but they aren't what give me the confidence to step forward. Instead it's the air that passes through his parted lips—the sound of my grandpa's excited voice. That keeps me going. His laughter rings through the house as I continue to take steps forward and I can see the ground edges of his yellowed teeth; some shine capped in metallic casings.

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The power source for your voice comes from air that you exhale. When we inhale, the diaphragm lowers and the rib cage expands, drawing air into the lungs. As we exhale, the process

reverses and air exits the lungs, creating an airstream in the trachea. This airstream provides the energy for the vocal box to produce sound. The stronger the airstream is the stronger the voice.

Words are such an interesting thing. Our need for them. Our yearning for communication and connection. A string of syllables put together in a certain way can cause joy, excitement, dread, pain.

We *need* words. We *want* words. We give them the power to stab into our hearts; to wreck relationships, build us up, bond us to others. But words are just sound. And sound is just air.

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I remember thinking his lips had disappeared. The way his pale skin was stretched so tautly across his bones. I could hear the rattling breaths wheeze from between the place his lips should have been...but instead it was just skin. The same waxy sick looking skin that covered the rest of his body. Cancer really screws with our bodies— good thing we get to leave them behind.

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Growing up, my mom and I would sit on the wooden stoop inside our garage. The humid summer air made our clothes cling to our bodies and damp hair blanket the back of our necks. We'd sit there during thunderstorms watching crystal pellets bounce off the black asphalt. I loved the way the eerie day light darkness made the grass appear emerald and the white lightning shattered the gray-black sky.

My favorite, though, was always the wind. The gusts funneling into our garage and whipping through the lawn chairs hanging from rusted nails, winding through the faded wooden croquette set, turning the peddles on the bikes my sister and I had outgrown, and sometimes even



knocking one of the dirt-stained towels off the leather seat of my dad's red lawn mower. Even more than lightening and rain the wind amazed me—and the barking thunder that gave it a voice. The air is what had brought the storm in the first place.

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No matter what holiday caused us all to gather together my body always found an empty place beside my grandpa on the couch and my head always found a place to rest on his stomach. My cheek would sink into the supple layers of flesh-covered fat, the seams on his soft button-down shirt imprinted on my cheeks. He was like a pillow, but better. Better because of the rise and fall. The air filling every stretched branch of lung.

There's something intimate about feeling someone else breathe. I think that's why we hug...not for the arms, or the warmth, or the comfort but for the rhythm of the rise and fall.

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To this day I have an obsession with Jeeps. When I was kid my dad had a white 1996 Jeep Cherokee and whenever our family of four had to split up and take two cars, I'd jump into the passenger seat without a second glance at my mom's little car (that lacked any attractive features). Riding with my mom meant AC blasting, quiet music, and perfect posture. In the Jeep I could put my feet on the dash, roll the windows down and let the wind pull at my skin and rustle the corners of the road maps shoved in the seat back pockets, while belting the words to George Strait alongside my dad.

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My grandpa's body is buried in the ground. By now, the skin is stretched and dried. The organs have disintegrated. There's nothing familiar left—not the fingers I held onto when I

learned to walk, the stomach my head rested on, the hands with ever dirty finger nails I watched build, fix, and garden, or the ear I whispered into, “Grandpa, it’s Emily. I love you. I’m here.”

He waited for that. I had my mom telling him I was coming when I boarded the plane in Chicago to rush back to Virginia – the doctors didn’t think he’d make it through the night. When I landed in DC my dad picked me up from the airport and as soon as we pulled into our driveway I got into my Toyota Corolla and sped the two hours to the hospital outside Charlottesville, Virginia.

That day, I minded the distance – the tractors blocking the road, every painfully slow driver. In the hallway, on the way to my grandpa’s room, I passed one of my uncles, who was walking to the bathroom. I got to his room, hugged his frail body, told him I loved him and he died, the last little bit of air leaving the space between his nonexistent lips – all before my uncle came back.

My aunt says he waited for me and I believe he did. I think he knew I needed to see him inside his body one last time. I think he knew I didn’t understand how unimportant our bodies are. Even in those last moments, when it probably would have been easier to let go and stop fighting against the pain he was still trying to take care of me.

That night, standing outside the hospital, I closed my eyes and listened to the sound of the wind—the sweeping up of nothingness like a broom beating fog. Reaching into the darkness my fingers grazed the empty space, they pushed around the air, and somehow I felt closer to him than I ever had.

## CHAPTER VIII

## SOLE TRAFFIC

Standing on the State Street Bridge at night I shiver as pieces of light swirl and fall around me. Hundreds of yellow rectangles float, trapped inside elevated steel and glass. Buildings blend into the pitch-black sky. The river below is dotted molten gold, reflecting each fragment – they flicker as the water laps against the concrete bank. Headlights illuminate the sidewalk as cars speed past behind me. The bridge and my body bob like the water below.

Months ago, in summer, I sat in a kayak on that water. The setting sun was hidden behind layers of massive skyscrapers. I looked down at my paddle as it cut through the water, rippling outward like a mini jet stream with each pull forward. With the sun low in the sky the entire city was cast in a shadow of cool blue light. Hollow footsteps hammered across the bridges as we glided below them, echoing off the walls. I remember looking at the LaSalle Street Bridge as I slid toward it. Suspended above the water swaying, the pavement looked like it was sinking downward, pounded by the endless traffic of soles.

Now, it's January and a cold wind flies off the lake, funneled by the buildings. My eyes water and well leaving salt tracks down my cheeks. The moisture inside my nostrils freezes and leaves less room for air. I open my mouth and suck in a deep breath. A single tooth is sliced with a sliver of pain and I snap my mouth closed. White breath blurs my sight every time I exhale. It's one of those northern nights when the cold is so heavy I feel numb to it.

I walk down here when I start to feel swallowed by the bigness of this place. When I start to feel disconnected and lonely.

I take my hands out of my pockets and place them on the steel railing so I can lean over its edge. I forgot my gloves and when my flesh touches the icy steel I want to recoil, but the cold

burns them into place. So for a moment I stand there, fingers freezing and notice a woman through one of the lower windows of the closest building. She pulls on a sweater, a large jacket, scarf, hat and gloves, walks to the door, flicks the light switch and leaves. The light flutters and flares out like a storm at sea.

## CHAPTER IX

### WALLS OF SKIN

Itch (noun): a sensation that causes the desire or reflex to scratch. Modern science shows that itch has many similarities to pain, and while both are unpleasant sensory experiences, their behavioral response patterns are different: Pain creates a withdrawal reflex, while itch leads to a scratch reflex.

I lived in the same house my whole life (unless you count a brief stint of time when I was still in utero). Throughout my adolescence, I would witness friends and classmates announce that their family was moving, their eyes pink and swollen. It baffled me that they were so upset. I would have killed to move. For over 17 years, the view from my bedroom window was a stretch of woods separating my back yard from the other backyards of suburban Centerville, Virginia. I hated it.

My parents are creatures of habit. We went to the same handful of restaurants – none more than a 10-minute drive away from our home. Every Wednesday, we went to *Ciro's*, a small pizza place where we'd befriended the manager, Salvatore. We were such regulars that, if we weren't seated in our normal booth by 10 after 6 (our regular time), my mom would get a text from Sal making sure we were okay. Sal has long since moved away with his own family, but my parents can still be found there every Wednesday night.

We went to church every Sunday morning at 8:45, sat in the same section, and went to the same handful of brunch places afterward. My parents are habitual; they're comfortable; and they're happy...and I was just there—with my bouncing legs, my obsessive-compulsive need to tear the ends of my hair off, and my glazed-over-zoned-out-day-dreaming eyes.

As soon as I had my license, I'd take day trips into D.C. or out to one of the small country towns that lined Route 50 on the way into the Blue Ridge. I spent hours on the Internet looking at the world, planning the trips I would take and the places I would live.

College was my escape route—I applied all over the country. The acceptances came in, the decision was made, and my suitcases were packed a full month before I was scheduled to leave for Chicago.

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Scratch (noun): a slight or insignificant wound or injury that happens when a sharp object, like a fingernail or thorn, scrapes along your skin. After getting a scratch, your skin may start bleeding. This happens because the injury breaks or tears the tiny blood vessels right under the skin's surface.

The first time I set foot in Chicago was on a field trip my senior year of high school. I'd already been accepted to Columbia College and had decided that I would go there without ever being off the East Coast. Unbeknownst to me, one of my teachers had told our tour guide that I would be moving to the city, and our tour bus made a detour to drive directly past the main building on 'campus.' I was seated by a window on the right side of the bus, enamored by the mosaic of colors that made up Grant Park in the springtime. "Now, to our left, where I hear one of you will be attending in the fall, is Columbia College," rasped the voice through the age-old speaker system. My head snapped away from the park and met the towering bricked façade of the place I'd spend my next few years. Over the glass front doors, a large black sign with huge white letters read "Columbia College Chicago," and the windows that covered the bottom floor were obscured by mural sized prints of students and the school's motto: Create Change.

I remember hearing the mutated marriage of a shriek and a sob, and knowing it had come from my own mouth. When the air left my lungs, my body shuttered, almost buckling under the absence of weight. The sandbags I constantly felt lodged behind my eye sockets dissipated. In that moment, the world became real for me; that school, that city, that park, with all its colors, were all there for me—and they were all new.

I moved to Chicago in the fall, and excitement both followed and led me everywhere. But within months, the newness faded. I spent more time staring at the ceiling of my cramped dorm room than I did wandering the hundreds of unexplored streets outside, trying to understand why this wasn't good enough—why my body felt weighed down by lead-coated limbs.

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Cut (noun): a long, narrow incision in the skin made by something sharp. Cuts are open wounds through the skin. Normally, the skin is under slight, constant tension as it covers the body; a cut is a forceful injury that breaks that tension.

South Circular Road in Dublin was home: a kitchen with no oven; a bathroom that you could shower, pee, and wash your hands in at the same time; a single bed with a mattress so thin you could feel the baseboard underneath. I only lived there for five short months, during my second year of undergrad, but when I was there I felt *right*. I couldn't put my finger on exactly what had changed for a while until one night, lying on my paper thin mattress, I realized the film reel of thoughts that usually buzzed through my brain and kept me from sleeping was gone. My constant worrying, the heaviness of my head, the pit in my stomach, the continuous nausea, they were all gone. From the moment I stepped out of the airport and into the van that would take me

to my new home, and I watched the unassuming streets of Dublin whiz by, I wasn't worried and it changed the way I lived.

When I walked down my street, framed by buildings with bright painted doors and small front yards, gated with ironclad fences, I felt like I belonged. Twice a week, I'd set aside the afternoon for reading at one my two favorite cafés. First, there was Bibi's, a tiny little place tucked into my neighborhood in Dublin 8 on a quiet corner. I found it by chance one morning, and ever since, I'd been going back for a pot of herbal tea and a lemon square to keep me company while I read. Then, there was my favorite, Cake Café. My little secluded spot on the ever-bustling and busy Camden Street, hidden behind the façade of Daintree Stationary Shop. You had to walk through Daintree and go out their backdoor, into a little residential courtyard, to find the illusive building where Cake Café lived. There, I would sit outside on one of the folding wood chairs next to the intricate wall someone had decorated with stacked books, buttons, splattered paint, pages of newspaper, silverware, streamers, and other eclectic items. I would drink my tea and eat whatever cake sounded best that day (usually carrot), while the potted plants and hanging laundry swung on the balconies overhead.

Most weekends, I'd go with friends for a pint at the Bleeding Horse, my favorite pub outside the city center, before walking down Camden to hit The Brazen Head, Flannery's, Whelan's, Cassidy's, and on occasion, The Hairy Lemon. Sometimes we'd be in the mood for a crowded tourist-filled night out in the Temple Bar district so we could listen to live Irish music at Gogarty's or Temple.

At least one Saturday a month, I would walk to Queen of Tarts on Georges Street for breakfast, always stopping at the Marcade on the way to peruse the various vendors. I bought my groceries at the Aldi on Rathmines, liked my coffee from Bewely's on Grafton, and only bought



macaroons from Noshington. If I was ever in the mood for an indulgent evening, I'd go to the Rustic Stone on Georges Street, where if you ordered meat or fish, it was brought out raw on a scalding volcanic stone, and the best desert was chocolate soup.

I had my places—my own version of a routine—but it was always changing. It never felt old. I walked everywhere, even in the rain; unless there was a torrential downpour. Then, I'd flag the bus and make my way to the top level, where I'd sit, still, with my throat sinking into my stomach, while I watched the streets of Dublin melt down the glass.

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Gash (noun): a long deep, jagged or gaping wound that bleeds profusely. Often, a gash will not heal on its own. Stitches must be used to pull the edges of skin together and forcibly weave it shut.

I was lighter in Chicago the second time around. Standing on the State Street bridge at night gave me the same feeling I had in Ireland—weightless and worry-free. There were hundreds of yellow rectangles floating in the blackness around them; the sky above, a deep black, and the water below reflecting each shard of light like broken glass in wool. Standing there turns the world upside down and wraps you in a sea of earthly stars.

Immediately after returning from Ireland, I moved, with some friends, into the third floor apartment in an old graystone in the heart of Wrigleyville. Everything about it was quirky and disheveled from the movie posters that covered our dining room wall (my favorite being the massive Yoda) to the model dinosaurs, tea candles, and stray rocks from my roommate's collection that littered the living room mantel. Seated on the moth-eaten floral couch on our back porch, I could see the lights that towered over Wrigley Field, and on game days, the voice of the

announcers, notes of the organ music, and roar of the fans glided through our open windows, crystal clear. I thrived there. I explored the city more; I made more friends; I graduated early; and every day brought something new. If Ireland had taught me anything, it was that you have to move, constantly and deliberately, because even a moment's pause could leave you stuck, weighted down, and suffocated.

I was happy in Chicago—for two years I roamed: stumbling through the allies of Lakeview and Lincoln Park after midnight; visiting the art galleries, hole in the wall restaurants, and listening to live music in Bridgeport and Pilsen; lying on the lakefront beaches in Uptown and Rodgers Park; eating my way through Little Italy, Ukrainian Village, Greektown, Polonia Triangle, and Argyle (the Vietnamese district); and landing almost every night at my home away from home, the Irish bar—The Galway Bay. I spent an incalculable amount of time in that darkened dive after hours, talking to the bartender, who'd become my best friend, downing enough liquor to numb my nerve endings. Both of us mourning Ireland—the country he was always fighting the urge to run back to, while I was always wishing I could.

Eventually, The Galway Bay became more than a nightly routine. Half the time, I was just as likely to stumble through the dingy glass doors at 10am as I was at 10pm, and the only roaming I did was from the bottom of one emptied glass to the next.

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Heal (verb): to become sound or healthy again. At the site of a wound, platelets stick together and clot, which works to keep blood and other fluids from leaking out. A scab, a hardened and dried clot, forms a crust over the wound. This protects the area so the skin underneath can have time to heal. Underneath the scab, new skin cells multiply to repair the

wound. You can't see it under the scab, but a new layer of skin is forming, and when the new skin is ready, the scab falls off.

Healing...what does it mean, anyway? The fusing together of skin cells, the eradication of emotion, the ability to look at yourself in the mirror each morning and say, "I'm whole." I don't buy it. The gaping wounds that leave my insides exposed, bloody, putrid, hard to look at—those are just as much a part of me as the smooth surface of my uninjured skin.

I live in Virginia Beach now, only 3 hours from where I grew up. My apartment is in a cookie-cutter complex, it's clean and color coordinated; it backs up to a lake and the porch is covered with hanging flower pots from the local nursery and cushioned Adirondack chairs. My fridge is stocked with blindingly vibrant food—veggies, fruit, and not a drop of piss colored alcohol. Every Sunday I eat dinner with a group of people who welcomed me with open arms when I first moved to town—my boyfriend sits among them spitting tobacco juice over the edge of the weather worn deck and every once and a while winking in my direction. He's winking at a responsible, grounded girl. I rarely find myself seated in the corner of a dimly lit bar sucking down margaritas after a long week. Instead, I go to work and come home to sit cross-legged in the dark, illuminated by the blue glow of some television show I'm not watching. I'm living the life I'm *expected* to live, but every day that passes pulls my skin tighter as if some medieval torture device is stretching me thin.

I'm starting to accept that I'm one of *those* people—that I can't leave well enough alone. Even as a kid, I'd drive my mom crazy because, any time my continuous motion caused the inevitable stumble, I couldn't leave the scabs on my skinned knees, elbows, or hands alone long enough to heal.

Despite my deliberate motion, I'm stuck in the space between the jagged walls of my own skin as they close together and fuse above my head. It's only a matter of time before I rip and claw at the underside of my freckled flesh and cause another itch.

## CHAPTER X

### CITY FILTERED THROUGH A KEYHOLE

When I think about my grandpa I think about his truck. The old robin's egg blue Chevy it's bumper torn with copper colored rust. The worn orange seat with a single seat belt stretched across both his red clay covered work pants and my pale thighs. I would ride to the dump with him through the wooded back roads of Virginia. The radio didn't work and neither did the AC, so we drove with the windows cranked halfway down. A halo of auburn frizz framed my face and sweat coated the back of my neck – gifts from the humid summer air. My grandpa wore a hat; I'm not sure which one. Maybe the red one with the Marines emblem or the blue and white one with a screen-printed photo of all his grandkids. Either way, his dark gray hair stuck out of the bottom in small tufts and white pricks of stubble covered his cheeks.

I think about the kitchen table. The floral vinyl table cover and the wooden, two-tiered Lazy Susan covered with pill bottles, salt and pepper shakers, rectangular packets of jelly and topped with a jeopardy tear-off calendar. In the morning, I would wake up before everyone else and find him seated there in worn pants and a white undershirt – hair still disheveled from sleep. We'd talk and I'd watch while he opened bottles and placed pills in a little mound in front of him. He'd swallow them all in one gulp, always with milk. I'd watch him prick his finger and test his blood sugar, writing down the number in a spiral notebook. And finally, I'd watch him roll his shirt up over his large, soft stomach and plunge an insulin filled needle into his flesh. I'd always been leery of needles, so I'd cringe and he'd assure me it didn't hurt. After he was finished with his routine we'd do all of the prep work for breakfast and then wait for my mom and sister and grandma to join us – I'd help him with the crossword or watch him play electronic handheld solitaire.

I think about the Pittsburgh Steelers. His black and gold knit sweater vest with their logo on the front, his countless hats and the memorabilia littered around their living room – a fleece blanket drawn up to his neck in the winter, a terrible towel and stuffed football player sitting in the corner, and plastic bleacher pillows on the fireplace ledge. He would yell and scowl at the TV while they played, tossing mild insults at the referees.

I think about Thanksgiving and Easter. I was the first of fifteen grandkids, joined next by my sister two years later. As more of them were added over the years I was expected to be the built in babysitter, the oldest, the one who should “know better.” Family gatherings were hard for me, not because I didn’t love spending time with a house full of relatives, but because after a few days I’d be emotionally spent – straddling the line between the kids and adults and not really fitting into either. When I was with the kids I felt like I was always on the outside of an inside joke, like they were keeping me an arms length away just in case I was playing for the grown up team. And then, when I was around the adults I felt invisible. I was always allowed to sit at the adult table in the dining room instead of with the kids in the kitchen, but I was too young to be able to contribute to any of the three different conversations going on at once.

One Easter, my Uncle Dave started telling a story about how my Aunt Nancy had tripped and hurt herself the night before because she hadn’t taken a flash light out to the car when trying to sneak in my cousin’s Easter baskets.

“Dave!” my mom said.

He looked at her confused and then noticed me at the other end of the table eyes looking down at my plate, pushing around a piece of kielbasa. The other conversations at the table still bubbled, no one noticing.

“I don’t think she heard me. She’s too young to put that together,” he replied quietly.

That's how I found out about the Easter Bunny and Santa Clause and the Tooth Fairy all in one blow. My Aunt Melanie felt bad for me, so that year she let me help her make the 'bunny tracks' she made leading up to the house every year after all the other kids had gone to sleep. Easter was early that year and the pitch-black night was cold as we poured flour through a cardboard, paw print stencil onto the driveway. She talked about how fun it was to see the kid's faces when they woke up in the morning and found them and how now I could be in on the fun. I nodded and smiled. I knew she was trying to make me feel better, but I also knew that there was now one more thing separating me from them.

After we were finished I stayed outside and sat alone on the porch glider until the motion sensor light over the garage flicked off and I could see the thousands of stars overhead. Over the years, I ended up out on that glider at night a lot over holiday weekends. Sometimes to find a little space to breath, sometimes to let tears silently slide down my cheeks over a comment someone made that hurt too-fragile feelings and sometimes just to take a second to try to figure out where I fit in. I'd listen to the muffled laughter coming from inside and even look through the bay window at the adults clearly illuminated in yellow light sitting at the kitchen table – playing cards, drinking beer, grabbing fist-fulls of chips or peanuts out of bowls my grandma had set out. The thick country nights shrouded me in darkness free too observe without anyone noticing. I couldn't see them, but I knew the kids would all be in the study sprawled out on the couch and floor watching a movie on VHS. Where should I go? The answer was always the same.

I'd walk back into the house and down the hallway past the kitchen and the study and find my grandpa, in the living room nodding off in his armchair.

“Hi Grandpa.”

“Hi sweetheart,” he’d smile and pat the arm of the couch next to his chair. I’d curl up there and put my head on the armrest, he’d pet my hair away from my face a few times and then we’d sit there, half sleeping, half watching TV and half listening to the rumble of laughter and chatter coming from the other rooms.

I think about soup, and how he ordered it every time we went out to eat. He always spilled on his shirt and by the time we finished eating he’d have brown blotches staining the front of whatever he was wearing.

I think about the collection basket at church. When I was younger my favorite part of the mass was watching my grandpa stand at the end of the rows of pews and usher the collection basket toward the back of the church. I remember thinking how cool it was that he got to stand up and walk around while the rest of us stayed in our pews and sang. I’d watch him instead of singing and when he got to our row he’d always wink at me, or if I was on the end squeeze my shoulder. I’d always hope someone else was watching so they’d know I knew him. That I was related to one of the ushers – I was so proud.

I think of beanie babies. He had a massive collection that he kept track of with inventory sheets. They were displayed all over the house in plastic boxes, glass display towers, on shelves and there were more in plastic bins in the basement.

I think about their basement. It was unfinished and every day he’d go down the stairs, grab a few empty gallon milk jugs from where they were piled, walk across the concrete floor pulling the draw string lights as he went and empty the water from the dehumidifier into the jugs. Then he’d add them to the rows of others on the floor. He used the jugs to water houseplants and the garden so that he didn’t waste the well water hooked up to their showers.



I think about *Wheel of Fortune* and *Jeopardy*, crossword puzzles, car rides, trips to Hallmark and Burger King, I think about grocery shopping with a handful of coupons. I think about him doodling on scratch paper and reading Bill Clinton's biography. I think about his garden, metal opossum traps and helping him replace the garage door. I think about his voice saved on my phone in a message he left for my Birthday that's five years old.

But, mostly, I think about St. Kevin's church in Dublin. I had just started a semester studying at Griffith College in Dublin, Ireland when I got the news about my grandpa's leukemia. Since I'd moved away from home a few years earlier I hadn't been much of a churchgoer. I believed in God and prayed daily; still, I didn't subscribe to church the same way the rest of my Catholic family did. But when I found out about my grandpa's prospectus I found St. Kevin's. I went to mass every Sunday and for an hour I'd sit and stand and kneel all the while pleading for time. Weeks turned into months and the end to my stint in Ireland drew closer. I started stopping in the Church every time I passed by, which was often and say a prayer for him to stay well until I could go home. And he did.

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I went on a month long backpacking trip in Europe over the summer. We spent our last ten days in Ireland – my first trip back since living there. On our first day, I showed my friend, who I was traveling with all around the city: where I lived, my school, my favorite spots for tea.

When we came to St. Kevin's I stood outside looking at the massive stone façade – slender towers, gray tiled roof, a dozen triangular peaks topped with thick stone crosses, the huge round stained glass window, and the wooden, red double doors. I walked around the building to a small black door with a large brass doorknob and entered on the side of the church near the altar. I took a place at the kneeler in front of a hundred little votive candles. Some have flames

flickering on the edge of their blackened wicks and others have melted down to nothing. I picked up one of the wooden lighting sticks, caught the end of it on one of the flames, pressed it to the white wick on an unused candle and watched it catch. A thin stream of smoke snaked into the air. I looked through it.

And in that moment, it was as if the entire city filtered through the keyhole of that church and projected on the wall above me. The grunge covered streets, the black-toothed busker I watched on a side street in Temple Bar, the waiting room of the doctors office in Dolphin's Barn, the counters in my apartment the day I got back from Spain, covered in dirty dishes, half empty beer cans and smashed cigarette butts, the iron barred windows on campus, muck filled rain puddles, bar room toilets crusted with vomit, gray smudges of gum stuck to the back of bus seats, cracked pavement, flowerbeds filled with brown, spindly stems and dried leaves – every disgusting image of the place where I chose to spend so much of one of his last years.

I pressed my forehead against my clasped hands, squeezed my eyes closed to try to slow the silent tears and I hated myself for not being able to remember the last time I let myself miss him.

## CHAPTER XI

## WICKLOW

I am standing in the middle of a field in Wicklow National Park. It's been just over four years since I was here last. Then, it was winter. The color pallet was yellow, brown and an almost black green. The air was sticky with rain and every once in a while a freezing droplet would stab the back of my neck.

Today the sky is clear blue and the air is crisp – it feels like fall in the middle of summer. I can taste the trees and grass on my tongue. Everything is emerald, alive, growing. Lush. I look back toward the road where our red Audi beams vibrant against the green. It's too cold outside for Rachel, so she sits inside. It's like she's not even here.

I want to lie down in the tall grass and let it envelope my body – to look up at the sky through the waving strands of green against blue. Let the thistles prick my clothes, stick to my hair and draw droplets of blood from my bare palms in the grass. I want to lose myself to the landscape. To stretch my body until I cover the land and am both the top branches of the yew trees and the rocks being licked by the edge of the Irish Sea. I want to be swallowed whole by the earth. Sunken into the dirt, tangled in roots – to let my body become the island I love so much.

Rachel calls my name from the car and I'm jolted out of my thoughts. She's ready to go and I want to scream at her to leave me, but I don't. I move. I get back into the car and we drive through the park. As we move I feel the grass, the trees, the brush bend toward us – reaching out to pull me back in.

I stare out the window and feel like I'm suffocating. It's like a gravitational pull is coded into my core that draws me here. I'm afraid to leave. Afraid of how long it will be until I can be

here again. Afraid I'll spend the time in between now and then doing the same thing I've done for four years. That I'll get back home and after a few days the longing will begin again and I'll try endlessly to quench it. I'll patch little bits of life together until I have something that vaguely resembles here. A forest of green trees, a seashore, winding back rounds, a dimly light basement bar, a friend's accent, the coffee shop I can walk to from my apartment, cobbled streets, pubs with lit fire places, mid-day pints, plates filled with curry fries and Sheppard's pie, the whistling kettle on my kitchen stove calling me for tea.

As we drive I dig my nails into the sides of my seat and let the car rip me out of my own skin.

## CHAPTER XII

## STRAY SOD

Before Catholics and Protestants there were Druids and Celts. Irish culture was rooted in myth and magic. If history has it right, Christians killed Irish gods. Some were made into saints and others came back to life as faeries and leprechauns. An entire belief system pinched and squeezed into tiny, laughable characters—all but forgotten over time.

In Irish folklore stray sod is a clump of grass that's been enchanted by faeries. If a person steps on one, he becomes disoriented and lost, even in familiar surroundings. There are two ways to break the enchantment: turning your clothes inside out or carrying a piece of bread in your pocket.

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When my eyes fall closed I'm sitting on my knees, feet folded beneath me in the middle of the grass in Ireland. I can feel the wet earth soak through my jeans and dampen my skin. Earlier the clouds rang out their moisture like a wet rag. Downpour. Drizzle. Mist. Now the air is clear. Strands of wet hair are stuck to my face, neck and chest.

Eyes closed, I study the way the wind sounds as it blows through the long wild grass—each piece collides with hundreds around it. When the force is soft the sound reminds me of a sleeping lover breathing quietly through parted lips, but when the speed picks up it sounds like hundreds of cascading pebbles. The air smells like soil, decaying leaves and salt water.

I want to open my eyes and look out over the landscape. The gradation of smooth gray-greens clumped and drifted like snow, intermingled with rough patches of brown brush and speckled with soft yellow splotches, wildflowers. I want to see the sun above, cracking through

the charcoal-colored sky and sending slivers of light onto the ground—turning the places they hit a vibrant emerald. In the distance, the ocean hovering—a brush stroke of blue watercolor.

When it rains in Chicago the streets brim over and water leaks through the cracks of buildings. In the bar, the city feels like it's sinking downward, concrete dissolving, cockroaches scurrying out of their hiding places to find dry, high ground. Low, angry clouds snag the tops of buildings. It's summer and the air sits heavy on the streets, humid and suffocating.

Nothing is clean about the rain in Chicago. Streams of gray, dirt-speckled water run down the egress windows of the bar. In the streets the water pushes around muck – there's too much to wash away, it just swirls and floats, waiting to settle somewhere.

I realized I'd dozed off, zoned out, had a drunken daydream sitting at the bar—while Chris was in the back shoveling the rapidly pooling water in the storage room into buckets to dump outside. He stood in front of me soaked and scowling. The bar flooded often when it rained, a festering annoyance for Chris. Secretly, I welcomed the floods. A, because I loved the metaphorical parallel it brought to my life which in the past few months felt like a sinking ship. And, B, because the bar was closed, allowing alone time with my vices, which I craved on days like those.

Everything was gray. Even the rainbow-coated windows on Halsted Street seemed like they were covered in a shroud of sticky sludge. The entire city had blurred edges— the shapes were distinct enough to recognize but lacked detail and clarity. The world seemed beaten down. I felt beaten. There were so many days like those—heavy days.

Chris flipped over an empty shot glass, placed it on the bar in front of me and filled it with golden liquid. I don't remember pressing the rim to my lips. Malort tasted like motor oil sliding slowly down my throat, greasing my insides.

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During the two years after I moved back to Chicago from Ireland, the world began to resemble a watercolor painting. Smudges, soft edges, everything blurred together – the older memories still form distinguishable pictures, but toward the end of my time in Chicago many are a swirling mass of color.

Sometimes there are signposts that direct me toward the truth of the moments I don't recall. Like the morning I woke up wedged in the fetal position between the toilet and door of the cramped bathroom in the Chicago apartment I shared with two friends. I tore my cheek off the blue patterned tile and ran my arm across the vomit-crusting corners of my mouth. I didn't remember how I'd gotten there, but when it registered that the toilet was splattered with half digested food I wasn't surprised.

Slowly, I pulled myself off the floor and stared into the sink while I breathed deliberately through my pursed lips. My stomach churned beneath my blood-splattered shirt. Blood? I looked up at the mirror and noticed the thick black gunk congealed and caked to a gapping gash on the bottom of my chin. The skin around it had already blossomed with bruises. I remember being unconcerned with the wound and instead fascinated by the gray color of my skin. I poked at my cheeks expecting to see blush pink color rush to the points of contact. They stayed ashen. I gave up, walked across the hallway and fell into bed.

My friend, Laura, told me later that she had tried to put me in a cab home when she noticed I could barely walk. She told me I kept insisting I was fine and as the cab started to inch away from the curb I'd flung the door open and tripped getting out of it. My chin caught my fall on the edge of the curb. She told me the crack was so loud she thought I'd broken my jaw. She

told me I just lay there, laughing on the side of Halsted Street as people walked by – eyes glazed, unaware of my crimson spattered chin.

Then there was the time I woke up in the passenger seat of a car I'd never seen before on a street I didn't know the name of. I sat up, and patted my pockets furiously to make sure my phone and wallet were still there. My wallet was, my phone wasn't. I panicked – I'd just had to replace my phone the previous week and then the screen a few days earlier after I'd shattered it. I tore through the contents of the glove box and center console hoping I'd find it there. I didn't. Still drunk, I stumbled out of the car and flagged a cab at the nearest cross street.

Later that day I sat cross legged on my bedroom floor getting ready to go out for the night and an unfamiliar number flashed across the screen of the new phone I'd bought earlier. It was Garrett, the owner of the car. I remembered Garrett. He'd pressed himself against me while we played pool at the bar the night before and he'd asked me to go home with him after. I half joked, half yelled at him for leaving me passed out in the car instead of taking me up to his apartment before he cut me off.

"Emily," he said. "I don't know where my car is. That's why I'm calling you."

"What do you mean?" I asked. "Isn't it outside your apartment?"

"No..." He replied. "I put you in the car because you were falling asleep and went back into the bar to pay the tab. When I came out it was gone."

"What?" I asked again.

"Do you know where it is?"

"No! I was drunk when I woke up in it this morning and figured it was outside your apartment so I left."



“Do you remember where it was parked?”

“I have no idea. I wasn’t paying attention.”

We looked for it and finally found it, scratched and parked a few blocks away from the bar sandwiched in between a dumpster and an SUV.

“Are you okay?” he kept asking me, worried.

“Yeah,” I laughed. “I just want to know what happened!”

He told me there was a group of drunken men standing outside the bar when he went in to pay the tab. He figured one of them probably thought it would be funny to ‘fuck’ with him and drive away with the girl he was trying to take home. They were all gone when he came back out and so was the car.

I think he could be right. I also think I could have gotten in the driver’s seat and driven the car away myself – I don’t remember, but I believe at that point in my life it’s something I would have done.

There are many other stories like these – and then there are countless mornings when I woke up to texts and calls from friends asking where I’d gone, if I was safe, why I’d disappeared. Hours of lost time.

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I lost track of the number of times I saw night turn into day between the cracks of silhouetted buildings. A halo of harsh, burnt-orange would set the rooftops ablaze and run into a layer of subdued yellow that faded as if painted by a trembling, soft hand. The yellow melted into a magenta that dissolved into lilac and finally ended in an expansive tie-dye of indigo and gray. Golden lamplights popped against the black façade of buildings. As light crept into the

crevasses of alleys the city lost it's one-dimension to two and then three as night expanded into day. I liked to imagine the early risers behind their paisley curtains slouching off sleep, mesmerized by steaming streams of coffee, yawning out the staleness of sleep and sucking in the beginnings of words not yet said. Little did they know that outside a few stars remained, caught like seeds in cotton. Their days were about to start as mine came to an end.

On these mornings, when I walked up the stone stairs to my apartment, my body felt like it was trailing a few inches behind, my sluggish limbs saturated with alcohol. So often, I dragged myself into bed and looked at my phone, not knowing what day of the week it was. I would only set an alarm if it ended up being Sunday, urged by a dull pang of guilt in my chest. I told myself I'd get up and go to church. Hours later, my alarm would ring and I would turn it off.

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I was raised Catholic, but not because of my Irish side. My mother's Polish and Czech family are Catholic to the core – all of our holidays are steeped in Polish Catholic tradition. On Good Friday we silence all but prayer during the hours Jesus spent on the cross, on Christmas Eve we aren't allowed to eat until we've shared a piece of our oplatki with everyone in the room, and unless your legs are broken you get up and go to church every Sunday.

One of my earliest memories is a trip my mom, sister and I took to Gallitzin, Pennsylvania, when I was six years old to visit my mom's uncle and aunt who were both working in the same diocese at the time.

My great uncle, Monsignor Bernard lived in a creepy, decrepit house provided by his parish and we slept in a spare room there. It was old and creaky with red, unpadded carpets and dark wooden walls. I lied awake at night listening through the floor to the muffled sound of a

box set downstairs. We went to mass every day and I dozed off as Monsignor delivered repetitive sermons in his monotone voice. He was fun and endearing as an uncle, but dry and disengaging, behind the pulpit. Over the years, as his brothers and sisters have dwindled from 10 to 5, he officiated their funerals and I've been to enough to know he gives the same speech at them all – about butterflies of all things.

Underground, a tunnel ran from the basement of his house to the basement of St. Demetrius Catholic Church. One night, my mom's aunt, Sister Justice, came over to take my sister and I to bingo, which was held in the church basement. I can see the tunnel vividly. It was lit by dim, drawstring bulbs we had to pull as we walked. The walls, floor and ceiling were made of dimpled cement and painted a sterile white. When the tunnel opened up into the basement, it was the same blazing white and the ancient bingo players sat at plastic folding tables their sagging, wrinkled faces made particularly garish by the florescent lights. In my memory it smelled like a suffocating blend of strong perfumes and mothballs.

Out of all my great aunts and uncles, I've always been closest with Sister Justice. When I lived in Chicago, we saw each other twice a year when she visited a sister convent there. Once a year, as I was growing up, she'd send me and each of my female cousins vocational pamphlets that urged us to consider becoming nuns. That's the tone of my mom's side. Religion and faith above all else.

My favorite traditions though, are the ones rooted in luck and superstition. On Christmas Eve we all have to rub quarters between our hands while we wash them before dinner so that we'll find fortune in the coming year. My grandma is still careful that there are always more or less than 13 chairs around every table, refuses to put her pocketbook on the floor, and tells us to 'hold our thumbs' whenever she plays the lottery.

My dad wasn't even baptized; he converted to Catholicism right before I received my first Holy Communion. I remember this, not because I was particularly moved by his desire to convert, but because I was annoyed that I'd been upstaged.

I like to believe that his family, my Irish side, believed in Irish fable and folklore. The few of my dad's relatives I have met call me Little Virginia because they think I'm a reincarnation of my dad's mom, who died before I was born. She was fair, freckled and ginger-haired. My parents got engaged right before she died and in her final days she handed my mom a large, wooden jewelry box and said, "give this to my granddaughter." Two years later when I was born, I inherited it and its Celtic themed contents. I've always been fascinated by them and what they imply about my family history. I like to picture the houses of my ancestors decorated with framed proverbs and four leaf clovers.

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It's only 9 p.m. in Dublin and we're walking to the closest club, D2. I stop to steady myself on a bus stop pole.

"Are you okay?" Laura's voice asks.

I look around trying to find the source.

"Emily?"

"All I see are colors." I say. And it's true. Orbs of red, green, yellow, white and blue blur together in front of my eyes where the street should be.

"Maybe we should take her back. She did drink an entire bottle of Buckfast before we left," I hear Laura say to Shane, her new Irish boyfriend and also one of our 'ambassadors' at the Student Union. Laura and I moved to Ireland together for a semester long study abroad program.

“Nah,” he says. “Let’s get her to the bar and get some more drink in her. She’ll black out and be fine.”

I woke up in bed in my apartment in Chicago my head felt like what I imagine the inside of a bell feels like after being hit with an iron hammer. The smell of something burnt invaded my nostrils. I noticed a bowl of hardly mixed macaroni and cheese sitting on my nightstand and half of the noodles were blackened and crisp. Shit. A fuzzy memory from a few hours earlier flashed to the front of my mind: I’d dozed off sitting on the kitchen floor while noodles boiled on the stove, being woken up by the smoke alarm, getting up and throwing the smoking noodles under cold water in the sink as my roommate’s boyfriend stumbled into the room to see if I was okay, continuing to make the macaroni even though half the noodles were burnt, and eating it. I groaned. This is the second time this month I’ve almost started a fire in the apartment – later there would be some kind of intervention and I’d feign admitting I shouldn’t drink so much and promise to be more careful. I rolled my eyes, already annoyed with the time it would take away from being at the bar, rolled over in bed and slipped back into sleep.

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I loved drinking. I loved that it allowed me to deflect all of my anxieties and insecurities. I loved how it turned pain into pleasure. I loved the way drinking eradicated my fear of life and even more so, gave me something to believe in. I believed in the bar; it became something like a church. It was a gathering place and not just on Sunday’s. I related more to its parishioners; I blended in because like them I needed a place to avoid myself. And it was beautiful.

In the summer, when breeze traveled up from the lakeshore and through the open windows it would flutter and ripple loosely fit clothing. Sun-kissed elbows rested on the dark

mahogany bar and classic country played quietly over the speakers, drowned out by the Cubs playing on the big screen. At sunset, golden hazes of light formed halos around heads of loosely pulled back hair. The air was filled with the smell of melted butter, popcorn, beer and sunscreen. Glasses chimed when they brushed against each other, cans cracked open, corks gasped as they slid out of bottle tops, ice crunched, the motor of the dishwasher hummed, people produced a chorus of laughter and cheers and chatter. In that hour, right before darkness fell I sat at the bar, night after night, slowly sipping on my first drink—and every time, I felt cleansed.

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I was always allowed to eat the body, but never drink the blood. I remember asking my mom why one time. I'm not sure how old I was, but it had to be in my elementary school years.

A hideous coral, floral skirt swished around my ankles as I walked down the upstairs hallway and into my parent's bedroom. The bathroom door was open and a fan sat on the floor outside of it pointing inward. I heard a drawer close.

"Hey Mom?" I asked, warning her of my presence before I stepped in front of the door. She stood in front of the sink a dark green towel wrapped around her head, one arm raised as she smeared deodorant in her armpit, stark naked.

"Agh, Mom!" I averted my eyes.

"What?" she shrugged. "I'm dripping sweat. What do you need?"

"Is this outfit okay?" I asked still not looking at her.

She looked at my frizzy hair and frumpy attire. "You look lovely," she said and went back to her pre-church ritual. I didn't move. "Is there something else?"

"Whose turn is it to hold the envelope?" I asked, stalling.

"Uh, you can do it this week." I could tell she was getting annoyed with me.

“Mom?”

“Yes, Emily?”

“Can I uhm...why can’t I...can I try the wine this week?”

Her body tensed a little, but she didn’t look at me. “Why don’t you just eat the host?”

“But I want to try the wine.”

“You don’t need that.”

“But it’s supposed to be the body and blood of Christ. Isn’t it twice as good to have both?”

“One is good enough.”

“But...”

“No.”

“But...”

“No means no, Emily.”

“Why?”

“Because I said so! And because you’re too young to get a taste for that stuff.”

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I’ve realized recently that I’ve always had a crippling fear of failure. I procrastinate so that I’m never fully invested in anything, I avoid committing to everything from my career path to long lasting relationships, and I move cities every couple years and apartments even more frequently. I spread myself so thin between people and projects and jobs and plans that it creates the illusion that I’m driven, invested and ambitious when underneath I’m unsure, insecure and immobile.

In the bar, failure is funny – it’s idolized. And when success or maturity or just plain ‘getting your shit together’ takes you away from daily drinking your name is spoken in hushed

tones, replaced with vulgarities by the bartenders and eventually forgotten. You're a traitor to everything the bar stands for. I loved the bar because in its eyes, as long as I showed up I was doing everything right.

Sometimes I think Ireland and my obsession with it has the same affect on me that the bar does, both of them stall time, they distract me, they don't force me to look into the future. In Ireland, I'm always looking backward, trying to uncover a past and connect with a family I never knew.

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God is a shout in the streets. – James Joyce

A stray dog sitting at the top of the hill that looks over Howth's Head, outside Dublin. Its long golden fur, matted and mud splattered. A man's open mouth full of black rotted nubs framed by wisps of straw-like hair, singing – the clear, strong sound echoes off the cobble stone streets in Temple Bar. A group of kids yelling from across the street to take their picture – their frozen, open-mouthed grins. Glass display cases, cramped tables, stacked ovens – the rush of warm air bringing wafts of chocolate, tea leaves and singed toast. Plastic covers on strollers, shielding curly-haired, cubby-faced babies. A mosaic of overlapping umbrellas covering pale-skinned limbs. The massive, stone façade of St. Kevin's towering over the tree-lined streets in Dublin 8 – dwarfing the row houses with their vibrant, colored doors. Flying buttresses, rippled glass windows, wooden double doors and my hand on an iron handle. Clasped hands resting on the pew in front of me – pinheads of rain clinging to my blonde arm hair.



## CHAPTER XIII

### SKY FULL OF MAN MADE STARS

The sky is a forest of flame. Candles suspended, rising into the darkness, each encased in a thin, paper chrysalis. Every so often, one catches fire – blazing hot white as the paper shreds, ripping holes into the night sky – and bursts. Shards glow orange like the end of a cigarette butt, slither, burn, float downward and explode into ash. A summer's dusting of coal, black snow.

My body is pressed between hundreds of others as the ash falls onto my upturned face. I am standing on the Ribeira of Porto engulfed in the crazed Festa de São João. Vendors are selling beer, wine and food, people are dancing to the pulse of music, plastic hammers arch through the air, squeaking as they make contact with skull after skull, buildings are draped in decoration, banners stretch between windows overhead creating a web of color and the entire city seems to float in a haze of smoke from grilled sardines. Earlier in the day as we, my friend and I, walked through the narrow streets we passed hundreds of families gathered outside their homes, cooking the small silver, scaled fish above beds of coal. The smoke drenched the atmosphere and for days, and despite showers and machine washes I would catch whiffs of it lingering in my hair and clothes.

Porto was the second to last stop on our 26-day trip, and we were there because of me. I was enamored with the idea of going to a lantern festival, admittedly this obsession was born largely after seeing *Tangled*, and however unwise it may be to base one's travel ventures off of an animated fairy tale, there I was. These lanterns; however, were more like miniature hot air balloons. Three or more feet in height and too large to encircle with my arms, each one took sets of 3, 4 even 5 hands to launch into the sky.

There was no grand release, people began launching their lanterns as soon as darkness fell and continued to do so until midnight when the festival would culminate in fireworks tearing through the sky over the river to the beat of 60s rock music. Still, at any given moment the sky was dotted with glowing orbs of color – pink, orange, red, blue.

Immersed in the crowd I lose track of my body. I'm swayed and shoved and everything blurs together until a single instant when there is a lantern next to me, sagging and enveloping the body of its owner. I pinch the thin metal wire at the base; it is warm between my finger and thumb. With my other hand I softly squeeze the paper skin as it swells away from the flame. Three more strangers have joined us, doing the same and our lantern rises. I push it skyward with the others – until I am standing on my tiptoes, full body extended, my arm stretched above the crowd. Reaching, afraid it will fall without my touch.

Then it leaves the tender pad of my pointed fingertip. Cries erupt from the crowd around us; the squeaking plastic hammers create an orchestra of sound; the owner of the lantern yells obrigado as he pats each of us on the back. But instead of seeing the lantern float effortlessly into the sky, instead of watching the shadow of the flickering flame dance inside its case, instead of basking in this sky full of man made stars – I stare at the outline of my pale hand against the pitch black sky and wonder how something so beautiful can leave you feeling so bare.

## VITA

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## EDUCATION

M.F.A. Creative Writing, Old Dominion University, 2017  
 B.A. Photography, Columbia College Chicago, 2013

## CERTIFICATES

Preparing Feature Faculty Certificate, Old Dominion University, 2017

## PUBLICATIONS

2017: "Collage of Angles," The William and Mary Review  
 2016: "Politics of Empathy: An Interview with Colum McCann," Barely South Review  
 2016: "Interview with Mike Pearson," Barely South Review

## READINGS

11/2015: 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Year ODU MFA Reading Series, Norfolk, VA  
 11/2014: 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Year ODU MFA Reading Series, Norfolk, VA  
 10/2013: Hybrid Forms: Creative Nonfiction Week, Chicago, IL

## PRESENTATIONS &amp; CONFERENCES

11/2016: "Travel Writing: The Ins and Outs, and How to Fund Student Travel on a Budget,"  
 Norwich University, Northfield, VT  
 04/2015: "Outer and Inner Space: Practicality, Pedagogy, and Community in Virtual and Actual  
 WC Locations," Mid-Atlantic Writing Centers Association Conference, James Madison  
 University, Harrisonburg, VA  
 03/2015: "Write, Writ, Wit: Play in the Writing Center," 36<sup>th</sup> Annual Writing Conference, Old  
 Dominion University, Norfolk, VA  
 09/2014: "Writing Center Services and Professor Communication for ESL Students," Office of  
 Intercultural Relations, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA  
 09/2013: "Integrating Arts into Education: Found Poetry and Reading Comprehension," Wabash  
 Arts Corridor Showcase, Chicago, IL

## AWARDS

2016: Graduate Teaching Assistant Award Nominee  
 2016: Division of Student Engagement and Enrollment Services You Make The Difference  
 Award  
 2015: Division of Student Engagement and Enrollment Services Shining Star Award  
 2015: Creative Impact Scholarship  
 2014-2017: Graduate Teaching Assistantship