

A Thesis Presented to  
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**Lingering in the Crosshairs**

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## Introduction

My thesis collection, “Lingering in the Crosshairs,” examines the dynamics of family relationships and identity, while focusing on how identity is formed within the family dynamic. I have explored these themes through the genres of short fiction, poetry, and the personal essay. Several of the pieces in this collection were both influenced by and reflect on my own experiences as the eldest daughter in a divorced family. Within these pieces I presented myself, or the characters that resemble me, as a daughter in the crosshairs. It is a place where my characters and I are forced to make choices between a mother and a father, and congruently the feminine and masculine worlds, or environments, that they each represent. Those that were not influenced by my personal relationships still reflect these themes by examining parent/child relationships.

The first piece in my collection, “A Woman Pondering Her Wedding Vows the Morning After,” was inspired by Sandra Beasley’s poem “Proposal,” from her collection *I Was the Jukebox*. On the surface, this poem is about a young woman reflecting on her parents’ marriage after her own wedding. However, it is also about a young woman comparing herself to her mother, and facing the fear that she and her marriage may end up failing as well. While writing this poem I attempted to use repetition and short, concise images to display that fear. The fiery images throughout the poem act as a prominent and almost inescapable presence that legitimizes that fear. The fire may also be seen as a reference to her relationship with her mother, as well as the failure of her parents’ marriage, which hangs over her even in the red sheets of her wedding bed. The fire in this poem is threatening and destructive, as are the words her mother offered her before her wedding, and has shaped this speaker’s character into one who fears the burns and scars of failure.

The poem that follows, “Three Kisses that Linger,” is another that reflects upon a mother/daughter relationship. The poem is broken into three sections that chronologically follow three significant kisses that the speaker has experienced throughout her life. The mother is not a very prominent character throughout the poem, and in fact only appears in the last few lines of the first two sections, and again in the last stanza of the poem. This was done purposefully so that the sections in which the speaker reflects on her mother were more prominent. While I was writing this poem, I had at first intended these sections to display the lack of a relationship with her mother in the light of a life that inevitably ended with the speaker taking on the role of mother herself. However, after editing, this poem instead highlights the speaker’s relationship with her mother. Each section ends with the speaker’s mother being the final and most prominent person on her mind, despite the strong significance of each kiss. However, the speaker doesn’t make this connection until she is a mother herself, when she questions the importance of each kiss and the people that they represent in the light of her relationship with her mother.

I’ve included my poem “Fishing at Griffis Sculpture Park” because I believe it ties the theme of parent/child relationships and the landscapes or environments that shape our identities together well. This poem relies heavily upon diction and images to make the connection between the environment and the families within it clear. Surrounded by this environment, parents are attempting to teach their children patience by helping them mold into a routine – here the routine is fishing – while the children are simultaneously attempting to mold themselves into the environment by climbing onto the statues and mimicking their poses in pictures. I have described the sculptures as aging “foreign nomads” that both represent the parents through their “metallic gaze, rusted with age,” and experience as well as

the children, who are attempting to mimic them in a state that is “forever searching,” as the children are for knowledge about the world.

“Things that Linger” is a flash sequence of one hundred word personal essays that examines my relationship with both of my parents and my identity, which has been shaped through these relationships, what I’ve inherited from both of my parents, and by the environment they each represent. The first essay in the sequence introduces these environments, which both mimic one another and yet appear very different from each other. By positioning this flash sequence as a transition piece between some of my poetry and prose, it also introduces the method through which I am exploring my identity and the conflict within these relationships, writing. As each section must function as an individual essay I had to rely heavily upon imagery while writing them, as I would while writing a poem. Due to the brevity of each essay, one may read them in this sequence as they would a poetry collection while the essays maintain their status as prose through definition. Using juxtaposition, I have compared my relationship with my mother to my relationship with my father. By doing this I have attempted to expose the things that I have inherited or learned from each that have helped to shape my identity. These pieces also represent the conflict of a daughter in the crosshairs and the choices I’ve had to make to establish my own identity.

“Hunting in the Crosshairs” is a personal essay that reflects on my experiences as a female hunter and examines my relationship with both of my parents, and to a smaller extent, my two younger sisters. I have formatted this essay in a way that allowed me to interview myself and embody two personae, the interviewer and the interviewee. By setting up this dynamic I have very quickly established one of the conflicts within this essay, one with myself. The other prominent conflicts in this essay reside within my relationship with each of

my parents. I have also made what's at stake for myself as a character more prominent, because both the interviewer and the interviewee have a stake in the questions and answers being posed, as well as the result of this essay. This format allowed me to analyze the environment created by my relationship with each parent that has shaped my identity more thoroughly. As the interviewer, I have quite literally placed myself – or the interviewee – in the crosshairs for scrutiny. While writing this essay I have found that what is at stake for the interviewer is the admittance of the interviewee's personal perspective on hunting. As the interviewee, what's at stake is my relationship with both of my parents and the choices that I have to make in order to clarify what I believe about hunting and my family relationships.

My personal experiences hunting with my father as I grew up also inspired my short story "Walk like a Man," which works as a companion piece to my personal essay. "Walk like a Man" is a coming of age story viewed chronologically through a young girl's experiences with guns. Throughout the story my main character, Kate, struggles to define herself in a divorced family where her father represents a very masculine world to which she has been introduced through hunting. In contrast, her mother represents a very feminine world, which Kate experiences through cooking and reading with her. The world around Kate often reflects her inner conflict. She is indirectly experiencing the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars through friends who have joined the military and are serving tours in each country, which brings the dangers that guns represent to her attention. She is also attempting to establish herself as an undergraduate English major while reading literature that reinforces similar conflicts. She is forced to make a choice between a masculine world that has defined her since she was young and a feminine world that she dipped her toes into via her major in college and her relationships with others outside of her family.

“Another Failed Poem about America,” is another poem that was inspired by Sandra Beasley’s poetry collection *I Was the Jukebox* and her series of poems in the collection called failed poems. The parent/child relationship that this poem examines is both literal and metaphorical. On the surface, I have written a common moment of parents teaching their child a life lesson by sending him/her out on a paddleboat alone, which is then reiterated in the end of the poem when the child joins the Navy. However, America itself could also be seen as a parental figure in this poem, through the images of the coal barge and the navy submarine, which represents possible influential forces in the child’s life. Regardless, the world that the parents are sending their child out into is dangerous and poised to eat the child alive.

My final piece, “Persephone in Rural Western New York, Early September,” is the most recent poem I have written for this collection. While writing it, I applied the Greek Persephone myth to my relationship with my mother. In this poem my speaker, Persephone, addresses her mother, Demeter, before the winter months and her inevitable descent to Hades’ realm. After editing and making the details from the myth a little less obvious, like that of the red fruit, I have made the environment that I was raised in, rural Western New York, more accessible and believable. The conflict of this poem resides in Demeter’s desire for her solitude that she has grown used to in Persephone’s absence and in Persephone’s desire for her mother to react passionately to her leaving.

The title of this collection, “Lingering in the Crosshairs,” represents several of the themes that string my thesis together. While writing each piece I attempted to construct images and moments that would linger with the reader, while simultaneously lingering on these subjects, characters, and moments myself. The word “lingering” also reflects the state



of myself and several of my characters in each piece; they are hesitant and loitering between choices that must be made, be it a choice between parents, or a choice between an individual future or one connected to their family. “Crosshairs” signifies where I have placed my characters and myself in each piece. To be in the crosshairs means to be in a position where they can be examined; it is also a dangerous place to be, one that demands that choices be made and acted upon. Although I do not resolve this situation in each piece for every character, or even myself, I have attempted to make the options presented to them clear. Those options are exposed through the themes that link these pieces together: the dynamics of family relationships, the environments that have molded these characters’ identities, and the choices that they are forced to make, often between feminine and masculine worlds, a mother or a father, or lingering in their past versus creating their own futures.

## A Woman Pondering Her Wedding Vows the Morning After

*"Promise you're worth my weight in burning."* – Sandra Beasley

Promise you're worth my weight in burning.  
Promise you're worth my weight in ashes.  
Promise you're worth my weight in tears.

My mother once told me that married life  
is like a slow cremation. In the end,  
all that's left of you is four pounds of ashes.

She told me this as she pulled lasagna from the oven,  
the hot, red glow from within lighting her face.  
It was my father's favorite, but that night we ate alone.

He stumbled in the door hours later.  
I laid awake, listening to my parents screaming  
and a door slamming shut.

Two years later, our house burned down.  
I huddled beside my mother on the sidewalk  
while a police officer told us it started in the kitchen.

Flames consumed our home; my mother fed me the ashes.  
They tasted like her lasagna, charred and searing  
my tongue like fear, like failure.

Now, lying in this hotel bed with you, red sheets strewn  
across us and your arm around my waist,  
her words are all I can think of. *Make him promise*, she said.

Promise you're worth my weight in burning.  
Promise you're worth my weight in ashes.  
Promise you'll never be worth my weight in tears.

### **Three Kisses that Linger**

#### **I.**

You've been kissed before –  
for scraped knees and bruised elbows,  
to say hello, and ward off nightmares –  
but none of them will remain as vividly  
as the one you label your first.

You're sitting at the back of a crowded  
yellow school bus as the hot June sun pours  
in through the windows, making your skin stick  
to the brown plastic bench seat. The heat is burning  
your legs, but you don't peel them off  
because he's sitting beside you  
with his backpack between your lap and his.

The voices of others around you pool  
into one confusing mass of whispers, laughter, and yelling  
that fades behind the noise of your own blood pounding  
against your eardrums. He leans in across his bag  
and you hold your breath. The kiss is short;  
barely more than his lips brushing yours  
before he shuffles off the bus at his stop,  
but your breath still trembles. You wonder  
what your mother would say if she knew.

#### **II.**

Several first kisses later, you're dressed in white  
and standing at the end of an aisle  
beside the man you said "yes" to, with a bouquet  
of flowers in your sweaty palms. The drums in your ears  
are familiar but do not make the knowledge that all eyes  
are on you any easier to bear.

When they pry the bunch of roses from your hands  
and he slips a little golden band around your finger,  
the silence of the people around you presses down  
and you can't breathe. For a moment you long  
for that hot, yellow bus and all the yelling and laughing,  
not this expectant silence.

At the preacher's word the man beside you  
presses his lips to yours, searing, promising,  
and binding. Your mother stands in the front pew,  
clapping, cheering, and praying for you.

### III.

Five years later, you're thirty-one  
and your four-year-old daughter is shaking you awake,  
mumbling how she's had another nightmare  
and she can't get back to sleep. You lead  
her back to her room and tuck her in with whispered  
promises that she's going to be okay.

In the orange glow of her night light  
you wrap her purple blanket around  
her shoulders and touch your lips to her forehead.  
Her skin is smooth against your chapped lips  
and her hair, which smells like her strawberry shampoo,  
tickles your nose.

You try to remember the feeling  
of your mother's kiss on your forehead  
and whether it helped soothe the pounding  
of your heart when you were your daughter's age.  
You wonder if it meant as much to you then  
as it does now. You think not.  
Sitting silently, you wait for the deep, even breaths  
that tell you your daughter is sleeping.

## **Fishing at Griffis Sculpture Park**

A little red and white bobber disrupts  
inverted images on the pond's  
black surface. Ripples stretch  
across the water, fading before they can touch  
the shore where small families lounge  
on a field of goldenrod and ironweed.

A gentle breeze tousles the weeds  
like a hand brushing blades of grass,  
wafting a sweet smell that tickles  
childrens' noses as they reel in their lines.

Beyond the field, children climb tall metal figures  
and pose for cameras. Little bodies  
settle into the nooks and crevices  
where aging welds hold metal limbs together.  
The sculptures' alien shapes tower above families  
that seek them out, casting long shadows  
across the lawn they were built upon.  
Their metallic gaze, rusted with age,  
ceaselessly examines a landscape that extends  
around them in green, brown, blue, purple, and gold.  
When the people have gone they will remain,  
frozen in place as a band of foreign nomads,  
forever searching.

A small path of trodden weeds and mud  
creates a bridge from one lawn to another.  
Goldenrod and ironweed reach out,  
prickling skin and clinging to children's clothing  
who dance just beyond their grasps.  
Fathers slowly bait hooks and cast  
lines before handing the rod to their children's eager  
hands. They watch and whisper patience  
into inexperienced ears as the young reel and cast,  
reel and cast.

## Things that Linger

The musky smell of my mother's Snuggle fabric softener mixed with the scent of Camel cigarette smoke and stale Genesee beer clings to my clothing days after I've left her house. In contrast, my father's house smells of dog, a mixture of Marlboro cigarette and wood fire smoke, and the metallic scent of well water minerals. When someone I meet at school asks me where I call home, my answer sometimes depends on the scent that lingers in the fabric of my shirt that day, or on the small details that have unfurled themselves beneath my fingertips as I write.

\*

Communicating with my Dad is a lot like fishing. When I was younger, it consisted of him baiting the hooks, casting the lines, handing me the pole, and telling me when to reel in until I caught a fish and swung it over to him. I've now learned to bait my own hook and cast my own line. I've learned the patient, repetitive pattern of reel and cast, that it takes before I can swing the end of my pole in his direction with a fish dangling and thrashing at the end – scales flashing in the harsh sunlight and mouth gaping wide, struggling to breathe – in hopes that he'll take the bait.

\*

In one hand, my mother holds a black and white photo of herself, and in the other she holds a glossy, color image of me. Her brown-eyed gaze meets mine and she says with a smile, "You wouldn't be able to tell the difference between them if my photo were in color and I wasn't wearing those Coke-bottle glasses."

She likes to point out the similarities between the seven year olds in our respective pictures; until I got my first pair of glasses when I turned thirteen, I liked to point out the differences.

Her response was always, "You've inherited enough from me; eventually your eyes will fail too."

\*

"You can usually tell if a deer is young by how short its nose is," my dad says as he clicks through pictures of deer that he has captured on his new trail cam; it's late summer, the fawns are still with their mothers and have spots.

"Older deer tend to let the younger ones walk ahead of them as a precaution during shotgun season. The big bucks will do that; they send the does and the younger bucks out before them and then come in with their heads down."

When I ask him why he replies, "To survive."

\*

I inherited my love of fire from my mother, with whom I often spend long summer nights sitting beside a bonfire we built together. We take turns prodding the embers with a large stick until they flush and burn brighter, or tossing old logs into the flames.

The fire is dwindling and it's my turn to feed it. The fire crackles and spits sparks into the air when the new logs hit the embers.

I meet my mother's gaze across the flames.

She says, "Be careful. Don't get too close."

"I know," I respond, take a step closer, and remain there until my skin is red, raw, and burning.

\*

A distinct, fine line extends across the round-top window of our dining room from the initial fracture where a BB struck it months ago. It glistens like a cobweb in the light of the room. I trace the crack with my fingertips from the impact point, down to where it stretches, blindly searching for an end.

Peering in from outside I try to catch my father's eye as he walks by. He ignores me.

The front door is locked and I have given up knocking, pleading.

The fissure strains beneath my fingers; I wish it would bend, break, and shatter.

\*

The chicken on the grill sizzles and pops as my mother bastes it once more. I hover by her side and watch her carefully.

I ask, "How do you tell when the chicken is done?"

She replies, "If you twist a leg, it should break away easily," as she pinches a chicken leg between two fingers, twists quickly and pulls it away from the thigh, skin, bone, and all. It's swift and violent and reminds me of the night she left my dad. I want to ask her: was it that easy to break away? Can I do it too?

## **Hunting in the Crosshairs**

*Do you remember your first hunt with your father?*

No, but I do remember sleeping on the ground when I was eight, in a blind at the foot of my dad's treestand which he had made of pine tree branches and other twigs that he had cut down to clear shooting lanes. I remember jumping awake, still bundled in my camouflage coat and snow pants and the layers beneath them on a thin mat that lay between me and the ground, from a dream in which my dad had just shot a deer, to him raising his gun to his shoulder and a finger to his lips to quiet me. I remember flinching when he pulled the trigger, waking my two sisters beside me. I don't remember seeing the deer until later, after she had died, when my sisters and I followed my father over to where she had fallen, her body and limbs splayed haphazardly across the frosted leaves on the ground.

*How old were you when you shot your first gun?*

I was nine or ten and the gun was a .22. It was old; my father had owned it since before I was born. The wood of the stock and the metal barrel were scratched; the protective wood varnish and water seal were chipping away in small yellow flakes that my father had to tell me not to pick at.

My dad had taken me camping with my two younger sisters, Sara and Rebecca. It was late afternoon on our second day at the campsite and we had all just gotten back from a short hike. While my sisters and I made s'mores over the campfire our father set up a few empty Bud Light cans and Pepsi bottles on the posts of an old barbed wire fence that once marked the perimeter of a farmer's land. He pulled the .22 from behind the seat in the truck's cab and called the three of us to where he stood behind our tent and handed me the gun for the



first shot. It rested heavily in my small hands, much heavier than what it appeared to weigh when it was seated behind the frosted glass of our gun cabinet at home.

*Did you miss?*

It took five tries and my dad adjusting the gun against my shoulder, lifting my elbow, and reminding me to keep both eyes open before I managed to hit one of the blue Bud Light cans. I remember hearing the hollow ping of the tin can over the ringing in my ears and I remember noticing how it barely made a sound when it hit the ground. By the time I handed the gun back to my dad, my arms and shoulders ached from the weight of the gun.

*How many years have you been a hunter?*

I'm twenty-one now, so depending on the type of game, I've been hunting for seven to nine years. I've been hunting small game, like turkey, since I was twelve and large game, like deer, since I was fourteen. However, I never quite considered myself a hunter until I killed my first deer when I was eighteen. Before that I was really only my father's hunting companion, who happened to carry around a gun that she knew how to shoot. Before my first deer, I'm not sure if I really believed that I was capable of killing anything.

*If you had lived during the Middle Ages and been born a man, Hunt would have been an occupational surname to define what you did for a living. Would you say your last name shapes you into the masculine world that it once solely pertained to?*

I have only ever called myself a hunter, without labeling the term by gender. The only differences I see between male and female hunters is the greater number of layers women usually have to pull on under their camouflage to stay warm in the morning, and the smaller guns they carry around.

My dad likes to point out female hunters on his Saturday morning hunting shows from time-to-time. Sometimes I wonder if he thinks I'm intimidated by the very male dominated presence in this portion of my life. Sometimes I wonder if he's worried that I won't be able to make this connection with him, or that I'll give it up.

I know I'm the only daughter of three who is willing to share this with him; and I know he doesn't want to lose that. My youngest sister, Rebecca, talks about taking her hunting safety course occasionally, but she hasn't picked up a gun unless asked to in years. The sister closest to me in age, Sara, took the hunting safety course with me when we were eleven and twelve. She gave up hunting before she even tried it, crying when she said that she couldn't make herself shoot a living animal as I tucked her gun away in our father's gun cabinet for her.

I wonder if my dad sometimes sees that I am not the son he'd like to share these experiences with, and that's why he worries that I'll give it up someday.

*Does hunting make you feel less feminine?*

Most of the time hunting actually reminds me that I am a woman. There are aspects of it, like the blood and gutting the animal that I just don't like. Every time I have to turn away as my dad cuts a deer open, or I throw my gloves in the washer to get the dry, crusted blood off of them, I'm reminded that I'm not the rough and tumble girl that people sometimes assume I am.

*What is it like to be the only daughter who hunts with your dad?*

I'm the only one of us who has ever actually experienced the early mornings of rising at four o'clock, blinking away the tears that form when I stumble into the light of the kitchen and living room, checking the temperature outside after watching the weather on the news,

chugging a cup of lukewarm, black coffee, and pulling on layer upon layer of clothing before slipping into my camouflage suit and boots. I'm the only one who has experienced trudging up a hill at five a.m. with a gun slung over my shoulder and a flashlight in my hand in temperatures below zero and through snow as high as my knees, to climb up in a treestand and wait for the sun to rise.

They've never experienced the frustration of walking out of the woods empty-handed after hours of watching and waiting, or the few minutes of adrenaline that makes my hands and breath shake and my heart thunder in my ears as I watch a small group of deer quietly meander through the trees in my direction. They've never felt the weight of a gun in their hands as it's raised to their shoulders to find a deer in the crosshairs of the scope on their gun. They've never had to ask themselves the question: "Do I pull the trigger?"

Sometimes I wish they had experienced those things too. Occasionally, they'll sight in the guns with my dad and me around mid-September, before hunting season. I feel like that's close enough.

*Why?*

Becoming a hunter was a choice I made to feel closer to my father. It often felt like the next step in the process after going out hunting with my dad when we were younger, learning how to shoot, taking my safety course, and getting my first gun – a Remington .20 gauge – as a gift for my twelfth birthday. It was just another layer, another decision that remained loyal to the woman I was being shaped into.

At times I wonder if either of my sisters could play this role better than me; maybe I don't want to know if they could. We've all made our choices: I hunt, Sara fishes, and

Rebecca cheers on my dad's favorite sports teams. To an extent, each of us takes on all of these roles, some of them just require fewer layers.

*What's the first thing your father taught you about hunting?*

My father began taking my sisters and me out hunting with him when I was around eight or nine-years-old. He would dress us up in several layers of dark clothing with a bright orange or red vest over our coats, and we would each carry a small backpack with food, water, hot cocoa in a thermos, and our camouflage cushions that we would place on the ground under us. The four of us would crowd into the front of his small gray Ford with all of our stuff and his own pack and unloaded shotgun, which would lie across all three of our laps, and he would talk to us about the hunt he was taking us on.

The first thing he mentioned was how long we would be in the woods, to which he always tacked on, "Remember to tell me if you get cold, so we can leave."

I don't remember any of us ever asking to leave because we were cold, despite knowing that there were plenty of times when I would have liked to. The first thing he taught us about hunting was that deer had a better sense of hearing than sight, and so it was important to walk into the woods carefully and to sit and wait quietly while we were hunting.

*What about your mother?*

My mother used to hunt. In fact, she took her hunting license course while she was pregnant with me. She was twenty-seven and about six months along. My mom was the only person over twelve and the only woman in the room. She still laughs about the proctors refusing to let her take the shooting portion of the exam. Before my younger sister, Sara, and I went to take our safety course, my mom told me that she had gotten a perfect score on her written exam, and was the only one in her class to do so. The proctors used that to counter

any complaints about her being excused from the second part of the exam. If that didn't work they asked, "Are you really going to insist that this pregnant woman shoot? Do you want to be responsible for anything that happens to the baby if she does and something goes wrong?"

*Does your mother ever talk about hunting?*

She talks about one shot she took at a small buck while she was trekking through the snow back to my dad's truck for lunch. I've never seen my mother in camouflage, and I don't know if she owns any now, but I can picture her dressed in as many bulky layers as I would be, if not more. I can picture her carefully trying to step in the footprints she and my father would have made earlier that morning to make the walk through the snow easier, her .20 gauge shotgun balanced in the palms of her hands, one on the forestock and one close to the trigger. For the first half of the walk down the hill from her treestand she would have been so focused on stepping in the footprints and keeping the hair that was falling out of the ponytail beneath her hat out of her eyes that she wouldn't have noticed the deer until she heard it snort and stomp its foot in warning.

By the time she spotted the deer it was running away from her. She took the shot anyway.

She called my dad and two uncles on an old walkie-talkie and told them to keep an eye out for it. One of my uncles spotted the buck not long afterwards and took another shot at it. They never found it.

Sometimes when my mother tells me this story she sounds disappointed about losing the buck; other times she just shrugs it off. She said she only got her license so that my father and her brother could have a couple of extra tags for the season anyway.

I'm not sure if I believe that. Although I know that that must have been part of the reason she got her license – since my dad and I often share tags – I think that she may have also seen hunting as an opportunity to bond with my father, to do something that he enjoyed with him, in spite of a relationship that may have already been failing.

*How did you feel when you were given your first camouflage suit?*

Before I received my first two-piece suit on my sixteenth birthday, I wore a mismatched suit of too big hand-me-downs that my dad had given me after I completed my gun safety course at twelve years old. In contrast, the new two-piece suit that my dad had wrapped in a vacuum cleaner box was smooth and unblemished by the quick repair patches in places where his old coats had torn on the metal of a treestand or broken tree branches. When I met my father's blue-eyed gaze after opening my gift, he smiled and said, "Try it on!"

I did so quickly, noticing the missing stale scent of sweat, gunpowder, and deer urine. It was unfamiliar and the inside lining was cold. "It's a little big," I said, bunching the arms up above my wrists and holding the pants up to keep the pant legs from draping over my toes.

Dad laughed, "Look at it this way: you can layer up under it. We'll get you a belt. At least now you have a solid pattern to wear that will help you blend into your surroundings."

"If we're trying to blend in, why do we wear a bright orange vest over everything?"

He replied, "Technically, deer are colorblind, so a little bit of a solid color isn't going to hurt your chances. It's other hunters that you have to worry about the orange vest keeps you from getting shot."

*Tell us about your first opening day of deer season.*

I was fourteen, and after crawling out of bed at four a.m., scrambling into the multitude of layers that I had laid out for myself the night before, and forcing my first cup of black coffee and a bowl of cereal down, I followed my dad up into the woods to our treestands through ankle deep snow, hopping between his larger footprints while cradling my gun against my chest with a flashlight in one hand. Since then, I've often wondered why hunting always seems to involve climbing a hill and I've stopped trying to follow in his footprints, in favor of plowing through the snow, barely lifting my feet, to make my own path.

After setting me up in my treestand he waited patiently for me to fumble with the bullets for my .20 gauge shotgun and load it by the light of my flashlight before he wished me luck and walked off in the direction of his own treestand. I watched him go until the yellow glow of his flashlight disappeared behind the trees and waited for the sun to rise.

When it was light enough to see, I turned my gaze in the directions that he had told me to watch, having hunted in this spot for many years before me, and waited, listening to the pops and cracks of other hunters' shotguns around me. About an hour after daybreak a small doe crept out of the pine trees behind me, catching me off guard. She moved cautiously through the trees, the snow crunching quietly beneath her hooves as her large brown eyes glanced from side to side, ears twitching, listening for anything that sounded like me. Slender muscles quivered beneath light brown fur when she paused to look around her. My body trembled; I tried to keep my breathing steady.

I left my gun in my lap and watched her walk away until she blended into the trees.

When my dad asked me later that morning if I had seen anything, I told him no. He laughed, because he hadn't either and then said, "Well honey, that's why they call it hunting instead of harvesting."

*What's a normal hunt like for you?*

Fur is natural camouflage for a deer. In the fall their fur becomes thicker and lighter in color, fading from a rich red clay color to a mixture of light brown and gray which helps them blend into the simple colors of their surroundings – different shades of gray, brown, and white – when the snow finally falls.

During shotgun season, which begins in the middle of November, I often don't see them until I can hear their careful foot falls and the crisp snow, leaves, and sticks crunching beneath their feet as they move slowly, expertly through the briers and beech tree saplings around my treestand. Even then, I sometimes don't see them until I catch a glimpse of a flickering white tail.

What follows is the careful movement of my gun in the direction of the deer from wherever it had been resting on my lap before, trying not to allow the sling to clink against the metal railing of my treestand or make too much noise as I shift on my seat into a better position to face them, slowly moving my wool hood and hair out of my eyes, hoping that my camouflage is convincing enough to keep them from noticing my movements, flinching when the sling clinks against metal anyway, wiggling my fingers out of my gloved mitts for a better grip on the gun, trying to find the deer in my scope, holding my breath whenever the deer stops and turns its gaze in my direction, praying that the sound of my heartbeat is only that loud to me, ignoring the cold that slowly numbs my fingers as I fiddle with the safety,



waiting for the deer to move into an opening that would put him or her in my crosshairs, and deciding whether or not I want to pull the trigger.

*Have you ever hunted with your mother?*

No. My mother and I barely talk about hunting, save for the occasional “Did you get anything?” she asks throughout the season. Honestly, to some extent I think we both know that by hunting with my father I’ve taken her place. We don’t talk to each other about hunting because we both know what it feels like to try to match the treads of our boots to the soles of a pair of shoes that will never fit us.

*What’s your favorite part of hunting?*

Dawn is a spectacular thing to witness in a treestand; for a moment I forget the ache in my wrists from trying to keep my rifle steady on my lap, or trying to remain quiet despite the crunch of the frost and ice on my seat and beneath my feet every time I move. It is a moment when the last few stars flicker in the gray light of the morning: Venus shines brightly on the horizon and everything on the earth and in the sky is cast in shades of black and white. The remnants of my condensed breath as it filters through my wool hood into the brisk morning air collect at the end of my eyelashes as small droplets of moisture.

Soon the sun will rise enough that color will begin to filter back into the woods – yellows, browns, and the deep green of the evergreens – all colors of a forest ready for slumber. When the colors return the cold sets in and I realize as it seeps through the layers of cotton and polyester to bring goosebumps to my skin just how many layers I’ve put on – never enough.

*What’s your regular pre-opening morning routine like?*

Every year, on the night before opening morning, my father and I gather our camouflage suits, orange safety vests, boots, guns, and backpacks (in which we carry snacks, water, flashlights, tissues, and our gutting knives) in the living room. While we're moving around the house to collect our things we discuss when we're going to wake up – usually four or five in the morning – and whether we're going to have breakfast. This discussion usually includes the small pieces of advice that my dad gives me every year: if it's cold, the deer will start moving early; if you get cold, stand up occasionally to get your blood flowing again; make sure your gun is cocked and loaded and the safety is on after you've hooked your safety harness to the tree.

While packing a few extra bullets in the pocket of my coat, my dad says, "You can usually tell if a deer is young by how short its nose is. Older deer tend to let the younger ones walk ahead of them as a precaution during shotgun season. The big bucks will do that; they send the does and the younger bucks out before them and then come in with their head down."

When I ask him why he replies, "To survive."

*Does that happen often?*

A group of deer will always send one out in front of the rest of them as a precaution when crossing a road or walking through the woods during shotgun season. It is usually a younger, smaller one – most often a doe. If she is hit by a car or shot, those following her know it's not safe to continue and choose another direction.

One night, when I was seventeen and my dad and I were driving back from the grocery store in the middle of December after the hunting season, he handed me a spotlight

he kept in the backseat of his truck and told me to shine it on the empty, snow covered corn fields near our house when no cars were around.

I soon caught a glimpse of the familiar white orbs that I'd often only seen in my headlights, shining bright like a star against the blackness of the trees behind her. My dad slowed down to look when I pointed it out; it was a young doe. In the snow around her, a wide patch of gray earth, glistening in the moonlight, were the footprints of many deer that had crossed the road before her. I lifted the spotlight over her to look further into the field and the trees that lined it and noticed several pairs of small, glowing orbs belonging to a small herd of deer that stood silently behind her, watching and waiting for her to cross, to live, or to die.

When I looked back at the doe across from us, I imagined that she was looking back at me, with pleading large, brown eyes that looked a lot like mine.

*Do you remember your first deer?*

It was the last day of muzzleloader season, and I had forgotten my gun. After riding our four-wheeler up the hill through a few feet of snow and the chill of an early afternoon in December my dad handed me his gun and sat on a bucket on the opposite side of a large oak tree from me.

About an hour later I pointed out a small buck and two does to him. As he turned, the bucket shifted loudly beneath him and the deer took off before I could even bring the gun up to my shoulder. A few hours later, as the sun was setting and the cold was beginning to seep through the layers of my clothing another small group of deer walked in. They were all does.

I didn't try to get my dad's attention that time; I raised the gun up to my shoulder, twisted so that I could find them in my scope, picked out the largest of the three, and pulled the trigger. She fell in one shot.

By the time I had brought the gun back down from the recoil to look through the scope again she was down. I don't remember her making a sound when she fell.

After my dad reloaded the gun he handed it to me and told me to lead him to her. I would have to poke her in the eye with the end of the barrel to make sure she was dead and shoot her if she wasn't. When we got to her I did so quickly, and then turned to meet my father's gaze.

He said, "You have to jab it Steph; make sure she feels it."

"I did," I replied.

He laughed and took the gun to do it himself. "Like this," he added.

Satisfied that she was in fact dead, my dad pulled her down to a flat spot on the hill to gut her while I looked away. I can't handle the idea of cutting an animal open while it's body is still warm, and limbs mobile, as if they could still be breathing. The thought of sticking my hands inside and pulling out everything that once kept it breathing to lie the organs in a bloody pile on the ground for scavengers to eat later still makes my hands shake and my stomach churn.

He made me drag her out of the woods by her hind legs to the four-wheeler. A wide streak of blood in the snow marked my progress. When we got there, we propped her up on the back of the four-wheeler and I sat behind my dad with my back against her, one hand holding his gun and the other wrapped around her still steaming body to keep her there. At

home, my dad stabbed a hole through her ear and used a zip tie to attach my name on a small green tag to her while I tried not to look her in the eyes.

When I reflect on the pictures my dad took of me with the deer, I can't decide whether that smile on my face is for me, or for him.

*How many things have you killed?*

Only the one deer. I've had several shots at a few other deer and a couple of turkeys throughout the nine years that I've been hunting with my dad, but I've always managed to miss.

*Is hunting genuinely a part of you, or are you role-playing in order to preserve some connection with your dad?*

What I like about hunting is the connection with nature that it offers. I enjoy being able to melt into and become a part of my environment in a way that camouflage could never replicate. There is something in watching color bleed into a black and white world as the sun rises, in seeing a woodpecker at work, in a yellow finch building a nest in a small beech tree, or a red fox scurrying soundlessly over a leaf strewn forest floor that feels like coming home. And that feeling is warm and comfortable like the heat that the sunrise brings with it on a mild fall day.

But I also know that winter always comes in Western New York, and that the cold always seeps through your clothing if you sit still long enough, no matter how many layers you've put on that morning. And those details remind me that even if I tell myself "this isn't so bad," or "eventually, this will be worth it," I know that I'm not willing to keep signing my name on the back of a tag that will label *any* kill as mine.

I'm playing the role of the hunter for my dad. I'm attempting to cling to a small portion of a relationship that doesn't really exist anymore. I'm no longer who little girl that could pull on all of her layers under her camouflage suit, pick up a gun, and pretend that her small, clunky boots would eventually fill in his footprints; I'm no longer who little girl that could live her life in the crosshairs without a second thought.

When I picture that little girl, I'm reminded of the many times I've sighted in my guns with my dad. I search for the target in my scope, bring my gun up to my shoulder and place my elbows on the railing of my back porch. My father says, "Imagine the target's a deer. Aim for the front shoulder blade or just behind it, where the heart and lungs are."

I find the red center of the target in my crosshairs, a haphazard circle that had been traced around the bottom of a pop can on a grease stained pizza box. The cardboard is white and gray, the marker is red; I like this image better. It's familiar, one that I'm comfortable with. The rifle is heavy; my arms shake. I pull the trigger.

I hear my dad ask where the bullet hole is over the ringing in my ears. When I find it – high and to the right – he adjusts the sights and I focus the scope on the target again. Sighting in a gun is a lot like writing; you pull the trigger and adjust the scope until you're on target and what you're aiming for is clear. In the end all that's left is the sound of it in your ears.

### **Walk like a Man**

You're seven-years-old and your father hands you a .22, motioning towards the empty pop and beer cans he has set up on old birch wood fence posts in your backyard. The muddy swamp that the yard becomes in the spring sucks at your feet, water seeping into your sneakers and soaking your socks, as he leads you closer to the fence. This isn't the first time you've held a gun, but it is the first time you've done anything more than cradle it against your chest the way you've seen your father do countless times before when he's walking into the woods. The weight of the .22 registers strangely in your small hands as you aim it towards one of the cans as he instructs you to, nodding his approval when he's satisfied with your stance. You stumble backwards with the first shot, not having expected the recoil when you pulled the trigger. Your father steadies you and adjusts the gun in your hands, pressing the butt of it against your shoulder. You look up at him nervously but he smiles, saying, "go ahead, you'll be alright."

Three shots, three misses, with nothing but a thin, gray splinter of one of the posts and the ringing in your ears to prove that you had pulled the trigger at all. Your father loads the gun once more and hands it back to you. You click the safety off as he showed you and fire again; a Blue Light can pirouettes and tips off its perch. Your father takes the gun and you collect your first pierced target. The mud tugs at your Disney princess sneakers, coating the rubber sole and covering the red lights that flash from the bottom of your shoes with every step.

~

You often look at pictures in the large, white family album, with purple and blue flowers littering the front of it, to remind yourself of what your family used to look like when

you were all together, before your parents got their divorce two years earlier. One photo that stands out is of you and your father.

There is snow on the ground and you are four, dressed up in a bright pink and blue winter jacket. Your father is wearing a camouflage suit and has spread the turkey he has just brought home from his hunting trip that morning in front of the two of you. He has one hand on your shoulder; the other holds the turkey up for a better picture. You have one hand on the turkey and the other on his .12 gage shotgun at your feet, keeping the barrel off the ground as he told you. Your elbows rest on your thighs as you wait for the flash of the camera, your knuckles white as the weight of the gun strains your arm muscles. You are both smiling up at your mother who stands on the front porch with a camera between you and her expression.

On the ground in front of you, the snow is speckled red with blood.

~

The second time you shoot a gun it's summer and your father has just bought you a gray and white camouflaged BB gun. Your father has nailed cardboard targets he made with your red markers, different sized paint cans, and a grease-spotted pizza box to the wooden play set he built for you and your two younger sisters a few years ago. He shows you how to load the pellets into the gun and leads you through the routine again, shifting your arms until he's satisfied, and clicking the safety off for you. This gun is considerably lighter than the last one you shot and much easier hold still and aim. You hit the target on your first try and continue to shoot until the handful of pellets is gone. When you remove the target a day later, the wood behind it is littered with holes and oddly shaped pebbles of metal imbedded in it that remain even after you and your sisters paint over them weeks later.

~



When you're at your mother's house she likes to bring her own photo album out as she's eating breakfast with you and your sisters on lazy Sunday mornings. You like to compare pictures of you to black and white pictures of her when she was your age and laugh about how you would not be able to tell the difference if her picture were not faded and yellow with age.

~

At eight, you carry the unloaded BB Gun around with the barrel against your shoulder and the butt of the gun in your palm and march like the Civil War soldiers you often see on the History channel. Sometimes you carry it nestled beneath your arm, the forestock in your hand, and practice pulling it up to your shoulder, pressing your cheek against the cool plastic stock, one eye closed and the other looking down the barrel to the bead at the end and aim.

When your father catches you doing this in the kitchen he yanks the gun from your hands and yells. You try to explain that you were only trying to be like the soldiers on TV. "This is not a toy," he replies and locks it in the gun cabinet and hides the key.

When you apologize that night he says, "Just remember that guns aren't toys, Kate. They can hurt people – they can kill." You don't quite understand what this means, but you can connect it to an image of the Civil War soldiers you see on TV marching towards each other in lines, collapsing to the ground when a bullet hits them, bloody and silent with a surprised look in their glossy eyes.

Sometimes you stare at the gun cabinet and wonder where the key is. Other times, your eyes linger on the guns stowed away behind the frosted glass and you hope that it never opens again.

~

One of the first camping trips you remember your father taking you and your sisters on was to a small campsite on state land in Western New York. You are nine-years-old and in the woods with your father instead of visiting your mother for the weekend. It is late afternoon when you arrive and you imagine that you would be helping your mother cook dinner by now, rather than gathering rocks for a fire pit and watching the patches of sun filtering through the trees fade from yellow to orange. Old pines tower thirty to forty feet above you, swaying and creaking, making you worry one will collapse on your tent overnight. You wonder if you could have convinced your mother to make lasagna.

Your father sets up a red nylon tent on a bed of brown and yellow pine needles, starts a fire, and sets up a few empty cans that he found in the back of the truck on old, rotting stumps. You know what is coming next even before he pulls his old .22 out of the truck. You and your sisters, Erika and Megan, watch from around the fire as he shoots the cans off their posts, gathers them, and places them back on before turning to the three of you. He offers the gun to each of you in turn, and the three of you shoot until the few cans he set up are riddled with bullet holes.

He takes a picture of you and your sisters afterwards. You remember standing in the middle, the old .22 cradled in your arms – the scratched wooden stock resting against your right forearm and the butt of the gun in your left palm, barrel pointed at the ground – a bright purple sweater tied around your waist and your two younger sisters on either side of you. In the background, your father's gray and white rusted Chevy truck sits with the driver door open wide, "Happiness is a Warm Gun" blowing out the speakers.

Later, when you look at the picture, your memory will revise the song to be Aerosmith's "Janie's Got A Gun," or Bob Dylan's "Knockin' on Heaven's Door."

~

Sometimes when you're visiting your mother in her apartment, about an hour away from your father's house, all you want to do is help her cook or sit around and read a book you had taken out from your school library the week before. Occasionally your youngest sister, Megan, will convince you to play dress up with your mother's dresses and high heels – you decide that you don't like dress-up, but humor her anyways.

Your favorite part of the weekend is when your mother reads a chapter or two of a Harry Potter book out loud to the three of you before bed.

~

At twelve, your father signs you up for your first gun safety course so that you may apply for your hunting license. It is basically a ten-hour long reiteration of everything your father has told you before, only this will make hunting legal for you. One of your younger sisters, Erika, sits beside you. She leans forward over the desk with her chin in her palm nodding off from time to time, or scowling at the proctors at the front of the room. You imagine that you probably have a similar posture. You get through it only because your father has promised you both ice creams for completing the test.

When you take the paper exam you feel as if you're writing out the rulebook of your life. During the physical exam you shoot three out of three clay pigeons from the sky despite the .12 gauge shotgun being too large for you and the way your arms quiver under the weight of it. Your sister manages to hit two out of three. One of the proctors later tells your father that you and your sister may have gotten perfect scores on the written exam. Your father tells you this with a wide smile on his pale lips because it's rare for girls to do so well on these exams.

“The proctor said that the two of you might have earned 100’s on your exams; that’s better than my marks!”

When the grades are announced he is disappointed to learn that you and your sister earned a ninety-eight and ninety-six percent instead. You and your sister are just happy that the course is over and you are going to get the dinner and ice cream that your father promised you for taking the course.

~

That Christmas your father buys you your first shotgun and camouflage suit. Your gun is a youth Remington .20 gauge with bright orange and green fiber optic sites at the end of the barrel. It comes with a beautiful, tan leather sling decorated with a forest scene, a twelve-point buck at the center of it, and a separate bird barrel. Your father later shows you how to interchange the barrels and puts the sling on for you. Afterward, you tuck it safely into the gun cabinet besides his shotgun and your BB guns. It looks small and much too clean compared to your father’s guns surrounding it.

~

The first time you shoot your gun it is so jarring that you stumble backwards slightly as if you had just been punched in the shoulder and your ears ring for several minutes afterwards. Your father shows you how to adjust the sights by loosening and tightening a small screw beneath the fiber optics, which allowed him to raise or lower them, and shift them left or right. He tells you that this creates better accuracy, and reminds you to keep both eyes open when you shoot to decrease the possibility of making a mistake or missing your targets. You continue to sight the shotgun in, trying not to close your eyes or wince when you pull the trigger.

Your father shows you how to clean the gun afterwards, as you will have to take care of it on your own from now on, and you decide that you like the way the inside of the barrel glistens when you tip it up to the light and peer through it after running a paper towel soaked with oil down it. The orange glow of the dinning room ceiling fan reflects off the black interior of the barrel – a light at the end of a long, dark tunnel.

~

When your father takes you to get your first hunting license, you are thirteen and have to stand on your tippy toes to reach the counter and sign your name at the end of the long strip of brown paper they have just printed off and folded up for you. Some small part of you feels as if by signing this license you are signing your life away. You wonder if this is how young men feel when they enlist in the military, or if they all go into training ready and willing to die for their country. You are enlisting yourself in a life devoted to the sports your father encourages you to play, cheering for the games you watch with him on TV, the history and military channel, and sighting in the guns in his gun cabinet. Secretly you know you wouldn't be willing to die for this.

You don't mention this feeling to your father in the car later; you only smile and thank him for paying for your license.

~

The first hunting trip with your father is a turkey hunt. You have practiced on print outs of turkey heads several times and know where to aim to kill should you stumble across a turkey, as you hope to do. After hours of walking through the woods with the gun tucked beneath your arm in a similar fashion to the way you used to imitate the soldiers you see on the History channel, you begin to believe you are not going to see anything. When your

father points a small group of them out a few minutes later you pull the gun up to your shoulder, stare down the barrel, past the bead, and fumble with the safety. Your fingers search blindly for the small button, seeking the red strip of paint that warns you that the gun is loaded and dangerous, but you can't seem to remember where it is.

You take too long. He raises his gun, aims, shoots, and hits it, but not well enough to kill the turkey on the spot. When you move down to the field to search for the bird you find a small circle of feathers and grass splattered with blood where it had been standing, but find no other traces of it after an hour of searching through the brush. On the drive home your father laughs at your hesitation in the woods and says, "If you hadn't hesitated, we might be bringing two birds back with us tonight."

~

Your father buys Erika, the sister who took the gun safety course with you, a left-handed .16 gauge after a few months of searching for something suitable for her – something small, that would fit her like your .20 gauge. She sights it in, cleans it, puts it away in the gun cabinet, and doesn't take it out again. A part of you envies her for it.

~

Once, while your father was sighting in his shotgun before deer season, you remember him telling you that if you had been a boy, your name would have been Justin. You repeat the name after him; it leaves a bitter aftertaste on your tongue. He told you this not long after you had suffered through your first menstrual cycle and your body had started to develop, something your mother had told you was normal when she found you crying in her bathroom a few months earlier while she laughingly tried to console you. You remember

the way his shot rang in your ears and seemed to vibrate through your core, your stomach flipping and clenching into a white-knuckled fist as it moved through you.

~

At fourteen you are old enough to go out for your first opening day of deer season. At four o'clock in the morning your father wakes you up, helps you put your stuff together, offers you a cup of black coffee, and ushers you into the truck. Your uncle meets you at the hill your father likes to hunt and you follow your father and uncle into the snowy woods by flashlight at five in the morning, making sure to step in your father's larger tracks, cradling your gun to your chest. You've been here several times before, on hunting trips that your father couldn't find a babysitter for, but the terrain is difficult to navigate in the snow and foreign to you in this early morning darkness. When he places you in your treestand, you wait silently and peer around you until the sun finally begins to filter through the trees, bringing with it a cold, gray morning.

Hours later, a small doe walks out of the pines behind you and onto a path not far from your treestand. You watch it walk away, lean muscles moving slowly beneath light brown fur with each step, head up and ears perked for any small, unnatural noise. Large brown eyes quiver from side to side nervously, slender white tail flicking behind her lean, softly curved body. There is a gentle majesty to the creature that you cannot connect to the two heads of trophy eight-pointers your dad has mounted on your living room wall. You are shaking too much to raise your gun and wondering how the deer cannot hear the pounding of your heart or the small, shaky pants that condense in the air in front of you.

Your report to your father is that you didn't see anything that morning. He didn't see anything either. Your uncle shoots a trophy buck. When your mother asks about it later that

weekend, you tell her about the doe, the fist in the pit of your stomach, and the gun you left at your side.

~

In December your mother's neighbor, Bruce, a man you consider to be something akin to an older brother, enlists with the Marines and ships off to the war in Afghanistan. Seeing him in his uniform with his packed bag at his feet in the airport reminds you of the time when you would march around your house with your BB gun, or pretend you were a sniper in the military when sighting in your guns. He hugs you goodbye and you're surprised that you hadn't noticed before how much taller and broader he was than you. You smile and laugh, waving cheerfully when he leaves, but cry in your mother's arms that night. She whispers reassurances and strokes your hair, telling you that Bruce will come home, that he'll be okay, that all you need to have is patience.

~

Your father has taught you that patience is sitting in a tree stand before the sun has risen in order to watch it silently rise and move through the sky, casting shadows across the earth in a slow dance combination that has been rehearsed since the beginning of time, only to climb down and return home with nothing to show for all of your waiting before going back out again.

Your mother has taught you that patience is waiting for a cake to rise in the oven without jumping around to risk its collapsing and then letting it sit for hours to cool before frosting it to prevent crumbs from ruining the colors.

~



A year later Bruce is home. You don't recognize him at first when he gets out of his car, and if he hadn't asked, "Don't I get a hug, Kate?" you may not have. You notice the dark bags under his eyes and his disheveled appearance while you cling to his uniform, laughing and crying and praying that he has given up his gun, that he hasn't signed his life away again.

~

At sixteen, your mother gives you a .12 gauge she and your stepfather won at a gun raffle for your birthday. She says, "At least now you'll have a choice of what gun to take out on opening day," and smiles. The gun lies heavily in your hands and you smile in return.

The gun is too large for you, and when you site it in with your father you cannot rest the butt of the gun against your shoulder as you should and instead pull it tight against your bicep in order to reach the trigger. Each shot throws your arm back with a painful jerk. By the time you're done a dark purple bruise stretches from your armpit to the inside of your elbow. You laugh and show it off as if it were well earned.

Then you clean the gun and lock it away in the gun cabinet.

~

During your sophomore year of high school your AP English teacher assigns your class *The Great Gatsby*. The part that sticks with you the longest after you have finished the book is the scene in which Wilson shoots Gatsby and the description of the small ripple of blood in his pool afterwards. You tell your teacher that you'd like to write about this scene because it fascinates you, but can't answer why when she asks. She advises you not to write about it if you can't answer why you found it so interesting.

~

The next gun you receive from your father is a muzzleloader. This gun is much more difficult to site in, but he walks you through it in preparation for your first muzzleloading season. “You only get one shot with this gun, so we have to make sure you’re on target,” he says while packing the bullet down the barrel for you because your arms are not strong enough and your hands not callused enough to do so yourself.

~

The day you get your first deer, you forget to bring your muzzleloader and have to use your father’s. A single deer walks into sight, winding between trees, leg muscles rippling beneath light brown fur with each slow, cautious stride. The gun is in your lap and your father is sitting on the other side of the large pine tree between you. You raise the heavy muzzleloader to your shoulder carefully, peer through the scope, bite your tongue and hold your breath as you wait until the small buck’s front shoulder is even with the crosshairs of the scope. The deer collapses to the ground with your one shot. You do not feel the recoil of the gun until you have handed it over to your father to reload it.

After your father guts your deer he makes you drag it out of the woods. A long, wide streak of red stains the snow behind you.

You help him clean the gun that night and scrub the barrel until every last speck of gunpowder has been wiped from the inside, and black no longer stains the brush and the white paper towel you run through it to do so, until all evidence that you ever shot the gun and the deer hanging in your garage is gone, save for the tag pinned to the animal’s ear with your name on it.

~

At eighteen, you'll be off to college in a week and you're staying at your mother's for a night or two to say goodbye. You help your mother cook dinner the last night you are there. It has been a while since you have spent this much time with her and you pass the time by talking about small, insignificant things, eating broiled haddock and what your mother calls "hobo potatoes" at the coffee table in the living room, CSI playing on the TV in the background. Unlike at your father's, guns and the coming hunting season are never mentioned. Neither is the amount of time that it may be before you see each other again.

~

You meet your first boyfriend during your freshman year of college. One of the first things he sees when you bring him home to meet your father are the muzzleloaders sitting in the corner. Your father laughs and tells him not to knock them over. Your boyfriend looks at you with raised eyebrows as if he hadn't believed your stories about hunting before now. You shrug and straighten your skirt, not entirely sure how to answer him.

~

In December of your freshman year, your best friend's older brother is sent to Afghanistan. Every time you can catch the news you listen for a name as you had four years earlier for Bruce. *Come home, come home, come home*, you pray. *Come home alive*.

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Your sophomore year of college you decide to major in English. Literature like Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* forces you to think about guns as literary symbols. Most frequently they are symbols of power, danger, violence, abruptness, finality, masculinity, phallic, and occasionally protection and security for the person wielding the weapon. You

begin to realize that your relationship with guns could be considered ironic; a term you learn in some of your first English classes that means “poignantly contrary to what was expected or intended.”

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A few weeks after you turn nineteen you make a trip home to site in your guns, including the new 273 Remington rifle your father has just bought you. From your position on the couch you can see him clearly through the glass door sitting in a green lawn chair on the back porch, his new .30-06 cradled in his lap. It is early October and the afternoon sky is gray and darkening with rain. The radio on the entertainment center softly plays *“Mama, put my guns in the ground, I can't shoot them anymore. That long black cloud is comin' down. Feels like I'm knockin' on heaven's door.”* You grab your own gun, leaning against the arm of the couch beside you, by the cool, metal barrel and slide the door open with a quiet rattle, which draws your father's attention.

He smiles and nods in your direction; you return the gesture.

“You ready, Kate?” your father asks.

You nod and shift your gun into your arms, cradling it as he does his own. The well-oiled barrel captures and reflects the faint grey light of the afternoon up into your eyes.

“Hopefully we can beat the rain if we get these sighted in quickly,” your father says, shifting in his chair and bringing his rifle up to his shoulder, taking aim at the cardboard target he has already nailed to an old tree about fifty yards away.

You can feel the loud bang of the gun in your chest when he pulls the trigger; you barely hear the brass, torpedo-like bullet clunk against the wooden floorboards afterwards.

After a few more shots and the following trips to report where the bullet has pierced the bull's-eye it's your turn. The wooden stock of the gun is smooth against the soft skin of your palm. The weight of this rifle is new to you; this is the first time you have shot it since your father bought it for you a few weeks ago. Knowing your father is watching expectantly, you waste little time in putting the butt of the gun to your shoulder, finding the bull's-eye between the cross hairs of your scope, and pull the trigger.

Your father shows you how to adjust the sights – one click to the right, another to the left – and hands you the first bullet you've shot with this gun. By now, it is a custom that you keep the first for every gun you've shot that you own – of which you now have four. The bullet is similar to those from your father's gun, only smaller and silver. It fits nicely in the palm of your hand, sharp angles contrasting the curved lines there.

You weigh the rifle in your other hand once more, experimentally. It still feels odd in your hands. You wonder if this is how Atticus Finch of *To Kill A Mockingbird* felt after shooting that rabid dog. You think not. You take a seat in the green lawn chair once more and fire again, the bang ringing in your ears.

After a few more shots and adjustments you ask, "How's that, Dad?"

He smiles and hands the target riddled with bullet holes to you, most of them within the bull's-eye. "Looks like that's as good as we're gonna get it. What do you think?" he replies.

You only nod in response, running your hand over the jagged edges in the cardboard that the bullet holes created and pressing your pinky through a hole now and again. You think it's funny how such a small thing can take down an animal as large and powerful as a bear – funny how such a tiny thing can kill. An ocean away, bullets like the ones that created

these insignificant little holes in your cardboard target are killing hundreds of people a day in a war that your father criticizes every time it's on CNN. Every night he watches until the news frustrates him and he changes the channel, pressing the power button as he pulls a trigger – quickly and indisputably – and the television screen fades to black.

“Ironic,” you whisper, crushing the tip of the empty bullet shell that you had stored away in your coat pocket earlier into your palm.

## Another Failed Poem About America

You're five years old and certain that the monster  
under your bed resembles the paddle boat  
your mother is about to put you on. She fastens  
a vibrant, orange life vest around your shoulders,  
too large to save you should you fall overboard.

*What if it eats me?* Your father chuckles,  
*This isn't like the monster under your bed.*  
*Monsters aren't real.* You hesitate,  
struck by the boat's bright red eyes.  
*It'll be fun,* he says, helping you into your seat.

All around you other parents are helping  
their children onto their boats or scolding  
them for jumping in too quickly. They watch  
their children paddle into open water,  
beyond their reach and then turn their gaze  
to other tourist attractions of Baltimore's Inner Harbor.

You paddle into the bay slowly, out  
and around the coal barge, its clunking gears  
and clinking wires threatening to pull you down  
to dark, endless depths below the water's  
surface with it. From the barge, you paddle on  
to the retired nuclear submarine docked close by.

Thirteen years from now, your parents will usher  
you onto your Navy ship, clinging to your uniform  
in tears and wishing you luck. You'll study the red,  
white and blue flashing above you, waiting for you,  
and wonder when you'll next see home.

But now, your parents stand on shore,  
smiling and waving as you paddle  
toward the old submarine— watching you propel  
yourself closer and closer to the gaping  
red mouth painted on its front,  
ready to eat you alive.

## Persephone in Rural Western New York, Early September

Lately, mother, your send off has been warmer  
than your welcome, your colors more vibrant,  
more striking. But we both know winter  
is coming. The days grow shorter  
and you pull on layer after layer –  
a long sleeved shirt, a sweater, a coat –  
as we huddle by the fireplace in the barn.

You'd like to think that the dry heat  
blowing over us reminds you of summer or spring  
as we take turns standing before the fire.  
I could tell you that it reminds me  
of red fruit and seeds that have flowered,  
been harvested, and are decaying;  
the last thing you want to hear.

You're watching the fire, as if adding one more  
log will save you. Save you from what?  
My staying? My leaving? I propose we add  
another, drawing your eyes back to me.  
You shake your head, say *no*,  
*I'll go in the house when you leave.*

Outside, frost has settled on the grass  
and glistens in the gray moonlight.  
The squeaky barn door hinges  
are the only things that will protest  
my leaving. Beneath your words,  
*Have a safe trip and I love you*,  
I'll hear the fireplace door squeal  
as you throw another log on the fire.  
I'll respond in kind, breathe the cold  
air in, and savor how it burns on the way down.