**Contents**

**ADULT FICTION**
Larry Hunt............................................................... *Four Downs* 1

**COLLEGE FICTION**
Benjamin Shindel......................................................... *Black Ink* 8

**HIGH SCHOOL FICTION**
Gabriella Ruiz.......................................................... *August 9th, 1945* 17

**ADULT POETRY**
Lorin Drexler.......................................................... *Soulmates* 19

**COLLEGE POETRY**
Alex Dodt.............................................................................
  *Santa Never Brought Us Anything, but at Least We Could Believe in the Mailbox* 22

**HIGH SCHOOL POETRY**
Sierra Smith............................................................ *If Only* 23

**ADULT NONFICTION**
Rosalie Hirano......................................................... *She Was My Only Sister* 24

**COLLEGE NONFICTION**
Rikki Tremblay.............................................................. *Assisted Living* 27
Reed threw his used Ford Pinto into park and cut the ignition. Even if he didn't love this car, he was grateful to have something. He was pretty sure the rust on it was older than he was and he couldn't even sit up straight in it. He had to hunch just a little as he drove and he wasn't even that tall, just over six feet. *Like Drew Brees,* he thought. Reed idolized Brees and wanted to be just like him. Drew Brees was the quarterback for the New Orleans Saints and they had some similarities. He and Brees were the same height, they played the same position, and, although Reed didn't know this about Brees, neither had parents that were still together. Reed was a big fan and wanted to be just as good as Brees someday.

He looked out at the empty field. The coaches were just showing up. A few teammates were out stretching. It was quiet out. *You could quit right now, if you want to,* a voice in his head thought. *Just drop off those pads and never look back.* The Arizona heat actually made him consider his mind's half-joking proposition. It made everyone consider it. Then there was the field itself to think about. The dirt was almost as hard as the pavement in the parking lot next to it and nobody knew how the straw-like grass even grew. It was rarely green yet somehow always here. The hard ground and sparse grass made being tackled an even worse experience than it normally was. Playing football in the Arizona sun was its own experience. People who haven't experienced it can't really grasp what it's like.

Reed stepped out onto the high school parking lot and walked around to the passenger side to start gathering his equipment. In the quiet of the afternoon, he felt like he could actually hear the afternoon heat. And yet, the boys still came out, year after year, generation after generation. Most of the team had brothers that had played football on this field. Some of their dads had played here, too.

He set his half-frozen gallon jug on the blacktop rubber track that surrounded the football field and sat next to it while he fiddled with his shoulder pads. He had filled the jug halfway with water the night before and let it freeze. In the morning, before practice, he would fill it up the rest of the way with water and bring it to drink. The ice would melt and keep the water cool while they practiced. Some of the kids had nice gallon jugs they filled with ice from the refrigerator. He couldn't afford a jug so Reed just used an empty milk jug over and over until it cracked, then he'd use another one.

SMACK! Reed heard a loud slapping noise to his left. He turned and saw a familiar messy haired face that took a backward glance as it ran away.

“*OW! You-“* and a string of profanity ensued from another boy. Hank, one of Reed’s teammates, had just whacked an unsuspecting teammate on the back. The remaining players
chuckled. Hank wasn't a bad kid, he just couldn't help but torture his other teammates, especially Darrel, the large teammate that Hank had just smacked.

Hank was Reed's favorite target on the field. Reed trusted him with the football and he was tough as nails. Reed also felt like the reason Hank was so fast was because he spent half his life running away from people after pulling some kind of stunt like he just did. They were neighbors and had grown up playing together. They knew each other so well, sometimes it seemed they could read each other's minds. That was one of the blessings of growing up in a small town.

Darrel was probably Hank's favorite target, but in a much different sense than what Reed referred to when he thought of a target. Darrel wasn't small, weak, unpopular, or a bad football player. He was actually the opposite of all those things. He was very tall, strong, had lots of friends, and was a phenomenal football player. Someone would say something if Hank was bullying the younger or underprivileged kids in some way; but what was anyone to say about Darrell?

“Had to get that mosquito!” Hank yelled. Darrel had a quick look of rage on his face but didn’t get up. He knew it wasn’t worth it. There was no mosquito. It was just an open-handed slap on the back of a poor, unwary soul. This was just one of the many slightly-too-cruel rituals football players had with each other.

They were gluttons for punishment, or they wouldn’t be out here in the first place, beating on one another, enduring the heat, conditioning their bodies, pursuing excellence. The results of excellence are pretty, Reed thought. Trophies in a case, ballerina twirls on a stage, a bodybuilder flexing for judges, a pianist holding a recital. Those are all beautiful things. The road to excellence, however, is not pretty. It is dirty, grimy, scalding hot, long, and painful. That’s what they were building here, excellence. They had a good team this year and no one wanted to miss out on what that could mean.

The boys grew up dreaming about this, about their turn to take the field. Reed and his friends had played behind the bleachers with toy foam footballs when they were younger while their older brothers, cousins, and others played the real game on Friday nights. The whole town would turn out to watch, not just parents and family. If you asked the old-timers about the varsity games, they’d tell you, “It’s bigger than the super bowl.” And they meant it. There is a brotherhood, all its own, among those on the football field which can’t be communicated to those who haven’t been a part of it.

Reed got up and found an underclassman to play catch with. For Reed, there was no better feeling than throwing a football. He hadn’t had anyone to teach him growing up and, so, he had taught himself. When on the field, throwing a football, nothing else seemed to matter. The world wasn’t shrouded under any other problems. He and his mom didn’t have any financial problems at home. His anxiety didn’t bother him. It was as if the world ceased to exist outside the four boundaries that boxed in the grass.

In ones and twos, the rest of the team trickled onto the field, preparing their gear and guzzling their water. All too soon, however, the coaches’ whistles sounded and the players fell in line. Today was sled day. It came once a week. After stretches and warm ups, the first thing the players did was push around a large football sled that the coaches all stood on, blowing whistles and yelling at everyone to push harder. The players would line up in sets of six and explode into the sled’s six pads, pushing the sled up and down the field until the coaches decided they had done
enough. Sometimes Reed wondered if he had upset some very important people in a previous life to deserve such treatment. Reed lined up for his turn. The whistle blew and he burst towards his assigned pad to hit, trying to impress the coaches, even though he was a standout senior. That desire for excellence never left him, or any of them for that matter. Half-hearted efforts weren't really something that were preached or accepted in small-town football.

After an hour of hitting the sled, the players were released for a short water break. Reed unclasped his chin strap and pushed up on the bottom of his face mask. The sweat that poured off his head like his own personal waterfall made it slide off easy. He shook his head back and forth a few times, shaking the sweat off his head and whipping around his hair of a couple inches. As they walked to their water, some of the players talked and joked about different topics. A favorite was about how, next week, they would sneak onto the field to cut up the sled with a blowtorch the night before sled day so they wouldn't have to hit it. Others just embraced their exhaustion, enjoying the water in silence. It was so refreshing that even the noise of players guzzling out of their jugs was satisfying to hear.

Today had been a bit of a reprieve because one of the larger coaches was on crutches. He had gout in his ankle and so he couldn't ride on the back of the sled while the players pushed it around. This particular coach was over 300 pounds so everyone hoped this gout lasted forever. That was a lot of weight off the sled. It also led to some entertaining moments. This coach, Coach Barrett, was the quarterback coach so Reed worked with him every day. Today, they were going over a new passing scheme. Coach Barrett was leaning heavily into his crutches while he explained the goal of this new play type. He quickly lost the players, however, as their attention turned towards a small parade of footballs that started rolling their way. Some other player had tossed a few footballs towards Reed and the other quarterbacks before going to get water. One of the balls had a particularly successful bounce as it inched towards Coach Barrett. All their eyes focused in as its potential dawned on them. The football rolled, end over end, towards its inevitable target. As it did one last revolution, it nearly balanced on its point, then finished its last roll and landed its point right on Coach Barrett's gout-ridden ankle. Every muscle and vein pulsed in his body as he balled fists in agony and tried not to scream or fall over.

Coach Barrett turned and yelled a string of statements about the receivers’ worth as football players and, eventually, as human beings. This was the cue for the quarterbacks that they could finally let go and they howled with laughter. Coach Barrett, now satisfied with his comments, turned back to the quarterbacks. “Man, you guys couldn’t have said something?” This prompted more laughter before they returned to their passing scheme.

Week after week, month after month this all continued like clockwork. They endured the awful heat and their grueling practice so they could be their best for their games on Friday. Part of the beauty inside the insanity was that no one was here that didn’t want to be.

Finally, the night came that was the last game of the regular season for Reed’s team, the Tigers. The Tigers were guaranteed a playoff spot either way but this game would determine seeding. Last year the team had also been very good but Reed had torn his ACL right before the playoffs and so, with only a backup quarterback, their team had lost early.

The first quarter was a defensive battle that only saw both teams punt back and forth. To start the second quarter, however, the other team, the Bulldogs, started making ground. They
were about to cross the 50-yard line. On third and one, they faked a run play and dropped back to pass. The Tigers bit on this hard and the Bulldogs targeted a receiver deep right that would set them up in scoring position. As he caught the ball, Hank came out of nowhere and nearly folded the receiver in half, causing him to drop it. It was ruled an incomplete pass and the opposing team was forced to punt. Reed took over on his own 10-yard line. It was time to put some points on the board.

The first play was a quarterback option to the left side. Reed faked the pitch to the running back, and the defensive end who was responsible for Reed fell for the fake. Reed kept the ball and took off down the field, picking up 15 yards before a defensive back brought him down. The crowd cheered as the offense was showing some life. Reed was determined to come away with some points. The next play was a play-action, where the quarterback fakes a run play but then throws a pass instead, just like the other team had nearly done before turning it over.

Reed faked a handoff. As soon as he looked up, he saw his big tight end, Darrel, streaking left and wide open. Reed let the ball fly. Darrel picked up 20 yards and another first down. The defensive end who had been fooled on the previous play had nearly fallen for this one, too. He had just enough time to see Darrel wide open before renewing his charge and slamming an unsuspecting Reed to the ground. Yellow penalty flags flew everywhere.

Reed shook off the hit, which had been obviously unnecessary, and then started back to the huddle. Why did he hit me? Reed thought to himself. He must have seen that Darrel was open and that we would decline the penalty. It was a free shot at me. Reed realized he might be in for a longer game than he thought. The next play came in from their coach. It was the same option play from earlier. Reed knew the defensive end would be out for blood this time, so he called an audible. At the line of scrimmage, he changed the direction the play was going. The ball was snapped and the play went nowhere. Their coach was so furious that Reed could hear him yelling on the sideline.

The next play was another pass. After the snap, Reed dropped back. No receivers were open and Hank was on the bench resting during this particular play. After a few seconds, the big defensive end, number 90, came around the backside and sacked Reed for a loss. Reed felt like this hit hurt worse than the one earlier that had drawn a penalty and this one was 100% legal. Reed tried to bounce up, but his side ached. He knew he would feel that one tomorrow.

It was third down. The next play was another pass. They had to get a first down here. Hank was back on the field now. He pulled a double move on his man and completely embarrassed him. The defender nearly fell over as Hank’s fake left him completely free and he raced down the sideline. Reed hit him in stride and Hank ran it to the endzone. Touchdown.

Big number 90 kept harassing Reed as the game went on. There were a few other hits that were penalties or that should have been, but other than that, he made sure Reed was uncomfortable all game. Reed almost respected that. He could tell that the player knew what he was doing. This led to Reed being a little jumpy with some of his passes and letting them go too early. Their coach had called multiple timeouts to help calm Reed down. They had built up a 14-0 lead with another score but he didn’t want to give the Bulldogs any breathing room.

On a simple run play in the second half, Reed handed off the football, but number 90 had come crashing down on the same play. Reed didn’t see him coming and he buried his helmet into
Reed's side, sending them both to the ground. Reed couldn't keep taking a beating like this.

The run play hadn't gotten them far and it was another third down. Their coach called a double reverse next, a trick play, and it gave Reed an idea. For this play, Reed would hand the ball off to the runner coming around the back, which already looked like a trick play. The defense would think they had it figured out, only to have another runner come back the first way. Number 90, in pursuing the football, had become too focused on making sure he was in position to make the tackle. The problem was, he hadn't been mindful of his surroundings and a sprinting Reed slammed into him, taking him to the ground hard and freeing the runner to race down the field.

Now it was number 90's turn to be slow to get up. Reed's teammates hollered a collective “Ohhhh!!!” at the unorthodox hit. Quarterbacks weren't really supposed to block defenders but Reed had wanted to make an exception. The hit didn't knock number 90 out of the game or stop him from coming, but it restored Reed's confidence and maybe slowed down number 90 just enough to give Reed some breathing room. Soon after, the buzzer went off, signaling the end of the game. The Tigers had won and were playoff-bound.

One of Reed's favorite parts of winning football games was the bus ride home. Even though this had been a home game and the ride was only a few minutes, the celebrating and revelry was not dampened in the least. They were going to the playoffs and had very high hopes.

****

“Are you nervous?” Reed's mother, Molly, asked as she and Reed ate breakfast.

“A little. Like usual,” Reed responded. The Tigers had rolled through the playoffs, handily beating every team they faced. This had worried Reed, and many of the players. They hadn't really been tested. Their opponent in the final, the Trojans, hadn't lost a game all season and were the overwhelming favorite.

“There's one thing those city boys don't have,” Molly said.

“What's that?” Reed answered.

“They haven't been hit, not by a team as physical as you. They're a bunch of pretty boys. You come out swinging and they won't like it. They'll fall apart.”

“Sounds like you should be our coach,” Reed responded.

“Ya, maybe then we'd have a decent quarterback,” Molly retorted before jumping up and squealing as Reed tried to squirt her with a water bottle. When Reed finally put it down, she came back grinning.

“Well, as your coach, I would say the single biggest problem your team will have isn't anyone on the opposing team.”

“What's that?” Reed asked.

“You've got to believe that you belong on the field with them. If you don't think that, you've already lost.”

“What do you mean?”

“These guys, they live off their reputation, their fancy uniforms, their snobby coach. They project an air of excellence. Most teams they face are beaten before they ever set foot on the grass.
When I played volleyball—"
   "Back in my day," Reed started, interrupting her with an exacerbated voice mimicking someone who must have been at least 100 years old.
   "Yes, back in 'my day,'" Molly continued with a smile, using air quotes around the phrase. "When I played, we didn't have size divisions. At the end of the season, everyone in the playoffs showed up and we just played. The largest school could end up playing the smallest school. You had to believe you belonged on the floor with whoever you were playing."
   "How did your team do?"
   "Well, my last year, I thought we were going to win it all. We almost did."
   "Wasn't our school tiny back then? I didn't think anyone lived here that long ago."
   Molly rolled her eyes at the age comment. She had also played at Reed's high school. She continued, "Yes, we might've been the smallest school in the playoffs. If there was a smaller school, I don't know who it was."
   "What happened?"
   "We made it to the finals. We had a couple of outside hitters that could make the big city girls cry. And we loved to do it, too. Our coach understood competition and taught us how to compete with anyone," Molly said with an obvious pride in her voice. "We had one girl go down with an ankle injury though. After that, we fell apart." After a short pause, Molly added, "It was a good run though. I loved playing with those girls."
   Reed knew that his mom had secretly always wanted a girl who would play volleyball. Molly had Reed instead, though, and, to her credit, had completely invested herself in Reed and his sport of choice. He was grateful for her involvement. He felt like involvement was one of the best ways you could show someone that you care.
   "I'm proud of you. No one thought you'd be state champions," Molly said.
   "We're not state champions yet."
   "You will be."
   "And how do you know that?"
   "Moms know things, Reed." And with that, Molly picked up her empty bowl and took it to the sink. As she was about to head out the door, she added, "Don't forget, you belong on the field with them."
Black Ink

Benjamin Shindel

∙ COLLEGE FICTION ∙

Eloise looked at the palm of her left hand, which she saved for only the most important messages. It read “Today” in clear black ink.

“Today” was probably her best chance. It was a Saturday toward the end of October, when the weather in Houston changes dramatically from hot and muggy to cool and dewy. This was Eloise’s favorite time of the year, when she could start to wear long sleeves and bike for hours. Today was also a day she had picked carefully on a calendar a couple weeks prior. Eloise had few character flaws — most people thought of her as kind, clever, and well-mannered — but indecision was one of them. Eloise had been working up the courage to tell her boyfriend something important to her, something she felt he needed to know. It was something she had never been able to communicate to anyone, that had been in her life since she was a young child.

..........  

Eloise’s earliest memories of her fascination with body writing were from when she was in grade school, maybe as early as kindergarten. She learned to write at a young age, as her parents always reminded her, and she had a faint memory of practicing the shapes of letters and words across her arm. She would sit in the corner of her classroom, next to the bookshelves, and use the fine-line Crayola washable markers. First, she would trace the words with her finger, and then draw them faintly, in a line, along her arm, before running down the hall to the bathroom to wash them off and start again.

In first grade, she had a memory, which had stayed with her vividly for her whole life, of scribbling the prettiest word she knew on the neck of the boy sitting in front of her in class. He didn’t mind, and thought it tickled, but their teacher noticed the marks at the end of the day, and made Eloise promise to stop, in a sharp tone. That was when Eloise learned it was an activity she should keep hidden.

In winter, when she wore long clothes, she would write words up and down her arms, the easiest place to draw on. She learned to write with both hands so that she could expand her canvas to both arms. Her sweaters would cover the scribbled phrases, which she would wash off in the shower at night. Eloise’s parents always told her that she was such a modest and mature child, as she stopped being naked in front of them from a young age. She would bathe without help and get dressed on her own.

Occasionally, Eloise’s teacher or a relative would catch her doodling on herself. They would either ask her what she was writing, or tell her authoritatively that she would get sick from the ink in the roller-ball pens that wrote the smoothest — and felt the best — on her skin. She knew this wasn’t true, as she had bashfully asked her science teacher one day whether the ink could hurt her. Her
teacher wasn't sure, but looked it up and got back to her, telling Eloise that most inks were labeled as "non-toxic" and wouldn't hurt her even if she drank a little.

“You didn't swallow some, did you?” her teacher had asked her.

Eloise never knew exactly what it was about writing on skin that was so exciting for her. It felt nice on her skin when the pen rolled across it, but so did just tickling her skin with a fingernail or the sharp end of a feather. She liked the haptic feedback when she drew on someone else, which she rarely got to do. She also liked the idea of placing words on the body. But she especially liked some of the more subtle things that went with writing on the body: keeping a word hidden under a sleeve or inside a clenched fist, delicately scrubbing off the words with soapy water, clicking open and shut the fancy pens she would take from the case in her father’s study.

In middle school, Eloise asked her parents if she could take calligraphy classes. They signed her up, and she went once a week to practice her penmanship. She learned cursive, which her school had refused to teach. (Often when she met someone for the first time, she would ask, “what do you think about schools in Texas not teaching cursive anymore?”) She also learned how to refill a pen with ink, and how to use nibs and fountain pens. She started a pen collection, which she kept in a cigar box under her bed.

Of course, Eloise’s life did not revolve around this obsession. She had other interests, from team sports to gardening. And at that age, she didn’t even realize that her fascination with body writing was something of note. To her, it seemed a natural, if hidden, interest.

In high school, however, it took on a new dimension. She began to feel ashamed of the words on her arms, and was increasingly aware of the acute possibility that someone would notice. Rather than draw on her arms, she would sit in front of a mirror and draw on her chest, or trace things on her upper thighs, above her skirt line. On some days, she felt like throwing away her collection of pens, and disavowing the whole thing. Sometimes, she would take breaks from writing, for as much as a month or two, to “let her skin heal,” although her skin was always fine.

Around the same time that Eloise began to think about boys in a new light, she also began to imagine what it would feel like to trace words on them: on their backs, on their palms, in other places. Eloise had her first boyfriend a couple years into high school. She didn’t dare tell him about these desires, because she was afraid he would think she was weird. He had no reason to doubt her when she said that she sometimes wrote notes on herself to help her remember things. Occasionally, when Eloise was feeling frisky, she would suggest they play a game. She would trace words on his back, letter by letter, and have him try to guess what she was writing. Then he would do the same for her.

After he taught her how to kiss, she would often jokingly write on her palm, in front of him, “remember to kiss James tonight.” It made her pleased when he would invariably say something like “I never understand how you can write so clearly on your skin,” or “whatever helps you remember,” but she would feel guilty about it later, for a reason she couldn’t explain.

Eloise broke up with James when she realized he was also kissing someone else. She made sure to pick someone nice a year later. She met Hugo in a cafe next to the Houston bayou, when she noticed him writing with a fountain pen. She introduced herself, told him she also liked pens, and he asked for her number.

Hugo was from a different high school, and Eloise felt her own popularity rising at school when
people found out she had a boyfriend from across town. Hugo was the son of two psychologists, and was an aspiring psychologist himself. He gave Eloise an engraved pen for her birthday that year, and told her that Freud thought pens were phallic and blank paper represented the virginal state. Eloise blushed when he said this, even though he followed it up by saying he personally didn’t agree with the idea. Eloise went online later that day and soaked up all the psychoanalytic interpretations of pens that the internet had to offer. Then she started looking up other things on the internet, after making sure the door to her bedroom was closed. Unfortunately, good things rarely last. As college began, Hugo and Eloise started to slowly drift apart. They both went to the University of Houston, but Hugo always seemed to be busier than Eloise, who was still undecided on her major. Eloise took classes about English literature and French, while Hugo studied human anatomy and neuroscience.

Eloise naively thought that all relationships went through rough phases. From time to time, she would subtly ask Hugo if he would write a note for her on her arm, or if she could draw a picture on his thigh. Usually, he would laugh it off or take the pen and then flirtatiously run the back end up her thigh. He seemed to understand the erotic connection for her, but maybe thought that she was just using it as an excuse to have sex. He would take off his pants so she could draw on his thigh, but then would take off his underwear too, and they would get distracted.

It wasn’t enough for Eloise. She knew that Hugo would be understanding — he always had been; he had visited her in the hospital when she had a bad case of the flu, and had comforted her when her grandfather had passed away during their senior year of high school. So she prepared a speech for him, letting him know about something important to her, something that formed the basis for her identity in many ways. And she set a date to tell him.

…………

And that date was “Today,” as Eloise’s palm reminded her every few minutes, not that she needed the reminder. Butterflies were in her stomach as she lounged with Hugo in his dorm room. He was telling her about something he had learned in class.

“So much of the way we experience pain isn’t even because of damage to our nerves; it’s created in our brain. That explains why we get phantom pain, referred pain, neuropathic pain. If you focus hard enough on any part of your body, you can get it to feel a little… well, a little painful. People with chronic pain often…”

Hugo could be boring sometimes. Eloise tried to look interested but clearly she came off as uncomfortable.

“…and some people think it’s unique to humans. Other animals have much more straightforward neural pathways… what’s wrong, Eloise? You look like you just swallowed your tongue?” Hugo asked, putting his hand on her arm.

“There’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you, Hugo.”

Hugo sat up straight and looked at her. “Sure, what is it?”

Then it all came out. Eloise told Hugo a bunch of stuff she hadn’t told anyone before. It was like letting the air out of a balloon. She told him about her fascination. She told him that she wasn’t completely satisfied with the things they did in bed. She pushed up her sleeve and showed him the few phrases she had written that day already. “Buy Courage Pills.” “Is this pen phallic?” “Water the Window Fern.”
Hugo had listened thoughtfully the whole time. When she looked up at him, expecting a response, he kind of half coughed, half cleared his throat.

“This is a lot to think about, Eloise,” he said at last.

“I know, and I didn't want to like, burden you or anything.”

“Have you told anyone else about this?”

“No, you’re the first person.”

Hugo seemed to be choosing his words carefully. “Maybe… this is something you should talk about with a therapist.” When he said this, Eloise's demeanor changed. She looked away from him, not sure at first how to respond to that.

“I mean, it's not like it makes me depressed... It's a little unusual, but it's not a psychological problem,” she replied.

“I dunno,” Hugo said. “It makes me think about all those times you wanted me to draw on you, and like… even how we met, when I was writing with a fountain pen. It’s… not normal.”

Eloise felt like crying. Neither of them said anything for a couple minutes. He took his hand off her arm and she avoided making eye contact, looking out the window of his dorm room.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I should have told you sooner.”

“I can help you stop,” he said, leaning his head in front of her gaze so that she was looking at him.

“Really. Just give me your pens for a while, and promise me you won’t write on yourself. It’s that easy. It's just like quitting smoking, or anything else.”

Eloise couldn't stop herself. Silently, tears started running down her cheeks. She felt more self-pity than she had ever felt, and a pure contempt for what Hugo had just said to her. She knew that stopping would never work; she had tried it before.

“Why are you crying?” Hugo shrunk back. “Look, jeez…”

“I need to go,” Eloise said. She picked herself up and walked out the door. She ran down the hall, into the stairwell of the building, and collapsed against the wall.

She texted Hugo the next day, but he didn't reply for a long time, and when he did, it was to tell her again that she should see a therapist. He even offered to ask his mom if she could sit down with Eloise. Eloise deleted their message history.

All that week, she struggled focusing on anything. She busied herself in books, spending all her free time studying and reading the texts for her classes ahead of schedule.

October was unusually cold, and rain came from one of those tiny cartoon clouds that hangs overhead and follows some sad character around. From her bed, under the dorm room window, Eloise stared out at the trails of water pooling and dripping down the pane of glass, her blanket bunched up around her, strands of fluff tickling the peach fuzz on her arms and neck.

The book Claudine at School lay finished, spread to the last page, on her bed behind her. Claudine was constantly rebelling, provoking people, and scheming her way around her little French school and town. Eloise wished she had Claudine’s talents for getting what she wanted. Eloise lay back in her bed, and the rainwater, streaming down the window above her, cast the light in little rivulets across her cheeks like tears.

Over the weekend, Eloise felt extremely low. She called her parents, but they didn't pick up the phone. She tried to hang out with her best friend, but she was busy. So, she wallowed in bed, her
mind going back to a subject that she often went to when she felt badly. Eloise thought about becoming a tattoo artist. She imagined how every day of her life, she could write words, in beautiful calligraphy, across the skin of dozens of people. Except, she hated needles. More specifically, she hated needles, blood, latex gloves, and the idea that the words she was writing would be “permanent,” stained there on the skin forever. It was for this reason that Eloise had never gotten a tattoo.

But this time was different. She wrote some words in French on her arm, “je suis un petit point” and “je suis désolé,” but this didn’t cheer her up. That evening, Eloise biked to the best and cleanest tattoo parlor in Houston, bit down on the neckline of her sweater, and told the artist to write Eloise’s favorite word on her thigh, high enough that no one would see it unless she wanted them to.

She had to keep it covered for three days while it healed. During that time, she felt strangely relaxed, knowing that her word was residing there under the white bandage. When she prepared to open up the bandage, Eloise thought back to some of her favorite memories. She remembered how her ears would perk up whenever teachers would say during a standardized test, “Only black or blue ink may be used during the writing portion of this exam.” Those were the colors that she liked to use on her own skin, and the phrase aroused her. She reminisced how, whenever she went to events with face painters, she would have the face painter trace little spiral patterns down her cheeks onto her neck and shoulders, to look like locks of hair pressed against her skin. Eloise could almost feel the cold, moist touch of the pastel pencils on her cheeks.

At last, Eloise unwrapped the bandage on her leg. The word was there, emblazoned in the neat font she had picked out. Eloise thought she would feel happy to see it, but instead she just felt nauseous.

She ran to the bathroom, turned on the shower faucet, and lay under the stream of water, scrubbing at the word more and more vigorously. It didn’t even smudge, just stared up at her smugly. That night, Eloise lay in bed for hours, looking up details about the process and price of tattoo removal. It was an expensive mistake but wouldn’t bankrupt her. She might even be able to ask her parents to help her. She felt a strange relief at having made a mistake. “You always make such good choices,” she imagined her mother saying, beaming at her. How surprised they would be when she told them she wanted to get a tattoo removed. What a stupid thing she had done.

She felt completely dry, like she’d rather not waste the water that crying would require. She wanted to fall asleep, but somehow couldn’t summon the will to do so.

Eloise turned over on her stomach. The fan above her bed shook gently, cooling her upper back, uncovered by her blanket. She could hear the traffic rushing by outside the window of her room. It was a calming sound, an ever-present reminder of the city. She pressed her face deep into her pillows, feeling the material bend along the contours of her cheeks. Why was everything so difficult? Eloise stretched her toes out over the end of her bed, pushing them into the gap between the mattress and the bed frame. She was tired of psychoanalyzing herself, tired of trying to rationalize her own desires. Why couldn’t everyone just be understanding? There are so many rules, so many ways to do things wrong, so many things that change right as you get your hand wrapped around them, and other things that never change, just stick around like a stream clawing its way down into a sediment deposit.
felt either guilt or apathy about everything. She squinted shut her eyes and visualized a man sitting over her, one hand pulling taut the skin of her back, the other writing across it. She could not see what he was writing, but she could tell that it was something meaningful. It was a scene she had imagined many nights. But this time, when Eloise placed this image in her mind's eye, she felt something new. A tinge of guilt crept in, settling like a rash onto her back.
August 9th, 1945
Gabriella Ruiz

· HIGH SCHOOL FICTION ·

8:36 a.m.
The mood in the Kato house was somber. Sora's mother stood at the window on the third floor of their apartment complex, pensive. Some time ago, she had sent her youngest son, Jirou, to the market for fish, but he had not yet returned. She tried to hide it from her daughters, Sora and Jun-Mai, but she was worried. Her eldest, Isamu, had been conscripted into the Japanese military less than a month ago, and she was afraid 11-year-old Jirou was next. Sora brushed her hair behind her shoulder. It was so dark her father had nicknamed her Sumi, after the ink her mother used in her paintings, though he knew the name embarrassed her. She stirred a tasteless soup in preparation of dinner, while concealing her concern for her mother. Jun-Mai was three, and sat on the floor of their home, oblivious to the war that had swept through the nation. Algebra notes sat on the table near the center of the room — Sora's — for a test the next day.

It was Sunday.

9:14 a.m.
Sora's father worked in a factory on the opposite side of Nagasaki, where a mountain met the valley. He worked every day of the week, from early morning to late at night since he had to travel so far. Despite this, the Katos were not wealthy. The war had caused prices to rise and made resources scare, and even the Kato's comfortable neighbors, like Yuri-san and her family, did not relish the luxury they were used to. In the years before the war, Yuri-san had often called out to Sora, saying “Sora, Sora, come dine with us,” or “Sora, come see the kimono I bought at the market today.” Now, Yuri-san’s husband was fighting somewhere near Tokyo, and her two sons squatted in bars, drunkenly ranting their convictions to any who would listen. They yearned to fight like their father and die for their country, but the Kato family did not want to fight anymore. Often, when Sora's father returned home, he raved about the futile nature of war, while their mother wept for her eldest or quieted her husband. Their mother knew government spies lurked in Nagasaki, anxiously searching for traitors to present to the emperor, like cats hunting mice for their master. Not that Emperor Hirohito had shown his face in years; Sora was thirteen and he had not made a public announcement, as far as she could remember.

The Emperor addressed his citizens over the radio six days later.
Their father was released from work early today. It was not a holiday, but lurid news. The men at the factory had spoken in whispered rumors of the decimation of Hiroshima. “It is a new type of weapon, sent by the United States,” their father’s comrades murmured, “They dropped it three days ago.” The word atomic swept through the workshop, landing on eager ears. Atomic, like in the silly plots of Jirou’s comic books. Their father rushed home to tell his family. Citizens of the city finally realized just how close the war was to their homeland, having been kept in the dark for so long.

Only Japan would get a taste of the devastation of this kind of bomb, no other country daring to use its power since World War Two.

There was hardly any warning when the plane flew above the city. The people of Nagasaki were used to their drone; American planes had done reconnaissance missions before, and the air raid alarm had not been activated since early that morning. The guards in the towers had not predicted the catastrophic cargo these planes in particular carried. Nagasaki wasn’t the original target in the first place. It was only important enough to be a backup, after the Kokuro drop point was hidden by smoke. It was a cloudy, dreary day in Nagasaki when time seemed to freeze. Bystanders at the nearby college, high school, and recreational center turned, prayed, wept as a light as bright as the Sun erupted in a chilling silence, the hypocenter of a second nuclear bomb less than four stories above them.

Two blocks away, Yuri-San’s sons fell to their knees and spread their arms wide, too intoxicated to recognize their imminent demise.

A half a kilometer away, Jirou apologized to his family a final time, for buying a comic book instead of fish.

A kilometer away, Yuri-san was blinded while drinking her usual morning cup of green tea. Her favorite drink shop never reopened, and neither did her eyes.

Two kilometers away, Jun-Mai crinkled her exceptionally tiny nose and smiled at her mother as their apartment collapsed, crushing them both under wood and concrete.

Two kilometers away, Sora and her father grasped each other, and in their final moments, found just how easily fiction became fact. Understanding that it did not matter what they, the innocents, thought because they would still be punished for the ignorance or sins of another. The force from the explosion blew them out of the room onto the street, thirteen meters below.

Four kilometers away, Isamu arrived at a train station, ready to surprise his family with a visit. He was knocked off his feet into a nearby stream, Atomic Bomb Sickness cutting his grief short a week later.

Yuri-San’s husband returned to Nagasaki, months later. What he found was not a home, or a family, or even a city. Only pain.

Japan officially surrendered on September 2nd, 1945.
Soulmates

Lorin Drexler

∙ ADULT POETRY ∙

Soulmates: Part I — Heaven

We are leaving this beach made
of pure silver, and wherever it is we
end up on this drive will be hidden in messages between dying stars...
Her heart, swimming through my stitching.
Hair like wildfire, or an erupted volcano...igneous.
My love, my one, my only—

I am grayed and broken doll in need of constant
repair and ventriloquism.
I tell the same story over and over, hoping
by mere will, it will change our reality.
It never does—and that never stops us.
Nothing ever could. I wouldn't allow for it
to get the best of us...the best of her.
We will go on living and fumble until the peeled-out end.

This cruel clock.
Such a beautiful ship.
The master, in control of nothing—
not even itself.

We will end up somewhere. Somewhere in a dream perhaps,
hidden between messages meant only to be read
at the moment they are lived.
And in this very moment, beyond the sea
and through the wind,
dipping through the bright cloudless day
that shall empty once again
into the night—
we will forget about the outstretched horizons
and immemorial artifacts, and know,
the beauty of life exists only here, with you, on this drive.

Part II — Hell

lies, lies, the cat that holds the secret doll. 
the egg from the magic ship. 
it is the question that destroys lovers. 
love is not a victory march—
it's a cold and it's breaking hallelujah 
from a creaking and stoned vision.

the cat lies and spreads its wings 
as the angel loses her rhythm 
remaining stoic in prayer. she's never done this before. 
neither have they. 
the dark cat. the red cat. one of which 
holding a sea of glisters in a lantern. 
one of which must decide. 
one is deciding but has never decided, and one too weak 
and frightened to understand the consequence of the decision.

the red cat runs and hides. 
the black cat chews off his tail.

the two of whom, 
soulmating, and strung out on the next, 
live eternal summers dreaming and understanding 
grief is the more constant parable in life. 
the treasure of their lost world must be reconciled. 
they have this perfect love between them that 
just as perfectly has been distorted and digested 
by time's ugly perpendicular wind. 
the grandfather chime and its wind.

but where could love vacate?—so fruitful and misplaced. 
how could it be so...frigid, 
and unknowing? 
so crippled beside itself.
this world, too strange—too greatly so.
just enough beyond the curb to recognize the chaos
slipping through the spasmodic vortex.
the silent admission of nature.
when you ask for things, they never come
as the things you ask for.
the emotion of them like roadkill, anthropomorphic—

the queen is angered and relentless.
she sends the hive on a chase.
honey is lost.
honey was lost.
honey was always lost.

i tell the same story over and over, hoping
by mere will it will change our reality.
nothing ever could. i wouldn't all for it...
to get the best of us. the best of her.
that wheelchair—her brine. her liquor cabinet. her final prayer.
we will go on living and fumble until the unpeeled-out end.

this cruel clock.
such a beautiful ship.
thi master, in control of nothing—
except us.

we will end up somewhere.
profound. unusual and beyond recognition.
mistakenly alone,
searching for something
we've already had.
searching for someone
we've already met.
searching, mistakenly,
for each other.
we moved neighborhoods too often to believe / in any mailman / our mailbox was king
it was our television / telephone, internet, altar / every day Noah & I slid the world
from the mailbox’s mouth & spread it across our bedroom floor like booty / we would read
everything / even teh junk mail / could remind us we existed / for a while
the mailbox brought a new letter from mom every week / first from Paris then Sain
Petersburg / & then places we hadn't studied yet in school / I read them aloud
to Noah / mom signed each one / in the language of wherever she was / but out loud
I only ever said / goodbye

we didn't stop believing in the mailbox / after it stopped delivering the letters we told it to
send to mom / it wasn't for us to question / the mailbox still brought our magazines / trial
subscriptions for Mrs. Anita Bath or Mr. Hugh Jass / or whoever we had made up
that week on the applications we filled out from the newspaper / National Geographic was
our favorite / Noah cut out the pictures of animals sleeping / or hunting / I kept the pictures
with no animals or people / just moss growing over a tree stump / unexplored places where it
looke like life hadn't begun yet / at least not the kind that comes with legs & eyes
& memory / in some of the explored places there are people who still believe thier commands
to the sky can change the seasons / it would make sense if the people who lived in deserts had
become atheists by now / but they haven’t / they’re just confused / they study God’s
tongue & mimic it movements / so sone day he will understand / what they mean
when they shout / drown us

when the mailbox brought dad Sports Illustrated swimsuit issue / we took it into our
bedroom & locked ourselves inside / took turns rating the women writhing on shower drains
talked about how Heidi Klum was a 10 & how they all had to be / but never talked about why
Noah went along with it / whether he didn't know yet / that he was gay / or maybe
he was just rating their makeup / or lighting or how much / he wished he could have a man
in the family who understood
In a corner a boy gave up his lifeline
To a creature who could not start
To acknowledge it.

The piece of luck served a mighty purpose
As a mother’s caress to a lone tear
On the surface.

His desire to be free of his one burden
Was only relinquished when he felt
His heart was certain
That the creature could go on
For one more night
Without sharing his pain that was hidden in
His purchase.

In a corner a boy gave up his lifeline
To a creature that would never
Acknowledge him.
My sister, my only sister, struggled her entire life with mental illness. Diagnosed at various times as bi-polar and as a paranoid schizophrenic, her life, and mine by extension, was a roller coaster of crisis and calm. For a long time, it wasn't something I talked about much. To anyone. And then Newtown, Connecticut happened.

It was December 2012, and I had been grieving her loss since she passed away right before Thanksgiving. Like many others, I was overcome when I heard the news of the 26 people who were killed, including 20 precious first-graders. In the aftermath of this horrific incident, a blog post written by the mother of a son who, like the gunman responsible, struggled with severe mental illness, began making the rounds on Facebook. She spoke of the similarities between her son and the gunman, and how hard it was to get her son the help he needed to protect him from himself and others.

Her story resonated with me in a very personal way. Although my sister was never capable of that kind of violence, I vividly recall episodes when she would lash out at my mother, less at my father, but sometimes at me. In times of extreme crisis, the hatred of the words she would spit out at all of us hurt just as much as the sharpest knife.

Such episodes were usually followed by a struggle to get her in treatment and keep her there long enough to find that magic combination of medications that allowed us to welcome the return of the loving, caring and generous spirit that was so frequently repressed by her illness. But the laws in this state, and probably many others, require proof that the individual is at risk of harming themselves or others. Each time she would spiral out of control, we held our breath that it wouldn't come to that, that we could get her the help she needed before anyone got hurt. We were lucky. No one ever did get hurt. At least not physically. It was the emotional scars that left an indelible mark.

As the sibling of someone who is seriously mentally ill, you wrestle with feelings of fear, anxiety, resentment, anger and, yes, embarrassment your entire life. Ours was a complicated and dysfunctional relationship in which the customary sibling dynamics of competition, jealousy and love were exacerbated by her illness.

Which is why, quite honestly, I was not there for her much in the last year of her short and tormented life. I had reached a point where I was tired of her constant demands for attention and affection. I also had my own family to protect. I was determined that my kids would never witness the things I did growing up. I kept them at a safe distance, a distance she didn't understand, a distance she resented.

With both of our parents gone, her daughter (who has her own story to tell) and I as-
sumed responsibility for her care. In addition, or perhaps to some degree because of her mental illness, my sister also endured extreme health issues. Her medical records would fill an entire bookshelf. The year before she died, she spent six months in the hospital following complications from several surgeries to correct an obstructed bowel. Five of those months were spent in extended care with nothing by mouth. As I had done dozens of times during her life, I sat vigil in the waiting room through every surgery. I made the long drive to visit her at least once a week (not always willingly). I did what I could, but it became too much.

It did not help that our mother had ingrained in her troubled mind a belief that I would turn my back on her when our mother was gone, and she would be left to fend for herself “on the streets.” What ultimately happened was that I made sure she lived her remaining years comfortably in the house where we grew up. As executor of my parents’ estate, (a fact that gnawed at her; as the eldest child she thought that was her role to fill), I made sure that the bills and taxes were paid and she had enough to cover her needs, including extras like getting her nails done regularly and the frequent visits to Sonic Drive-in for giant sodas (extra ice).

Still, she always wanted more. She wanted her share of the inheritance. Her share had to be kept separately to protect her eligibility for AHCCCS and full insurance coverage for the litany of expensive medications that kept her out of crisis. Spending is a hallmark of the manic-depressive, and she found a way to indulge in online shopping sprees on Amazon and Kohls. When she died, we found no less than 14 credit cards in her name and unopened boxes of merchandise piled on the kitchen counter.

Right before she died, I had reached my limit with her. Temporarily, I told myself. I needed time to heal from the loss of our parents and the burden of being her sister and I just needed a break to catch my breath.

I had no idea that by year’s end she’d be gone. I received the call of her death in disbelief. Because she had survived so much, I thought she was invincible.

In mourning her loss, I have struggled with a whole range of emotions. Relief that she is no longer suffering. Relief that the weight of my burden has been lifted. Regret that in that last year I did not call her every Sunday, that I made little effort to visit her as frequently as I should have, that I was embarrassed to include her in family events. Regret that I don’t remember the last time I told her I loved her and meant it.

I am left clinging to the few happy memories we shared. I would have liked to have had more time with that sister. The one with the wicked sense of humor. The one who loved to go to the movies and get the biggest tub of popcorn and a Coke (extra ice). The one who was a voracious reader. The sister with a childlike affinity for sweets. The one who rescued my wedding from disaster. When the priest said we lacked the proper paperwork and turned us away, it was my sister who sprang into action and in a few short hours, produced the most beautiful wedding ever.

A wise priest counseled me once that I should direct my anger and frustration with my sister not at her, but at her illness. How many families have experienced the same anger and frustration? It seems that as a society, we just can’t seem to find the resolve to come up with better answers to addressing mental illness in our communities, in our families. And for the sake of those families, the ones like mine, I hope that mental illness can become something that is no longer talked about in whispers, no longer a battle that is fought in the shadows, alone.
It's been seven years since she passed, and I am still haunted by the feeling that if she had gotten diagnosed earlier, if there had not been such shame in seeking treatment, how different things might have been. When her mind was at peace, she was intelligent, creative, loyal, funny and strong. That is how I will remember her. She was, my only sister.
It's October. Halloween soon. I think of the thinning veil between who's alive and who's not.

I think of ghosts and the living dead.

I think of what haunts us.

****

My mom is the only one in the family who visits Grandma anymore, especially after I moved away. [And I think she hates visiting].

We pull up to this family-home-turned-assisted-living center to visit her mom, my grandma. We get out of the car and walk to the front door. [I think I hate visiting, too].

There's a paper note taped to the screen, NO SMOKING - NO FUMAR - OXYGEN IN USE. I take a breath [from whom?].

I stand aside, letting my mom through to open the door first so I don't have to. “Thanks for making me do it,” she says.

She goes in and I follow [just moving your feet forward is all it is, just moving them along]. [It doesn't smell like you'd worry it would smell inside]. It smells like whatever they must have had for lunch - beans and rice maybe? The television set is blaring and loud. It's a commercial for Toyota, and six elderly [zombies skeletons ghosts] people are watching it.

A man I already know, Randy, reaches up over the couch and shakes my hand. “Hello there, honey.” He doesn't live here. His wife does. He visits her. He jokes and flirts and laughs and hugs. She stares and shits herself. Terry.

Terry's eyes are watery [not sad, just watery - does she ever get sad?] and she flicks them up at me [red-rimmed lined with red eyeliner big red dewey ovals]. Her hands are jerky [like slabs of beef jerky and they're twisting and moving randomly around] and she picks her nose and scratches her cheeks fast and hard until Randy pulls her hands down to her lap. [I don't want to get old I'm screaming I'm screaming-]
“Oh!” My grandma sees us. “Hi there, sweethearts.” She gets off her recliner [it matches the one sitting next to it, the ones we bought for my grandparents, the one Terry sits in now and not Grandpa anymore].

She is much shorter than me [small and tiny, even more so than the last time I saw her… was that a year ago? I am a terrible granddaughter. I complain that we don't care for our elders and then I [try very hard to] forget about mine-].

“Hi Grandma!” I say. [Smile smile, cheerful smiles hello! You’re dying and I’m gonna die too! In a horrible place like this someday but everything is cheerful and smiles smile! Hi!].

She shuffles from around the couch - the television blaring - and gives us hugs. “Well, look who it is,” she says at me. [This seems like a thing a grandparent would say, but I know she doesn’t say my name because she really doesn’t recognize me].

“Your favorite granddaughter [MY NAME] is here,” I say [jokingly but also so she can know who I am while saving face. Her, always concerned with appearances. I know the stories. Some days when she was pregnant with my mom, she’d eat nothing but black coffee all day so she would “stay trim”] and I smile [smile smile smile don’t look at Terry. Jesus Christ, don’t look at Terry].

Another [skeleton] elderly resident named Jean looks up at us hugging. [Jesus, don’t look at Jean either. I remember Jean. Jean’s husband had dementia. Jean’s husband died. Jean has dementia now. She tries to run away if they leave the gate open]. I look at Jean. [Fucking run faster next time, Jean].

My grandma is wearing a red shirt I remember buying her, but now it hangs loosely on her bony shoulders. Her hair is curly, more white than the last time I saw her, but for being 81 years old, still mostly dark brown [something I know she’s proud to show off].

I kiss her cheek, deep wrinkles [from what my mom is convinced of were the years of chain-smoking deep depression alcoholism vodka and beer after her teenaged son died].

“Mom,” my mom says, “Do you want to go in your bedroom to visit because the TV is so loud?”

“Sure,” Grandma answers and begins to walk towards the kitchen, away from where I know her bedroom is.

“No, Mom,” my mom scolds, “Mom, no. This way.” I squint at my mom [be nicer].

“I know,” Grandma says, starting to walk the right way now, “I wanted to check on the… the — I just wanted to check over there.”

She turns into the first bedroom on the left, my mom follows, then I follow [she will die, then she will die, then I will die]. The room — the whole house — is warm, kept at a temperature that to me feels stuffy and sweaty.

There are two twin beds in the room, one is Grandma’s and one [used to be Grandpa’s] belongs to Jean now, her roommate. Both beds are parallel to opposite walls of the room; neither headboard is against a wall [which is so unnerving to me, untethered and unsecured]. Grandma’s bed is under the window, the blanket folded. Jean’s bed is unmade and I can see shit stains down the side of the box spring mattress.

“What time is it?” My grandma asks us.

“It’s 3:30 p.m.,” my mom answers.

“3:30 a.m.?” Grandma looks at her watch.
“No, 3:30 p.m.”
“Oh.” She looks at her watch again. “7:15am? I don’t want to be late for the students.”
“No, Mom, 3:30 p.m. And you don’t have students anymore.”
Grandma and I sit on her bed [firm, lumpy, and uncomfortable] and Mom sits on Jean’s.
“This mattress isn’t very good,” I tell Mom [let’s get her a new one].
Mom asks Grandma if she wants a new mattress — we could get it today.
“Oh, no,” Grandma says. “I won’t need it. I won’t be here much longer.” [Here or here-here? Does she think she’s moving out of this assisted living center? or is she saying she knows she won’t live that much longer — I don’t want to get old].
Grandma smiles at us. “My two daughters,” she says.
“No, Mom,” my moms says. “I’m your daughter and [MY NAME] is your granddaughter.”
“My two granddaughters.”

The bedside table [isn’t a bedside table. It is a rolling medical tray. [I remember this tray. It’s the tray they had the medical equipment on when my grandpa was on hospice care in this room, when he died in this room, when he died in this room, when he died in this room, when I was here and he died in this room].

We don’t talk about grandpa on this visit. A picture of my grandparents on their 50th wedding anniversary hangs above my grandma’s bed. [Last week, my grandma phoned my mom furious and crying asking why no one told her that her Owen died two years ago. We did, we did — you were there in the room with us when he died. Are you sure? Sometimes she thinks my mom is Owen. I’m deeply in love with you, she’ll tell my mom. No, Mom, I’m not Dad. Oh, right, thank you].

“How’s… school?” Grandma asks me. [She might think I’m a kid still in grade school. Or she thinks she’s still working in education, a teacher for 40 years. The patients in this assisted living center are not patients, they’re students. The nurses are teachers. They have curriculum meetings every semester. But I’m in graduate school, so maybe she does remember me].

I tell her about my program [but all I can think is how shitty it is to live past your spouse. Alone after they go]. She says she’s proud of me [and it almost makes me cry because I really believe it] and pats my leg. She says she hopes I like living in Florida. I don’t live in Florida.
She’s wearing three rings stacked on her left ring finger, no wedding ring because she lost it decades ago. Her nails are jagged and sharp, grown out way too far [no one gives a shit about you when you’re dying, nearing the thinning veil]. “Can I cut your nails for you?” I ask her.
“That would be fine.” She says. “The teachers do it for us sometimes, you know. All kinds of colors, too.”

“The nurses,” my mom corrects her. “And it looks like they haven’t done it in a while. Your nails look terrible.” I squint at my mom [be nicer]. “[MY NAME], get the clippers from her drawer.”

The dresser is covered in crumpled tissues and coins and photographs of the family (I’m in a few, Guy as a baby and Guy a few months before he died, my mom and her sister Lisa, their old dog Pepper that loved my grandpa and who we had to put down last year). I open the top drawer.
The first thing I see is a half-eaten chocolate Easter bunny; it’s now October. I ignore it and keep looking for the nail clippers.

I push around notebooks [that I want to steal to write more found poetry from her private journals, especially the ones when she first started showing signs of dementia and from before she was medicated]. I flip through a notebook sneakily and Grandma sees and comes over, concerned. “What are you looking for?” she asks.

My mom sighs, “The nail clippers, remember, Mom? We just said that.” [I don’t squint at my mom. She visits every week and I’m sure is tired of explaining things to someone who sometimes thinks you are not their daughter but their dead husband (zombies skeletons ghosts)].

I keep looking [for why anyone should keep living when you’ll end up with nails too long and half-eaten chocolates and no one who loves you], digging around the drawer. [Terry with her red eyes, skinny and bony and Randy alone with a wife that’s dead but not dead and I don’t want—]. “Are you looking for peanuts, dear?” Grandma asks.

“No,” I say. “The nail clippers.” [to be like Randy or my grandma or Jean. I don’t want to fall in love and get married and then they get dementia and forget who you are and then they die they die and then you forget them but you remember sometimes in the most painful recollections and then a mean nurse you think is a teacher that doesn’t give a shit about you gives you beans and rice when you don’t even like beans and rice and waits for you to die and your daughter and granddaughter who you don’t remember force themselves to see you out of guilt and wait for you to die and your husband is dead and your wife is dead but not dead.

All the relationships I ended that were happy and growing more intimate, too intimate because then we’d be committed and then married and then older and then they’d die. I just don’t want to be like Randy and Terry and my grandparents, alive and dying and dead and alone forever—] I find the nail clippers.

“Grandma, what would you think if I wrote stories about our family? Would that be okay?” I ask her.

“I think that would be just fine. I would like that. Just don’t tell any stories that shouldn’t be told.”

“That shouldn’t be told?”

“The bad stories. Don’t tell anyone what they shouldn’t know.” [I think of the stories the stories the stories with blood on them].

“Okay,” I say. “I won’t tell any stories that someone shouldn’t know,” I say [truthfully. Because there are stories that should be known].

****

I don’t look at Terry when we leave.