

When Death Gave Birth to a Writer: A Collection of Essays and Poems

by

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This personal collection of creative nonfiction sheds light on issues of abandonment, victimization, and dysfunctional relationships. It is accompanied by poems that serve as prefaces to each individual story, as well as epigraphs pulled from film, literature, and music. Readers will get a glimpse into the following roles that help define my character: daughter, teacher, mentor, lover, and student. More importantly, they will be introduced to characters who impacted my life in various ways, without whom I would not have a broadened sense of awareness.

My thesis started as an idea in the summer of 2011 when I photographed abandoned houses on NC-43; those once homes, now dilapidated buildings, began to symbolize what once was and how they came to be. I thought of myself. I related past happenings in my life to what stood broken before me: the night my father died; afternoon conversations with a Mexican mother and her struggle to bring her son, Jesús, to the United States; a distant relationship between my own mother and me; and the first moment I felt violated by someone. Those damaged buildings and I had something in common; I felt a connection to the unknown stories embedded within their broken structures.

Perhaps stories like mine have already been written, but certainly not in my unique style or voice. I exposed others along with myself in order to bring important issues to the surface, issues that readers could find relatable: student-teacher relationships, failed love, sexuality, cancer, loss of youth and faith, and being abandoned by those we love most, both emotionally and physically.

My stories often follow a non-linear format, switching from past to present so that reason and emotion are better understood as a whole. Subject matter often reveals uncomfortable truths, such as a detailed scene of being molested by the same man that read the eulogy at my father's funeral – this brings me back to the idea of those unkempt houses, and how they transformed from homes to empty structures. What each of us becomes is often times a direct effect of past happenings. We ultimately have no knowledge of our futures, yet we are constantly reminded of what brought us to this point in our lives. Those buildings may be standing on rotting foundations, but they are indeed, still standing; as long as they stand, the stories will remain kept inside.

EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

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A Collection of Essays and Poems

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
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in

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by

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Burial – Mount Airy, NC

*In some part of myself, I remain
a child behind glass, watching the tall grass...*
– Shara McCallum

My therapist once said,

*Part of you is still
a thirteen-year old girl
who feels lost
after the loss of her father.*

I say,

*Part of me still
chases the Ararat River,
forever searching for
what I lost when he died –
my childhood.*

I left it somewhere,
somewhere along the base
of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

When Death Gave Birth to a Writer

*And the road
The old man paved
The broken seams along the way
The rusted signs, left just for me
He was guiding me, love, his own way
Now the man of the hour is taking his final bow
As the curtain comes down
I feel that this is just goodbye for now – Pearl Jam*

My brother and sister say that I was a happy child. Happy until it happened, at least. Aaron will be forty in March of 2011, sort of a milestone I guess, and Kelly Jo turned thirty-five back in August of this year. I am the baby of the family. Amber Lee Carpenter, born February 7, 1983. Loss of childhood came thirteen years later in September of '96; the birth of a writer happened that same year.

My middle name is misspelled. Mom tells me that the birth certificate was supposed to read *Leigh-Ann*, but my dad thought it best to write *Lee* instead. Of course that was his middle name, as well as my brother's, so my middle name was not misspelled after all. It suits me just fine. It seems that our bond between father and daughter began the day I was born, the day he decided to give me part of his name.

I was raised in a small town that sits at the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains in North Carolina – Mount Airy, NC, also known as Mayberry – a tourist hotspot for elderly folks who enjoyed *The Andy Griffith Show* in the sixties. The show was filmed there; white-haired people often arrive downtown on tour buses to get a peek at Floyd's Barber Shop, or eat a pork chop sandwich at Snappy Lunch. A picture of me as a small child still hangs on the wall with hundreds of others at the famous barber shop. Those places were simply part of my home, like surrounding rolling hills, the Ararat River, and boxy brick

buildings spread throughout town. I woke to a rigid blue horizon line for twelve years through my bedroom window on West Devon Street, in a quiet neighborhood filled with a combination of one and two-story houses. Dad chose a two-story blue house with blood red shutters for our family to live in. Highway 52 ran adjacent to several eighties-built homes, including ours, but we were separated by giant trees, an open field, and the cooling waters of the Ararat. We moved there in the fall of '89 from the suburbs of Chicago on account of my dad accepting a higher position with Star Cable in Dobson, NC – a drastic change from packed neighborhoods and hectic streets.

I started first grade that fall. Aaron got a soccer scholarship to UIC (University of Illinois at Chicago), so he stayed behind when the family moved. Kelly had to start her freshman year of high school in Mount Airy that year, and she was the least content of the three. She left all her closest friends in Illinois and had second thoughts about the move. Well, second to my mom since we moved several miles from her oldest child and only son. The location of the house was purposely picked. West Devon held a few houses on each side, but ours was at the bottom of a dead-end, separated by pine trees from the rest. Horses ran free in a large field beside us, and casually drank from the same body of water where I learned to fish. I often dug my toes into the sandy banks of the Ararat, rolled my jeans to meet my kneecaps, and skipped rocks across calming currents. The water was too cold for swimming, even during summer months, but that never stopped me from walking the lengths of broken trees from bank to bank.

Mount Airy reminded my dad of his upbringing on a farm in upstate New York; it was a place where you could take off your shoes and run barefoot along the rolling, grassy hills. And I did. I spent most of my childhood outdoors. I climbed trees filled with

bird nests and sturdy branches. My favorite was the apple tree in our backyard near the shed – it stood out amongst the shallow creek, vegetable garden, and seemingly infinite wooded paths that I journeyed through before my teenage years. I splattered rotted apples all over the shed whenever I got angry. I built Barbie doll houses out of books on our back porch because my parents never bought me one. Everything else I ever wanted – matchbox cars, cabbage patch dolls, Barbie dolls, dogs, a basketball goal, baseball glove, etc. – I got. Anything I lacked, I used my imagination to fill in the gaps. Most of our neighbors consisted of old couples living in houses on the street behind ours, as well as those who occupied West Devon. I visited them if I got bored on rainy afternoons; they made tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches, and taught me how to play checkers. I rarely won, but it was the company that counted.

Much of my time was spent with a basketball in hand; my dad had installed a basketball goal into our gravel driveway. We often played Horse together on the weekends in between his regular schedule of watching football or golf on television. The game of Horse involves two players or more, and begins with a person shooting the ball from a specific spot. If the ball falls into the net, the next player has to try and make the same shot from that exact spot. If the second player misses the goal, that person receives an H. The game continues in that pattern until someone has all the letters that spell out the word, Horse. That means you lost.

I stood at a perfectly normal height during my childhood years. My young athletic build was the direct effect of being on the community swim team, as well as playing basketball, soccer, and baseball for the YMCA. Dad stood so many inches over me at 6'2; he was a big man. Not fat, just big. I looked up to him in more ways than one, and

my dedication to sports only proved my admiration and desire to be like him. I could never shoot a basketball the way he did; he stretched his arms behind his head and took quick jump-shots. If the ball flew through the net without touching the rim, he would yell, “String Music!” Of course he had to exaggerate his victory and lean toward the goal, point the index finger at his ear, and ask, “You hear that, Amber Lee?” That was him. He got a smile out of me every time.

Dad always tried to make me appreciate nature. He sat in a flimsy lawn chair on our concrete porch with a Rolling Rock or Coors Light in hand, typically during spring evenings before the sun set into the Blue Ridge Mountains. I sat Indian-style on the concrete beside him. We observed in silence for short periods of time, looking at the landscape of our backyard – beyond the gravel driveway in front of us and into nearby trees where birds chirped conversations slightly ahead. Leaves rustled in the thicket behind our basketball goal, along with other mysterious sounds that frightened me at times.

“Do you hear that, Amber Lee?”

“Hear what?”

“Nature. Just listen.”

“Okay.”

I pretended to understand why he listened so intently to the blue jays and cardinals around our house. I wanted to be interested, but all I could think about during those evenings was throwing a baseball or shooting hoops with him. The idea of sharing his affinity for nature bored me in my youth, though I spent most of my time engaged in it as a little girl.

When I had to be indoors, I played with our red-haired miniature dachshund, Savannah. Mom named her after Savannah, Georgia; she thought it was a suitable southern name since we made a transition from Illinois to North Carolina. On her first night with us, Mom placed her in a box of blankets in our downstairs kitchen. She yelped and cried for a couple hours until I tiptoed down the carpeted staircase; my small hand gripped the wooden banister with each quiet step. I crept around the furniture in the living room until I reached the kitchen. Savannah stopped whimpering at the sound of my footsteps on the cold floor. I reached in the box and picked her up. She fit beneath my chin as I carried her upstairs to my bedroom. Once in my bed, she nestled between my legs and made a donut-like shape. She was comfort to me, especially on the nights that Dad wandered in late from the Elks Lodge.

He spent many nights at the bar with his buddies. A calm silence lingered in the house until our front door opened on those nights; size fourteen footsteps resonated and rattled through the upstairs on the way to his room right beside mine. I could hear muffled arguments between my mom and dad; mostly, Mom would be outraged that he was out drinking instead of being home with his family. Dad always said, “Oh, Joann,” as if her disappointment in him was a ridiculous notion.

I never knew it then, but my dad had left my mom for another woman before I was conceived. He left my mom, brother, and sister – somehow, she took him back. I was an accident, one that happened after their reunion as husband and wife in the same household again. That explains why Aaron and Kelly are substantially older than I am. To me, late night entrances from the bar were normal, although doctors later blamed alcohol for the sudden oncoming of cancer. That’s where it all started.

While transitioning into adolescence, many girls my age worried about starting their period or liking boys. I worried about making the junior high basketball team; I wanted to make Dad proud. I made the team in November of '95. Mom waited for me in the car as I ran out from basketball try-outs in my shorts and sweatshirt; that winter brought frigid temperatures as it did every year, but that particular winter brought devastating news along with the cold. Headlights shone brightly against the brick building comprised of the school gym. I raced in front of them and quickly jumped into the passenger seat of our vehicle. Mom held tissue firmly beneath her Italian nose; her deep brown eyes filled with tears and overwhelming despair. I had never before seen her weep, yet alone mildly cry. She always forced herself to portray a woman of strength in front of us kids. In between a breaking voice of high and low tones, she sputtered, "Your father has cancer."

"What does that mean?" I said, suddenly terrified and confused. No real response, really. Instead, more tears, and the onset of internalized, quiet coping.

The following ten months – December through September – were nothing but clouded happenings of hospital visits and awaiting an unavoidable death. Dad originally went to the doctor for a physical because he thought he pulled a muscle from a golf game; he left with a six-month life sentence. My mother kept that from me. We visited my grandpa in Saratoga, NY the summer before my dad passed away; Dad and I were driving back from getting ice cream along the banks of Saratoga Lake, and as I watched random ripple effects through the car window, he said, "You know the doctors only gave me six months to live, but I'm still here. I plan on being there for your high school graduation in a few years." A lump in my throat restricted me from responding. I gave a

fake smile, but on the inside I felt sick with worry. *Six months? Only six months?* That meant no chance for survival. He was dying, and there was nothing I could do about it.

The longer he had cancer, the quieter I became. Dad bought a motorcycle that summer, a Suzuki 800, and a black Labrador named Suzy. Perhaps those two things distracted him from his fragile frame, yellow-toned skin, and completely bald head; I wish they had done the same for me. Sure, I rode on the back of his motorcycle with him. We even did a poker run together through the Blue Ridge Mountains with all his friends from the Elks Lodge. Just me and him on a bike, and a winding highway surrounded by trees. I played with Suzy, and loved her the same as I loved Savannah. She once broke loose from the rope attached to her collar, and got hit by a car on the main road near our house. I came home from school to a three-legged dog sleeping on the floor of our living room; thick blood dripped down freshly shaved, stitched skin where her front right leg stood earlier that day. The veterinarian had to amputate, and it seemed like a foreshadowing that something bad was bound to happen sooner than later.

The last hospital visit in Winston-Salem was a significant moment in our relationship as father and daughter. Mom had me work on a puzzle in the waiting room as she and the doctor discussed Dad's condition. Not long after she left, she came back in and said, "Your father wants to see you." I walked down wide hallways full of sick people and mournful visitors; when I reached the wooden door to his room, I opened it to find my dad in a hospital gown, his frail body hooked to plastic tubes and a machine. His blue eyes looked directly into mine as I slowly walked past him, avoiding physical contact in fear of somehow hurting his weakening figure. He was a tall sunflower hunched over with no chance of recovery. I sat down in a cushioned chair beside his

hospital bed and watched television with him. In the midst of limited sound that surrounded the room, he cleared his throat and said, “I love you, Amber Lee.” Tears rolled down my face, and I stared hard at the boxed television on the wall. I refused to let him see me upset. I quickly said, “I love you, too” to avoid any chance of my voice cracking. That is the only time I can recall my dad saying those three words. It was more than a statement; it signified that his death was lurking around the corner. And it held true.

He died the following month on the evening of September 5, 1996; he was at home in our den, a room he rarely entered before the disease consumed his liver and esophagus. It resembled a study more than a den, filled with stacks of encyclopedias and random books that had no correlation to one another. Two in particular belonged to him – a seventies book on running, and beside it, *Thriving on Chaos*, a handbook on management. He took his last breath surrounded by a hospice nurse, my mom, and me – his youngest child clenching tight to his arm as his eyelashes fluttered, a clear sign of the nervous system shutting down. Our final word spoken between father and daughter happened earlier that afternoon when I came home from school; we each said, “Hi.”

Aaron drove home in the middle of the night from Chicago where he was teaching at St. Ignatius College Prep and coaching soccer. Kelly drove two hours from Charlotte to Mount Airy; she was an illustration artist at UNC Charlotte. I had recently gone to my eighth grade dance, an outdoor-themed event with beach balls and sand; Dad drove me there on the back of his motorcycle so that I could arrive in style. I kissed his cheek and scampered off to be with my friends. No embarrassment – I was daddy’s little girl no matter what.

They officially buried my happy childhood beside him when cemetery workers lowered his body into the ground. I barely spoke to anyone after he died. Mom put me in therapy rather than comforting me herself; she had a bit of a breakdown and was a faded presence during my teenage years. The therapist asked me to write my feelings rather than frequently talk about them, and thus, the writer within me was born. I went twice a week for a few months until bitterness set in, and finally rejected the idea of continuing on with therapy. The last birthday gift my dad gave me was a subscription to *National Geographic* magazine. I was unsatisfied with the gift; I thought of it as his last attempt to make me appreciate the beauty of nature. Looking back on that memory, I feel as if he knew something that I would figure out later in life. It took an unfortunate accident to transform Frida Kahlo into an artist; it took the death of my father to evoke the writer within me.

As I sit here writing this piece at twenty-seven years old, I stare at the quirky squirrels through my bedroom window in eastern North Carolina. I notice the skeletal-like branches that winter brings each year to East Carolina University, the place I chose for graduate school. Dreary days drift slowly through the season, and the birds sing a softer tune. Brown leaves cover the ground where I walk Zoe and Louie, my Boston terrier and miniature Dachshund; they shiver with each step. I see a couple horses every day that I turn onto L.T. Hardee, the road I take that leads me into my neighborhood. I often think of my dad when I pass them, and that he wanted to buy a horse for me when I was a child. I still get the urge to ride one every now and again.

His death opened my eyes to everything around me. I observe my surroundings

when I walk through campus – squirrels standing upright while nibbling acorns, tired students dragging their feet to class, men shoveling mulch with pitch forks, and leaves flipping in the wind – he did that for me. And when I publish a book someday, the name on the front cover will read Amber Lee Carpenter. The name he thought best.

“Do you hear that, Amber Lee?”

“Hear what?”

“Nature. Just listen.”

“Okay.”

Feet Planted

I traded my tire swing for a porch swing,
the old man stammers to himself –

opaque, blue eyes look back
at cracked wooden planks,
cotton fields, broken corn stalks
standing six feet tall –
power lines climbing like giants,
twisted roots stretching across
the rusted tin roof,
red-tailed hawks in flight,
bright green tobacco leaves,
white dandelions.

Calloused hands grip weather-stained rope
hanging from a thick oak branch;
he positions one worn boot
onto faded black rubber,
hoists himself upward
off the ground – he swings
within mid-morning sunlight
pouring through scattered leaves,
past feeble scenery
where boyhood notions are kept at play.

Backyard on Berkley

I was learning that leaving a place wasn't as easy as packing up and getting out. You carried part of it with you, whether you wanted to or not. – Ron Rash

Late morning sunlight crawls across old wooden floorboards throughout my bedroom. I awoke shortly before nine o'clock to the sound of heat blasting through ceiling vents; Zoe and Louie stirred a bit, followed by their morning routine of stretching and licking my face. Louie, a short haired, black-and-tan miniature Dachshund, could stay bundled beneath the mound of covers on my bed, while Zoe – well, her energy is endless, something that characterizes her Boston terrier breed. She is either fast asleep, or forcing squirrels to run up tall pines that tower over our backyard. Our usual is quite simple: emerge from bed, step down into the sunroom attached to my bedroom, open the door, Zoe sprints after squirrels (she just *knows* that one of them will make a mistake and fall to its demise), both dogs squat over pine needles, I yell, *Time to eat!* and they come inside to be fed. Like I mentioned, simple. Every day begins and ends with my dogs. They are my consistency in all the daily chaos of work and graduate school.

I sip a tall crème brulee latte from Starbucks, one of those holiday specialty lattes. I used to hate the taste of coffee, or anything affiliated with it. That was before college, before late night writing binges. Now that thirty soon approaches, my body wakes at earlier morning hours, and coffee is a must.

A salmon-colored sky paints the horizon line. Above it, a fading Carolina blue. I sit by candlelight; smells of balsam and cedar ascend from a Yankee candle, and fill the barely lit sunroom. I type at this light wooden desk, one that James and I dragged out of the garage. That place is a multipurpose room; its uses are storage, squirrel nesting, bird

nesting, tool shed, and workspace. *James's space* more than anything else. It looks like a giant heap of junk to me, but I know it all means something to him. I never thought I would be living with someone who hunts different game according to seasons, who keeps three rifles standing upright near his bed, who mounted a stuffed duck on his bedroom wall, and who maintains a hunting boat in the backyard (one that he built with his own two hands). Nope, not I.

James grew up with his younger brother and sister, all raised in Currituck, North Carolina. Each one knew how to fish and hunt. We were brought up on opposite sides of the state; the only rifle I ever shot was a .22, and my target was a soup can that sat on top of a barbed wire fence post in Dobson. I was eight. I learned how to fish at age seven, probably the only thing James and I had in common during our upbringings. I guess our appearances were similar as well, this I know from a few childhood pictures he showed me once. Both light haired, light-eyed, light-skinned children. Both born in '83 only a couple months apart. The main difference: my dad pointed at deer and said, "*Look, Amber Lee; aren't they beautiful?*" James's dad pointed at them with a rifle, with intentions to kill and salvage the meat for good eating.

Ron Rash once wrote, "But nothing is solid and permanent. Our lives are raised on the shakiest foundations. You don't need to read history books to know that. You only have to know the history of your own life." Those four sentences exude great truths, even though they derive from a work of fiction. This house I live in, it does not belong to me. The owner bought it for his son to share with friends during their attendance at East Carolina University. Once those young men graduated, he rented the house to a Jewish

news reporter who had just graduated from UNC, along with two ECU graduate students. I was one of the two, James being the other. Adam thought it was a solid, center location since he reported all over Greenville and surrounding areas. James liked the fact that it was directly behind the football stadium; his immediate thought: *tailgating season*. His second thought: *it has a garage in the backyard where I can work on my fishing and hunting boats*. And I, well – I knew it was suitable for two small dogs. Fenced-in backyard, *check*. Hardwood floors, *check*. James even decided to let me have the bedroom that led into our sunroom; he thought it was practical since I would be letting the dogs out first thing every morning, and right before I go to bed at night. So, it was the perfect house for all three of us. A Jew, a Christian, and an agnostic. Interesting, right? But it works.

I awakened this morning, eyelashes stuck together from a deep sleep. I lay in bed for a while, resisting cold floorboards that waited for the bottoms of my feet to touch them. *Today is already beautiful. Chilly, but beautiful*, I thought. According to bright rays of sunlight that reached the far corners of my bedroom around 8:30 this morning, I knew it was a perfect day outside. *Clear blue skies*, I imagined. When I let the dogs out, several life-size swans stared back at me, all spread out across dead grass, pine needles, and curled-up leaves. Their white plastic coats stuck out against the fall backdrop of our backyard. I could only wonder what James was up to, wondering if he was preparing for another hunting trip.

“What were you doing this morning?”

“I was opening up them boxes and puttin’ together decoys for huntin’ – swan decoys.”

“I don’t understand why you had to paint them.”

“The beaks had to be painted black ‘cause they were the wrong color – they were originally orange.”

“Oh. I thought you were leaving for Currituck later today? Duck hunting, right?”

“Yep. I’ll be outta here after my meeting at school.”

Pretty soon James will pack up his camouflage shotgun and put on his camouflage flannel button-up. His shirt will be neatly tucked into dark denim jeans, not exactly what I envision a person wearing when they go hunting. His toothbrush and toothpaste will be missing from our bathroom for the next couple of days, and when he comes home, a stubbly, strawberry-blond beard will have grown in on his face. After he showers and shaves, he will go back to his usual attire. Surf t-shirts and jeans. He really *is* a beach boy at heart. A long yellow board standing up in our garage is all the proof you need of that.

Last year I watched him out in the garage at our old house on L.T. Hardee, building fishing boats and drinking Natural Light beers until dusk. He listened to country music on the radio out there, and I knew he was about to tell me a story every time he took a Marlboro Light cigarette from his shirt pocket. He told me how that Mallard duck ended up on his wall instead of his younger brother’s. “Me and my brother got into a fight when we were kids because we shot the same duck, and we both wanted it. I won the fight so I got to keep it and hang it up on my wall – plus Laura won’t let Ernie hang up dead animals at their house.” He chuckled; I cringed at the thought of a duck being

stuffed. But there was something magical about the way he described his duck hunting expeditions. I could almost hear the silence at sunrise, feel slow currents rock the boat, feel daylight break on my face – it was the way he said it, with a calm, deep tone in his voice. His eyes would search some distant sight ahead as he took a smoke break from working on one of his boats; I always sat on a white plastic bucket and listened as he spoke. “I get up an hour and a half before sunrise, make sure the decoys are in the boat the night before. Make sure everything’s runnin’ right, go where you wanna go huntin’ in pitch-black darkness. Sometimes things are frozen and you gotta break the ice. Then you sit there and put up a blind on the boat, wait for the sun to come up, and then you start killin’.”

I took a brisk walk this morning around my neighborhood. I surrendered to the cold that accompanies early days in December. It awakens the senses; Zoe and Louie trotted ahead, each attached to their own leash. We rounded curves that belong to Berkley Road, past houses already decorated for Christmas, around a scarce wooded area barren of any lively, colorful leaves. One house was particularly tacky, lights strewn everywhere from bushes to rooftop. A jolly Santa figure stood beside a row of reindeer that slowly moved their heads up and down. We walked alongside Dowdy-Ficklen stadium, stopping every so often so the dogs could sniff undiscovered spots. Finally, we cut through the Elmhurst Elementary playground, devoid of its usual screaming, running children. As we reached the concrete steps to our fifties-style brick house, I thought about that wooded area, and my youth.

I left Mount Airy ten years ago at the age of eighteen; I practically ran from its Mayberry-affiliated borders. I spent five years studying English at ECU, telling myself each year that I would leave North Carolina as soon as I graduated. Go someplace like Chicago or Boston. I wanted culture. Broadway, Cubs or Red Sox games, authentic ethnic foods, subway systems, *all* of it. Instead, I got caught up in a couple dead-end jobs, as well as a couple meaningful ones, like teaching seventh graders down in Dillon, South Carolina. I took that time to grow up as an individual, and learn a little about what life had to offer someone with a Bachelor of Arts degree. Turns out, with economic disparity only worsening, not much was out there for me. I made a decision to do the one thing I swore I would never do: return to Greenville for a Master of Arts degree in English. Sure, I had other options – I got accepted to a school right outside of New York City – but, for the purpose of financial peace of mind, I chose ECU. That is where I am now, the reason I have yet to call a place *home*. You see, this house where I reside – it is temporary. All of my previous addresses (other than Mount Airy) were temporary ones.

A half-moon is the bright nightlight in our backyard at this hour. I can see but a few objects thanks to its dim stream of light – my breath becomes a cloud of fog that lifts into a black sky as I shout, *Go to the bathroom!* at the dogs. Tonight the ugliness of our yard hides in shadows, hides from the moon. Stacked swan decoys, stacked floral-patterned lawn chairs, a gray fishing boat with a plastic red gasoline can on its back edge, a rusty swing set without swings, a rusty cross that used to have a clothesline attached to it, and a hunting boat with fake marsh grass and a painted white registration number on its side. Squirrels must be sleeping; birds, silenced. I can hear Elm Street traffic, cars

rushing along to different destinations. Train whistles will resound throughout our neighborhood in a few hours; its tracks run right past us.

A wired fence boxes in our yard. It has enough room for roughly fifteen cars to park in its parameters, and a family barbeque to take place – unlike the wooded backyard I grew up playing in, which had no limits or borders. I splashed in and out of a shallow creek that emptied into the Ararat River, a body of water that resembles the Tar River only in width. Its waters are cleaner, cooler even, since it lies at the base of the Blue Ridge Mountains rather than running over flat landscapes of Pitt County. It (Ararat River), too, was my childhood backyard. There were no train tracks near my house, no college football stadiums across the street. Just a Church of God that was built after my family and I moved in. It was a safe haven for my small feet to wander through.

Greenville, on the other hand, has frequent robberies and shootings. I think about what this town used to be, or what sat on Berkley Road before foundations of homes started being built.

A tall elderly man who remains nameless to me – covered in age spots – pulls out a 1930 map of Greenville from a private room in the North Carolina Collection (a section of Joyner Library). Dressed in khakis and a long-sleeved, navy blue polo, he pushes back his thinly framed glasses with his index finger and thumb, and begins searching through several rows of historical books. “I’m sorry it’s taking me so long to find what I’m looking for; I just had cataract surgery.” I try to show him my patience and appreciation with a warm grin. He continues, “You’re probably better off taking a closer look at those maps I pulled out for you.”

I scan three or four maps, moving my index finger across the laminate in search of my neighborhood. Not a sound can be heard – empty desks, eight-foot tall bookshelves standing like soldiers in a line – I wonder how one can work in such a quiet environment; I would be incredibly bored. John Ewald donated this map from 1930 in 1971; it is tan colored with black ink drawings and place names. Berkley Road had not yet been developed, but approximately a couple miles from my neighborhood – E. Third Street through E. Sixth Street – was considered outside city limits back then. Tobacco companies populated the area: tobacco warehouses, Imperial Tobacco Plant, Export Tobacco Company, and Greenville Tobacco Company. It speaks volumes for what the most popular crop used to be in eastern North Carolina.

Another map, only forty-five years later, shows Berkley Road with only one or two numeric addresses on it. The Norfolk & Southern Railway runs past my neighborhood on the map, just as it does now. This area apparently transitioned into city limits rather than occupying the outskirts. Everything probably seemed new at that time and perhaps more family oriented; these days, if you take a look around the neighborhood, you will find elderly couples, college students, and only a couple young families. It shows growth and expansion, but mostly how things progress over the years. But, despite obvious changes that took place even in my few years of absence from Greenville – this town, this house on Berkley Road – will never be *home* to me. A single-family housed street with fifties-style homes on each side. Nothing special, just a temporary place to rest my head at night. I will, however, carry part of it with me once I leave this place behind.

I graduate in May, only a few months away. I will no longer have to step through a sunroom in order to let Zoe and Louie outside. James will no longer tell me stories out in our garage; actually, *our* garage will be considered false phrasing come May. No more afternoon walks around Berkley Road, no more listening to screaming children chase each other around the Elmhurst playground. Who knows if Adam will stick around. James will probably end up back in Hyde or Currituck County, somewhere he can hunt and fish according to season. I have an idea as to where I will end up, but then again, I have been known to veer off chosen paths in my past. All I know is that Greenville will become a memory – this house, these roommates – will all fade away until I dredge them up again someday, like a toy from your childhood that went missing for years. Familiar, ever present, but long gone.

The Elephant in the Room

It starts with a slow drip. *Plink. Plink. Plink.*
Hits the stainless steel sink and stacked plates
caked with leftovers eaten last week.

I notice it first. She sleeps beside me, faces a wall
decorated with framed photos of us kissing at the state fair. I lie
awake tonight, counting mistakes like sheep.

She stirs, groans, mumbles, *The sink won't fix itself.*
It quickens. *Plink Plink Plink.* She notices, but stays
in position on her side. I read neon red numbers: 3:14.

Water splatters against ceramic cups we painted ourselves.
Her back is an outline fading into blackness – I think,
She's right, it won't.

Breakfast Aspirations

*We're not the same, dear, as we used to be;
The seasons have changed and so have we.
There was little we could say and even less that we could do,
To stop the ice from getting thinner under me and you. – Death Cab for Cutie*

Lindsay flicks her mood ring and sends it spinning in my direction. I look up from my cup of coffee and smile. Our waitress walks over, pulls out a pen and pad of paper beside our booth, and kindly asks, “Are you ready to order?”

I let Lindsay go first. She orders the usual French toast with no powdered sugar, a side of hash browns, sausage links, and cheese grits. She playfully says, “I’m really hungry; can you tell?”

I throw in my typical sarcastic response, “No, not at all.” I order the quick two egg breakfast with a side of hash browns, bacon, and wheat toast (as if the wheat toast will make it any healthier).

“Can I get anything else for you ladies?”

In unison, Lindsay and I say, “No thank you.” Our middle-aged blonde-haired waitress grabs our menus and hurries into the kitchen.

Lindsay stands slightly over five feet tall. Her head rests firmly between my breasts when we embrace. She swears that she gained weight since we last saw each other over Labor Day weekend, but I will argue that until my lips get chapped. Only a month has passed since then; the only changes I see are the multi-colored leaves of autumn that now decorate the trees outside of IHOP. I could scoop her up and throw her over my shoulder if I wanted to. Her hair is much shorter than it was during the summer months; she chopped it off into a pixie cut. I think it’s adorable. Three years later, and those blue eyes can still distract my thoughts, although today might be an exception. I am more

transparent than the oversized windows that allow a section of IHOP customers to feel the warmth from mid-afternoon sunlight. With concern in her voice she says, “Don’t look at me like that.”

In late June of 2007 I went to my first gay pride festival in Atlanta, Georgia. I rode down from Charlotte with a few friends of mine; the four of us shared a room at the downtown Marriott. It was a hectic weekend full of drinking, dancing, bar-hopping, and playing soccer in Piedmont Park. The city made me feel alive with its tall buildings, fast-paced people walking on sidewalks, taxi-cabs honking their horns, and various ethnicities lingering at every corner. I met several people from around the Charlotte area, including a girl who went to Limestone College with Lindsay in Gaffney, SC (an hour southwest of Charlotte). I chatted with her in between drinking and playing pick-up games of soccer at the park, and a girl with sky-blue eyes walked over and introduced herself to me.

“Hi, I’m Lindsay.”

I barely acknowledged her that day with all the festivities going on around us, but she eventually snagged my attention when she and her friends made a couple appearances at local Charlotte bars where I hung out. Little did I know that I would be discussing future aspirations over an afternoon breakfast three years later.

“Like what?” I ask in a high-pitched voice that makes it painfully obvious how uncomfortable I am with the conversation.

She starts explaining with an austere tone, “I need to do something for myself. I’ll have my Master’s degree in May and I want to explore a little before we settle down

together. You'll still be in school, so it's a good time to go." This is the part where I am supposed to be supportive. Believe me, I want to be. But when she talks about the possibility of teaching in the Middle East for a year, I have my doubts. She expects me to take her seriously, this coming from someone who keeps a rubber chicken in her purse and gets a cheap thrill over two-dollar mood rings. I search the crowded dining room as an escape from the conversation.

The entire restaurant fills with a cacophony of sounds – clanking silverware, busy conversations, whining children, waitresses hustling, and cooks shouting. IHOP staff members come charging through the restaurant; they clap and sing “Happy Birthday” to an unlucky customer. I smell sweet syrup. People of every caliber surround us – college students in sweats who are hung over from a night of partying, church goers in flashy outfits (an obvious reminder that it is Sunday), snooty parents who hear the words “thirty-minute wait,” and rush out the door to their Escalades, and toddlers in high chairs. I almost want to take our breakfast and have a picnic on the sidewalk outside, even with an uninviting view of Harris Teeter, TJ Maxx, Target, Chick-fil-A, and packed parking lots. Instead, I take a sip of coffee and sift through past tribulations of our relationship. We would endure far worse than the idea of teaching overseas for a single year while I stay here in Greenville for graduate school. Much worse. We taught in a southern town where being outwardly gay was unacceptable, we got laid-off from those teaching positions and reverted to living with our families for a short while, and our relationship currently struggles from the strain of getting our Masters degrees in separate locations (Winthrop and East Carolina University).

Rumors spread like wild fires of California; only this is Dillon, a rural town in South Carolina composed of tobacco fields and factories. It has a total area of 4.8 miles and I suffocate within those parameters. Lindsay and I teach at JV Martin Junior High; President Obama visited the school before winning the presidential election in 2008. It gained attention in the *Corridor of Shame* documentary, a video about the neglect of southern rural schools along I-95. Neither one of us planned to be here. Lindsay was waiting tables at a bar in uptown Charlotte, while I managed a restaurant in the Lake Norman area. We were desperate for teaching jobs, and Dillon District II was desperate for teachers. We each had strong ambitions to have fulfilling careers, ones that involved teaching children. The situation worked in our favor since both a Physical Education and English Language Arts position had opened in the summer. It all seemed as easy as the reading of a Dr. Seuss book. Turns out, it was anything but easy.

“Have any of the kids said anything to you?” I whisper during activity time while my students play football with an empty Gatorade bottle and walk around gossiping in the open field behind the school. This is part of their everyday routine after lunch – mid-day free time that lasts approximately twenty minutes. The weather is exceptionally nice today with spring flowers starting to blossom, so I might give the students an extra five minutes outside. The school year will be done in just a couple of months.

Wide-eyed, Lindsay replies, “No, why, have they said anything to you?”

I teach in a tight, personal space; she blows a whistle in a gym without air-conditioning all day. I hear more from our students on a daily basis because of the close proximity, like who has crushes on each other or some sort of crisis going on at home. “Some of the kids are saying that we’re together; I’m having a talk with them when we

go back to class.” She looks at me in disbelief. I try to ease her mind by saying, “Don’t worry, I have a plan.” On the inside I feel defeated, like the day in high school when everyone found out about my undisclosed relationship with my first girlfriend. *This can’t be happening.*

Once my students and I are back inside the classroom, I begin my bold lecture. “Now, I want all of you to close your eyes for a minute and think about all the rumors that some of you have been spreading this week concerning Coach G and I. I want you to really think about the privacy of your teachers, and how wrong it is to fabricate stories about their personal lives. Okay, open your eyes. Do you see anyone standing at the front of this room?”

Guilt resonates through the class as they all say, “No,” simultaneously.

“If these rumors continue, I could be fired and they would have to find a new teacher to come in and teach you; is that what you want?”

Once again, a long droning, “No.” Problem solved, back to playing pretend.

Our food arrives and brings my thoughts back into focus. I inhale the assorted aroma of breakfast under my chin and calmly say, “I’ll support you in whatever decision you make; just please do extensive research about these teaching abroad programs that you’re looking into.”

Her blue eyes pull me in as she slides her hands across the table for me to take them. She will soon be driving four hours back home to Rock Hill, SC, and our weekend visit in Greenville will shortly end after our meal. She releases my hands so that she can start eating, and says, “Thank you for being so understanding.”

I flick her mood ring back across the table. “You’re welcome.”

Every Sunday

grapefruit pulp bites her tongue, halting
any ability to talk at the kitchen table.
Her partner sifts through Sunday morning comic strips,
disregards Republican debates and discussions.
She sips black coffee from a mug
that says, *Keep Calm and Carry On*.

They split two slices of whole-wheat toast as
seven o'clock sunrise sheds light onto listless faces.
Two thirty-somethings hold hands across the table,
enjoying a morning without interruption –
except the last bit of coffee dripping into the pot,
a slow turn of the page, incidental glances.

First Impressions

*Oh, life it seems a struggle between
What we see and what we do
Well I'm not going to change my ways
Just to please you or appease you – Dave Matthews Band*

It's funny how a place can move you – how a snapshot of scenery shifts your thoughts as a river bends with the land. An empty beer can cradled in green blades of grass is not just a labeled cylinder. Natural Light. The brand of beer your drunken roommate snaps open on weekends. Perhaps it is a painful reminder of an alcoholic father. In actuality, it is simply an inanimate object that sits perched in sunlight with art students sketching its aluminum structure nearby. To me, it's a distraction. This entire scene is a distraction for that matter – runners, joggers, bikers, barking dogs, dogs sniffing other dogs, couples holding hands, waving trees, Irene debris, and a muddy river known as the Tar River. A display of commotion plays with the senses. Rays of light beg for attention through green hues; mid-September warms my skin. But, back to the empty beer can – its presence keeps me focused. Chennye did the same thing during the year I taught seventh graders.

“Guess what, Ms. Carpenter? I got a new dog.” Chennye expressed her usual wide grin, no teeth showing. Just a dimple on her porcelain-like cheek. She often tapped her index finger against her chin as she spoke, as if curiosity was ongoing.

“That’s great, Chennye; now take a seat.” She shrugged her shoulders and practically skipped back to her desk. I made sure she sat in the front row in order to maintain her focus, something she lacked on a daily basis. I know it seems that I turned her away to avoid conversation, but had I not told her to go sit down, my fifty-minute

teaching period would have been wasted. I was already on constant watch as a first-year teacher.

Most of my students were talkers, some were trouble makers. Some lingered in the shadows at recess. That was Chennye. Her eyes lit up when she had my attention, and I just knew – I knew her grandmother rejected those same eyes at home. I spent a lot of time wondering why social services never stepped in during that year, why she was on a kindergarten reading level but somehow remained in my seventh-grade English class. Sure, they tested her. Nothing was ever done about it. One less child to deal with in an already flawed system. Chennye was spilled milk that everyone stepped over or walked around. No one stopped to clean up the mess – uneven haircut, mismatched outfits, short-sleeves in winter, corduroy jacket in late spring, grime and dirt underneath her fingernails, and unwashed hair. Half the time she drew pictures at her desk. Sometimes she fell asleep, head rested against folded hands. I desperately hoped that nothing kept her up at night.

“Have a seat, Ms. Carpenter.” Ray Rogers positioned his hand palm-side up beside the chair he wanted me to sit in. “I’ll be with you in just a few minutes.” The only reason I showed up to the office was to fill out paperwork before the first day of school. I trudged through the one-hundred degree heat that envelops Dillon, SC in its summers. Across the street was a fenced-in, vacant baseball field full of sand and grass. No diamond. No perfectly strewn white marking dust. No children playing. Just a field with run-down houses as its borders, and an aged JV Martin Junior High on the opposite side of the pavement. Parallel to the school sat the administrative office, my destination on

that particular sweltering morning.

Kay Lynn, the assistant superintendent and woman who officially hired me, greeted me at the door with her sweet-tea-and-grits accent, “Good morning, Amber.” Her self-righteous, aristocratic attitude made my stomach churn as she looked down at me from the tip of her nose. She was like a newly polished piece of furniture, or a wind-up toy that never got its release.

I cleared my throat. “Good morning, Kay; I came to fill out my W2 forms.” She walked over to an array of filing cabinets and fingered through a sea of manila folders. In the meantime I sat down at a desk and waited, wondering if the secretary was suspicious of my sexuality as she squinted in my direction from above the rim of her glasses. My tattoos were showing on account of the heat; normally they would be covered in a professional setting, but I knew that my entrance into the teaching world had not yet begun. I dressed appropriately that day in a casual black top and pleated shorts that fell directly below the knee. I posed no threat to anyone. I searched the office with my eyes for anything to distract me from the intense boredom. The secretary rapidly tapped keys on the keyboard in front of a computer screen. Paperclips, staplers, yellow post-it notes, pens, and papers were scattered across her desk. How tedious. I once had an office job and it felt like the ticking of a clock. *Tick, tick, tick. Tap, tap, tap. Ring, ring, ring.* An endless rhythm that becomes mundane.

Then, out of nowhere, “Here they are! I just knew they were in there somewhere, just took me a while to find them.” Kay spoke in a matter-of-fact tone. She could never be wrong, of course. She handed me the W2 forms and hovered over me in order to give instructions (as if I had never filled one out before). I gasped while engulfed in a cloud of

gaudy perfume. I stared down at the half-sleeve of tattoos on my left arm. I felt no regret about the displayed artwork of Dali roses, stars, wind bars, a sacred heart, autumn leaves, *Unspoken Goodbye* in cursive writing, and tiger lilies; however, I realized that I made a poor decision by revealing my tattoos in a town that rejects anything out of the ordinary.

I started to fidget. I rotated back and forth in my swivel chair; my fingertips left sweaty imprints on the glass desk. I jotted down jagged information on the correct lines of the W2 form. A panic attack was on its way; I only had them when I felt an intense amount of anxiety. Thin strands of hair tickled my eyelashes; a quick jolt of the head moved the strands like surfers do when they emerge from the water. Those same pieces of hair used to curve upward to a point when I had a faux hawk. Lesbian onlookers had cheered as I performed in drag shows back home in Charlotte. I began to wonder how I got to *this* chair, in *this* office, in a town where I had to hide my identity. I wore an engagement ring, an arrangement of amethyst and blue topaz. Nothing extravagant. It was our birthstones intertwined, mine and hers. If anyone asked, I spoke of a male fiancé, someone suitable for their Holy Bible mentalities. In reality, Lindsay was unpacking duct-taped boxes at our new home in Florence (a forty-five minute drive south of Dillon). She and I moved there together with our animals when JV Martin Junior High offered us teaching positions. We left our families and friends – more devastatingly, we left acceptance.

The last thing I wanted to do was leave the city lifestyle for an unknown town that most people recognized as a passing exit en route to Myrtle Beach. But what choice did I have? I managed McAlister's Deli more than forty hours a week, a job I never aspired to

have after receiving a Bachelor of Arts degree in English just two years prior to getting that job. My sole purpose in life at that point was to make sure employees did what was asked of them, and chat with customers about their overall satisfaction with the food. I yearned for an English teaching position, a job that would allow me to feel rewarded at the end of my work day.

Lindsay waited tables at a bar in uptown Charlotte; she had just graduated from college in May of 2008. She graduated with honors and the best she could do at that time was wait tables uptown due to economic hardships – not good enough in her opinion. We had opposite schedules and barely spent time together. Once we got an actual minute to spend with each other, it typically involved watching movies in bed. Relaxed and unwound. We realized that something had to change, so Lindsay made a phone call. Coach Carter, the woman who coached Lindsay in softball for several years, was on the receiving end of that phone call. She had advice for both of us – Dillon District II needed a P.E. and English teacher. Perfect.

Perfection quickly turned repulsive when Lindsay and I drove to Dillon for our interviews. Streets were lined with dilapidated buildings and rows of houses had poverty written all over them – laundry flapping from clotheslines, dogs chained to tree trunks, trashed porches, random bricks scattered from their structures, and people slouched in lawn chairs during daytime work hours. Not a single white person could be seen. The town itself is adjacent to I-95, and various crop fields are its only surroundings. Oh, and who could forget about South of the Border, a Mexican themed amusement park? It lies just a few miles down the highway from Dillon. I wanted to turn the car around and never look back, but I knew that Lindsay and I both needed those teaching jobs in order to get a

head start in our careers.

The drive from Rock Hill to Dillon took a couple hours; Lindsay and I took I-77 South towards Columbia, and ended up on I-95 North (a highway I have no recollection of being on with the exception of late night travels to New York to visit family as a small child). It was just the two of us, both dressed in casual summer clothes with a duffle bag in the backseat. Our interview button-ups and dress pants hung from hangers on a clasp above one of the back windows, ironed and pressed. We agreed to change clothes and freshen up at a gas station on the outskirts of Dillon; it was, after all, mid-July in South Carolina. Sweat poured from our skin at the rate of ice cubes melting in our mouths. I fidgeted more with each bug that splattered across the windshield. Lindsay sat upright in the passenger seat, singing familiar songs from the radio. As usual, she was calm and collected. Anxiety bolted through my veins like a hawk diving at full speed into river currents after a fish. Change was upon us, whether we were ready or not.

It was the year Obama was elected into office, one year after Lindsay and I met at gay pride Atlanta. Her face was plastered to the window watching a new kind of reality unfold before us. Neither one of us was prepared for what we saw. We stopped at Love's gas station just off the exit, surrounded by nothing but heat, silence, and endless rows of flat farmland. I wondered what would happen if I got hired and they rejected her, or perhaps it would be the other way around. I thought about our families and friends back home in the Charlotte area, our backbone. I wondered if our relationship would be able to survive, or if its structure would begin to crack and fall apart like the houses in Dillon. I must have stood there thinking for a while outside of that gas station; maybe it was just a

minute. Either way, it took Lindsay's voice to bring me back. "You ready, babe? We only have thirty minutes before our interview starts."

I looked into those blue eyes that matched a pale blue sky on the clearest of summer days; I was comforted during that moment, if only for a single moment. "Yeah, I'm ready."

I was not surprised when Ray Rogers came out of his office and asked me to step inside, nor was I surprised when Kay followed closely behind me. I walked past the door that read *Superintendent* and into a room with cherry wood furniture and stacked bookshelves. Mr. Rogers was unlike the wholesome, tidy guy from the PBS show of my childhood. He resembled The Penguin from the movie *Batman Returns*, with his short, concave stature. He constantly jiggled his pants up his waist; I wanted to ask him if he ever considered wearing suspenders. With a look of discernment on his face, he politely told me to sit down. I sat directly between the two of them; it would be a meeting of ping pong, and I was the white ball that got paddled back and forth. Mr. Rogers wiped his brow and said, "Now, about your tattoos, Ms. Carpenter...."

Jésus

“I am not letting you fail. Even if that means coming to your house every night until you finish the work. I see who you are. Do you understand me? I can see you. And you are not failing.” – Freedom Writers

Everything happens for a reason. There is a reason why my father bought me twenty-five cent toys at town festivals rather than give me what I wanted on any given day (Cabbage Patch dolls would have sufficed, but they cost twenty-five dollars). My mother thought it best that I tag along when one of her students, a boy with Down Syndrome by the name of David, had his sixteenth birthday party. His hands were particularly large, and small slits in his tongue caused a speech impediment. I witnessed the death of my father at age thirteen. I picked up a pen to write truths, a paintbrush to splatter emotions, and a camera to capture nature. I never cared about x- and y-intercepts or long division. My Ken dolls dated each other, not Barbie. But the real story I want to tell is about a student of mine. Jésus. There is a reason for his introduction into my life, his introduction into this story.

Open-house night, JV Martin Junior High, Dillon, SC. I stood in the doorway to my classroom. A dry-erase board was stuck to the white block wall at the front of the room. Approximately thirty mismatched desks sat behind it. All empty. My desk was catty-cornered at the opposite end of the room from where I stood. It had all kinds of necessities on top of it: a hole-puncher, stapler, tape, paperclips, etc. The usual. Before long that desk would become stacked with graded papers, journals, and sweaty handprints. The carpet was old and worn. Navy blue and stained. There were no windows to show the light of day. Just a ticking clock on the wall and my version of teacher decor. Prison-like room, first-year teacher. I was off to a good start.

The red dirt driveway made my body bounce and jerk as my car attempted to reach the trailer without tire damage. Late afternoon sunlight nearly blinded my view. A dark colored mutt frantically circled a tree on its short rusted chain. It barked aggressively when I stepped out of my vehicle, especially when Jesús and his two younger siblings greeted me on the wooden steps of the trailer. I could see their mother through the screen door, smiling and motioning for me to come in. She was in the midst of cooking an authentic Mexican meal in the kitchen. I dodged a couple fly strips hanging from the ceiling before sitting down on a couch in between the kitchen and living room. It was all one room, really, with a couple of doors that I assumed were bedrooms. No one in the family was thin; the mother made sure those children were well fed. Jesús would soon be turning fifteen, and was in my class of seventh graders. He looked like a linebacker, but the only football he played was with empty Gatorade bottles on an open field at school where the kids had twenty minutes of free time after lunch. He grabbed a Sprite from the fridge for me. He sat down next to me on the couch, his Wal-Mart brand shoes touching the floor. The younger brother who looked identical to Jesús had walked out back to feed the chickens in the wired chicken coop. His little sister kept showing me her toys and smiling in my direction; she had a pink Hannah Montana outfit on that stretched to fit. The mother spoke broken English and insisted that I eat what she was cooking. The smell was anything but appealing, but how could I be rude?

Others may wonder why I visited one of my students at his home. Perhaps wondering how something so typically unacceptable turned trivial. Let me explain. Dillon bred children in poor conditions; my students grew up with little to depend on,

both emotionally and monetarily. Most were subjected to drugs and abuse. Not all, but most. I read their files in the guidance office. Kids pushed through the system, one by one. Others were held back and old enough to drive cars by the time they reached my classroom. This was no ordinary system, and luckily for those kids, I was no ordinary teacher. Each student had my phone number in case of an emergency, or if they simply needed help with their homework. Not once did I receive a prank phone call from those kids. A few still call to this day, two years after teaching them; they let me know how high school is going for them. I usually get the chance to talk in between writing papers for graduate school. I have to admit there is comfort in hearing those voices, in knowing that they still want to make me proud.

Jésus had a different story to tell – well, his mother did. She and her husband escaped from Mexico many years ago when Jésus was just a toddler. They wanted a better life for their son in the United States, land of the free, where supposedly every culture was welcome. I think of him every time an argument arises about immigration laws, or when I read CNN articles. These days I keep reading about the ongoing dangers of drug cartels in Mexico, and I have to be thankful that Jésus and his family are in a safe environment.

She placed a paper plate of Mexican food in front of me. A flour tortilla, pieces of chicken (maybe one of their own), and a brown gravy-like substance poured on top of the chicken. It took every bit of my strength to swallow that food without throwing it back up. I had to talk myself through each bite. *Bite, chew, swallow. Bite, chew, swallow.* I was not about to be unappreciative; my parents raised me better than that. She listened intently from a chair at the kitchen table as I boasted about her son. “He pays attention in

class, makes good grades, writes a lot in his journal, and you have every reason to be proud of him.” The visit was intentional; we were only a couple of months into the semester at the time, but I wanted his mom to know that he was doing exceptionally well in my class. Jesús sat there with a smile on his face; that expression alone made my job worth it, even after a bad day. This kid repeatedly wore the same outfits and lived in a small trailer. The trailer was surrounded by flat fields where crops vastly grew during flourishing months. He barely had much of anything, but he loved his family. And he was happy. Genuinely happy. I had complained about living in a three-bedroom house throughout my initial teaching career for the 2008/2009 school year. I hated living in a rural town that offered nothing more than a few expensive drinks at a local Japanese steakhouse. But here was this student of mine who accepted his situation for what it was, and always thought positively. He wants to be a surgeon when he grows up; I think he will be. I may have taught him how to write organized paragraphs and comprehend seventh grade literature, but he taught me as well. I got a lesson in life, a reminder of what my parents tried to instill in me as a child: *Be happy with what you have; others have little to nothing at all.*

I had no idea what I was doing. I wonder if it showed. Parents came and went that night. Few came as husband and wife; most were by themselves accompanied by their children. Some barely said anything, others had several questions. Every once in a while a student entered my room alone, without a parent or adult beside them. That was absurd to me. It gave me a hint as to what I could expect in the upcoming months: little support from actual adults. But then, an entire family walked in. A Hispanic mom and dad, a

young boy and girl, and a teenager who could look me straight in the eyes. He swung his arms back and forth for a moment, then politely said, “My name is Jésus; are you Ms. Carpenter?” I nodded, and smiled.

Testimony

1.

Three a.m.

I woke up with a soldier.

What happened next?

Dragged.

Hit with a pipe.

Poked with a skewer.

Hands cuffed.

They were laughing.

2.

Hit in the face, back, legs.

They released a dog on me,

hit me with a broomstick.

Ten minutes.

They woke me at three a.m.

3.

Abu Ghraib.

There is one ... I cannot talk about –
a religious man between my legs.

Rifles around me, photographers.

Then they started.

They put rope around my wrist, rope around ...

took my clothing.

Hitting. Beating. Going. Coming.

Cold, wet –

all six nights.

4.

A beard –

they were men with beards.

Like Bin Laden.

I remember ...

I don't remember those days.

I don't remember.

Soldiers said they raped me.

5.

They beat me.

I woke up urinating.

The guards would molest me.

I started to forget after one year –

tried to resist.

They kicked me, insulted me.

A big Egyptian beat me, smashed my face.

The next was more difficult.

They hit me, kicked me –

left me alone.

6.

Twenty-two at the time of the arrest –

forced on the ground,

hands tied to feet,

hit with fists.

I vomited blood for nine days.

They told me to undress.

I removed my underwear –

forced to take off my underwear.

I walked naked in front of others.

No food for three days.

Another soldier would have sex with me –

other soldiers came in with sticks.

I passed out.

They broke my left arm, my right leg –

still tied up.

Naked.

7.

My eyesight is fading.

Did this happen to you?

Yes.

Did you get forced to do this with men?

Yes –

I had to,

three months I was naked.

Fall from Grace

*How fickle my heart and how woozy my eyes
I struggle to find any truth in your lies
And now my heart stumbles on things I don't know
My weakness I feel I must finally show – Mumford & Sons*

I remember sitting, standing, kneeling. Then again, and again. Two rows of mahogany pews, all aligned. Jesus Christ nailed to the cross, Virgin Mary dressed in white. Stained glass windows, a colorful distraction. Our priest unwillingly shook his head and hands as he read scripture; he stood centered behind a podium, each Sunday dressed in a beautiful, eloquent robe. I wore dresses and tights thanks to my mother, and chomped pink bubblegum against her shoulder. I recited the Lord's Prayer along with everyone else. When the priest read, "Peace be with you," I replied, "and also with you." I could read hymns perfectly fine, but I mostly listened while others sang together. I was usually too tired to sing, or simply uninterested. My father never attended church; he always claimed he had his own beliefs, but to this day I am unaware of what he believed in. I am unsure of my own beliefs. My only certainty in that regard is that I abandoned the Catholic Church long ago – no regrets, guilt free.

2011 – Present Day

November sunrise moves across the landscape of eastern NC, greeted by dewdrops and low-lying fog amidst flat fields where deer feast at dawn. Farmers stripped rows of cotton earlier this season. Summer cicadas finally hushed, while spider webs still glisten on porch swings. Cardinals perch themselves on pine tree branches and sing their morning songs. Blue jays swoop past in a frenzy, angry with those who trespass into their

territory. Spastic squirrels jump from tree to roof to power lines. Colorful leaves rustle and wrestle in circular movements, mimicking tiny tornadoes. Clouds of thick smoke roll along, drifting away from piles of burning leaves. A familiar autumn scent.

This is where I find peace. Nothing can touch me here. No interruptions, just a manual camera strapped around my neck. I step out of my red Corolla onto dead grass beneath my boots, onto uneven ground. Highway 43 north sits beyond the beaten driveway behind me. Shriveled brown corn stalks tower over my five-foot-nine body; pine trees wilt, becoming barren. Wild weeds graze my shins as I approach an abandoned house, a common sight often seen while traveling the back roads of 43 between Greenville and Wilson. I steady my FM-10, 35mm SLR camera in hand, and focus the lens on several things: cloudy backdrop amid a flat horizon line, broken planks, rusted tin roof, shattered glass windows, Budweiser beer cans, a single white dandelion, twisted roots, floral furniture, sunken porch, filthy mattress, clothes strewn across floor boards, and a barely-visible teddy bear buried in the same dead grass I first walked upon. The stories are there; we just never had a proper introduction until today.

2000 – Junior Year of High School

I reach for the brown, worn teddy bear – a piece of childhood comfort that belongs to Kate – it comes alive in my shaky grip, wet with palm sweat. It feels the punch of my heartbeat. My eyes are the size of this bedroom. My brain, on repeat – *it's okay, you'll be home tomorrow*. The bedside lamp stays on tonight while the monster sits outside the door, in his living room where it all happened a few minutes ago. He foams at the mouth, bubbled alcohol leaking from his lips. I ponder, *Is this my fault? How could*

he do this to me? To my family? Question after question. Thought after thought. Then, a knock at my door. I hear it creak as it slowly opens. He sits against my back, talks to a bare wall. His face hidden from mine.

“Are you okay?”

[Did he really just ask me that? Just say you're fine and he'll leave you alone.]

“I'm fine.”

“I...I've been drinking tonight. I'm really sorry, Amber. Do you think you can ever forgive me?”

[Just say yes, Amber.]

“Sure.”

“I don't even know if I can forgive myself; I'll understand if you can't.” Silence. “Anyway, you probably want to get some sleep. I'll already be at work by the time you wake up. Pam is taking you to the airport. I hope you have a safe flight to North Carolina – goodnight.”

The door clicks shut. I try to close my eyes, but I feel as if someone has shot me with a stun gun. Once my eyelashes reach the tops of my cheeks, images and thoughts begin pouring in: flickering television on mute. Dark living room. Stories about my deceased father, his best friend; he cried, made me vulnerable. The lingering question, “*You want a foot massage?*” Rough carpet. Wrinkled, calloused hands sliding up my ankles, past my knees, my thighs. Underwear lining lifted. I sat up just in time before he could move any farther. Then, a hasty realization – no one, not even God, can erase those minutes. And I want to know, *Why? Why would He let this happen to me? He already took my dad from me four years ago.*

1996 – The Night Before His Funeral

I lie on my side, on the uncomfortable couch where my dad died a couple nights ago. Mom had pulled it out into a bed for a couple weeks; the hospice nurse said he was too weak to walk upstairs. This den is mostly used for guests, or a bedroom for my big brother when he comes home from Chicago. Now it holds more meaning than it ever did before. My dad took his last breath in here – no longer miserable from rounds of chemotherapy treatments or hospital visits.

I turned thirteen this year. And right now, I want to be left alone. Not because I have some useless excuse for teenage angst, no, not that. But because people keep coming in our house to bring us food, or give their condolences. All the food you want, southern style, especially from people around town in Mount Airy – fried chicken, honey baked ham, macaroni and cheese, pasta salad, green beans, mashed potatoes, and cherry pie for dessert. My entire extended New York family gets a taste of the South, not that it really matters. The food is mainly to keep my big brother and sister, mother, and me all fed during our time of mourning, as if that will ever end. I just want everyone to leave.

I look around the room; this spot keeps me close to my dad. Truthfully, I could not care less about the television. His books are spread in rows across bookshelves that surround the TV; I never read any of them. Framed family photos are also on those shelves. Hard to envision the four of us without him. I hear whispers and chatter coming from the living room. “How do you think Amber is handling all this? It’s just awful that she has to grow up without Gary. They were so close.” Ordinarily I would march right out there and join their conversation, tell them I’m doing just fine. But I would be lying. And honestly – I don’t really feel like talking, not about anything.

Suddenly, familiar voices arrive in the front entrance to our house. John and Pam must have flown in from Florida. Dad and John were friends for many years because they both worked in the cable business, and he plans on reading the eulogy tomorrow. He is like a second father figure to me. I hear him ask, “Where’s Amber Lee?”

Mom replies, “She’s in the den – she hasn’t said much since it happened.” His face appears around the corner with a wide smile attached to it. I turn my focus back to the television as he sits on the edge of the couch near my feet.

“How ya doing, kiddo?”

“Fine I guess.”

“I know you’re going through a tough time; I miss your dad, too. But I thought about something on the plane ride here. Tomorrow is a brand new day, and your dad loved you very much. He wouldn’t want to see you so down. Remember, you can visit Pam and me anytime in Florida. Anytime you want, okay?”

“Okay, thanks.” John gave me a hug and left the room.

2000 – Kate and I

She rests her head on my chest in this house on West Devon – just she and I, alone – the only way this thing works is for us to be out of sight from our parents. We typically talk in our cars after play practice, or wait until my mom drives down to Louisiana to visit her boyfriend. My house got doused in egg yolk and eggshells a couple nights ago. Someone put a dent in Kate’s car door that same night. The joys of living in a rural town in North Carolina where nothing atypical is accepted. We think it had to be

someone at school. Our high school principal, Mr. Jones, even questioned a few students about the incidents. No one came clean, but then again, why would they?

I run my fingers through her brown hair that barely reaches her shoulders, and skim past her pale freckled cheek. Our tall, lanky bodies intertwine on my bed – legs and arms distinguishable only by skin pigment and freckles. She is much lighter than I am in skin tone. We both know the probability of this relationship lasting. Our chances are pretty slim, two teens in love – both female. I live with guilt every day, never straying far from my Catholic roots. But I have not sat in a pew since my dad died, and I am certainly not a child anymore. What makes me uncertain, if anything, is knowing how much Kate recites the Bible. Seems strange since she made a conscious choice to be in a relationship with me, but her growing faith is important to her. I only wish I could understand why. I lost faith in God when He took my dad a few years ago, then again when John molested me over spring break just a few weeks back.

Kate clears her throat and sighs. She begins to fidget like what she is about to say is going to make me uncomfortable, perhaps uneasy –

“Do you still think about what happened a few weeks ago?”

“Of course I do.”

“You ever wonder if things would’ve been different if your dad was still alive?”

“Everything in my life would be different. My mom would stick around rather than pack up and leave for Louisiana every so often. I’d probably focus on school more than I do. My brother would still come home for the holidays. And...well...my dad’s best friend would’ve probably never laid a hand on me. Why do you ask?”

“Just curious, that’s all.”

“I’m sure there has to be a better reason than that.”

“Well...I was just thinking about stuff. Wondering whether or not your dad believed in God.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Nothing really. Like I said – I was just thinking. But if your dad didn’t believe in God, or if he didn’t mention it, you know he didn’t go to heaven, right?”

2011 – Present Day

I squat down just at the side of this abandoned house where a month’s worth of weeds sprung up into flimsy giants. A light breeze catches their ends as I finger through them to get a better look at the teddy bear – both eyes intact, white cotton stuffing protruding from its chest. Stuck to this land, its broken memories. Stories are piled in left-behind remnants. I wonder what child it kept safe at night, or if a child was brought here against their will after this place became abandoned property. My lack of faith in humanity – anything, really – leaves me no choice but to think such unfortunate thoughts.

Cumulus clouds begin to roll in. *Something must be up there – something has to be responsible for this land and its damaged grace. What or who is responsible, I will never know. Maybe I abandoned the Catholic church several years ago, but the search for something to believe in – that’s an endless mission, just part of my journey.*