Contents

ARTWORK

ALEXANDER AGHAYERE
Parts of Me / 26

MARIA DIMANSHTEIN
4 / 33

ELIZABETH GRAEHILING
Squidestines / 34

VIRGINIA HOESLY
Mango the Emperor / 13

NICOLAS LEYBA
Albany Park / 25

CATHERINE TROMP
Dark Magic / 27

LAUREN TROMP
Damsel in Distress / 8

SARA WILLADSEN
*Greater Than Less Than / Cover Entry / 7

POETRY

PHILLIP BANION
Spectress / 28

GABRIELLE FISCHER
Silence on the Stoop / 24

NICOLAS LEYBA
"Cretan" / 12

JARED MOORE
Smoke Signals / 20

JESSICA TARRANT
February 17th, 2012 / 14

S. WILLIAMS
*Nightmare Mirror / 30

CREATIVE NON-FICTION

JESSICA VOLKENING
*Uprooted / 32

FICTION

REBEKAH CASTIELLO
My Hill of History / 9

ALAN HERRERA
Through the Lens / 2

GALEA RAIN
*Fallen / 16

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Special Acknowledgements

Lori Hall
Eric Hoffman
Diane Smith
Phil Torgerson

*Named for the spires of Altgeld Hall, the “Castle on the Hill,” Towers is Northern Illinois University’s literary and creative arts magazine. Originally sponsored by the Xi Delta chapter of Sigma Tau Delta (International English Honor Society) and Nu Ita Pi, the publication has been printing student work since 1939.

The magazine is published every year by ITS Document Services.

www.engl.niu.edu
A

Unknown entity appears to an unsuspecting narrator who lives an ordinary life.

Dim left me breathless when he first appeared in my snapshots. His blurred figure stood behind a warehouse’s dirty glass pane. My hands trembled as I watched his sunken eyes lifelessly peer through the photograph’s glossy surface. I threw the picture back into the liquid in front of me and shut my eyes. I tried to recall if I had in fact seen anyone when I trespassed onto the warehouse’s grounds, but I only remembered a pressing eeriness of seclusion. I clenched my eyes tighter and recalled the exact moment I had taken the snapshot: I had turned the lens and focused on the window, but nothing out of the ordinary had stalked me then. I opened my eyes and examined the photograph again. Dim wavered under the fluid, haunting me with his devilish presence.

I removed my glasses and rubbed my eyes. I sighed and knocked on the side of my head with his devilish presence.

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Just before bed I developed the photographs. Five pictures dangled on an overhead wire. Each one displayed Dim’s face clearly. The chills in my veins stopped fifteen minutes after I memorized his face: cracked lips, blackened eyes, a pale face. His fractured skin reminded me of clay left out in the sun. I blinked a few times at the photographs. Dim’s demonic features proved his existence.

I dreamed of Noah that night. Last year’s badly decorated Christmas tree blinked happily above presents that neither of us had been eager to unwrap. Two coffee mugs sat untouched on the coffee table. I sat on the couch toward Noah with my hand on his knee. He stared blankly at the phone, as if he waited for his father to call back and yell, “April Fool!”

Half an hour ago, Noah’s father had informed him that his brother had passed away this morning.

“My mother denies it, but my father thinks it was suicide,” Noah whispered. I bit my lip at the lack of inflection in his voice.

“‘Noah took a deep breath and shut his eyes, a pale face. His fractured skin reminded me of clay left out in the sun. I blinked a few times at the photographs. Dim’s demonic features proved his existence.”

“Noah took a deep breath and shut his eyes. He grinned sadly.

“I know what’s odd? My father says my dramas.”

“I know, mom.”

“Weird. They smell just as I remember. And the medicine. So we had a tea party and she left to deal with another squeeze.

“I’m dissatisfied with my life.”

“Why is that?” she responded with a tiny frown.

“Your face glimmered with newfound joy. I held the roses close to her face. She cupped her frail hands over mine, closed her tired eyes, and sniffl ed slowly. She smiled the entire time I struggled to fit the bundle into a tiny vase.

Finally, I sat on a chair beside the white bed and looked upon my mother. She fondly eyed the yellow roses beside her.

“They’re my favorite,” she grinned.

“I know, mom.”

“They smell just as I remember. And the way they brighten up the room! Just lovely.”

“How are you, mom?”

She answered my ritual question in high spirits: “Splendid!” Although the hoarse raspiness of her voice proved otherwise, she continued: “Though I do wish the nurse would let me have my dramas.”

She smiled again before she coughed for a minute straight. “Yes, I suppose you did, even after the... oh, no, I shouldn’t be telling you this.”

“I want to live to see that house you promised to buy me.”

My mother pursed her lips and gave my hand another squeeze.

“You’re still young, honey. I don’t think anyone your age is satisfied with their lives. You can only use what you have and make the best of it.”

We remained silent for a while. I cleared my throat and asked, “Are you scared, mom?”

“Oh heavens, no! I made my peace long ago. I’m quite lucky to have done so.”

My mother, who promised that a few combinations of her teas would do the job. Some sort of herbal medicine. So we had a tea party and she left to let the teas do their job.

“Next morning, just before the sun came up, I saw a child. No, I don’t think I could call it a child. It was a tiny thing. It had miniscule arms and legs and tiny, closed eyes, and skin as white as snow, as if it were frozen. It stood in the dark doorway of my bedroom. I was so shocked I could not move. When the shadowy thing started to walk toward me, I flipped on the lights and it vanished!”
I knew at once what the darkness was. I knew at once I didn’t want my baby to die. I called an ambulance and they saved me. They saved you.

Not wanting to dwell on burdening thoughts, I asked my mother another question. “What about your fear of dying? How did you overcome that?”

“Overcome? I never used that word,” she wiggled her finger at me, a sly smile on her face. “I said I made peace with it. Some nights I’m still scared of the new shadow that haunts the reflection in the television, but I know that until the darkness creeps closer, I have nothing to fear.”

She fixed her eyes on something over my shoulder. I turned to look. The television hung in the corner behind me. I faced my mother again. She didn’t look at the set. She looked below it, and she smiled.

“Mom?”

She squeezed my hand yet again and searched my eyes. After a moment, she sadly stated, “You have a darkness too.”

I waited by the phone when I arrived home. For some reason, I knew I’d be getting the call. At nine, the hospital rang to inform me that my mother had died. I scribbled the name of local funeral homes they provided me with. I hung up, turned around, and confidently stared at the living room. I looked upon the television set without fear because I knew I wouldn’t see Dim anymore.

The phone rang again. My speech froze when Noah’s voice said, “Hello… Hello?”

I cleared my throat. “Yeah, it’s me.” He stayed silent for a moment. “Er… Are you there?” “Yeah,” he hesitated. “I’m here.” “Why are you calling?” I asked him. “Weren’t you the one who said it would be better if we didn’t talk?” “I know, I know,” he said, “It’s just…” he sighed. I remembered his long, sad sighs. “I went to the cemetery today to visit my little brother, and I felt like I might need someone to talk to. You were the one who was with me the day he died.” “Yeah, I remember that day.” He sighed once more and he stammered out a reply: “How are you?” “My mother passed away today,” I said casually. “You’re joking,” he said, and when I didn’t respond, he added, “Shit, I’m sorry. I had no idea. How are you managing?” “I’m better than I thought I’d be. Thanks for asking. I can’t talk right now, though, but we can get together. If you want. Coffee tomorrow?” “Sure.” I hung up the phone. A sly smile on my face, I walked to the couch, flipped it over, and gazed upon the extravagant Persian rug underneath. I rolled it up, prevented it from unraveling with crude duct tape, and propped it against the wall. I replaced the couch and sat down, glowing in my new living room.
So much history lies within the layers of my aged being. I am a solemn hill. Long were the days of old when I used to hear people use my name but only to tell of a place of torment. A name long forgotten that it is heard only in the oldest of tales, a legend to all. I stand, my friends, as Golgotha's Hill. My cracked, old earth bears one story, just one. A story so important that my soil hungers for its recount, for from one day I became a hill of history.

The third of time was my birth. My Creator spoke me into existence. He made me of exquisite, ashen rock that when placed in the night, glowed with an unearthly hue. My soil is rich in minerals. Erected high above a town, I stood. Bequeathed with a mark, my Creator sanctified me from every other hill. A skull was etched into my rock of perfection. From whence came Golgotha’s Hill or ancient Hebrew for “The Place of the Skull.” I would not have guessed the importance to Him that I one day would be. Rounded I was shaped, and placed with very few trees as my companions. Luscious, olive green grass became my clothes, and soil sat as my skin. The few trees that were placed on me were of a deep mahogany hue. The delicate leaves turn a pale pink in spring, white during the heat of summer. My Creator orderly placed the small trees at the bottom of my body. Very few animals chose me as their earthly home, for I was bare of fruit trees and shelter, save the handful of trees at my base. Mortally, I lived on as peaceful and solid as any one hill could be. Then as time grew on, I became wearied of the unpretentious place around me. All I saw was the outskirts of a small town christened Jerusalem. It was a quaint town with buildings made from brick and mortar. It was clean, and had markets that sold every type of item available. The people of Jerusalem never came upon me except for the occasional meanderer. However, the day I hungered for a taste of flesh on my earth, I got it.

Humans and trees were the first sign of life I had felt hundreds of years. I lifted up my unaccustomed eyes and saw an overwhelming multitude of heated people shoving in order to gather around one man fastened to a cross. Made from the cruelest sort of tree, this cross ripped uneven grooves into my imperfect skin. In addition to the cross-bearer, two other men trudged behind with crosses also. However, the first man seemed to be all that mattered. I tried and hardened my spineless earth to give relief to the holders of the crosses. Nevertheless, I still smelt the stench of salty sweat on their saturated brows. I tasted the iron of blood as it dripped into my soil. As the ruthless men dug the unwieldy crosses into my earth, I felt myself break.
which echoes the words, "My God my God
Hebrew saying "Eloi, Eloi, lamasabachthani?"
before: my birth.  The words spoken were
with an agonizing voice that I heard only once
ing place was not an ordinary one.  He cried
a statement the man on the middle cross said
iciest of rains.  It was then that my ears beheld
the ninth hour" (Luke 23:44).  I became as
began to taste a sweet vinegar.  I yielded up
began to taste a sweet vinegar.  I yielded up
began to taste a sweet vinegar.  I yielded up
duration pain on my parched and crack earth, I
began to feel the ache of the holes where the three
crosses tore into my earth.  The two men on
the outside had been lugged away.  The man
I heard called Joseph of Arimathaea, carried
away the disfigured body of my Creator.  He
left me that day dead, but I knew I would see
Him again.
After a few days' time, the atmo-
sphere still hung with an air of somberness.  I
skimmed the people and began to take notice
of their condemning glances at my hill.  Their
looks spoke louder than words.  Glances re-
buked me as if I was at fault for the crucifixion
of my Creator.  I sealed my eyes to them and
never felt disgrace.  I remember the time I hun-
gered for people to gaze at me: now I am made
fat by their looks.  Three days after the traves-
ty, I began to hear tales of rumours pertaining
to the death of my Creator.  I gathered from
the secreted whispers that my beloved Creator
had risen from the dead.  "Impossible" were
the words spoken by the unbelievers and be-
lievers.  However, I was there from the dawn
of that day.  Although man may never know
what had happened on me many moons ago, it
only gives me glory to know that I did indeed
hold my Creator.  That is my history.
the one eye ghastly stubble man gusts an uncanny whistle in seven offbeat caves,

enchancing the bottom dwellers to bring him salted foods and shells,

fish skeletons with indented grooves hang alongside him,

the sand still, is hot,

even when shaded,

ancient ruins bear him in mind,

for he is the son of the motherland,

father of a bastard; possessed by a dogs red eyes,

for he holds the devils DNA on his left hand,

for one day to answer and create,

a clone.
Sometimes I think I can still hear you.
When I close my eyes, my lids tight, in a
jailed wrap, the lashes prickling my skin until
your voice, presses on them, pulling
them free, making me realize I could never hear
you again. You never liked it when I held on,
to what wasn’t there.

---

I was in ________. Pulled under covers, in my
cocoon, a hard wired outer layer, that wove over night.
I heard the still hum of my phone
but I didn’t want to move.

My breath was like the dish washer
singing the tune of the womb
a silent startle, and rustle
and back to the womb

I heard the phone again
but I didn’t want to move from the womb.

(Pick it up, it’s 9:30am—your sleeping too much)
I roll and tumble off the bed,
smack against the carpet, warm like my cocoon
and I look at
my phone.

---

Missed call
from _____

---

8:45am, 8:55am, 9:05am, 9:10am
---

My breath sank in, and swallowed back
down my lungs. Dry sticky breath, that
tangled in my throat, clotted my breathing,
clotting my mind,

---

How many times did ____ call?

---

My hand could not steady. Nobody calls four
times in a row, for every ten minutes if it wasn’t
something bad. I didn’t want to call back.

---

Hello? (my breath clotted)
my feet dragged out of the door, scratching the carpet
(my breath still not coming out)
(Hang up you don’t want to hear this)
(clear your throat—unclot your lungs).
She watched him just as she always had his whole life. He smiled in his sleep and she won-
dered what he was dreaming of. Lately he always smiled when he slept. She rolled over in
the clouds and closed her own eyes. She never dreamed because she never slept. What was it
like? What did she see that always made him smile? He only smiled when he slept. During the
day his golden brown eyes always looked so sad and his lips never turned up. But after sleeping
he always glowed and he woke up with deep forest green eyes. What was it about him that she
couldn’t stop thinking about him? He was just supposed to be her job but he was so much more
than that to her.

She reopened her eyes and looked back at him. She wanted to be near him. Spreading her
wings she dipped through the clouds and flew down to his side. She folded her wings as she sat
on his bed and placed a luminescent hand upon his own. She wished she could feel the warmth
of his skin. Many nights she sat by his side for hours and not once did he know. It shouldn’t
have mattered; guardian angels are just meant to protect and guide. However, there was some-
thing about this man that kept her intrigued, that made him more than just her duty.

He let out a sigh and rolled over into her. She was in his head again. Who was this mys-
tery woman he dreamt about? Her long blonde tresses and grey eyes haunted his every dream.
She seemed like a ghost but with a voice as sweet as honey. He floated among the clouds by her
side as they talked about the world. He felt safe with her. Was it possible to fall in love with
your dreams? She danced and the clouds danced with her covering her luminous skin like a
dress.

“Are you real?” he asked her. She just nodded and pulled him into her arms. Ever so gen-
tly she brushed her lips against his. She tasted like sunshine, if tasting sunshine was even pos-
able. Suddenly she faded away and he was left in darkness, an odd ringing resonating around
him.

She flew off into the clouds as soon as he stirred from his sleep to answer the phone. It
was sad to leave his side but guardian angels were not supposed to be seen. True they had ways
to be unseen but they could never truly be invisible. Humans always talked about the sparkle
of light or movement in their peripherals, what they were really seeing were their guardian an-
gels. Often the angels were mistaken for ghosts since they moved about usually transparent, it
was the closest they could be to invisible. Some humans had seen their angels under rare cir-
cumstances, usually after serious accidents or on their death beds. She wished she could reveal
herself to him and let him see her as she truly was.

Pain in his voice reached her ears and she focused her thoughts back to him. He had
finished his phone conversation and was in the shower. She could tell by his defeated manner
that the person on the phone had been his girlfriend. She
could protect him from harm but not a broken heart. Every time he talked to the girl they just
ended up arguing. He was unhappy yet he kept trying to fix it. It brought tears to her eyes to
see him so hurt. Anger suddenly flared in his
golden eyes and he punched the shower wall.

Blood started pouring down his knuckles. She
drew the water and into her wings. It was her senses telling her something bad was about to happen. In
his anger he failed to notice the red light and
went right into the middle of the intersection.

“Fuck!” he shouted. A shiver ran up her spine
and into her wings. It was her senses telling
him something bad was about to happen. In
his anger he failed to notice the red light and
went right into the middle of the intersection.

He felt safe with her. Was it possible to
fall in love with your dreams?

“What?” he answered obviously an-
noyed. “I’m already on my way so could you
just relax. I’ll get there when I get there…Why
do you always have to argue with me? If you
keep this up I’m just going to leave. I don’t
have to put up with this!”

He hung up and threw the phone in
the passenger seat. It started to ring again.

“Fuck!” he shouted. A shiver ran up her spine
and into her wings. It was her senses telling
her something bad was about to happen. In
his anger he failed to notice the red light and
went right into the middle of the intersection.

He didn’t even see the minivan coming at him.

“Nothing happens to me!” he shouted. A
tear escaped her eyes as she began to heal his
knuckles. She didn’t
understand how he made her feel this way.
She wished she could hold him for real and not
just surround him with comfort.

A shiver ran up her spine
and into her wings. It was her senses telling
her something bad was about to happen. In
his anger he failed to notice the red light and
went right into the middle of the intersection.

She held his neck to cushion it from whiplash.

He didn’t even see the minivan coming at him.

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tear escaped her eyes as she began to heal his
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went right into the middle of the intersection.
She woke up in a hospital bed from a very strange dream. She was heavily bandaged but still sat up to look around. In the bed next to her lay a man with dark curls. He seemed rather familiar to her. She tried to think about where she had seen them. Realization crossed her mind. "You are real! I can't believe you're actually here."

With some effort he pulled himself into a wheelchair by his bed. His legs were in casts and his chest was bandaged. One of his hands was covered in bandages right at his knuckles as if he had punched something. Stitches covered his arms and side of his head and yet he still forced himself into the wheelchair and rolled over to her. He stared at her adoringly and she continued to be confused. He seemed even more familiar but she still couldn't remember why. "Now that you are here," he whispered in her ear. "Maybe we can be together. I love you and I have since I first started dreaming about you."

She looked taken aback and opened her mouth to protest the audacity of someone falling in love with a dream. Before she could say a single word his lips were upon her own. Memories flew through her and she realized it was no dream she had waken from, it was her fall. She had been his guardian angel but she fell from heaven because she was in love with him. She could feel his warmth against her. His scent was intoxicating, his taste even more so. It was everything she had ever imagined and more.

"I love you too," she whispered back when he finally pulled away.

"Do you have a name?" he asked. She had never really had a name before and she took a few moments to think about it before finally answering.

"Yes, it's Angelica" she responded. He smiled and kissed her once more. As he kissed her she finally did something she had always wanted to do but had been unable to, she ran her fingers through his dark curls.
Smoke Signals

Those gnarled branches reaching up, up, brushing solid breath of time from the sky with every twig quivering in the chill reminds me of why fall is old and full of transactions. It remains simultaneously a separation, a bridge, between life and our collective ruin; taste the scent of berries, crisp cologne, gentle molding breath: all inertia in the divide. In that dim place

I remember my grandfather approaching, lighting the darkness with kerosene leaves. Each fall was a similar ritual, a ceremony of color of changing, and there, the same pile I used for play yesterday, flying skyward like little gasps flicking the unsaid, unthought prayers that I never knew I had to some arresting God I had never considered outside of picture-book stories— These dramas tended to be full of some tacit forgetfulness. Children are to be seen, he would begin, and I was a violation, often forgetting his law by speaking into silence, by filling the unmentionable space: I wondered at the incense grasping towards the heaven my grandfather tried building in his burning— towards the heaven grandmother climbed, and is waiting. Did he think a sacrifice would gather her spirit, would push those empty piano keys down into singing again? And how numerous those veined reflections of childhood, those little endings of innocence appeared to the pale shroud covering my child eyes widening, having never seen or feared the affect time etched on the faces of those who warred against beginnings. I never understood the silence as my grandfather’s way of coping with the loss.
And wasn’t I to follow him as he followed
his? Time waited in our parted mouths, ashen, as star points
flashed out and hid behind the curling
smoke that tendrilled through us, filling our lungs
and expelling in misted whispers,
in futures laced with dead pasts, shaped
into prayers we drenched with the heaviness of living, and the smoke
only built, only grew, only shaped itself further
to the memories we offered it. Burning our throats,
it spoke in our stead, a rite of purification.
Alert as a priest, he directed the vigil,
and it must have been with tired,
dreamy eyes that I imagined
him hunched over, with the shape of a beam
on his back to feed the flames
he would sooner entrust to me.

We were alone, but the smoke hovered
above, and though we were inarticulate to express it,
it touched us; it smelled of everything the year
couldn’t place for us. It poured out all those pains
we never made time for under the crackling
of our humanity. Somewhere, it made room
for the shooting leaves of April
we would sooner try to forget, surrounding, reminding
us of all the life we try to handle
when peering through darkness
into the fury of that fire’s light.

Now, imagine: children, a day and some miles
away, playing tag around a Japanese maple, and one
pauses to admire the lit sky filling the spaces
between the golden leaves. The drifting smoke
has pulled together. He says
look, those clouds! and another, no, not clouds,
a rocket! another chides, my guardian angel!
and the girl tentatively mentions, my family, see them?,
finding its replica having cascaded past heaven
into reality—they see, gripping
that rough bark, all of the possibilities
that have yet to be offered.
It took prayers to render those
shapes from smoke and ash: those children,
having never gazed through God’s eyes,
will never realize that none of it is truly theirs.
The engines of speeding cars hum through the windowpanes of this room,
And it’s too late–or too early–to get out of bed, because the world
is hovered under blankets and heavy sleeping pills.
Tiptoeing across the floor, I am breaking the silence into pieces with each
and every step, and it’s just shouting at me to go back to sleep.

Outside, the autumn air bites at my cheeks, but the sobering freshness overwhelms me.
And just as I wonder if you’re worried, you join me on the stoop.
A silent smile.
A silent understanding.
You light a swisher that we share, and the hum of speeding
cars becomes our soundtrack for the night.

Just us, just silence, just being.
Echo, bellow  
the spirit, I hear it  
Reeling as I feel the blissful kiss  
I reminisce of how  
I miss her face, her warm embrace  
how she caressed me and  
blessed me with a divinely peaceful mind  

But shaken, my tranquility taken  
by her surreal visage, the appealing image of US  
of who she used to be sets me free  

Liberation, from her indignation  
Her perpetual presence is in essence  
my now tumultuously tortuous and seemingly infinite existence  

Kneeling and dealing with the fact that she’s changed  
dementedly, mentally deranged, estranged from even her closest of friends  
A trend that eludes and confused me  

Sue me for I cherish the perished person, the lovely lady  
now a scornful shady little girl, my blackened world  
one a beacon now reeks of bitter scorn, a quitting torn  
apart heart screaming for a second chance  
entranced by sins I did not commit  

With grit and the skin of my teeth  
I sheathed my far too dated self hatred  
and stood and could once again endure the demure lure  
of inspired conspiring admirers  

but the thoughts lingered, delicate wringing fingers  
with a singing touch, now a stinging clutch that crushed me  
and rushed me into the arms of other lovers  
hoping to cope in those rope arms of partners I trusted too soon  
swayed by swoons strewn across the air,  
impaired and half hearted affairs, I dared  
to push and shove to call them love  

Gloves and masks tasked to hide the twisting  
mistress in my mind, in the form of fists and smiles  
all the while dreaming of my own lost Lenore  
the one I hand once before, before she broke  

Spoken tokens I still remember, smoldering embers of  
long forgotten years that smear my queer ideas of love across the wall  
Appalled by how you made me suffer, ache and shake  
during dark and hopeless, cope less nights  

my bed a memento of what we had been through  
and when you had bent to lustful thrusts of trust  
and un-rusting connection that beckoned us  
like destiny had sent for us and been for us  
and asked for “when” from us  
and we said “now and then for us, forever us!”  
an endeavor, us  
ever again must  
I see your face, but just a murky grimace in its place?  
I’ll save our pictures just in case.
Nightmare Mirror

Waking up in bitter cold
Nightmare new but also old
Sweat dripping and coating my skin
These are things that make me grim

I get out of bed and start to the door
But what I hear makes me stop short
Down the hall is my mother and stepfather
People who view me as a possession and bother

Howling like hyenas with laughter
They speak loudly and banter
Like a nimble cat I inch down the hall
All the time I want to bawl

I look into the mirror
There is something wrong with me
There is something I can see in me
There is something weird about me
This isn't the person I should be
I twist, I turn, I walk back and forth
Trying to figure out the itch
That I so badly want to ditch

Then I see it in my reflection
The thing that gives me rejection
My maleness down below
The thing that brings me so low
We raced down the trail as fast as our prepubescent legs would allow us. Playing in the woods was a lot like training for a sport. Our feet knew every bend and every obstacle on the trail. Our eyes were trained to look for roots attempting to burst out of the ground and grab our ankles and cobwebs reaching down from menacing low-hanging branches to tangle around our faces. Fatigue was catching up with us, but our opponents were on our heels. The birds were circling us; one dove down and came frighteningly close to our heads. The fort was just ahead! We sprinted the last forty feet and collapsed under the safety of our finely built stronghold.

There’s not a memory I have of my childhood with Em that isn’t out in those woods. What now seems like a relatively small piece of land, one acre, was vast unexplored territory when it was first introduced to us. We woke up early, packed a lunch, grabbed our shovels, and went to work. No day was the same, but every day was the same. The same trees, the same smell of the mustard weed, the same snaps of critters watching our daily progress, but different projects. We never stayed in a finished fort too long. The more area we covered, the more sanctuaries we could build. We would go back and reinforce old ones if needed, and try to camouflage them as best we could so no one but us could find them.

The first fort was known as the bouncer log. Yes, we were quite clever and original in our naming of things at seven and eight years old. A giant fallen oak tree marked the front of the fort. It had not been down for long because the inside had not yet started to rot. Because of this, we could continuously bounce on the giant V-ed branch suspended several feet above the ground. A lot of kids my age had trampolines; not many of them could say they had a massive bouncing log to play on. Behind what I thought was the greatest form of entertainment ever discovered was the rest of our haven. We didn’t have to do too much work to it: the trees seemed to circle up around the cleared away brush, and the leaves on their branches overlapped to provide a canopy over our heads. We suspected deer probably frequented there and thought if it was good enough for them, it was certainly good enough for us. We used our shovels to clear away pricklers and dig random holes. We found small logs overgrown with leaves and used those to build a wall surrounding our area. Rarely would we cut off a branch or attempt to mangle a perfectly good tree. The woods was never unkind to us and we were adamant in returning the favor.

Em is older and therefore was always in charge of our missions. I’d like to think she believed it was all real just as I did, and that she wasn’t just taking advantage of the naivety of her younger, smaller cousin. When the evil lord of the vultures swooped down on us repeatedly, she covered my head to protect me from it. I was never truly scared of the birds, but I liked the feeling that came from the adventure too much to not play along. I had unlimited freedom of my imagination, but also grounded comfort. There was no reality, only bliss.

We rarely had an agenda until we actually got out into the woods. The last fort we ever built was by far our most impressive. My two other cousins, Erica and Michelle, had come over for the day and enjoyed playing in the woods just as much as Em and I did. A new tree had fallen sometime during the week and was an optimal base for a new fort. We ran home and got my mom to show her what had happened. She assessed the tree and helped us come up with a plan for a teepee fort. We hauled ten feet logs off the floor of the woods over to the fallen tree and braced them slanted up against the side. We continued this process until dusk and barely managed to finish. Our craftsmanship was superb because to this day I can still walk inside it. The next day we came back and camouflaged it with leaves and decided to reinforce the ceiling with bark after first laying down an old burlap bag we had found on one of our previous adventures. It was perfect.

Our breathing was intense, but eventually began to regulate. We rewarded our narrow escape by eating the sandwiches we had stashed at the fort earlier. Em picked leaves off the mustard weeds and we added them to our sandwiches. We pretended to know exactly what plant they were and that eating them connected us to the woods somehow. Actually I don’t know that we had to pretend the latter. I’ve always felt pretty connected to the woods. It is still a sanctuary for me. It is a place that brings me serene happiness, but also a feeling of loss. I miss it. I miss the smell, the adventure, my childhood, my innocence. Stepping onto the trail restores about nothing but the next turn. But as I take the final turn, and see the end of the trail ahead of me, I am tripped up by the roots of reality.