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Crater Lake

Molly Arndt

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CRATER LAKE

by

Molly Arndt

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for graduation with Honors in the English

Sean DeMers
Thesis Mentor

Spring 2018

All requirements for graduation with Honors in the
English have been completed.

Marie Kruger
English Honors Advisor

University of Iowa
Honors Thesis
Department of English

Crater Lake

By
Molly Arndt

Sean Demers
Honors Thesis Adviser, Department of English
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A closeted priest, suddenly forced to reckon with his two identities when he is expected to speak out about marriage equality. An illicit love affair turns into a crisis of identity. Two teenagers at a Catholic school receive an invitation, and the events of that night have lifelong consequences.

Sexuality is complicated, and so is faith. Navigating the space where they intertwine can be a nearly insurmountable task. In the three stories comprising my thesis, I attempt to raise questions of identity and belief, and forgiveness and loneliness. How do we reconcile what we believe of heaven with what we know to be true of ourselves here on earth? For queer people in particular, issues with identity resonate far into adulthood. Many of us don't come out until after high school, which results in a kind of delayed adolescence, figuring out romantic relationships and sex long after our straight peers. The intense loneliness that comes from being in the closet often leads to mental health problems, substance abuse, and vulnerability to domestic violence and sexual assault. These problems are exponentially worse when combined with a theology of intolerance, like the Catholic church, which teaches that homosexuality is "intrinsically disordered" and sinful.

In my critical essay, I write about queering the coming-of-age story. Bildungsroman, or coming-of-age, refers to stories where characters experience a profound change throughout the course of the narrative. I examine Emily Danforth's *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, which exemplifies a coming-of-age narrative where the narrator experiences shifts in religious and sexual identities. The catch-22 of being queer and belonging to a religion that does not accept queerness creates a question that cannot be answered: how does one continue to believe when belief requires a renouncement of ones' own nature?

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*A solitude ten thousand fathoms deep
Sustains the bed on which we lie, my dear:
Although I love you, you will have to leap:
Our dream of safety has to disappear.*

-W.H. Auden

Ordination

The alarm hadn't even gone off yet when bright sunbeams from the easterly window streamed into his consciousness. He kept meaning to give Father Stevens a call—his superior, who was supposedly in charge of things like that, housekeeping—but Stevens tended to ramble and he had been avoiding it. Was it seven already? He had three hours before he had to say mass. What if he said he wasn't feeling well and cancelled? No, he'd done that three weeks ago, better to just suffer through. Afterwards he would have at least four hours to read before it was time to hear confessions. He was re-reading *A Good Man is Hard to Find*. He liked to think about the people in the confessional booth like characters in a story. Beneath their minor sins he thought he could feel their real ones, like Flannery O'Connor did, making every character a mosaic, the kind with mirror shards so when you looked into it you saw yourself, sliced up into pieces of the grotesque.

Gingerly, he reached over and felt around the dark wood nightstand for the industrial-sized bottle of extra-strength Tylenol that he kept there, then dry swallowed two more than the label said he should be taking. *Lord have mercy on my liver*. The half-empty whiskey bottle stashed beneath his bed, one of his many indulgences. He always bought one of the big bottles when he traveled to Sioux City for diocesan meetings. It was too much of a risk to buy in Crater Lake—he'd be recognized. He had crawled a bit too far into the liquor last night, and today he would suffer for it. Nobody ever said sixty-two was fun. He crawled back into bed. The water stain on the ceiling was getting bigger. It had been getting bigger for fifteen years. Eventually he would wake up soggy. His little room was small, with soft green carpet and a single bed. One of the few dreams he hadn't given up on was to sleep in a queen sized bed—not that he needed the extra space, simply for the luxury.

He closed his eyes against the sun and tried to drift back into sleep. *Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed are thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.* Over and over and over again, just like his mother had taught him when he was young, when he was the age of the kids over at the school. She had been so proud of him when he was six and was first in his class to memorize both the Hail Mary *and* the Our Father. She cried when he entered the seminary—he cried too, not because he was leaving home, but because he was a coward. He had fallen in love once and it had been so painful he could not bear to let it happen again. He thought the seminar would keep him safe. Things could have turned out so differently. He had wanted to live in a big city—New York, or Chicago—and do something with books, maybe teach or work at a library, but when he was young it had seemed impossible that he could ever do what he wanted or trust what he felt. The priesthood seemed like a refuge. It made his mother happy, earned him respect, gave him a purpose—but there wasn't any vocation in it, for him. He had never felt called, not like you're supposed to.

The angle of the sun rose and the beams grew stronger. Father Leary finished his prayers. Falling back asleep no longer seemed to be an option, and the Tylenol was beginning to kick in—the pounding in his head had faded to a dull thudding, and the pain in his back was reduced to a firm twinge. He turned over, carefully, then stood, yawning and stretching. Then, just like every other day for the past thirty-some years, he walked over to his closet and donned the black suit and white collar that let the world know he was a man of God. Or a man of the cloth, at least. Once dressed, he kneeled and retrieved a few crusty Kleenex from underneath his bed. It didn't happen very often anymore, now that he was older, but sometimes the

temptation grew and grew until suddenly he was a teenager again. Except this delayed adolescence had its perks, because images of the kind he had looked at last night existed only in his mind when he had been a teenager. The future was a mystical place, indeed.

The stairs creaked under his weight as he made his way downstairs to make coffee. There were always coffee and baked goods after mass, but it was a Wednesday—Mrs. Flores’ turn to make the coffee. All the church ladies took turns—there was a group of them that wouldn’t miss daily mass. They were his audience. Half of them were immigrants from Mexico or Central America who had moved to Crater Lake to work at the poultry factory in the eighties. The other half were of Scandinavian descent, remnants of an older wave of immigration. He had learned to write his daily mass sermons specifically for the old church ladies—he talked about having patience with your grandchildren, and dealing with illnesses, and the grief of losing a beloved spouse. Afterwards, they would go down to the basement and play cards and drink cheap coffee. He breathed in the scent of his own grounds—Columbian roast, yet another indulgence—and the scent anchored him. He had read in a magazine once that the smell of coffee activated the part of the brain that makes you feel nostalgia. Every time you smell coffee, you think about your childhood. *I have measured out my life in coffee spoons.* He had loved T.S. Eliot when he was younger. He thought about the seminary, all of the mornings he had woken up, alone, empty except for his prayers, silent despite his pulpit. He filled the metal pot with water from the sink and left the kitchen to check for the paper—a more nerve-racking experience than one would think, ever since a few years ago someone had slipped nasty letters into the plastic bag the paper came in. *The bowels of hell are too good for nasty baby fuckers like your kind. The Catholic church is full of liars and murderers. I hope you get*

cancer and die a slow and painful death. The letters had been tested for anthrax, and the sheriff started driving through the Saint Rita's parking lot and checking in on the rectory several times a night for a few weeks, but nothing had ever come of it. He was more relieved than angry—better to be accused of something he was innocent of. Whoever had written the letters was most likely in a much worse state than he was. They deserved some sympathy, surely.

There were no letters today, but the headline shocked him more than any death threat ever could. He hadn't been paying attention. SUPREME COURT RULES MARRIAGE EQUALITY LAW OF THE LAND. It was like the time he fell out of the ancient oak tree that grew in the vacant lot across the street from his childhood home. His father had forbade him from climbing it, but the temptation had been too much, and he'd gotten the wind knocked out of him. He felt the same gasping-for-breath emptiness, the dark spots flashing in his eyes, the sudden awareness of his own fragility and nakedness against the wild whimsies of the world. He had known that this was a possibility, but he hadn't been paying attention—the world was changing, yes, but not as much as it seemed—people were still the same, deep down, and they were still afraid. There must be other gay people in Crater Lake, but they kept it to themselves, too. Perhaps the secular world had moved on, but marriage? If he had known—if that had even been a possibility—perhaps things could have been different. It was exhilarating. He hadn't even realized that he thought of himself as a gay man until he realized that he was allowed to be. The church might think differently, but to his country he was just the same as everyone else.

The air crackled around him, palpable with change. His joy was fleeting, however—he would have to address the news at mass. It was almost eight. He had less than an hour and a

half. *What was he going to say?* They would expect him to address it. After all, he was a priest—a representative of the Catholic church and everything that church stood for. The institution he represented had spent an incomprehensible amount of money to oppose the court decision. Gay marriage was going to ruin the moral fabric of the country, de-value traditional marriage, and generally make the world into a more unpredictable, terrifying place than it already was. He had always suspected that most of the priests who railed against homosexuality were either like him, and were doing so to hide their own shame, or else they were just too lazy to tackle any of the harder stuff—mortality, crises of faith, poverty, sickness—so they distracted everyone with petty morality issues instead. He was probably just being arrogant, though. He had lived with his own fear for so long it had grown up into a forest, lush and green, casting long shadows over his life and the secret he kept buried underneath the roots. He had learned to hide so well that he couldn't even see himself, anymore.

Recently, just every so often, with retirement creeping closer and closer, he allowed himself to dwell in fantasies of honesty. His whole life, he had been a coward, and his deepest desire—even more than to fall in love—was to feel brave. He had entered the seminary because he was afraid. He had stayed in the priesthood because it was an insular world, it had become familiar to him. Crater Lake was a nowhere town, so far away from his adolescent dreams of skyscrapers and bustling streets full of a million different kinds of people. What if he stood up today and told the truth? The thought made his heart race. The ladies would have a decade's worth of gossip. He imagined himself, noble in long white robes and green sash, thick black glasses slipping down the sweat at the end of his nose, clearing his throat and walking out in front of the altar. "I am not who you think I am. I am so much more. I fell in love with a blond

boy named Robert when I was fourteen, he broke my heart even though I never told him. I think that men are beautiful, and I think about kissing them almost every day. I am a homosexual, though I don't really feel like one. I am fascinated, aroused, and a little repulsed by the thought of another man putting his penis into my anus. I have been lying to you almost the whole time you have known me. The Lord be with you."

What would he even do if he came out? He wouldn't get any type of money for retirement. He would lose what few friends he had. St. Rita's—the parish that he had been guiding for almost twenty years—would turn against him, his life's work, essentially. *Jesus. What have I done.* He had dedicated his life to the belief that God would guide him. When he was younger, he had prayed that he could be turned normal—that he could feel for women what he had always felt for men. As he grew older, and wiser—or maybe just sadder—he realized that there was no such thing as change, that he would be the same person he had always been for the rest of his life. There would be no escape, no healing. His prayers turned into pleas for relief from the aching loneliness that permeated every aspect of his being. *Lord, please help me to accept this. Please help me to keep going.* On his lowest days: *Lord, please stop my heart.* Of course, there was no real consideration of ending things—it was a mortal sin. A coward, even in the face of death.

The smell of coffee jolted through to him and realized that he was still sitting on the front step, clutching the paper. He stood up, feeling his knees and ankles crack, and slammed the door. The noise startled him. He walked into the kitchen and pulled his favorite mug out from the cupboard. It was blue and yellow. The St. Rita's preschoolers had signed their names and presented it to him for his ten-year anniversary with the parish. He had always liked

children, though considering the stigma of his profession he had never really felt comfortable spending too much time around them. He opened the fridge—it really was time he cleaned it, it was beginning to smell a little funky—and grabbed the milk off the shelf. He liked to watch the swirls the two liquids made when they met for the first time. What was he going to do? What was he going to say? He carried his coffee to the beat-up leather couch in the den and sat down with his feet up on the coffee table. Of course, nothing had to change. He could treat today like any other, secure in the knowledge that life could continue on indefinitely, with no earth-shattering revelations or uncomfortably raw confessions. He had made a home here. Crater Lake was as good a home as any.

If he was being honest with himself, though—and he wasn't, usually—he hadn't really been happy for years. Possibly decades. In fact, he wasn't sure when the last time he had been really, truly happy was. Most of the priests he knew—men he had gone to seminary with, or saw at the monthly diocesan meetings—seemed to glean at least a modicum of satisfaction from their duties. He had to psych himself up just to go sit in a dark booth and listen to people's secrets. Sure, every once and a while someone had an affair, or got into a hit-and-run, and there was so much premarital sex in the world, but unless it was homosexual premarital sex (which it rarely was) he just wasn't that interested anymore. He had never been a social butterfly. Besides, he was getting bored with the Bible—once you heard all of the juicy violent bits as much as he had, it wasn't all that interesting, saying the same things about the same stories, year after year. His life was a lethal mix of boredom and agony in equal doses.

He thought about turning on the TV to distract himself, but the idea of watching people celebrating the court decision seemed like too much to bear. Instead, he sat in silence, drinking

his coffee quickly so that he could taste something other than existential indecision. He knew he should at least have a piece of toast—coffee on an empty stomach always led to indigestion—but food seemed like the least appealing thing in the world. He wished there was someone he could call to ask for advice, but there was no one. He had never told a single person that he was gay. He thought about Robert—his old friend. They used to play baseball together, and eat dinner at the other’s house almost every night during the summer. When they were fourteen Robert’s mom let him sleep over and they were talking about girls and they “practiced” kissing. He liked it—but when he took his neighbor Cathy out behind the barn to try it with her, he could only think about kissing Robert. They “practiced” a lot that year, until they turned fifteen, and Robert stopped talking to him in school. They began to avoid each other. He had never experienced anything quite like what losing him felt like. Their time together didn’t feel wrong. He simply craved the companionship, the camaraderie, the tingles down his back when they would wrestle around together. He felt guilty, later—at the time, their kisses had felt pure. There was an innocence to their immorality.

He remembered one of the kids in the sophomore religion class he had been a long-term substitute for a few years back, when the original teacher, Mrs. Petersen, was out on maternity leave. Sam was too thin for how tall he was, and was one of only four boys brave enough to sing in the choir that year. During one of the class periods where he had been too lazy to make a lesson plan, he let the kids write down anonymous questions on little pieces of paper. One girl asked about one of her classmate’s parents’ divorces. It was uncomfortable—he had answered the question like he was supposed to, saying that divorce was a sin but of course so were lots of things, that getting a divorce didn’t make you a bad person—but he apparently

hadn't done so very well because the guidance counselor, Mrs. Garcia, had to be called in to mediate the controversy. Most of the other questions were about why he had decided to be a priest and what the little white collar was supposed to mean, and what color socks was he wearing that day, but one question asked if he believed that gay people went to hell. He had answered that he didn't think having those kinds of thoughts were enough to warrant eternal damnation, but he was mostly evasive and moved on rather quickly. He had seen Sam's face redden when he read the question out loud. The boy left as soon as the bell rang, and when all of the teenagers had left, he sunk down into one of the cold shiny chairs with the attached desk, trying his very hardest not to cry.

Though he never interacted with Sam again, he had seen in the St. Rita's newsletter that he'd gotten in to some fancy music conservatory on the east coast, and he liked to imagine him there, in a nice wool sweater, with a stack of books and sheet music underneath his arm, holding hands with a nice young man, finally able to put a face and a pronoun to the love songs that he sang. He wanted that for him. He wondered what Sam thought about the Supreme Court ruling. He wished he had given him a different kind of answer during that religion class. Maybe he could have helped him. There was a shared pain—a particular kind of loneliness, in living your life that way. It's far too easy to become comfortable with lying—you can lie so well you don't even trust yourself anymore, let alone anyone else. It was so easy to keep on being Father Leary, known for his short sermons and lack of enthusiasm for social gatherings. He was just boring enough to avoid scrutiny.

He stared at his coffee mug, still half full. He felt nauseous. It was time for him to start heading over to the church—it was a short walk, but he had to print out his sermon, and get

dressed in his robes. He still didn't know what he was going to say about the ruling. He slid into his shiny black dress shoes, tied them, and stepped out the door. It was still early, but the air was heavy and damp, and the humidity crept down his back. The blue and yellow flowers that he had helped plant in front of the rectory were blooming, and the oak tree at the edge of the yard provided the only shade on his walk. By the time he reached the end of the driveway, he was already sweating, and his glasses were beginning to fog. At least the church would be cool—it had to be, no one wanted any of the little old ladies fainting from the heat during services.

St. Rita's church was a large, rounded stone building. He had always preferred the more traditional churches to the modern ones—he liked stained glass, and statues, and heavy wooden crosses hung wherever an empty stretch of wall dared emerge. Catholicism required a dark, slanted kind of faith—churches were meant to embody that faith. Though frequently his nightmares were set within the walls of St. Rita's, he still considered the building an extension of his home. The preschool-slash-elementary-slash-junior high-slash-high school next to the parish lightened it up a little bit, from the outside, and he liked the juxtaposition of the cheerful playground equipment next to the heavy stone statue of St. Rita herself in front of the church. He tapped the base of her statue as he walked into the church, like he always did for good luck before saying mass. He was a man of ritual.

He heard organ music and gentle chatter as he walked through the door into the cool air. Judith, the organ player, was a sweetheart, but the way she played "How Great Thou Art" sent him into a rage. It was supposed to be a song exalting all of the glories of God's beautiful earth—not a funeral dirge. He could scarcely dwell on that today, though. What was he going to

do? Maybe he should have called in sick. Too late for that now, though—Agnes, a widower and one of the daily mass regulars, was already coming up to greet him. He desperately wished for her not to say what he expected she was going to say.

“Good morning, Father. Are you okay? You look warm.”

“Yes, it’s—

“Terrible news this morning, isn’t it? I mean, I’m okay with whatever anyone wants to do in his bedroom—none of my business—but I don’t see why they have to get married, it’s not like they can have children.”

“Yes, you’re right, Agnes, of course—excuse me, I have to go and get changed, I’ll see you after mass—”

“Father Leary, are you sure you’re not ill? I’ve heard there was a bug going around—”

“I appreciate your concern, but I really am fine—I have to go and get ready, I’m sorry. I really am.”

It was worse than he expected. He ducked into his office—his sermon was already printed, it was sitting on his desk. He was a little senile, perhaps. He was talking about Peter today. The first Pope. He talked about Pope Francis in it, how the new Pope challenged Catholics to live with compassion—bland stuff, like “we must strive to treat all around us with love and respect, regardless of their politics.” So generic it could mean almost anything to anyone. No one could argue with that—not that they expected any argument from him. He wasn’t the type to go on tirades of morality.

He pulled the long white gown over his head and placed the green sash across his chest. Everyone was waiting for him. He had never gotten used to how important he supposedly was. “Father this” and “Father that” and “Father, what can I do for you?” He had done nothing to deserve the respect that they gave him—seminary certainly wasn’t easy, and he supposed he was reasonably well educated, but it’s not like he could save lives. There were plenty of better educated people in the congregation. Public speaking still made him nervous, too, even after doing it every day for so many years. Not cripplingly nervous—just a twinge of fear, over the possibility that he might say something shocking and unplanned, or trip and embarrass himself. Once, at his second parish, he had brushed by the altar servers too quickly, and the large flames from their tall white candles had caught his wide sleeve. He had squealed like some kind of farm animal and leapt about a foot into the air—it was not the dignified response that one wanted from their spiritual leader. Just thinking about the embarrassment made his cheeks burn.

His heart was beating quickly underneath his green sash as he walked out of his office and stood at the entrance to the chapel. He nodded at Judith, and she began her molasses-slow rendition of “How Great Thou Art.” *O Lord my God, when I in awesome wo-nder, consider all the world thy hand hath made, I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder, thy pow’r throughout the universe displayed.* By the end of the first verse, he was already standing in place at the altar. *Then sings my soul, my glory God to thee, how great thou art, how great thou art.* Judith pounded out the notes on the piano so hard that you could hear a great ‘clack clack’ as her rings struck the ivory. He wondered if anyone else noticed. When at last it was over, he nodded at her, and she beamed.

“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

From the pews came a loud, unified, “Amen.”

“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you.”

“And with your spirit.”

He began to relax—he couldn’t help himself. That was his favorite thing about the Catholic church—everything was a ritual. He could put himself on autopilot, and nobody would even notice. It was beautiful, and a little tragic. Once you begin to stop paying attention to one part of your life, it became a lot easier to stop paying attention to all of it. He didn’t want to stop paying attention, but he had. His life had passed him by because he had allowed himself to become numb to it. He said the things he was supposed to say, and the congregation said the things they were supposed to say, and maybe it was beautiful to some of them—maybe the words still meant something, to the old women in the pews, the good old women who lived for their families, not themselves. They came and sang their songs and said their prayers and they believed that by doing so they were safe. He wanted to be safe, too. He listened sang along with the psalm, feeling near tears, his mind burdened by the waste he had made of his life. Suddenly, everything seemed hopeless. His mouth was dry, and his stomach was turning. He was afraid they would be able to see how much he was sweating through his robes.

Judith clack-clack-clacked her way through every last refrain—he tried to keep his sermons short, because her organ playing took so long, but today he was grateful for the delay. He was dreading his sermon, dreading the words he knew he did not have the strength to say.

Coward. He stood up, and walked towards the lectern. He placed the crisp, typed white pages onto the blank wooden platform. He raised the microphone towards his mouth. The pews were mostly empty—there were only about fifteen people there, thirteen women and two men. Agnes was there, looking straight at him. He thought about what she had said earlier. *I don't care what people do in their bedrooms, but*—the but was what got him. *But. But. But.* A few rows back from Agnes sat Mrs. Flores, who always burnt the coffee. He realized that he didn't even know her first name. She would probably agree with Agnes—there were some things you just don't talk about. Almost everyone in the congregation was older than him—the youngest was probably in her fifties. They were his generation or older. He was sixty-two. People simply didn't speak of these things. It wasn't right.

He looked at his sermon, white pages framed by dark wood. He was a decent writer, he'd gotten good at writing sermons over the years. Just a few thin sheets of paper, full of words like love and kindness and faith, things he talked about at every single mass, so many times—so many platitudes—that none of the words meant anything at all to him anymore. He felt like he was miles away, looking down at himself. Agnes kept staring at him, expectant. He was conscious of how long he had been silent. People were beginning to shift around. He was making them uncomfortable. He started to read. “When Jesus said to Peter, ‘Upon this rock you must build your church,’ he was talking about all of us. He was speaking about each and every one of us—we are all the church, the church is made not of bricks or stone but of the human spirit. Our love and kindness—” he stopped. *Love and kindness*. Two intangible things that should mean everything to him—the currency of his very existence—but they meant nothing. *Love and kindness*. He thought about Sam, the gay kid, who made it out, away from Crater Lake

and away from St. Rita's, away from everything. He thought about Robert. When he was just starting out as a priest, he took a weekend off and went home to visit his mother. She was still healthy—she was a church lady herself—and she had heard from one of the other church ladies that Robert had gotten married. “You two used to be such good friends,” she said. “What happened?”

His stomach turned and turned. “When Pope Francis says we are called to love...” *What happened?* Robert, with his blond hair and his soft mouth. Married. The room was spinning. “I’m sorry, everyone, I’m just—I’m not feeling well.” More silence. He stepped back, away from the lectern. *Oh God, please.* A terrible, awful retching sound came out of his mouth and he threw up. The tall wooden pulpit blocked the worst of it from the congregation. He threw up again. Brown coffee sludge, vile yellow bile, soaking the crisp white pages. Judith was watching from the organ in the back, a look of motherly concern upon her face. Tentatively, Agnes called out—“Are you okay, Father?” He tried to speak but kept his mouth closed for fear more vomit would find its way out. Instead, he nodded, and turned and walked back down the aisle as quickly as he could—a procession in reverse. Several people tried to get up and follow him—including Agnes—but he waved them away, and—thank God—they left him alone.

He walked through the foyer, out into the oppressive humidity. There were dark brown coffee-vomit drips all the way down his white robes. It felt wrong to be wearing them outside of the church. Everything about today was wrong. He passed St. Rita, her imposing stone form, her lifeless eyes, and hurried back across the parking lot to the refuge of his quiet little house with the flowers out front and the shaded tree. He knew it wouldn’t be too long before concerned church ladies knocked on his door with saltines and ginger ale, offering to stay with

him until he was feeling better, or drive him to the doctor. He did not need a doctor, or ginger ale, or saltines. What he needed was a different life—if only there was a reset button. If only he had known the full price of cowardice. God had tested him—he had given him so many tests. Today, like every other day, was a test, and he had failed it—just like he had failed so many other tests.

He found a marker and a piece of cardboard and made a sign for the front door. *Thank you for your concern. I have a virus, and am now resting.* Then he walked upstairs, grabbed the bottle of Extra-Strength Tylenol off of his dresser, and chased the entire thing down with gagging gulps of whiskey from underneath the bed. He thought about Robert on his wedding day. He imagined his wife, pretty and blond and faceless. He laid down, gathering his white robes around him. His back wouldn't hurt anymore, there would be no more guilt, and no more secrets. He closed his eyes and tried to drift away. Then he retched, stuck his head over the side of the bed, a stream of white bullets and brown bile flowing out of him. Then the world went dark.

Two Years Later

He woke up with a start. It was a beautiful day, and soft light was filtering in through the light blue curtains. His little room was cheerful in the sunlight. It was small, and most of the space was taken up by his queen-sized bed. There were cars honking outside of his window—the delivery drivers got impatient with the workers at the Korean barbecue below. It was the best Korean barbecue in Queens. The food was delicious, and the owners were nice and held his key for him—he needed that, because years of living in the rectory in Crater Lake and never

locking his door had made him lose the habit. He groaned a little—his back was sore. He sat up slowly and hugged his knees to his chest. He did yoga at the YMCA down the street every Wednesday morning, and the stretching helped with his back pain. Sometimes he worked on the garden, with Tony. Tony had lost his husband to AIDS two years ago. He had lived just long enough for them to get married. He was still grieving—one of the reasons the two of them had become such fast friends after living such different lives was because he had spent so much of his time helping people grieve. Sometimes Tony would come over, and they would eat Korean barbecue and watch old Seinfeld episodes on the couch, or Tony would bring over a movie—usually something about detectives and old murder cases—and they would watch that. They would each have a beer, and sometimes he would hold Tony while he cried and told him stories about Bobby, his dead husband. He wished he could have met Bobby—he was a philosophy professor, with a focus on religion. They probably would have had a lot to talk about. Tony was bald, but he was tall so it kind of worked for him. He wasn't the most handsome man in the world himself. He wasn't looking for a lover—it would be a long time before either one of them was ready for that—but it was nice to have a friend.

He still went to mass on Thursdays and Sundays. Sometimes, on Thursdays when the crowds were less overwhelming, he would ride the subway into Manhattan. The city still scared him—he had moved to New York because he wanted to walk around without being recognized. He was sick of notoriety, and just wanted to live where nobody knew his name. He would walk over to St. Patrick's Cathedral because he like how massive it was, and how it was always full of tourists from all over the country and the world there to marvel at the imposing stone loops and angles and the ceiling's delicate engravings. It was nice to think that no matter how much

the world changed, people still admired the beauty created in God's name. It made him feel like his life was worth more than just the lonely years and the silence. When the organ began to play, and the hush fell over the congregation, and everyone—tourist and faithful alike—began to sing, he felt grateful for his faith and the years he gave to it. He listened to the slow, sweet chords of the hymns, and watch light streaming in through the stain glass windows—purple, and indigo, and red, and orange, and yellow, and green, all shining through. The color of a promise.

*And from the same simplified point of view
Of night and lying flat on one's back
All things might change equally easily,
Since always to warn us there must be these black
Electrical wires dangling. Without surprise
The world might change to something quite different,
As the air changes or the lightning comes without our blinking,
Change as our kisses are changing without our thinking.*

-Elizabeth Bishop

Theology of the Body

I was eating lunch in my office with Beth, the new art teacher. It was tentative. We met at the St. Rita's beginning-of-the-year meeting, and became friends after struggling to keep ourselves from laughing when old principal Miller took forever getting the computer presentation to work. She had short, light brown hair and wore winged eyeliner to school every day. The lines were always straight—she was a painter. I liked her, but she was reserved—we had never had a real conversation. I was lonely for friendship and I thought it seemed like she might be, too.

“Why did you move to Crater Lake? And take a job at St. Rita's, then, since—”

“Since I'm gay?”

“Um...I guess—”

“I'm messing with you, don't worry. I know you don't care, I could tell when I first met you.”

“Really?”

“Sure! I even wondered if—you know—”

“If I was gay?”

“Well—yeah. But then you brought up your husband, and it was clear that you would be a friend. But just a friend. No homo.”

“No homo, indeed.”

I took a bite of my salad. I hadn't put enough dressing in it and the spinach taste was not well camouflaged.

"I'm sure growing up here you didn't encounter many gay people, did you?"

"No, I can't say that I did. I mean, of course there were kids who we all thought—who seemed like maybe they were when I was in high school, but everyone waited until they graduated to come out. I don't blame them, it's a small town. We may have gotten more diverse in some ways, but other things don't change."

"That was certainly true for me—I never would have come out in high school."

"Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Why did you move here?"

Beth took a bite of her sad, school-lunch salad. I regretted bringing it up.

"I'm sorry, I—"

"No, don't be sorry! I was living in Minneapolis, working at this gallery, and painting on the side, and I was—well, I was living with this woman I was crazy about. She was older, and she had this cool political job at the capital, working for the governor, and I really thought we were going to make it."

"But you didn't."

“Right. She—well, she met someone else. Someone more...solid than me. She always seemed to think of me as this flaky artist type, which I don’t even think is true. Like, I messed around when I was younger, of course, but by the time I met her I had a decent job and I was taking care of things just fine.”

“So you guys broke up. But why move here? Why not try Chicago, or New York, or, I don’t know, somewhere warm?”

“My parents are from Iowa, and I like the Midwest. I looked up “art teacher jobs in Iowa” and St. Rita’s was the first one that came up. So I took it.”

“That’s brave.”

“Is it? It felt cowardly, at the time.”

“No, I think it’s brave. You took a risk—you didn’t even know anyone here.”

“Well, I know someone now. And I like it here. It’s adorable.”

“Yeah, I guess it’s pretty cute.”

“Why did you come back?”

“Um—well, Sebastian had always wanted to raise his kids here, and both of our families immigrated here—it was hard, when they moved, nobody here spoke Spanish and of course some people were racist assholes. And I want Melanie to know her grandparents. Plus it’s cheap, Sebastian works for the city, and I’m a school counselor, so we didn’t feel like we could afford to live anywhere more exciting. We thought about moving to Des Moines, but we figured if we were going to be boring and stay in Iowa anyway, we might as well commit to it.”

“I don’t think you’re boring.”

“Thanks—you’re wrong, though. But I don’t regret it. It’s good having a sense of community—St. Rita’s really is a community. And I like Crater Lake, despite myself.”

We both paused to chew. The leaves were just barely beginning to turn outside of my window. Beth had just the sliver of a tattoo poking out from underneath her short-sleeved shirt.

“Do you still go to church?”

She said it quietly, like she was afraid the room was bugged or something.

“I do. I guess I’m not that religious, personally. I stopped going in college but I go with my parents and Sebastian. Mostly for Melanie, though. And it’s easier.”

“The path of least resistance.”

“Right. Father Leary is pretty boring, but at least his sermons are short.”

“Weekly mass still takes forever, though.”

“I always wanted to skip mass when I went here.”

“Did you?”

“No, I wasn’t cool enough. Or I was too guilty. Sometimes I felt guilty just thinking about skipping mass.”

“I used to skip class to smoke cigarettes in the parking lot.”

“Oh no, you were cool in high school, weren’t you?”

“I was rebellious.”

“My only rebellion was getting pregnant at twenty and—”

“You got pregnant at twenty?”

“Yeah. And married. And finished college—”

“And moved back to your hometown. Real rebellious.”

“Yeah. I know I’m not—”

“That’s impressive. I barely graduated on time, and I didn’t give birth halfway through college. You’re really smart.”

“Sebastian was really good about helping. I don’t know, though. The decision to have Melanie—of course, I love her. I can’t regret her. But it was such—we were so young, we still are. It wasn’t planned, of course. If I’d had a different sort of childhood and been less Catholic or been a more—rebellious person, I guess, my life would be so different.”

“I think it’s natural to wonder about stuff like that.”

“I guess you’re right.”

I realized I had finished my salad and dropped my Tupperware into my backpack. I usually packed a lunch. Beth always ate at the salad bar at school. She liked to have a carton of chocolate milk with her meal. It was cute, like she was a little kid or something. She had hazel eyes, and a pointy nose—I bet she hated it, but I thought it was nice. It fit her face, made her

pretty in an interesting way. I felt strange, drunk on my own honesty. The bell was about to ring.

“Will I see you over break?”

Beth and I were perched on the long, paint-spotted art room tables, munching on a plate of Christmas cookies we had liberated from the teacher’s lounge.

“I’ll try.”

“Try hard, please.”

“I want to see you, too.”

She reached over and kissed me.

“Try very, very hard.”

“I’ll text you.”

With Sebastian, everything had happened so quickly—I was a sophomore in college with a cute boyfriend on the track team, and then I was pregnant, and then I was a wife. He was only the second person I had ever kissed—which made Beth the third. Or did lady kisses count in the same category? I supposed they must. With Beth, we were friends—best friends—but I had never had a friend like her before. Usually, with friends, I didn’t wonder where they were, what they were doing, every hour of every day. It had been like that with Beth, since the beginning. If

being with Sebastian was like an old pair of sweatpants, being with Beth was a sparkly New Year's Eve dress—she was a special occasion.

I kissed her again, quickly this time, and walked out the door. The floor in the hallway outside of my office were slick with wet gray footprints, but the teenagers who had made them were gone. The bells on my massive red and green sweater jangled as I walked away from my best friend and towards my husband and child. It was the last day of classes before Christmas Break, and all of us young teachers had agreed to wear ugly Christmas sweaters to cheer the students up at their finals. Beth wore a huge men's sweatshirt with a cotton ball snowman hot-glued onto it. Typical art teacher things.

The stairs outside of the school were shiny with ice, and I nearly tripped as I hurried down them. Melanie saw me stumble and grab onto the freezing hand rail, and laughed. She had practically come out of the womb laughing. Sebastian leaned over and kissed me when I slid into the passenger seat. He tasted like the spearmint Altoids he kept in the glove compartment, and his beard was rough against my cold skin. It was nothing like kissing Beth, and I could almost pretend that this kiss could override the previous one. Almost. I knew that night I would fall asleep thinking about the way her hair fell wild over her back as she twirled around to grab a bottle of paint off the supply shelf, or her body, soft and hidden underneath that gigantic sweatshirt, pressed up against mine. Even as my husband's sturdy arms reached around me and held me close, I would be thinking of her.

“Were you planning on cooking tonight?”

Sebastian was looking over at me. Of course I was planning on cooking tonight. We were the school counselor and the Parks and Recreation director—we couldn't exactly afford to eat out every night.

"Of course I'm cooking tonight. I was going to make pasta."

"Again?"

"Yes, again. We're out of everything else, and we have to use up that marinara."

"We could run to the store."

"I'm tired. And I don't want the sauce to go to waste."

He looked disappointed, and I immediately felt terrible—for my tone, for not going to the store with him. Sebastian loved Hyvee. I imagined telling him—just coming out with it, saying "Hey babe, so, guess what, I'm having an affair with my female best friend. Don't worry, I'm probably not going to leave her for you." I was nauseous, and sticky underneath my massive sweater. I could still taste her chapstick on my mouth—it tasted like bubblegum. She used the free chapstick from the dentist. I wondered what she was doing. Was she happy? Was she thinking about me, too?

I looked out the window, at the lake in the distance, and the little shops and restaurants that made up downtown. Crater Lake wasn't exactly a bustling metropolis, but it had its own quaint charms. It was known as a vacation spot—as far as a small town in Iowa could be a destination. The tourists were primarily comprised of families from other nearby small Iowa towns. We were special because we had a lake, and until the late nineties, scientists believed

that the basin came from the meteor that killed the dinosaurs. We had a dinosaur-themed restaurant, and a small museum, and a big statue of a stegosaurus by the lakefront.

The car thudded as we pulled into our driveway. Our house was a cute little three-bedroomer with red paneling on the front and a massive rock in the front yard. We weren't sure why the previous owner had put the rock out front—it was not a particularly beautiful rock—but Melanie loved climbing on it, and I convinced Sebastian not to move it because I thought it gave the house character. There was a birch tree in the back, and Melanie loved pulling the bark off—the entire bottom trunk had been stripped naked.

“Yes, again. I think we're out of everything else.”

I had been nauseous for the entire car ride, and I jumped out the minute he cut the engine. I went around to the back and freed Melanie from her car seat. She had fallen asleep on the short drive from St. Rita's. The school was on the opposite side of town, but it was still a short drive. Everything in Crater Lake was a short drive. I kissed her little sleeping eyelids, pearly little seashells against her smooth face. Her eyelashes were as big as fans, and they cast shadows—just like Sebastian's. She was beautiful. I carried her inside and laid her into her crib. She had always been a good sleeper.

“Are you okay?”

“What?”

“Are you okay? It's just, you seemed quiet, and kind of mad about the grocery store. I wasn't criticizing your cooking or anything.”

“It’s fine, just, stressed about work.”

“I’m stressed about work, too. I manage to not be short with you.”

“You’re being a little short with me right now.”

He sighed. I sighed too. I was being exasperating, when I should have been loving.

“I’m sorry—Seb, I’m really sorry.”

He put his arms around me and squeezed me, then began to rub my shoulders. It was too much. I broke away, claiming a need for “private time.” I liked to stay mysterious, or as mysterious as you can be in a marriage. As soon as I shut the door, I began to sob. I was in love, and I was supposed to be ecstatic, but I felt awful. My desire—no, my need—to text Beth was incredibly powerful, which only made me feel worse. I wanted to run into Sebastian’s arms and tell him I would never leave him; I wanted to walk out of the door and run into her arms and never see him again. I wished we could all live together, and raise Melanie with two mommies and a daddy. I wanted everything, which surely meant that I deserved nothing.

“Are you sure?”

“Pass me the bottle.”

I took a swig.

She was looking at me, and the three dollar bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon we were sharing had dyed her lips red. We were parked by the lake, on a freakishly warm February evening, and she was straddling me.

“Were you avoiding me?”

“Not avoiding—just busy with family, the holidays and all.”

“I was busy, too.”

“Please don’t be mad at me.”

“I’m not.”

“This is hard for me.”

“I can’t imagine. I feel guilty enough.”

“I don’t want to talk about it right now.”

She bent down and kissed me. She pulled my shirt off and unhooked my bra. I took hers off, too. Then I unbuttoned her pants. The moon reflected off of the top of the lake, it was lovely. She was lovely, too. I had always been an admirer of breasts—who isn’t, really—and she had nice ones, perky, with little rosebud nipples. I kissed one. She placed her mouth just below my ear and mumbled, “I wish this was all the time.” I wished too, except mine was a wish for love without complication. The stars were out in full force, and it smelled earthy and new and a little strange, like spring, even though it was only February. I felt myself thawing. She unbuttoned my pants. We moved to the back, and by the time we were finished, we could draw little pictures in the fog on the windows. I drew a cartoon dog. She drew an anatomically correct heart. I drove home dangerously, buzzed off cheap Hyvee wine and an unfamiliar body. Sebastian barely stirred when I crawled into bed next to him.

“I’m sorry, Camila, but I’m just not sure if I can do this anymore.”

We were eating lunch in my office, as usual, and she was looking solemn over her tuna salad. I hated tuna, and could barely tolerate the smell in such close proximity to me, but it seemed like such a petty thing to complain about that I rarely did.

“What do you mean, you can’t do this anymore?”

“You’re married. It’s not—it’s not that I’m judging you for anything, because—“

“You’re not judging me?”

“No! I know. I know it’s so hard for you, harder than it is for me. And I know that this isn’t what you want, and you feel awful about Sebastian—“

“Don’t—“

“—and I just don’t think I can keep doing this. I don’t think you can, either.”

“Of course I feel guilty.”

“But Camila—Camila, I think I’m in love with you.”

We both froze. It would have been scary enough with another man, but it was terrifying with a woman—because we had never said it out loud, because we both worked at a Catholic school and could lose our jobs if anyone got even a whiff of anything untoward happening between the two of us. We were in dangerous territory.

“And Camila—Camila, you know I understand, this is complicated, so much more complicated for you—but you don’t even know if you’re gay or not. That’s this whole other thing—yeah, you’re married, and you have a kid. I get that that’s fucked up, believe me, I do. I think about it every day. But I had to go through hell—I mean, really, I went through hell—to come out, and then I put myself back in the closet for this job, and being with you is this even deeper closet. I feel awful for being the one who wants to end things, but I think you know that this is bad—“

“Beth—“

“This is bad for both of us.”

“Beth, I’m going to leave Sebastian.”

It was what I thought I wanted.

“I can’t let you do that.”

She was crying, by now. Her pretty hazel eyes were leaking tears, and her mouth was clenched up in a most unbecoming manner. I felt my mind leave my body—I wasn’t sitting in my office at St. Rita’s Catholic school in Crater Lake, Iowa, anymore. I was floating above everything, somewhere in the atmosphere, watching my best friend break my heart like a dropped glass. I was relieved. I was devastated, and I was a whole person, at least.

“I hope you understand. I hope you’re not mad at me.”

“I would leave my husband for you, Beth. I will. I’ll do it right now.”

“I can’t ask you to do that.”

“You didn’t. I’m volunteering.”

“I still can’t let you do that.”

“I don’t need your permission.”

She was still crying.

“It’s not right, is it though?”

I wasn’t sure, not at all. I thought about Melanie. I pictured her tiny hands, with their tiny fingernails, and her tiny little nose and the way she smiled when she was asleep, and the way she had started talking nearly in full sentences, because she was so much smarter than she should be, considering her parents, and I wondered what it would be like for her to grow up with a mother who had left her father for another woman. It wouldn’t be easy. Maybe it would be better, though, for me to be happy. It would be good for her to have a happy mother.

“I regret so many things already and I’m only twenty-four. I don’t think I have much room for error. My marriage was maybe wrecked from the start.”

“Our relationship wouldn’t be starting out great.”

“I think I’m going to leave Sebastian anyway. I love you but that’s beside the point.”

“But Sebastian—”

“I love him. I probably will always love him—a little bit.”

“He’s a good person. He’s a good father.”

“I feel horrible—Beth, I’m just so tired of feeling horrible.”

"I'm sorry."

"That's easy for you to say."

"No, it isn't."

"Beth, it isn't your fault."

"I think I know that"

"We'll lose our jobs."

"I don't know. I'm not that upset about that."

"Maybe I'll go to grad school."

"I love you."

I kissed her. I had to go break up with my husband.

The house was quiet when I got home. Sebastian was sprawled out on the couch watching the Vikings game with the sound turned off. He always did that, he said it was because he liked to watch the game without being influenced by what the announcers were saying. He liked to make the calls himself, I guess. It was silly, but I understood—I hated reading movie reviews. He had already put Melanie to bed.

"Hey, babe."

I hated that I could tell just from the way he looked at me when I walked inside that he loved me. I hated that he loved me, and I hated that I still loved him. But it wasn't the same.

"Hey—Sebastian, I have to talk to you."

"You were out pretty late tonight, again. Beth?"

"Yeah. Beth. I'm sorry."

"No, it's okay. I know it's good for you to have some friend time."

"No, it's not okay."

"What do you mean?"

I sat down next to him. I couldn't make my mouth say the words I needed to say.

"Camila, what is it?"

"Sebastian—I've—I've been a bad wife."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't deserve you—you're too nice, and good to me, and you're such a good dad, and I might be making the biggest mistake of my life right now, I don't know—"

"Camila, are you having an affair?"

He had sat up, and inched away from me. I kept my head down. I couldn't look at him.

"I've known there was something going on with you. You always say you're with Beth, but you come home late, and any time I try to initiate—"

“I’m so sorry—“

“No. Who is it?”

“It’s—“

“I just don’t understand why you would do this. I thought that I was giving you—that we were making a good life, here. I thought you were happy. Why aren’t you happy?”

“You can’t just ask someone why they’re not happy.”

“Well, if you’re cheating on me, then I think I deserve to know why you’re not happy.”

“I’m not—“

“Who is he?”

The dent in the couch we had bought together held my butt perfectly. I thought about how many times we had sat there together, my legs over his, his hand on my thigh, watching Breaking Bad or Mad Men or The Bachelor, it didn’t matter, we were together. It was bright red—to make the room pop. I had picked out the color. He hadn’t been sure, but when we brought it home, and he saw how it brightened up the living room, he had grabbed me and kissed me. “You have an eye for this kind of thing,” he said. “I sure can pick ‘em,” I said back.

“It’s not a he.”

He looked at me, not comprehending what I said.

“It’s Beth.”

He looked away.

“I’m an idiot.”

“No—you’re not an idiot. Sebastian. You’re not—“

“I married a lesbian. Clearly I’m an idiot.”

“I’m not a lesbian.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I don’t think I’m a lesbian, okay?”

“But you’re with Beth.”

“Well—yes. I am. But I was with you too.”

“Obviously you weren’t really with me.”

“I was! Sebastian, I love you.”

“Look—I can’t—“

“I’m so sorry—“

“I can’t believe this. So are you leaving me?”

I started crying.

“Don’t cry—“

I realized that he had been crying, too.

“Yes, I think I am.”

“Camila—”

“I’m so sorry, Sebastian. I’m so sorry.”

I ran into the bedroom and grabbed a few things. My college sweatshirt. A sweater—shit, that was Sebastian’s, originally—a change of underwear. Jeans. What was I doing? I ran out, and into Melanie’s room. I picked her up out of her cradle and hugged her to me. She was asleep, and I kissed her forehead as many times as I could and whispered things to her. *Your mama loves you. She is so, so sorry. She loves you more than you will ever know.* Finally, I set her down and walked out of the room. I grabbed my coat from the chair where I’d flung it when I had come in. Sebastian was sitting on the couch, just sitting. He didn’t say anything.

“I’m so sorry, Sebastian. I love you. I don’t know—maybe I’m just a selfish person. Maybe things just don’t always end up like we think they will. I’m so sorry.”

He just kept looking down. I walked out of the house, got into my car, and drove to Beth’s apartment. She met me at her door with two shots of whiskey in her hands. I gulped down both and then collapsed onto the kitchen floor.

“I’m so sorry.”

I didn’t say anything. She crawled down next to me, and hugged me. There was nothing left to say between us.

Two Years Later

“Do you think the sun looks too smiley? There’s something creepy about how happy he looks.”

“I love it. It’s so bright.”

“I hope Mel likes it.”

“You know she will. She likes everything you do.”

“Well, she isn’t old enough to know what I did.”

“Quit it. You didn’t do anything. She’ll hate me, when she understands.”

“She’ll never hate you. Well, maybe when she’s a teenager. But she’ll get over it.”

We had just purchased an apartment in downtown Omaha. Beth was working at a museum there, and I was getting a Master’s degree at Creighton so I could be a real psychologist. It was only a two hour’s drive from Crater Lake, and I went to visit Melanie almost every weekend. Sebastian and I had started talking again—really talking, not just discussing Melanie’s sleep schedule and preschool class. I called him every night so I could hear her voice. He hadn’t forgiven me, yet, and I wasn’t sure I deserved his forgiveness, but we were co-parenting pretty well. Melanie loved Beth. The weekends we had her, the two of them would fingerpaint and tear up construction paper to make homemade confetti and generally make a mess of things. I loved watching them.

“Should we have spaghetti or lasagna tonight?”

“Lasagna.”

“I’ll make a salad.”

I leaned over and kissed her. She was wearing her painting sweatshirt, which was oversized and blue, and black leggings with a hole in the crotch. They were her “inside pants.” We had made quite a stir when we left Crater Lake—the principal of St. Rita’s had sent us a letter telling us he “hoped we realized the error of our ways and made right with God.” We both missed our students, and the lake, but I knew that I had made the right choice, for myself, at least. My life was nothing like I had thought it would turn out, and I was all the happier because of it. Beth left to go start dinner, and I looked at the mural she had painted for my baby. There was a big smiley sun, with square sunglasses, and rays shining down over a deep blue lake. Swaying pine trees surrounded the lake, except for a big sandy beach, where tiny little dots of people in colorful swimming suits played. There was even a tiny dinosaur statue behind the beach. Melanie would love it.

“Do you want tomatoes in the salad?” Beth hollered from the kitchen.

“Sure!” I yelled back.

My life had turned out to be nothing like what I thought it would be, and I was all the happier for it.

Transubstantiation

*God knew no East no West no South
no Skin nothing I learned like
traditions of sin but later
I survived His innocence
without my own
-June Jordan*

Most small towns generate within them an uncanny energy, an eternity, a sort of magnetic beating heart buried underneath City Hall or your high school parking lot that echoes with every pump—*return, return, return*. I feel that way about Crater Lake, at least. The fog from the lake in early spring sinks into me. The old adage about never seeing a new face in your dream—that’s what Crater Lake is to me, recycled faces from a Neverland where they never change and I never get any older.

I was running in Forest Park, near the zoo entrance—I slowed down and decided to look at the monkeys. Say what you want about St. Louis, they have a nice zoo. Gregory took me there on our first date. I wasn’t very good at dating men yet—I guess I’m still not, now I’m only good at dating Gregory—and I tried to pay for both of our tickets and got mad at the cashier when she refused my money because I thought she kept giving it back because she was uncomfortable with gay people but really she was a volunteer and the zoo is free. It was a chilly fall evening, so the sidewalk leading by the monkey cages was mostly empty. Three baboons walked in a conga line, bobbing up and down, each with his long monkey arms around the waist of the animal in front. They smelled terrible, but their silly dance made me laugh—I pulled out my phone to take a video for Gregory. My stomach flipped—I had a missed call from my mother. We only spoke on Sundays or if there was bad news—it was a Wednesday.

I hit the call back button. She picked up on the second ring.

“Leo, honey?”

“Hey, Mom.”

“Listen—are you at home? Where are you?”

“I’m out for a run—”

“I have some bad news, honey.”

“I can just—”

“You’re going to have to come home.”

Ten Years Earlier

“Fuck, how are you going to get your mom to agree to let you stay out that late? Are you gonna tell her we’re at my house? Because you know they’ll end up talking about it—”

“I’m telling her I’m going to see Sam. His dad works the night shift so they’ll never see each other. She thinks his mom still lives there.”

My Mom got uncomfortable when she found out people in my class had divorced parents. I guess she thought I would be shielded by that at Catholic school. Just because people are religious doesn’t mean they always follow that religion, though. Lots of kids at St. Rita’s have divorced parents—one time, at the Assumption mass in sixth grade, Kayla’s mom crossed her arms during communion and Megan told the whole religion class about it by asking Father Leary why during our monthly “Ask a Priest” session. He seemed really uncomfortable when he tried to explain why divorce was bad. I think Mrs. Petersen pulled Megan aside to yell at her after class.

“My mom’s strict too but at least she’s not a bitch.”

“What the fuck, you can’t just call my mom a bitch.”

Nick was lucky I wasn’t the kind of guy who beat people up. He definitely deserved a good punch now and then. He felt far too free to say what was on his mind. We were sitting on the steps outside of the art room, killing time before we went home to chores and pre-algebra homework. Mrs. Garcia, the school counselor, was sitting on a desk talking to Ms. Stanley, the art teacher. They seemed like they were having a serious conversation. I wanted to know who they were talking about—I was assuming it was a student—but we could just barely see them in the window. Lots of people said Ms. Stanley was gay—they called her a dyke—but I thought she was nice, regardless. I liked how she let us pick our own projects in art class instead of making everyone do the same thing.

“I’m just saying. She kind of is. Remember when she told my mom she thought I was dyslexic just because I kept losing to you at Scrabble?”

“She was worried about you! She doesn’t know you’re an idiot.”

“It’s not my fault Scrabble is a dumb fucking game that you only like because you’re a fucking nerd.”

“Oh yeah, because you’re cool.”

“Shut up. Neither of us is cool. Which is why we’re going to pretend on Saturday night.”

On Thursday, after cross country practice, Chase Barrett and Logan Graves—juniors to our eighth graders, varsity runners and leagues above us in terms of coolness—had invited us

to “night games” on Saturday. We were to meet in St. Rita’s parking lot at eleven. No telling our parents what we were doing. Dress in dark colors and running shoes.

“What are we even doing?”

“Night games.”

“Like, kick the can?”

“No, like, it’s a secret ritual or something. Because we’re going to be in high school next year, we’re getting initiated.”

“We’re getting hazed.”

“No, it just means they like us.”

“My mom made me promise I wouldn’t join a frat in college because she read an article about hazing.”

“We’re not joining a frat and we’re not getting hazed.”

“I want to believe you but I’m not sure I can.”

“I’m okay with that.”

Nick and I have been best friends since we were four. He was loud and conspicuous. I do everything in my power not to be. Our best friendship—our unitdom, the way people referred to us as “Nick and Leo,” all one word, like one could not be imagined without the other—was my greatest blessing and my greatest curse. Despite enduring years of taunts accusing us of

something more incriminating than friendship, we stuck together. I wasn't even sure if I liked him. He was just there, and he kept being there, and I couldn't imagine him not being there.

"Should we meet first? My mom won't let me leave that late, we'll have to go somewhere first."

"Let's just say we're going night fishing. Around eight."

"Then we'll have to bring poles and all that shit."

"Fine, we can fish. Then to Sam's."

"Where will we actually sleep?"

"We'll say Alex wasn't feeling well and go to your place. Your parents will be asleep when we get there, they won't be mad when they wake up and we're all tucked in safe."

"That's probably true."

"Are you sure we should do this?"

"Yes. My god, chill the fuck out, okay? Just calm the fuck down."

"Okay, Nick. I'm just nervous about this, okay?"

"I know. You're always nervous. It's going to be fun, okay?"

I wanted to believe him. I was also aware that Nick was a terrible judge of character, and also probably of intent. There was a big chance that the only reason we were invited was to fuck with us. I wasn't sure how I felt about that—a part of me was terrified, and a part of me was bored and looking for any kind of excitement, even if it meant being publicly humiliated.

The worst that would happen, I assumed, was that we would be pantsed or something. Maybe they would make us drink beer until we puked, or something.

“Okay. It’ll be fun.”

“I have to go home. My mom is still pissed about my grade on that history test last week. I have to stay in and watch a documentary about World War II tonight as punishment. It’s going to suck balls.”

“Good luck with that.”

“See you tomorrow. For our “movie.”

“Bye, Nick.”

I watched him while he drove away. He had gotten tall, in the past few months or so. His hair was getting curlier and was still streaked with blond from a summer spent swimming and fishing and biking around. He was like oxygen to me, but I had started noticing him lately, and I couldn’t stop. It made me nervous, but I wasn’t sure why. I told myself it was because I was jealous—he was taller than me, and had a deeper voice, and was more outgoing and generally more memorable than I was. I told myself it was normal to pay attention to your friends. I told myself a lot of things I wasn’t sure I believed.

After

I spent so much of my teenage years trying to pretend that I was a normal teenage boy, that nothing had happened. I pretended so hard that I almost convinced myself that it was true.

It was such a tempting lie. I got a part-time job lifeguarding at the lake in the summer. I ran cross-country and track. I graduated middle of my class and went to a state college. I slept in late, went to all of my classes and did all of my homework and raised my hand. I went to parties and talked to girls. I went on dates. I ran track for the intramural team and wrote for the campus newspaper and stage managed several plays. I did well—I played my part with a nonchalance that easily disguised myself. Except for when I didn't. There were days I woke up and everything seemed gray and slightly out of focus, and the thought of going to meet friends for a meal or going to class or even reading a sentence seemed insurmountable. I think of those types of days as my trysts with the void—part paralysis, part memory, part need for an oblivion that will not come. I'm never suicidal, exactly—I'm numb. I lie and say I have migraines, when I feel like that. It's easier.

I called in sick to work the day after my mom called. I had spent the night at Gregory's, rigidly sitting on his couch as he tried to come up with the right thing to say. There was no such thing. I don't like to be hugged when I'm upset—I don't like feeling exposed, in that way. Or maybe I just feel like if I start to let myself cry while someone's holding me I'll never stop. The thing is, as much as I love Gregory, he'll never be able to stop any of this—he can't change a past he was never a part of, no matter how much he wants to make things easier on me. It doesn't help me to see him wish he could change things. He wants to go to the funeral with me—it's an attempt, on his part, to understand me. I'm afraid if I bring him home with me I'll be exposing my soft underbelly, giving Crater Lake one more way to hurt me. I said that I would think about it, then drove myself home, peeled off all of my clothes, and crawled into bed. I felt nothing.

Ten Years Earlier

I dressed in my darkest pair of jeans and a black sweatshirt. It was mid-September, still warm out, but chilly enough at night to warrant long sleeves. I hoped Chase and Logan wouldn't be mad at me for not wearing black pants. The only kind I had were the running tights my mother had gotten for me, and I was too embarrassed to wear those—they showed everything. I put shorts over them at practice, but that seemed like a weird choice for whatever we were getting up to. To say I was apprehensive would be an understatement. I was terrified. All day—as I raked leaves and helped my dad mow (he had been saying “last time before winter!” for several weeks now) and went to Hyvee with my mom to get burgers for dinner and helped my little sister Addie with her word search—the bottom of my stomach had been churning in anticipation of whatever tricks awaited us that night. I would have cancelled, if Nick hadn't been so damn excited. I just couldn't bail on him—the thought of him showing up alone was much more tragic than the idea of both of us getting humiliated. So I had told my parents I was meeting him at Crater Lake Cinema to see *The Dark Knight* one more time before it left theaters, and I put on my dark clothing.

The bike ride out to the lake took less than twenty minutes, and I took my time, really feeling every stroke of the pedal, every slight incline or descent. Northwest Iowa is a flat place—“you can watch your dog run away from you for miles,” my grandpa used to say. He owned a farm about an hour away from here. He never made any money—our corner has the worst soil, in a state known exclusively for its soil. My dad really dreamed big when he moved

away from the farm, to a town with a lake, no less. I was going to do much better. I wanted to be a comedian, and live in a big city—Chicago, LA, or New York. Or maybe Seattle. Somewhere bigger than here, anyway, where I could walk into the grocery store without every face being a familiar one. I kept the comedy part a secret from everyone, though. I was too quiet to be funny, people would laugh at me if they knew that was what I wanted to do, and not in the way I wanted people to laugh at me. Nick was the only one who knew—we would watch stand up specials together on Youtube, people like Dave Chappelle and Chris Rock, and try to mimic the way they told stories. Nick could mimic their swear words, too, but I was still too afraid of being overheard by my teachers or parents. A big factor in my lack of coolness was my overwhelming fear of authority figures.

I crested the hill right before the lake, and it spread out in front of me, resplendent in its deep blue, still sparkling from the memory of sunlight. It was dusk, a little before eight, and the sun had already passed beneath the horizon, but the glow still remained, and the sky was a soft lavender. I had gotten expensive lights for my bicycle as a birthday present, so I could stay out later on my own—my parents hated driving me around as much as I hated being driven. They cast shadows on the pavement. I looked around for Nick’s bike, but couldn’t find it. I was ten minutes early. He would be at least ten minutes late, just like he always was.

After

I don’t think about what happened every day, like I used to, but I’m thinking about it tonight. I’m sure it was worse for Nick. It was worse for me in high school—the terror I felt every

time I left my house, afraid that he would be waiting for me around the corner. The way my skin used to crawl when we would sit behind his family in church. He would come back for summer breaks and winter holidays. Sometimes he would smile in my direction. I don't know if he was trying to fuck with me or not. Sometimes I wonder if he even knew what he did, if maybe in his mind he has assembled the events of that night into something we both chose, a mistake we both made, drunk and inexperienced and fumbling. My memory is like a jigsaw puzzle, fragmented and random, and I can never look at the pieces for too long. He has the same pieces, but maybe he sees things differently.

He has a wife now. She is small and blond, with a bland face and a cheerleader name. Dani? Tiffani? Something that ends with an i. She isn't his type. She looks nothing like me. I've tried to learn not to hate myself for it, but he's my type, too—I like men who are small but powerful. I was taller than him, but he was stronger than me. Gregory is 5'7 with curly brown hair, too. Chase works at a bank and Gregory is a civil engineer—he tests bridges to make sure they're safe. Once he caught me on Chase's facebook page and he didn't say anything, just shut my computer and went into the kitchen and made two mugs of tea with whiskey we drank in silence on my bed. He knows I don't like to talk about it. I want to ask him to move in with me, but I don't want him to know that I need him. We kiss and touch and have sex and it does not hurt me. I am proud that I can still do this. It makes me feel victorious, somehow, that there are parts of me that were left unscathed, that I can still give and receive various kinds of love. Gregory makes more money than me—he has a nicer apartment. I don't want him to think that I'm using him, but we stay at each other's apartments almost every night, anyway. He wanted to come

over tonight but I told him I was too tired, that I wanted some alone time. It's the truth. He always tries to cheer me up but that's not what I need tonight.

He's going to come with me to Crater Lake. It's a seven hour drive. He's never met my parents before, but I think they will like him. They would like him better if he was a woman but at least he's an engineer, and he grew up Catholic, too. It will be good to have him at the funeral. When my mom called she told me I needed to come—that I needed closure. She's probably right, even if she only knows half of what it is I need closure for. I've tried to forget—it's easy, when I'm with Gregory, or out on the town after work with friends. It's more difficult when I'm alone in my apartment, with its thin cheap walls and the footsteps upstairs, navy blue sheets and a double bed and a black futon left over from college. It's not that it's such a bad place, it's just that I feel like I can't recognize the version of myself that lives here. I'm still stuck—to a part of myself I'll always be Leo the fourteen year old from Crater Lake, Iowa, not Leo the twenty-four year old adult living in St. Louis. It's hard not to feel like I'm running away from myself.

Ten Years Earlier

“Should we head over soon? It's getting late and it's like a fifteen minute bike ride.”

“Will you calm down? It's the SRPL. They're not gonna be worried if we're there on time.”

“It's not like we're doing anything else, we might as well head over to what it is we're doing with our night—”

“God, Leo, can you stop being such a pussy, just this once? It’s going to be fine. It’s going to be fun.”

“I don’t know what your idea of fun is—”

“You don’t really think I would have gotten invited anywhere unless it was to make fun of me, do you?”

“That’s not true—”

“Yeah, it is true, and maybe you think of yourself that way but that’s—”

“That’s not true, and you aren’t—”

“I for one don’t want to go into high school thinking I can only hang out with one person and only do one thing and everything else is obviously some kind of joke because I can’t be taken seriously—”

“Nick, I don’t think this is about you, I think it’s just weird—”

“You can just be such a fucking asshole but you act like it’s just because you’re looking out for me, and that’s not fucking helpful, is it Leo, because I already have a fucking mother, you’re supposed to be my best friend and—”

“Okay, Nick, okay! We can wait and show up later! It’s fine!”

“Good. It better be fucking fine.”

Nick had filled a water bottle with some of his dad’s Wild Turkey and brought it along. We had been sitting by the lake, next to the stegosaurus statue—old Stieg--fishing for bluegill

and throwing everything we caught back into the lake, cracking jokes and passing the bottle back and forth. I had been feeling better about the night—even excited, maybe—until he had started mentioning that there might be girls from our class there, as well. I wasn't even sure if we were going to a party or not. I had heard about the SRPL—St. Rita's Parking Lot—as a place kids went to drink and hang out. I wasn't sure if “night games” were considered a part of those activities, but that's what we were doing, so I was going to find out.

It had always seemed strange to me that teenagers chose the parking lot between the school and the church to rebel in, especially because cops drove by there all the time, but nobody ever got caught so either the cops didn't care or the teenagers had convinced them that they were participating in more wholesome activities than what they really were. We were going to find out, I supposed. The closer we got to eleven, the more nervous I got—and Nick wasn't happy with me. I think he thought that the whiskey would be enough to stamp out my fears. It dulled some of them, but brought others to the forefront—there was something painful about sitting that close to Nick, looking out at the water on such a beautiful night, completely absorbed in our friendship, with him only thinking of what would come after. I wanted him to be there, the same way that I felt like I was being there. I also knew that my wish was impossible to grant.

We sat in silence for a while longer.

“Okay, it's time.”

He threw the empty plastic water bottle into a patch of trees near where we were sitting. One was tall, with a hollow trunk. I placed the bottle into the tree. It seemed less like

littering that way. Nick stashed the fishing poles underneath a patch of nightshade bushes. It was early enough in the fall for things to still be green, and the leaves surrounding us felt cool to the touch, like little fingers. I shivered.

“To women and high school and whiskey. Let’s go!”

His proclamation embarrassed me, as did his eagerness for the entire venture. I put on my helmet, and hopped on my bike. The whiskey really hit me when I stood up. I felt a little off balance, everything seemed a little friendlier. He turned on his lights and I turned on mine, too, and followed him onto the sidewalk. I was glad he hadn’t gone into the street. My dad always told me stories about a kid he knew growing up who got hit by a car and lost his mind—he had been smart, or at least average, but after his accident he was in a wheel chair and had to go to special ed. He could barely even feed himself. I would rather die than end up like that. There weren’t too many cars on the road—Crater Lake isn’t the kind of town you have to worry about traffic in—but it was late enough that no one would be watching out for two kids on bikes.

The wind cut my face and made my eyes burn. It had gotten colder. I regretted not wearing a jacket over my sweatshirt. Ah well—Nick would have made fun of me, and I would have regretted wearing it, anyway. It was just like how all of the guys in my grade wore shorts in the winter and no one ever wore heavy coats, as if being a man had something to do with the ability to withstand weather-based discomfort. Maybe it did. I still cried when I had to get shots and had my dad tie my ties for me. I wasn’t exactly the pinnacle of masculinity.

“The light in the rectory’s on.”

“Woah, crazy night for old Leary.”

“I bet he’s up looking at kiddie porn.”

“Shit, you went there.”

“Or probably the old dude’s into tits. I bet he likes really, really big boobs. Like Ana’s mom.”

“Oh yeah, one time at a field trip one of hers smacked into my shoulder. It was like getting hit with a water balloon. It really—”

“Shit, that’s really gross.”

It was gross. Mostly I just felt embarrassed, which was exacerbated by the fact that I didn’t know if I felt embarrassed for myself or for Mrs. Larino. We pulled into the parking lot. There were four cars at the far end—by the statue of St. Rita. I thought I could make out a few person-sized dark spots over by the tall stone saint.

“Look—”

“They beat us here, I guess.”

“I told you—”

“We look cooler, showing up later.”

“Okay, well, we should go, then—”

He was already going. He flashed his lights a few times and then rode up right to the statue. There were about six of St. Rita’s finest sitting around her, two sophomore girls I recognized from last spring’s production of *Bye Bye Birdie* sitting on the little stone bench and

four junior guys sprawled out on the grass, including Chase and Logan. They were all holding cans of Busch Light. Logan pulled two more out from the box he was sitting next to and passed them to us as we sat down.

“We had whiskey already.”

I had meant to sound cool, but instead I sounded like my mom did when she scolded my dad for having more than one glass of wine with dinner. Logan laughed. I couldn't tell if he meant it to be mean or not. The prettier of the two girls—one was skinny and brunette with a symmetrical heart-shaped face and the other was heavier and blond with a squat, slightly upturned nose—looked at me encouragingly.

“Liquor before beer, you're in the clear, beer before liquor, never been sicker—”

“I thought it was the other way?”

“It doesn't rhyme the other way.”

Chase pointed first at the brunette, then the blonde. “Lorena, Michelle.” Then to the two guys sitting on either side of the bench. One had on a St. Rita's Varsity Soccer sweatshirt on. The other was wearing a Patagonia fleece. Both were of the variety of adolescent male whose facial features look blurry to the degree that they actually become indistinguishable from one another. “Nick, Jacob.”

“I'm also Nick!”

I tried not to let my cringe show through. We were not playing it cool.

“Look at that, two Nicks.”

I looked up at the statue of St. Rita, hoping that perhaps she would lend us some of her divine powers. She was the patron saint of impossible cases, difficult marriages, and loneliness. Not exactly a party girl. I had always wondered why we had such a bumner of a saint—the other Catholic school in our district was St. Patrick’s, and they had a live snake for a mascot and a cool shamrock logo. St. Rita was Italian, and everyone here is either Scandinavian or Latino. Whoever had sculpted her had intended for her face to look reverent and peaceful, but the slight smile on her lips did not extend to her eyes, and she ended up looking kind of dead inside.

After

The theater I work at, an old movie theater called “The Fabulous Fox,” is putting on *Hamlet*, and the old guy who plays the ghost keeps scaring the shit out of me by dragging his chains when he walks past the office to go to the bathroom. I do marketing for them—basically, I am the marketing department—and I get my own office, right between the green room and the bathroom. I’ll be deep into some press release I’m working on, then clang, clang, clang. I’m being haunted.

I don’t make very much money, but it’s my first job out of college. Gregory thinks being around theater people is good for me—lots of gay people. I didn’t come out until the end of college so I’m not used to having gay friends. Gregory thinks it will help me be more in touch with my emotions. I think I’m plenty in touch with my emotions—in touch enough to know that there are some things I just don’t want to feel. I think that’s my prerogative.

The other day, Hamlet's father was hitting the can while I was reading Nick's obituary. *Clang, clang, clang. He had suffered with his addiction for a long time.* He was only twenty-four. *He was a beloved son and a child of God.* Sure, he went to St. Rita's all his life—they always told us we were children of God. *His family, friends, and girlfriend will miss him.* I never met her, but she seemed sweet—I know they met in rehab, and they relapsed together, but I've heard she's clean now. He always liked petite brunettes. She was just his type. I wonder if he ever told her what happened to him—if she understood. I'm sure she had her own reasons. They were together when he died—sharing a bag. At first they thought it was fentanyl but it was just heroin, just straight-up good heroin. She didn't even overdose—he died, but she was fine. I don't think I'm the only person wondering if he did it on purpose. I guess we'll never know.

Hamlet's dad is coming back from the can. *Clang, clang, clang.*

Ten Years Earlier

"The tall one is a Nick, and the shorter one's Leo."

No one responded. No one seemed even the slightest bit interested in us at all.

"We're playing Hostage."

Michelle, the blonde, looked up from her beer. "I hate that game."

"I do, too. It's dumb, we always just end up in the cornfields and like, don't know where we're at."

“That’s the whole point of Hostage.”

“Yeah, that’s why it’s dumb.”

“Okay, fine, my dad said we could go to his house tonight anyway. He doesn’t care if we drink.”

The two blurry-faced boys exchanged a glance.

“Can we come?”

“Yeah, we’re sick of Hostage, too.”

“Whatever, my dad doesn’t give a shit.”

Logan looked annoyed.

“You guys are just going to bail?”

“I mean, you guys can come. Not the kids. I didn’t plan on babysitting tonight.”

“Yeah, why did you invite them again?”

“Clearly he’s just fucking with them.”

“We thought these two gentlemen might appreciate a good game of skill. Teach them what it is to be real men.”

“Positive role models, and all.”

The pretty girl laughed. “Sure. Role models.”

I took a sip. The beer tasted awful, like rotten bread or something. Everything was still a little wobbly from the whiskey. My face was burning. I tried to make eye contact with Nick, but he was looking down at his can. I wanted so badly to leave. I tried to muster all of my brain power to telepathically inform him that we should leave now, it was time for us to go, the entire venture had been founded on false hope and blind faith and it was really going to be much better for us if we left before anything actually bad happened. *Nick. Let's go let's go let's go let's go.* Nothing. He kept looking down. I took another sip, trying not to let my revulsion to the taste show. The two girls were gathering up their jackets and purses and the two boys were following their lead. I saw one of them—the soccer sweatshirt guy—physically lick his lips. It made me shudder.

“Okay, so if you’re all leaving—I guess it’s pairs Hostage then? Two teams? Going man to man?”

“Man to man!”

Now, Nick was looking at me.

“Um—what exactly are we doing?”

“Are you serious? You don’t know Hostage?”

“Um—I think—”

“Ooh, look at this, boys—we’ve got a virgin! Virgins!”

“We’re not—”

“I mean, we are, but—”

“Don’t worry, we’ll show you how to play. I’ll take Nick and you, Chase, can be Leo’s buddy. Just like little kids on a field trip.”

“I thought maybe Nick and I—”

“You can’t be teammates if neither of you know how to play, can you?”

This was a fair point. He was making good points. I realized as I tried to stand up that I was drunk. I had never been more than tipsy before, and I was fascinated by the feeling. The night was beginning to feel less like something I was participating in and more like a teen movie I was watching. Chase walked over and put his arm around me. He smelled like beer and Old Spice, and he was unnervingly attractive. It freaked me out how good it felt to have his arm around me. He was holding the box of beer.

“Shotgun before we go?”

“I think we’d better!”

Chase grabbed a fresh can, pulled his keys out of his pocket, stabbed a hole in the side, and pressed it to my lips. I felt like I was drowning. The carbonation made me feel like I was going to throw up, but I tried to drink as fast as I could. Beer soaked into my sweatshirt. *I’m going to have to tell my mom I lost it.* Logan was doing the same to Nick—he made eye contact with me and pumped his hand in the air. It was like something out of a college movie. It usually would have pissed me off—I hated things like that, people doing things because they had some kind of idea that it was what they were supposed to be doing, mimicking the older and much more attractive people they saw on TV—but it made me smile, tonight, and I pumped my arm

too. I finished the dregs of my beer and coughed. I didn't feel like throwing up, but I had the feeling that could change.

"One more, or are we ready?"

"Aren't you guys going to do one?"

Speaking made me nervous, but it seemed weird that we were the only people drinking.

"Nah, we're driving—safety first, you know."

I remembered one time my dad telling me that if I was ever at a party and people were drunk, and I didn't have a ride home, I could call him and he would pick me up, no questions asked. They didn't seem that drunk, at least. Chase still had his arm around me and he wasn't wobbling at all. It was like he was steadying me. I didn't think that they would do anything too stupid—they were applying to college, and stuff, and getting caught drinking and driving would obviously be bad for that. So I waved at Nick and let Chase lead me into his car.

"So, um, Hostage?"

"Wow, straight to business, I guess. No niceties with this guy."

"Sorry, I just thought—I'm not used to—"

"Nah, you're good, bro. Chill out. I'm messing with you. You need more people to really play—this isn't really Hostage. We're just going to go drive somewhere and then park and I'll text Logan and Nick some clues and they'll have to find us."

"So I'm your Hostage?"

“Sure, you’re my Hostage. Country okay?”

I hated country music but I thought maybe I would like it if he played it.

“Sure.”

The radio station was playing an ad for Taco Bell, even though we didn’t have a Taco Bell. I was hungry. I couldn’t quite follow what the man on the radio was saying. The commercial ended and another one began, for Lebeda Mattress. *Lebeda, Lebeda, everybody knows it’s—Lebeda*. As far as I knew, we didn’t have one of those, either.

“I want a seven-up.”

“You want a what?”

“Seven up—it sounds like the guy in the commercial is singing about seven up.”

“You must not drink much.”

“No, usually Nick and I—we just take sips from whatever we find in his parent’s liquor cabinet because my parents don’t drink, and usually we don’t want to take so much that they notice so we don’t—we don’t really get drunk off of it.”

“Seems like it.”

“You guys though—thanks, for sharing your beer or whatever and inviting us to hang out.”

“Sure, of course, we were just trying to be—what was Logan saying back there? Role models. We were just trying to be role models.”

“Sure, okay.”

One of his hands crept off of the steering wheel and slowly, deliberately, ended up on my knee. I shivered. I looked over, but he was looking straight ahead, concentrating on keeping the car steady. I realized that he probably wasn't as sober as I wanted him to be. The fear that had been overwhelming me earlier returned, suddenly.

“Hey, um—Chase, what a cool name, you're a cool guy, Chase—you're not like, drunk or anything? Are you?”

“Don't worry, I'm a good driver.”

The hand on my knee squeezed. I was warm all over. I closed my eyes, and sent up a prayer to St. Christopher. My mom always had us pray to him before long car trips. *Please let me get home alive. Please don't let me regret this.* We were outside of town now—deep into the cornfields. We swerved onto a gravel road. The stars were beautiful tonight. A man on the radio was singing about drinking beer and driving a pickup truck. I knew that as a small-town kid I was supposed to identify with country music, but I hated it. All the songs sounded the same.

“This seems like as good a spot as any, doesn't it?”

“Sure—are you going to text Logan now? And let him and Nick know where we are?”

“Yeah, of course.”

He pulled out his flip phone and hit the buttons.

“What clues are you giving them?”

“You know, cornfields. West of town. Past the lake.”

“How about ‘past the quilted barn?’”

“Sure, that’s good.”

His hand was still on my knee. It felt good but I wasn’t sure what was happening—was he gay? Did he think I was gay? Was I gay? In my drunken state, I didn’t seem to have many options but to admit to myself that I was probably gay. After all, I had been thinking about how attractive he was all night, and I hadn’t slapped his hand away when he’d touched me.

“Want to lean your seat back?”

I was deeply confused. “Okay.”

He reached over me, placing almost all of his body weight onto my chest, and pulled a lever on the side of my seat. I dropped back immediately.

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay—I guess?” His hand was beginning to slide up my leg. My stomach felt off—I didn’t feel nauseous, quite, just off.

“I like your sweatshirt.”

“Well, you guys told us to wear dark clothes.”

“Yeah. It looks good on you.”

“Mind if I—”

He launched himself over to me, mashing his face into mine. His lips found mine. He tasted like stale beer and old gas station pizza. I gagged. He pulled back.

“Listen, if you’re going to throw up—”

“I—”

He didn’t let me answer, just mashed his face into mine again. I had never kissed anyone before. I didn’t like it very much. I wondered if that meant I wasn’t really gay. I pulled back.

“Look, I’m not sure if you—”

His hands were on my zipper, now, and he was pulling it down. I froze.

“Look, Chase—”

Everything was beginning to spin, but I felt very still. I didn’t move. He unbuttoned my jeans and began to slide them off of me. I was silent. I didn’t know where I was. I thought about jumping out of the car, and running, but I wouldn’t have had a ride home and besides, I had to admit to myself that this was something I had thought about, without ever letting myself really think about it, so I should just lie back and try to enjoy whatever was happening. My pants were down and his hands were off doing something and my body was responding in a way it never had with another person before, and I felt sick and didn’t move and decided that I didn’t like what was happening.

“Chase, I—”

“Shhh”

“I feel like I’m going to be sick.”

As soon as I said it, I threw the car door open and vomited. I didn’t quite make it in time, and some of the sick splashed onto the mat underneath the passenger seat. Chase swore at me. He had begun to take his own pants off, but he pulled them back up. He pushed my shoulders so I was dangling out of the car—I was done throwing up, though. His face was red and he was sweating. It scared me that I had found him attractive earlier—he was so grotesque, now.

“I’m sorry—I just, can you take me back to St. Rita’s?”

He didn’t say anything, but started the car. I felt like everything around me was spinning. I wanted to take the world’s longest shower and crawl into bed and sleep for a very long time. We didn’t speak for the entire ride back to St. Rita’s. The rectory light was still on when we pulled back into the parking lot. There was no sign of Nick and Logan. I wondered where they were—still out looking for us? Did Logan try whatever it was Chase was trying on Nick? I hoped not. I felt sick, and I was pretty sure Nick wasn’t gay at all—he wasn’t just pretending, like me. It wasn’t something we had ever talked about, but he was always talking about whatever girl he had a crush on, and I was the one who just nodded along, occasionally pretending like I liked someone to just so it didn’t become suspicious.

“Is Nick coming back soon?”

He didn’t say anything. I couldn’t stand to be in that car any longer, so I got out, slamming the door behind me, and ran to my bike. It was damp, though it hadn’t rained. I wasn’t sure what time it was. I felt like I should wait for Nick, but I wanted so badly to be home. I decided I would bike back to our spot by the lake to check for him, then go back to my place

and tell my parents I hadn't felt well the night before and came back home so I didn't get everyone else sick. I had thrown up one more time before I climbed onto my bicycle. I was probably too drunk to bike, but the chances of running into one of the two police officers that patrolled Crater Lake seemed small. Biking in a straight line required all of my mental and physical prowess.

The lake was dark and beautiful, but ominous. It had turned into a cold and cloudy night. I pulled up near where we were earlier—by Stieg the stegosaurus—but there was no sign of Nick. Both of our fishing poles were still stashed underneath the bush where we had left them. My heart was racing, but it was so quiet—where was he? I wanted to believe that things were going differently for him, but there was a bad feeling in my stomach—separate from the alcohol—telling me that things were probably much worse for him. The waves crashed gently against the shore, but I couldn't hear them. The water was so dark that I could imagine the kinds of twisted forms that were waiting to crawl out and get me—zombies with torn, mildewed clothing and sewn-shut mouths, clammy, pale, rotting hands that would slide up my shirt or underneath my belt. I had to get out of there.

It took me ten minutes longer than it should have to get home. I left my beer-soaked sweatshirt in my neighbor's trash can and keyed in the code for the garage door. I couldn't wait to get into bed, but I couldn't stop thinking about Nick. I considered waking up my parents—I couldn't even begin to imagine what I would tell them, though. I wasn't even sure what had happened. I told myself that what had happened with Chase was probably unrelated, that Nick and Logan were probably just off somewhere drinking terrible beer and talking about what pussies Chase and I were. Just normal dude stuff. I told myself he was fine, that nothing was

going to happen to him. Nothing had really happened to me, after all. I leaned my bike against a pillar in the garage and crept into the house. I took all of my clothes off except for my boxers, crawled into bed, and waited for the night to end, for darkness to stop the spinning in my head. *Nick is fine. Go to sleep.* I repeated this like a mantra, until it worked.

After

We got into town the night before the funeral. We drove by St. Rita's, but I couldn't bear to stop. There were still cars in the parking lot, from the wake. I pictured the coffin, surrounded by candles, the soft satin they laid him on, the black suit they had dressed him in, the kind but empty things the townspeople would say. I'm sure many of them were blaming him—did it to himself, after all. Just say no. It wasn't how I wanted to say goodbye to him.

I was right. My parents did like Gregory—he was quiet, but polite, and my mom thought he “seemed smart.” My dad hardly said anything, but he brought us both cold beers as soon as we walked through the door, and he showed Gregory to his room—they were kind to him. I was grateful. My mom made us grilled cheese, which we ate in the family room in front of House Hunters. She had me sign a sympathy card from the family before I went to bed.

The next day, we woke up and put on our funeral black. My parents drove separately, in case I “wanted to have some time with your old friends.” I'm not sure which friends she was referring to, but my mother always liked to think that I had more of a legacy. People knowing

who you are is different from people thinking that who you are is something special—there just aren't enough faces in this town for anyone to be forgotten, so the fact that I was still inquired after didn't mean anything special about me. I was grateful for some quiet time with Gregory before the funeral, though.

St. Rita's was packed—I wanted to show Gregory the statue of the old gray lady, but there were too many people standing around outside of the church. There was a long line leading through the foyer into the sanctuary. We stood in it—I introduced Gregory as my “friend,” to a few old acquaintances, which he didn't like, but accepted. My old friend's funeral didn't seem like the correct time to shove my gayness into everyone's faces. I'm sure most people knew. I hugged Nick's mom—hard. She wasn't crying. She seemed like she was all cried out, and I didn't blame her. Nick was sick for a long time before he died. I had heard pieces of his story from my mom—dropping out of college after one semester, in and out of rehab, a few stints in jail for possession. His dad had called the cops on him twice. They were trying to scare him straight.

We found seats—near the back, next to my parents. Nick's girlfriend sat next to his parents in the front pew. She was even cuter than she had looked in photographs. She sobbed the whole time. Old Father Leary gave a solemn but kind eulogy, focusing on Nick's sense of humor and energy—the things I had loved about him. Halfway through the service, during the fourth verse of “On Eagle's Wings,” which felt like it never ended, thanks to Judith, who had been playing the organ at St. Rita's since my baptism—I caught a glimpse of someone familiar. Logan Graves. He had come to Nick's funeral. He was sitting next to an older man, his dad. He must have known Nick's parents, somehow. I clenched my jaw and grabbed Gregory's hand.

And he will raise you up, on eagle's wings, bear you on the breath of dawn, make you to shine like the sun, and hold you, hold you in the palm of his hand. Fuck. I got up. I had to get out of there.

Gregory followed. I motioned at my parents, like I felt sick. I did feel sick. I scanned the room for Chase—he wasn't there. He was in Illinois. I was safe, but Nick wasn't—he hadn't been safe since that night. I could have kept him safe, but I didn't. I could have waited by the lake—waited for him to come back and get his fishing pole. I could have known whether or not he was okay. I should be upfront now, I guess, it doesn't matter anymore—I have no idea what happened to Nick that night. Maybe if I had waited longer I would know. Maybe he went to our spot, after he got back, dying to let me know that he was okay, that nothing had happened to him, that they had just driven around, bonding over their shared love of karate movies and Kanye. Maybe it was just me—that Chase had known, somehow, he had smelled it on me, and Logan had no idea.

If Nick had been okay—if nothing had happened to him—he would have been back by the time I got there. Or he would have called me the next day and asked me to come over. He wouldn't have quit the track team and started hanging out with the stoner kids. He wouldn't have ignored me in school. We would have stayed friends. He wouldn't have started skipping class. He wouldn't have died from a heroin overdose at twenty-four.

I walked out to the car. Gregory followed me.

"I saw him."

"Chase?"

“Logan.”

“That was the guy—”

“Yeah. That guy.”

He didn't say anything. We both knew there was nothing to say. I got in the car. He climbed in next to me. I drove us through town, past the coffee shop and the café and the dive bar. To the lake. I parked, and we got out, and walked over to the scrubby trees lining the water. I detected a whiff of something skunky and green as we passed by a particularly dense clump of trees. I wasn't sure what I was doing—we had left the funeral, but I still needed to say goodbye. I thought about St. Rita's parking lot—the rectory, the stone saint, with her vacant eyes, the looming church and the short, wide school. I thought about all of the hours I had spent there. I looked out at the water, and thought about the hours I had spent here with Nick—cracking bad jokes and fishing for bluegill, sneaking liquor out of our parent's cabinets and climbing on Stieg. We were childhood best friends, we had a whole imagined world together that ended in a single night, and then we weren't really ever children again. I always thought that the problem was with me, that I didn't wait for him, that he came back to the lake that night expecting me to be there, and I wasn't.

Gregory put his arm around me as I stood on the beach, looking out at the water. I was back home. Where Logan lived. Nick would have seen him all the time—Crater Lake is a small town. We have one grocery store, one Catholic church, three bars, one coffee shop—you run into people. I had felt that way about Chase, and it was hell. I couldn't understand why either of them had stayed. Then again, I couldn't understand how Logan—and Chase—were allowed to

continue to simply go about their lives. It was viciously, moronically, hope-blisteringly unfair. The lake crashed into the algae stricken rocks on either side of the beach. It was quiet. I leaned my head onto Gregory's shoulder and prayed to St. Rita, patron saint of impossible causes—we were an impossible cause, weren't we—and cried because Nick was dead, and Logan wasn't, and I had to keep on living with that. Knowing that I should have waited, or at least called. I turned around. We were by the edge of the beach, near a large tree with a hollow trunk—where we used to fish. I ran over to it, bent down and looked inside. The empty water bottle-turned flask was long gone, of course it was, there are animals and children and strong winds and storms every year, and they change things. I looked around. I didn't see any nightshade. I hoped our fishing poles had ended up in good hands.

I turned back. Gregory was waiting for me in the parking lot, watching me from a distance. He had forgotten his jacket in the church, and he was hugging himself. He was adorable, with his curly hair and runner's body, and his suit was a little too long for him. I jogged over and wrapped my coat around him. He hugged me, and I began to cry. A flock of geese screeched overhead and landed in a flurry on the amaranthine waters of the great Crater Lake. We heard voices and laughter coming from the trees—high school kids. They sprawled out on the beach, passing a water bottle back and forth. I continued to cry. Gregory turns the car on and fiddles with the radio and we drive away.

Queering the Coming-of-Age Narrative

There are few narratives more familiar than that of the coming-of-age story, or bildungsroman. Everyone reads *The Catcher in the Rye* in high school, whether they like it or not. There are a million forms of art that have been created with the sole purpose of capturing the journey from ignorance to awareness, innocence to experience. These stories resonate, because in a way they are universal—we were all once a child, and now we are grown. Or, we once did not understand something about ourselves, and now we do.

Typically, coming-of-age narratives are tied to adolescence—the shift in perspective is, very simply, the journey from childhood to adulthood. However, though of course the teenage years are a rich and complicated time for everyone, there are so many transformative experiences throughout the course of one's life that it is a mistake to say that a person only comes of age once. For queer people, in particular, adolescence is typically plagued by sexual repression, fear of violence, attempts to conform to society, and a pained need to hide all of the feelings swirling around inside of them. We refer to this lethal cocktail of emotions as “the

closet.” LGBT adolescents do not come of age in the same way as their heterosexual peers do. They are not allowed to.

Kenneth Millard writes in his book *Coming of Age in Contemporary Fiction* that adolescents “have the potential to reconfigure the existing social structures and institutions to which they find themselves heir, and thereby in some senses change society.” (Millard) This makes the coming-of-age genre uniquely suited to tell queer stories—unique, because the struggle against existing social structures does not stop when a queer person matures. Typical rules do not apply. For example, one of the characters in my story collection is a Catholic priest who is forced to confront his sexuality at the age of sixty-four. He reckons with his attraction to men, and fears rejection from the institution that has raised him. He is forced to make a decision about who he is going to be—just like adolescents must, as they move towards adulthood. His age does not protect him from the vulnerabilities of self-discovery. Neither does his religion. Faith is an ever-changing thing, and religious people are constantly asked to re-evaluate their beliefs and their identities as their beliefs are tested.

That is why the intersection of religious identity and sexual identity is one of the ripest places to explore coming-of-age stories—these narratives are able to be universal while still being very specific. They are not bound to age, or place, or time. Reckoning with oneself, and oneself in the context of ones’ god, is a massive undertaking. Living as a person whose very identity is considered to be sinful under their belief system is particularly difficult—what happens when the framework you were given to understand the world does not provide a space for the truth of your experiences? That is the question that the characters in my stories are grappling with.

Emily M. Danforth poses a similar question in her young adult novel *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, which follows a girl in a small town in Montana as she comes of age after losing both of her parents in a car crash, and realizes her attraction to women. Her grief becomes intertwined with her guilt over her sexuality. Eventually, she falls in love with her best friend, and is sent to a conversion therapy “school” called God’s Promise by her conservative aunt. In many ways, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* follows a formula for coming out novels, but with a keen eye for detail and a unique compassion towards everyone around Cameron. The adults who “mis-educate” her are doing so because they truly believe that they are saving her. This speaks to both the tragedy and the moral complexity of religious institutions when it comes to LGBT people. The psychological damage done to queer people within these institutions is done with the best of intentions--namely, saving them from eternal damnation. Cameron says something similar towards the end of the novel, when a state social worker visits God’s Promise after one of her fellow “disciples,” an earnest young man named Mark, slashes his genitals with a razor blade and then pours bleach over the wounds. “I’m just saying that sometimes you can end up really messing somebody up because the way you’re supposedly trying to help them is really messed up.” (Danforth page 306)

The two adults in charge of God’s Promise represent two different faces of religious homophobia. Rick, a young, ex-gay himself, is kind, goofy, and attempts to confer upon the teens in his care that leaving their queerness behind is the only way to “heal” and live a happy life. Cameron does not want to like him, but she cannot help herself. The other counselor, Lydia, is strict and frightening. She attained a degree in Psychology from Cambridge, and uses a daunting mix of therapeutic techniques and Freudian psychology along with fire-and-brimstone

evangelism to strike fear and root out the vulnerabilities of Cameron and her fellow students. She also, by the end, manages to get underneath Cameron's skin. After an illicit tryst with her roommate, nicknamed "the Viking Erin," she nearly ruins her and two of her friend's escape plan by telling Lydia about it.

Her friends, Adam Redwing and Jane Fonda, support one another throughout their stay at God's Promise. Ironically, though they were sent there by their families to shed their queerness, they end up finding a community of support in one another. They understand each other in ways that they have not experienced before. After the incident with Mark, they decide to run away together. None of them are eighteen yet, and they have nowhere to run to. Yet they decide that they must leave in order to preserve their sanity. They choose a terrifying unknown over an equally terrifying known. Their mental well-being, and their need to be honest about what it is they feel and believe, wins out over shelter and self-denial.

Most queer people experience something called "delayed adolescence." Instead of dating and figuring out romantic and sexual relationships in a healthy way, in high school, many LGBT teens are either completely in denial about their own sexuality or are busy attempting to hide it from those around them. The complex emotions and nuances of love are put on the back burner until college, or even later in life. This repression leads to higher rates of mental illness and substance abuse. (Medley) Sadly, this correlation is frequently used by religious institutions as a reason why homosexuality is immoral, instead of as a problem stemming from homophobia. Before Cameron is outed by Coley, the best friend she pines after, and eventually enters into a strange, messy sexual relationship with, and sent to God's Promise, she drinks heavily and smokes weed with her male best friend. At God's Promise, Jane, Adam, and

Cameron secretly grow marijuana in the forest outside of the school. Jane is an “off the land type” who possesses an impressive green thumb. Growing and smoking brings them together, connects them with who they were before to God’s Promise, and provides a small but significant act of rebellion against the institution they have been forced into.

One of the most unusual parts of *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* is Danforth’s understanding of sexual fluidity and the way she carries it throughout the novel. Cameron experiments with her male best friend, Jamie. He knows that she is most likely not straight, but he likes her and she trusts him and together they “figure stuff out.” Later, at God’s Promise, she makes out with Adam Redwing. He identifies as neither male nor female, gay nor straight. (Though throughout the novel male pronouns are used to describe him.) He is a member of the Lakota Tribe, and when he was born he was declared winkte. He explains this to Cameron early on in their friendship. “Winktes are supposed to somehow bridge the divide between genders and be healers and spirit people. We’re not supposed to try to pick the sex our private parts most align with according to some Bible story about Adam and Eve.” (Danforth, 239) Adam’s gender identity is fluid, as is his sexual orientation. When Cameron asks him to say whether he is more gay or straight, he replies by saying “That’s a really small way of looking at desire.” (Danforth) His father sent him to God’s Promise after converting to Christianity in order to further his political ambitions. In one heart-wrenching scene, Adam returns from Christmas break with his long hair shaved off. The haircut represents both a forced repression of the feminine side of his identity, and his identity as a member of the Lakota Tribe. His struggles as both a gender non-binary person and a non-white queer person are presented with nuance and care. Both of these experiences are vastly underrepresented in literature.

The Miseducation of Cameron Post works as a coming-of-age story because of the changes that Cameron experiences throughout the novel. At the beginning, she blames herself for her parent's death. She experiences guilt over her feelings for her best friend. She is barely coping with her grief, let alone close to coming to terms with her feelings towards women. Slowly, as she gets older, and begins to come to terms with her loss. Her feelings of shame about her sexuality shift into feelings of righteous and well-deserved anger over how she has been treated because of it. This anger is necessary. The kindness and understanding that she shows towards Rick and Lydia throughout the book is commendable, and necessary, too.

Things are getting better for LGBT people. This cannot be denied. Marriage equality is the law of the land. There are a whole slew of actors and politicians and public figures who claim their sexualities and identities with pride, and come out with little fanfare. Still--though there is a trend of kids coming out younger and younger--the average LGBT person doesn't come out until they are twenty, though the average age that one discovers they are not straight is twelve. That means eight years of lies and mistrust and repression and crippling fear of what will be done to us if we tell the truth. And yes, there is still plenty to fear. We as queer people are not able to explore our sexualities in high school. In fact, many of us spend our high school years deep within the closet, terrified that no one would like us if they knew the truth. This is particularly true for those growing up religious. A study of LGBT young adults who were raised in religious homes found that those whose practiced religion included anti-gay rhetoric were significantly more likely to experience internalized homophobia, mental illness, and suicidal ideation. (Gibbs)

During the years when our heterosexual peers are beginning to explore their sexualities, date, and figure out how romantic relationships work, we are grappling with our identities. Prom dates with the opposite sex are fraught with tension. *Will they figure me out?* Is it a form of perversion? Or perhaps it is simply the original sin deep within you, the devil working through your lips and your heart and the curve of her chest as you lie beside her. Queerness becomes wrongness, an unsettled feeling that one does not belong, will never belong.

This unsettled feeling drives the characters in my stories. More than anything, they are lonely. It is a particularly odious form of loneliness--to be surrounded by people, some of whom you have known your entire life, none of whom know the truth. How long can a person live with a secret before that secret consumes them? My characters grapple with this question. They can deny themselves, deny their experiences, deny their lovers. They can try to run away or ignore what they feel, or they can pretend that they feel differently. Still, there is always a breaking point. The truth must be reckoned with. One cannot hide from God, after all.

While I am eternally grateful to all of the writers that showed me how to live as a queer person, I am aware that the representations I found were limited. Most of the characters were white, male, and gay. A few others were white, female, and lesbian. Very few represented transgendered people, or bisexual people, or people of color. Even fewer addressed religion as a factor in the challenges facing queer people. (With the notable exception of *Oranges*.) I did not learn what bisexuality was until college. Now, I identify as one. In my own stories, I attempt to tell stories of coming out and coming of age in ways that present the different ways our perceptions of our sexualities and our identities shift over time. My own Catholic religion taught me that my feelings were “intrinsically disordered.” The catechism defines this disorder as

“contrary to the natural law” and says that “under no circumstances can it be approved.”

(Catechism) I cannot express how damaging that is to hear as a teenager struggling with both religious and sexual identity. The closet is one of the loneliest place in the world, and it becomes far lonelier when there is a crucifix hanging on the wall.

Throughout the process of writing these stories, I have tried to place my characters on the battlefield between belief and identity. There are so many difficult choices that must be made, so many complex and nearly unnameable emotions to be felt. There are so many things that must be realized. In my first story, Father Leary represses his sexuality for over fifty years, until one day he can't anymore—he hits a breaking point. Faith is powerful, but it is not more powerful than honesty—and which is more crucial to a happy existence? Can they coincide? And what of place—another crucial element to these stories. They are all set in Crater Lake, a fictional small town in Northwest Iowa—all of the characters exist in the same context, they come from a place where secrets hold all of the power. In my second story, Camila, a wife and mother realizes that the life she is living doesn't look very much like the life she wants for herself. She falls in love, yes, but it isn't a love story—it's a question of loyalty over self-preservation. Can we regret our children? Can we say no to love? What about sex? Then there's Leo, from my third story—he learns about sex in the context of fear, and learns about friendship in the context of loss. There is violence in small towns, and it seeps into everything. There is also connection—all of my characters leave Crater Lake, eventually, and they all find what they are looking for, at least partially. No one gets saved—they all just keep on living, searching for meaning and happiness and closure, those great white whales of the human experience. No one emerges unscathed.

Works Cited

Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen. *Emerging Adults in America: Coming of Age in the 21st Century*.

American Psychological Association, 2008.

Jeffrey Arnett's book examines how young adults in the United States deal with relationships with one another, their parents, and society as a whole. Since Arnett is a psychologist, his book will help me write realistic characters who reflect what it is really like to come of age in this time period. Since I am writing realistic fiction, it is important to me that I understand the truth behind the particular essence of human experience that I am trying to capture.

Bechdel, Alison. *Fun Home: a Family Tragicomic*. Houghton Mifflin, 2015.

Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* is a graphic memoir based on Bechdel's experience growing up in a funeral home with a dysfunctional family. Her father reportedly had affairs with his high school students, including a young man who babysat for her, and eventually committed suicide. Bechdel grapples both with her father's repressed homosexuality as well as her own, and tries to overcome both the anger she feels at the unresolved issues with her father stemming from her childhood and the uncertainty surrounding his death. *Fun Home* has informed my thesis because I like how it gives weight to both Bechdel and her father's coming out—it shows that you can "come of age" at any stage of life.

Becher, Jeanne. *Women, Religion, and Sexuality: Studies on the Impact of Religious Teachings on Women*. Trinity Press Internat., 1993.

Jeanne Becher's *Women, Religion, and Sexuality: Studies on the Impact of Religious Teachings on Women* discusses studies about the way that women are affected by religious doctrine. I am fascinated by the way a religious upbringing impacts the way people see the world, and I believe that Becher's novel provides some valuable insights into this. Like Arnett's book, I am reading this as a sociological look into the ways that real people are affected by the issues I am attempting to write about, because I want my characters to think and respond to the world in realistic ways.

Burd, Nick. *The Vast Fields of Ordinary*. Speak, 2011.

This novel, set in Cedar Rapids, follows Dade Hamilton the summer after he graduates from high school. He falls in love for the first time, as he watches his parent's marriage fall apart. He must decide whether or not to come out of the closet before he leaves for college.

Cart, Michael, and Christine A. Jenkins. *The Heart Has Its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969-2004*. Scarecrow Press, 2006.

Cart and Jenkins' book examines LGBT young adult novels from the past few decades. They manage to tie in queer adolescent literature with major historical events like the Stonewall Riots, Harvey Milk's election and assassination, AIDs, and the coming out of a few

prominent figures. They attempt to give recognition to the adolescents who benefit from these novels, and discuss the cultural and literary significance of queer teen characters. Cart and Jenkins also talk about the challenges queer writers face while trying to get their books published and widely circulated, since many school districts still oppose any mention of homosexuality in schools.

“Catechism of the Catholic Church.” *Catechism of the Catholic Church - The Sixth*

Commandment, Catholic Church,

www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s2c2a6.htm.

The Catechism is essentially a list of all of the rules and official stances of the Catholic Church. It covers the things that didn't really make it into the bible—homosexuality, for one.

Danforth, Emily M. *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*. Balzer Bray, 2013.

Emily Danforth's *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* is my favorite coming-of-age novel. Cameron Post is orphaned the day after she kisses her best friend. As if coming to terms with your sexuality in a small, rural town in Montana isn't difficult enough, she must grieve whilst simultaneously trying to overcome everything she has been taught as a Christian in order to accept herself. She is taken in by her religious aunt, and sent away to a pray-the-gay-away school. This novel is thematically similar to the short stories I am writing, and has inspired me greatly.

Gibbs, Jeremy J. “Religious Conflict, Sexual Identity, and Suicidal Behaviors among LGBT Young Adults.” *Archives of suicide research : official journal of the International Academy for Suicide Research* 19.4 (2015): 472–488. *PMC*. Web. 25 Nov. 2017.

This study shows the link between religious upbringing, queerness, and mental illness and suicide. There is a correlation between the three things that is crucial to understanding the stakes of this discussion.

Mental Health: Results from the 2015 National Survey on Drug Use and Health.”

Sexual Orientation and Estimates of Adult Substance Use and Mental Health: Results from the 2015 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, SAMHSA

LGBT teenagers and adults alike are more susceptible to addiction than their heterosexual peers. The relationship between drug and alcohol use and repression is fascinating.

Millard, Kenneth. *Coming of Age in Contemporary American Fiction*. Edinburgh University Press, 2007.

Kenneth Millard’s *Coming of Age in Contemporary American Fiction* examines coming of age novels in the United States. It discusses the ways in which coming of age novels exist on the forefront of social change, and the ability that they have to influence America’s youth.

Adolescents not only reflect the values of the United States, they also have the ability to change these values. Therefore, novels that reflect this tumultuous but fruitful period of adolescent’s lives are particularly important.

Salenz, Benjamin Alire. *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*. Simon & Schuster, 2014.

Benjamin Alire Sienz's novel *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* deals with homosexuality, racism, cultural differences, and loss—all of which inform the experiences of the two titular characters as they struggle to grow up and find some kind of peace with their identities. It is both a very sweet love story and a hopeful exploration of what a person can overcome. It is never easy to come out, but what I find particularly delightful about this novel is that it is about so much more than a single conversation or coming out moment, and the characters are much more than their sexualities. I believe it deals with intersectional identities particularly well, and I hope to emulate that in my own story collection.

awSimmonds, Kevin. *Collective Brightness: LGBTIQ Poets on Faith, Religion & Spirituality*. Sibling Rivalry Press, 2012.

Since I am incorporating poetry into my thesis, it was important to me to read some in preparation. This book consists of poets discussing how their queer identities come into conflict and how they coexist with their religious experiences. The poets who contributed to this book are diverse and write eclectically. I am hoping to bring some of this diversity into my own writings.

Winterson, Jeanette. *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*. Vintage Books, 2014.

Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* is a classic queer coming of age novel. Winterson's interweaving of sexuality and religion and how they impact the narrator (also named Jeanette). She has a difficult home life—her mother and her belong to an almost

cult-like evangelical church that is not at all supportive. Winterson's novel has influenced me immensely in my attempts to write short stories that deal with coming of age and coming out.