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# Ojai, Ohio, Italy, Home

Sabine Hoskinson  
*Santa Clara University*

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Ojai,  
Ohio,  
Italy,  
Home

Sabine Hoskinson

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A Canterbury Fellowship Collection  
2014-2015

These are the sounds that run across the page and roll through my  
mind. The sounds sing out notes of O's and dips of Y and J.  
Like a wallpaper pattern, these words pace through my mind:  
Ojai, Ohio, Italy, Home.

# Table of Contents

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Under a Pepper Tree.....	1
Braided-Back Hair.....	8
The Air is Wet and Warm.....	15
Holding a Pouch of Pencils.....	19
Floating in the Mediterranean.....	23
Bibliography.....	28
Consulted Works.....	37

# Under a Pepper Tree

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*I wasn't there, but everything happened on the knoll.*

There's a grassy knoll across from the freshman girls' dorm, Casa. Not like the boy's dorm, Lower School, with its promise of shirtless boys and dirty innuendo, Casa hums like a hive of secretive bees. Each girl is busy and elusive in her own room, moving through private, childhood rituals she's learned from home. No girl combs her hair the same; no girl strips her sheets like someone else's mother.

At night, outlines of girls move through Casa's sheer curtains in golden light. Like a line of moving cameos, their forms are fuller than just shadows. Boys sprawl on the knoll and watch them. If a girl begins to change through open curtains, sometimes another runs down to pull the curtains closed—sometimes she doesn't.

“Do you think she's naked?” a guy asks from the lawn.

“I bet,” answers another.

At night, under the streetlamp's orange glow and shadows, the knoll buzzes like this. Couples cuddle and stargaze, sometimes ducking under sweatshirts while others flirt and roughhouse. Tucked in the Ojai valley, the stars are bright here. Girls are coy and whispery or bold and teasing. I'm in my room, peaking out at the knoll. When I walk by, I smell the grass and its groping tension. Warm air floats by sweet with orange blossoms, and summer in Ojai lasts deep into fall.

*We eat lunch at eleven thirty.*

Some days, satisfaction tastes like turkey sandwiches on blueberry bagels with sweet balsamic dressing and chips. I love the simple serenity of following someone through the sandwich line. The best days are when we eat lunch outside on the pergola. I always take the shady spot under a pepper tree and run my shoe over dried pink peppercorn berries on the ground. Below the terrace a lawn slopes down into tennis

courts. You can't see it, but further down the hill our turf and track carve into the hillside. When the green turf and brick colored track bleed into the valley view, I stop seeing the differences at all.

*A pack of naked boys cuts off my path. Over my shoulder, I hear catcalls.*

*An older boy hollers, "Yeah, baby!"*

After study hall, from nine-thirty to ten, everyone has a slice of night to mingle in the bright student commons or gather in the leafy dark. Walking towards the warm lights of Casa, the pack pushes me from the road. I'm looking down but still stumble on the curb as my ankle wobbles and is grated by asphalt. From the corner of my eye, the herd of white butts and thighs is flattered by the streetlamp's orange glow—almost a lovely sight.

That night, the bravest boys bust through the wide corridors of the student commons. Under the white lights and tall ceilings, nothing's a mystery. Anna, a small quiet freshman like me, hides in the narrow walkway between the wall and mailboxes. But Zachary—tall, lanky, and laughing loudly—finds her. Panicked, she darts from side to side and he laughs at her flushed face. He jogs in place until she buries her face against the wall. On his way out, Zackary is still looking over his shoulder at Anna and runs into the center doorjamb of the open glass doors. He winces at his justice but runs on.

On the other side, Patrick--a dick who's cool with slurs and pre-packaged misogyny--swings through the door on crutches. He tries to keep with his pack—the boys who swore to keep by him but are now long gone—and his face purples. I'm not there, I'm safe in golden Casa by now, but I half wish I wasn't.

*I'm fifteen so I believe in magic.*

The water pooling on the stonewall seeps into the butt of my tights and my right knee touches Madi's. We sit cross-legged in the rain on the altar of Thacher School's outdoor chapel that looks over the valley. Each raindrop is a pinprick of cold that feels as

heavy as round, solid beads. Our raincoats crinkle as we move to taste the rain. The rain crackling on leaves echoes, spreading through the valley.

She gets up from the wall and runs to that bush with berries. I notice I need pee. Madi, the herbalist, comes back with arms full of bounty. We snap each leaf like a wishbone, not caring who gets the bigger half. The wet leaves are soft pads against our fingertips. A concave shell found in her garden sits between us gathering water. We press the leaves out into the softly curving bowl. We feel a thousand dirty grains between our fingertips.

I reach into the bowl of leaves and draw one as a seer draws a card. She mimics me, grabbing a torn leaf as I raise the green to my nose and inhale. The leaf smells like dirt and bitter grass but tastes fresh. The leaf's sinews don't disintegrate in our mouths as we chew; some things must be swallowed whole.

We stand up on the wall and extend our arms, fingers splayed. We offer ourselves as tuning forks to the rolling valley. Eventually we drop our arms and stand at ease.

"I gotta go pee," I tell her.

She laughs.

"No, really," I say, "I gotta go."

"Go in the bush."

"Yeah?"

"Sure."

I climb over the wall. My loafers squish in the mud and I worry about snagging a twig in the black tights I wear under my plaid skirt.

"Just go down there," she whispers.

I pull my tights and undies down and reach into the bush for a sturdy branch to support myself. With that one arm anchoring me, I separate my feet and lean downhill.

"Are there ticks when it's cold?"

"Maybe," Madi says laughing.

"Aw shit," I say. The rain pours down harder as I let loose.

*It's hot outside so Anna wants to shower while I settle into our Algebra assignment.*

“I’ll be quick,” she says, setting down her bag, “I’m just gross— my hair feels sweaty against my neck.”

Freshman year Anna wore her hair in two buns on the side of her head, but we’re older now so her hair coils against her neck in a low ponytail. Years later, she’ll go for a pixie cut. These days, I wear my hair long to the middle of my back. The longer I wear it, the tighter it curls and on hot days like these I swirl it into a messy top knot.

Anna slips into the back of my room to change. She lives with her family in Ojai, not in the dorm with the rest of us. We’re best friends so she uses the second desk in my room as her own. I’ve set aside a drawer for her where she keeps a towel.

We’re up on The Hill, a collection of three sophomore girl dormitories—Topa Topa, Sespe, and Matilija—all named for the mountains and land surrounding Ojai. I live in Topa Topa and the rectangular one-story building has its back half set into the hillside while the front rests on stilts. My shoebox shaped room backs into a window view of trees and it feels like a tree house.

As Anna pulls the towel around her body, I feel something flutter against my ear. Like a moth’s wing, something tickles the skin against my left temple. Immediately, I run a hand against the side of my face.

“Anna, is there something in my hair?”

She pokes her head around the corner and glances at my messy bun.

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Can you check? I felt it against my ear, like a bug or something,” I ask.

Anna comes closer and I spin around so she can check my whole head.

“No, nothing.”

“Ok,” I say.

While Anna showers, I changed out of my jeans into elastic shorts. All the dorm rooms on The Hill are doubles but my roommate, a new sophomore also named Anna who modeled for magazines and was a Hurricane Katrina refugee, left after the first three



weeks of school. I have the room and two of everything to myself. Two built in desks make up the front half of the room and in the back there is a small sink and mirror between two twin beds. I see my legs in the mirror and they're strong from after-school dance. I lift up my shirt and turning to the side, I see my belly is tauter, but not flat.

At the sound of Anna turning the doorknob, I pull my shirt back down. Gaby, who lives next door, calls from the deck outside.

"Hey what's the math problem set?" she asks.

I grab my notebook and read out the assignment. She circles the problems in her text book with a pencil.

"Odds only," I say, "so no answers in the back of the book."

Just then, standing in the doorway of my room, I feel it again—something's on my head. This time I feel it moving against my scalp, underneath layers of piled hair. I'm too scared to reach up and feel for it myself.

"Anna! There's something in my hair for sure."

"There isn't; I already checked," she says from behind the closet wall.

"No, there is. I swear. Please come look." I whimper as I feel something move again.

"Hold on. I'm literally naked."

When Anna finally comes over, I'm bent over with my head pointed to the ground.

"I don't see anything. What do you want me to do?" she asks.

"Can you take out my bun?"

Anna reaches down and slowly works the elastic band from my hair.

"I don't see anything..." she starts but then screams.

I panic and kneel on the ground. Then, I see it—a lizard crawling across the wooden floor towards the door.

It lays down, warming its belly on the hot wood deck and grins at me.

*Twenty-one girls--we're now seventeen--stand in line for the high dive.*

It's dark and we're naked. Someone in charge nodded silently to the junior girls' prefects who've taken us skinny dipping after hours. Waiting with wet hair in top knots or hands hugging breasts, the palest girls shimmer in the dark. Because it's a full moon, Tyler does a cartwheel on the grass. In front of me, standing three rungs up on the high dive ladder, Stephanie's back is rippled with goose bumps. We're not supposed to yell, it's part of the deal, but Katie shouts, "Cowabunga" as she jack-knifes.

I won't dive off the high board; I'm too scared. Instead I'll jump straight and narrow like a pencil. At the top, once I'm at the edge of the board, I turn back and see softly glowing Casa over the treetops. Through the walls, through the years, back to that first year, I see myself moving the pillows across my bed. I fold back the blankets and slide the picture of my family with our dogs between the sheets before I climb into bed. Now, I fold my arms across my bare chest and jump.

When I was a kid, my mother sung my name as a cheer: "Go go, Bena, Bena, go go." The first time I went off a high dive, she sung to me from the water below. In my head, I sing the song in my mother's voice: down down, faster, faster, down down. The naked nighttime sky pulls me closer to the water and I don't stop singing until I reach the bottom.

*Because it's Wednesday afternoon and we have a half day of classes,  
the sun is high and hot.*

It's burger day and the lunch lines loop through the dining hall. Casey and I sit outside on the pergola with our feet propped on the black patio table. With her face in the sun, Casey's eyes are closed and the open afternoon stretches out before us.

When shade falls over our table, we walk up through campus. Thacher is tucked into the hillside of this small east-west running valley. The Math Science Courtyard is carved into the hillside and I slow down to linger in its cool shadows.

We're headed to the old Hill—what was once the sophomore girl's dorm and now houses us senior girls who aren't prefects. Because we're not prefects and have this bit of

freedom living on our own without younger girls to watch over, it's okay they've stashed us up here in Sespe. Times are changing and in their campaign to make a better Thacher, they've bulldozed Matilija and my Topa Topa tree house. Only us and two-story Sespe remain—swallowed on three sides by a churning construction zone.

As we climb a steep set of stairs into the sun, a string of freshman and their horses hoof across the Perimeter road that loops around campus and leads them from the barns to the gymkhana field. The line of horses kicks up dust on the dirt trail. One cocky junior boy trots on the pavement around the slow line, posting out of the saddle in an easy rhythm. The sound of horse hooves on asphalt echoes.

The last stretch of path from Perimeter up to Sespe is crowded by trees. We walk by Los Padres, the sophomore boy's dorm, as two boys kick a hacky sack back and forth. Beyond these boys, the last weeks of high school wait for me in our high ceiling dorm room scattered with my Diptyque candles and Casey's sage smudge sticks. Our tall wardrobes store Frye boots and shortened thrift store dresses. We cherish our text books and adorn stacks of them with tea mugs. There are apples next to bowls of rings and bangles and we're ready.

## Braided-Back Hair

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On the third day, we hiked uphill. With the weight of my backpack settled onto my waist and shoulders, I looked at my dusty feet on the trail and my lips trembled. My throat burned with dust and tears. It's the first week of boarding school, and already people know me as the weeper—I'm sure.

I'd just begun my freshman year at the Thacher School in Ojai, California. In those first days on campus, I cried at night and in the days' empty spaces. In the prefects' room I'd sit on the floor with a tub of Red Vines between my legs, watching the older girls unpack crates of DVDs and sweaters. I crammed as many Red Vines into my mouth as I could, chewing to keep from crying. While phoning home, I cried the hardest.

"Honey, you chose this," mom would say.

"I know," I sobbed, "I just miss you. I'm scared I made a mistake."

"You can do this Bena. I know you can."

"I need you," I'd say.

I tried not to plead, "Come get me." But sometimes I did, begging through sobs.

Years later, my mother told me she wept the whole car ride home. Mom tucked in the suburban's front seat for the six hour drive up North—it's an image I file away, way back, and it seeps out only when I'm saddest or looking the other way. She's told me they wanted to come get me every day. When they wanted me home too, how did they say no to my begging? Now that I'm older I wonder how moms and dads do anything at all.

In its hundred-year tradition, this school I'd chosen sent all its students camping for the first week of fall term. All the freshmen headed up into the Sierras for a rugged orientation. Kendra, a girl two dorm rooms down who let me sit on her bed when I cried after dinner, braided my hair into two French braids for the five-day backpacking trip.

Kendra wasn't in my camping group and when we piled out of cars at the trailhead to the Cottonwood Basin, she took off on a different, flatter trail than my group's steeper path. On the switchbacks, it wasn't the hill or the slow burn in my thighs that fluttered in my throat like panic—it was the crowd of girls surrounding me who already seemed friends.

While the others sprang ahead, I hiked slowly in the back with a girl who maybe hadn't ever walked uphill before. My legs wanted to fall into their naturally longer stride, but I pretended the hike was hard for me too.

“Oh my God,” Emily said as she leaned the weight of her pack against a large rock, “This is bullshit; I don't even want to talk about it.” We didn't talk.

I played with spongy patches of moss or stripped tiny twigs with my pocketknife, telling myself I enjoyed her company and we might become friends. After mile three, Emily switched to a slower group, and I hiked alone.

I was at the end of the string of girls and came last to see the lush green grassland when we reached the top. At a fallen tree, our leader Mully eased out of her massive pack and sang out, “We're here.”

I shrugged out of my backpack and a ring of sweat darkened my shirt where my backpack's waistband had been. Not even Emily wanted to compare sweat stains as she joined the other girls and they laughed at her moaning complaints. We dropped our stuff onto a patch of dirt in the small valley of this big basin. Lunchtime was called, and each girl dug through her pack for her share of the provisions. I slipped into my long underwear top and pulled the sleeves down over my cold, pinkening hands.

After lunch we made camp, and the other girls lay in a circle of sleeping bags whispering. I went out to the water. Sitting on a wide flat stone, I wiggled my toes in my boots to assess any rising blisters, and I put my face into the sun. The cold wind blew through the loose hair around my face and bit at my ears. Soon it was almost dusk and the water lapped against the bank and swirled through the reeds, settling them next to my stone.

In the lake's reflection, I saw my braided-back hair in the water and suddenly felt safe. I was a windbreaker, a layer of white fleece, a collar up, wisps of hair around my

ears. I was thick socks folded down over boots, pink cheeks and pink nose. I was the wind and water of a mountain lake. I was a headlamp shining in the distance of this mountain valley bowl.

The next morning my period came two weeks early.

“This feels like the last straw.” I cried, wiping my eyes with a sleeve already covered in snot.

“I’m so sorry sweetie,” Mully said. But she then smiled, “Just part of being a woman in the wild.”

We stood away from the group as she portioned Tylenol into my hand. I fanned air into my eyes with my hands and hoped they’d look less red from crying.

I joined the breakfast circle around the stove and filled my sierra cup with oatmeal. Mully approached the group and grabbed me by the shoulders. She squeezed them tightly.

“Everyone, Sabine got her period this morning.” A numbness spread from my fingertips to the back of my neck and hot oatmeal slid onto my wrist as the sierra cup twisted in my limp hands.

The girls turned towards me. Mully beamed. The oatmeal burned.

“That sucks,” someone finally said.

“Welcome to boarding school, no privacy,” said another.

“Hey, you can sit here,” said a girl named Madi who smiled and made space on the log next to her.

Camped behind the small ridge, we slept three in each two-person tent, and I lay with my face turned towards the inside of the hood of my apple green sleeping bag. It’s always warmer when you wear less, so I’d quickly strip off my outer layers before zipping myself into the bag.

In the camping store that summer, Dad had picked out this sleeping bag for me and said the green went nicely with my hair. The bags hung upside down from a rack, and he read through the tags and rubbed his hands over the nylon lining.

“This will keep you warm.”

On that first Drop-Off day, my mother made my dorm bed before she left. I had new white bed linens and piles of pink and cream pillows. Mom fluffed the comforter and arranged the pillows the same way she makes her bed at home. Those first two nights in the dorm I slept on top of the covers; so I wouldn't destroy her work, I lay on the thin strip of the bed not covered by pillows. I was cold the first night and pulled a quilt from my closet for the second night, sleeping stiffly and restlessly so as not to push the pillows out of place. Away from the blankets I cherished that reminded me of her, I slept so well in the mountains.

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Five years later on the Appalachian trail in West Virginia, I shouldered my pack with ease. Kenyon College bused us from Ohio to a trailhead where our Freshman Pre-Orientation groups split off onto different trails. Put in charge of making sure no hikers in our group fell behind, I took up the rear by choice this time but again my legs were forced into a slower pace. The group leaders were sophomores, twenty-year-olds leading this group of eighteen year old freshmen, but after my gap year, I was almost twenty myself. At Thacher, we hiked behind faculty who loved the mountains and knew them well. I trusted them more than maps. I missed Mully and missed my parents too. Breathing in the fresh air, I tried to shrug off those longings.

The first night on campus, deep relief eased the brows of our student leaders when I listed my camping experience as we loaded our packs for the next morning's early start for West Virginia.

"Wow, so you're like an expert?" a sophomore named Hannah asked.

"I mean, not an expert, but I know how to do stuff," I said.

"Well shit, you know more than me," said Steve, a lanky sophomore leader wearing aviators. He snorted into his red cup.

Gracie, a quiet freshman girl who lived down the hall and whose mother had bought her periwinkle quick dry camping pants that unzipped into shorts at the knee, said, "What?" and her eyes widened at Steve.

"Don't say that Steve," Hannah whispered.

“He’s joking,” I told Gracie, as I convinced her to choose one of the six sunscreens her mother had packed for her. I braided her hair.

I showed them how to use the camping stove and how close to hold the lighter to the gas; I showed them how to use iodine tablets. I carried the heaviest pack. My shoes were already molded to my feet, and I winced as tall, heavy boys tried to step around their blisters. My clothes smelled the same way they did when I was fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen on my Thacher trips—Old Spice *classic clean* deodorant and the citrus, but also buttery smell, of bug spray.

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Even now, I don’t know what it was—what happened in Ohio. On that first night in the woods, I was sick to my stomach and it lasted the whole trip. My body weakened and my confidence withered. I started crying then and two months later quit school. Now I wonder if I was actually sick. I think everyone else wondered that too. The mind can overthrow the body.

I imagine it as a barometric shift, and my heaving stomach behind the tent was a sign. The weight of air shifted and surety slid from beneath my feet. It occurs to me that surety wasn’t there to begin with. The solid footing I hiked on in those trusty boots wasn’t anything but eggshells all along. Think of Ohio. Think of Ojai. Think of a freight train on loose tracks. The tracks aren’t beyond repair, but they’re shitty.

---

I had lunch with a new friend last month and we talked about my shame. We sat outside a café called Blue Fig in my new San Francisco neighborhood. I’ve finally moved out from my parent’s house. It feels good. I work full time and am writing essays for a fellowship. I’m living with boys. I’m not too thin or too big. The Mission is sunny as Stephen and I talk.

“I got really messed up after dropping out of college,” I told him. “So much of my identity was being a student, and getting off track felt like being jerked backwards—for



almost a year my insides felt tightened and squished like I was being dragged in a harness.”

“You can’t think like that,” he said. He’s confident.

“Well, I don’t anymore,” I tried to explain. “I was young and didn’t know any better. You don’t always know what you’re supposed to do.”

Stephen nods and says, “We get so caught up in what other people are doing and what other people call success.”

It’s not him, it’s me—but I felt a new rush of shame for my shame. I was so shallow and confused; I’m ashamed I couldn’t see past the mirages of words like *success* and *failure*. I used the word *failure*.

“I know,” I tell him and push a piece of chicory endive around with my fork. It’s pink now from the beet juice welling on the plate. “I’m not like that any more; going through that’s made me smarter. Trust me.”

---

On the van ride back to Kenyon’s campus from the camping trip, I laid my forehead against the window as the Ohio countryside zipped by. I rolled my brow across the cool glass and promised myself I’d stop crying. I hoped my box of bedding shipped from California would be waiting for me and played out just how I’d arrange the pillows. I haven’t slept beneath these sheets since Thacher and I tried to remember how my senior dorm room smelled. My roommate Casey and I burned incense and expensive French candles. The room also smelled like pine needles and sometimes—just like everywhere else in Ojai—orange blossoms and horse. With my neck cradled in the seatbelt, I remembered how that room’s pitched ceilings looked as I lay in bed.

---

In my dreams, none of it happened. It’s not skin under my eyes that’s rough from crying or the mealy yellow floors of Kenyon’s bathrooms that I remember. It’s the green front lawns of the one-story clapboard houses along the highway, the silos, and that one red barn. That black hole that opened and caught me by the toe wasn’t real. I imagine the

gemstones and crystals I have hidden in boxes and the smell of the incense and sage Casey and I burned in high school. Inside my mind, I hiked both trails like a stronger sister and a happier daughter. Pictures from Ohio when I was skinny and a bent Thacher sierra cup whistle at me from shelves in my mind. They always catch my eye. Like old Kodak slides, the mountain and the trail click around in my brain, illuminated briefly only to disappear.

# The Air is Wet and Warm

---

There is a picture we took in the frat house basement bathroom. The walls are tiled in mint green and there are three stalls and three showers. In the picture, Aubry, Gracie, and a girl whose name I will never remember are blurred figures in the background. Aubry's arms are raised above her head like she's dancing. My eyes are clear as I hold my phone up to the mirror. No one else is looking at the camera. The fitted floral dress slides off my shoulder and my mascara is either smudged or I let someone layer too much eyeliner underneath my eyes. I'm wearing fuchsia lipstick; I wish I were smiling.

At the party, I stand at the edge of the dance floor and hold a beer. The girls and this guy Aaron chatter next to me. I don't like Aaron. He has a deep voice, and this makes him seem confident, even when he doesn't know what to say.

He keeps yelling, "Look at me and all my ladies."

It's dark down here and the room pulses with a heavy bass. I close my eyes and let people jostle me as they move on and off the dance floor. I feel alone and their bumping shoulders and hips are comforting.

In my head I think, "No one cares I'm drowning."

---

I awake underwater each morning, drowning in bed with no air to breath. The dorm room air is stagnant and musty; homesickness waits like a cat crouching on my chest. Panic electrifies me when my body swims awake. I have thirty seconds to get outside.

I sleep in jean shorts and with a packed bag under my bed, ready with school books, a journal, pens, and Pepto-Bismol. As I jam my feet into sneakers, my roommate Claire doesn't stir in her bed. Out through our door, I run down the zigzag dorm hallway and hold my breath. Without windows or fresh air, the corridor scares me most. I'm

almost sure it will swallow me until I burst through the double doors to the dorm courtyard. Outside, the air is wet and warm.

September in Ohio is humid in a way I knew it would be, but different from any memory I have of East Coast summers. Sometimes the evenings or mornings here smell like my early childhood years in Maryland. We moved to California when I was seven, and my life in Bethesda, Maryland lives on in memories idealized and rosy. I've always dreamed of moving back East. I'm twenty now and Kenyon College in Ohio is my first attempt, but I'm homesick and it's harder than it should be. Like my first year of boarding school, my biggest pastime is crying. It's become harder to eat.

Weekend mornings are the hardest. My dorm room is stifling and I can't think there. My roommate Claire's side of the room is scattered with stale clothes and I hate her bedspread. As I panic, Claire doesn't seem to care about anything. As I spend an hour on the treadmill at the campus athletic center, she sleeps for hours in the middle of the day. Years later, I'll see she was drowning in something too. But now, the room is steeped in her stewing body.

Because neither the library or dining hall open until later, I sit on white Adirondack chairs on a small hill at the edge of campus by the President's house. I'm reading *The Narrative of Frederick Douglass* and sip tangy water from the Nalgene I've ruined with Benefiber powder. Among other concerns, I haven't shit in eight days.

I tuck my legs underneath my body and the wooden chair digs into my shin bone. My stomach gurgles and tightens as Douglass slides through freedom and captivity. He calls it a *beast-like stupor, between sleep and wake*: his body fills with flashes of dreams of freedom and then dark realizations of his own enslavement. I realize I'll write a paper on identity crisis.

---

My English professor calls me to his office hours. Yesterday I said *fuck* during our theory lecture and cried a little. His walls are lined with books and there are tulips on his desk. His name is Ted, and though his voice is soft, he speaks gruffly.

“I saw your notes on the Fredrick Douglass about identity crisis. Are you going through something?” Ted turns a paperclip around between his thumb and middle finger. In their rough way, his words chafe me comfortably.

“I don't know,” I answer.

“Did you like the Stuart Hall reading?” he asks.

“Yes, I'm interested in identity. And literature,” I say, looking up from the paperclip in his hand.

“It seems like you're interested in a lot of things,” he says, holding my gaze.

“I'm not sure what you're getting at.” My eyes move back to his hands.

“You seem like you're struggling,” Ted says, “and I hope you find something to hold onto. Either here in the classroom or somewhere else.”

Time stops and the twisting paperclip slows. He's seen me on the other side of his seminar table chewing Pepto-Bismol tablets or maybe he's seen me reading Frederick Douglass on the still dewy grass Saturday mornings at six. Ted sees I'm drowning. This feeling cradles me but I wait too long in its safety.

When I look up from the paperclip again, it's too late. The space between us has grown into leagues—I can't find the words.

“I'm fine.” I say.

---

When I drop out of school a month later, I'll leave all my school books in the dorm room for Claire to deal with, but I'll take my English texts. I'll read the whole reading list, in the same way I would have read it with Ted. Ted will forget about me, but even when I'm still drowning months later at home I won't forget the books he gave me, like Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*.

---

There's another picture from the half Fall I spent at Kenyon. I'm sitting at a cafe smiling into the camera. I'm wearing a necklace my mother gave me when I graduated

high school. It's a string of green garnets with a silver thumbprint pendant that's curved to fit someone's thumb.

"It's for when you're worrying," Mom tells me, "You can run your thumb against this silver part and soothe yourself."

I wore the necklace four years ago in Ohio. I also wore it the other day. Driving down Highway 280 from my apartment and job in San Francisco, I rub my thumb against the pendant. I'm writing this story for a fellowship at Santa Clara University, and on my drive down to school I think about Kenyon and what Ted would think of me now.

## Holding a Pouch of Pencils

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Inside, through the revolving doors, the wet pavement smell that always reminds me of summer suddenly turns stale. The sky, swirled with black clouds, sits against the large slanted windows of the Columbus Ohio airport. There are no lines at the ticketing desks. Dad reaches the airline counter first. A strawberry blond agent waits behind the desk. I walk up second and place my ID next to his wallet and then stand back next to my two suitcases. Dad heaves the first bag onto the scale and it soars to nearly seventy pounds; the second levels even higher.

“Okay, shit.” Dad says.

“Sir, the limit is fifty pounds per bag,” the woman says.

“He knows,” I answer defensively.

Dad turns towards me. His eyes move from me, to my purse, to his own carry-on bag. Back home in California, we compulsively measure our suitcases as we pack. It’s a Hoskinson tradition to never pay for an overweight bag.

The agent, whose hair is nested into a smooth bun, clears her throat and reaches under the desk.

“Would you like to purchase a bag from us?” she asks, setting a black duffle bag wrapped in plastic on the counter. The price of buying this bag and checking it is conveniently less than the overweight fee.

My jeans are too big and gape in the back as I crouch down. Dad holds the new bag open as I transfer armfuls of sweaters and scarves from one bag to another. There are books and sandals and notebooks and linens all mixed together. A stapler falls out from an armful of socks.

“Jesus, Bena,” Dad says. Sweat glistens along his brow.

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In my dorm room the night before, my hands shook as I dumped all my lotion and shampoo into a black garbage bag.

“You might want to keep out your toothpaste,” my roommate Claire said from her bed, as she watched me sweep my arm across the bureau to push my makeup, razor blades, and perfume into the bag.

“Right,” I said and fished the tube back out. On second thought, I pulled the glass perfume bottles out too. Wrapping them in a pair of wool socks my mother bought me for the Ohio winter I’ll never experience, I put them in one of the open duffle bags. Anything goes into any bag. My duvet and pillows—white and pink, the same since Thacher—would be packed in the morning.

Leaning against the door frame, my friend Margaret asked, “Are you sad?”

“I’m so sad,” I said, but there was a thrill pumping through my body. The sadness was there—a deep, vast cavern in me that would only widen in the next year before it lessened—but that night I was high. I was going home.

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At Kenyon, in the terminal, on the tarmac, in my dreams, I yearn for that feeling of home. You know the feeling: the gentle feeling of breakfast as a child. My mother lights a candle, a quick rip, and then faucet water on the match’s smoking end. Cream from a cup, cups still as cups along open shelves, a dog’s brown paper bag eyes. Sliced bananas fan out on crystal salad plates. Clumped brown sugar in milk glass bowls, a painted dog on a pitcher filled with milk. Small spoons for yogurt, smaller spoons for runny boiled eggs. On birthdays, warm pink boxes of fresh donuts. A black cat trails along her robe.

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The night I return, sitting on the foyer floor, surrounded by my dogs and my younger brother and sister watching from the staircase, it—the feeling of falling—won’t be better. Refusing to go to bed, I’ll sit in the center of the pink spiraling woven rug in my bedroom, and pull everything out of my suitcases. Mounds of clothes will surround me like petals and I’ll weep with my mother watching me, holding me. She is everything



I want but can do nothing to truly soothe me. At Kenyon, removing posters and tacks from my wall the night before, I don't know this yet.

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I'm kneeling on the airport floor next to piles of underwear and a black garbage bag with spilled lotion inside. I'm quiet but crying. Even with the new duffle, we've still got a bag over fifty pounds.

Dad's at the counter. "We're moving her back from school," he says.

Over the desk, the woman looks me in the eyes and it's only October so she knows something isn't right. Her eyes are big and soft.

"I'm so sorry honey," she says. She bends down again and grabs another bag.

"Here," she says, "this one's on us."

"Thank you so much." Dad's voice is soft and I can't see his face, but I know his eyes are warm and sincere.

I sit back on my heels holding a pouch of pencils in my hands. I watch Dad unpack and repack my suitcase. He gently tucks my clothes into corners and smooths down the bent front cover of my German workbook. He reaches and takes the pencils from my hand.

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It will be another three years before I leave home again. I'll be twenty-three and headed off for three months abroad in Berlin. I'll sit on the round, pink woven rug of my childhood bedroom and watch as my father helps pack my suitcase. I'm determined to fit everything in one bag and we both know it has to be under fifty pounds. Dad's the best at packing and knows which suitcases are roomiest and lightest.

"I'm nervous," I'll say as I watch him move a stack of jeans from one bag to another.

“I know, but you’ll be ok,” he says. “Believe me.”

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The agent lets us check the fourth bag for free. I see the wings pinned to her smart navy uniform. Her wings, her lipstick, her long manicured fingers clicking calmly against the keyboard. Her belt buckle shines and her skin looks soft as clouds.

Like an angel, she knew I just needed to go home. She saw the path ahead and the dark moments in doctor’s offices, parked cars, and the floor of the bathroom my sister and I share.

But beyond that, she saw four summers ahead—me and Madi standing on the red rubber Thacher track looking over Ojai with our five-year high school reunion bustling behind us. She saw me slow dancing on the Pergola with my face in a lapel and banquet red wine buzzing in my head, smiling. And beyond even that, she saw months backwards in time to the day in August that I left for Kenyon.

Sitting on my bedroom floor in my mother’s favorite pajama set, I took my childhood room and put it into my mind: the books bound in bundles by yarn and the folders of poems from high school. With my eyes closed, I had followed the next four years to come at Kenyon and all the things I would do: the rooms and roommates I would have, the clothes I’d wear, the books I would read and stories I would write. Like a reflection, she saw these things spread out before me, when I saw nothing at all.

## Floating in the Mediterranean

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It's our last night here. After two sunny weeks in Italy, we run through the long corridors of the Milan Maplensa airport hotel. From the outside, the metallic gleam of the hotel windows reflects the sun. From the inside, a thick blue window tint blocks most of the evening dusk. Mirrors at the elevator reflect us: my best friend Madi's cropped brown hair and tan skin, my curly hair, red against my pale, pink face. In the room, the carpet smells like talcum powder and the windows overlook an empty parking lot.

I am twenty. It's almost a year since I dropped out of college, and I've spent all my money for these two weeks of July in Italy. Kenyon College, Ohio—I try not to think these words because they slam in my head like closing private gates. Lying on the hotel bed, I study Madi's packed bag as she showers. Madi left school too, but it's different. She withdrew from school in Portland, Oregon, and spent the summer at a dance workshop in France. She'll unpack her bag for a fresh start in Portland with friends and a boyfriend I don't know. I dropped out—mid-semester, crying and hungry—and I've kept dropping, falling further from where I should be. I see my unpacked stained green bag, open and gutted on the hotel room floor, and picture what's waiting for me at home.

At home in California my therapist Hal Lynn and I talk about feelings—my feelings of failure. Even now, I imagine her cream-colored wingback chair. She wears crew neck sweater sets matched to slacks and heavy strokes of orangey blush across her cheeks. Hal Lynn's mouth is always dry and she sucks lozenges around her words. She crosses her legs, balancing a Steno Pad across her lap, and clasps her hands under her chin. "So, how was it? How do you feel?" I already hear her ask.

But I don't want to tell her anything. What would I say? Nothing's changed—I'm still no good? But if something changed—if between Rome's uneven cobblestones or my reflection in Portofino harbor's clear water the words *college dropout* felt less like an indictment or a cairn of bricks towering on my back—saying it in the stuffy, ordered office would kill it—I'm sure. Sometimes when I listen to Hal Lynn talk, I think I should

wear coordinated tops and bottoms too with peach blush across my cheeks—I should be a grown up lady.

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In Italy we wore bathing suits and hats. Chunky sandals with thick straps and loose, flowered dresses we'd bought in high school at thrift stores. Our faces are more freckled now and our hair feels rougher and salted. Madi's godmother Eleanor lent us her apartment on the Italian Riviera, in Ruta, and each day we walked 1,000 steps down the cliff to the Mediterranean, to a rocky point: Punta Chiappa where a metal ladder hangs attached to the rocks. Each day we lowered ourselves down and let the tide gently carry us out. The water was cool but not cold. When we swam beneath the surface we saw more rocks and clean sand. With our heads underneath the waves, at first we thought the sea made a crackling sound, almost like a tinkle but softer and with a flatter tone. The next day we heard it too. The third day we realized it was the sound of my bracelets hitting together as my arms circled. Denser and saltier than anything before, the water floated us well.

Moving along a trail atop the coastal cliffs, we hiked South to Portofino. We looked down on narrow inlets and white belts of sand curving around private resorts and waterfront mansions. We hiked, dreaming of that life. In the harbor, we walked through umbrella patios of tourists eating pizza. Looking for flour to make pancakes, we stopped in a small market. The goods were laid out in rows on square tables. There were yellow tomatoes in the middle, too far out of reach, and that's all I would have wanted.

We took the bus back to Ruta and went down again to Punta Chiappa. An old Italian in short black trunks that bunched up around his groin took our photo as we floated in the sea. His wife lay against the rocks with her bathing suit rolled down to her waist. He said, "Okay, Okay, Okay," as he took the photo. In the photo, we're smiling into the sun and our bodies cast shadows in the shallow water.

One day in Ruta, Madi was gone and I leafed through her notebook, looking for a picture she'd drawn for me. When we first arrived at the apartment, a letter waited for Madi on the plaid blue tablecloth. It was from him, her boy, and when I opened up the

balcony doors to see where the sea met the horizon line, she read it in the back bedroom. The letter was tucked between her notebook's pages and fell out into my hands. He told her he loved her, he told her he missed her, he told her he couldn't wait for Fall. She'd written to him about me I supposed because he wrote back that he was sorry I wasn't well and that he hoped I'd get better soon. I put it away and didn't open the notebook again.

I surely held the letter in my hands, but I don't remember lifting the envelope with my finger or seeing the way the words covered the page. I surely knew what they all were all saying about me, but the words and their diction seem more mine than theirs. How certain can I be that I read the letter? Was I that kind of girl or did I just decide I knew what she thought and what they'd all say? Once I told my sister I knew she didn't love me. Caroline loves me and hasn't forgiven me yet for those words.

And where was Madi that day? I can't think where she would have gone. Now, four years later, the memory seems less certain than a dream.

The second week, we took the train to Rome to see Madi's godmother Eleanor, a sommelier. With her, we ate dinner late at night, always outside with the best wine. I told her I dropped out of college, that I wanted to be a writer. The red wine buzzed in the back of my head and the word "writer" jumbled around in my mouth. At home I work at the mall and sell clothes to teenage girls and bored moms. I fold clothes after hours, pinching and molding stacks of sweaters into piles of even squares. In Rome, eating risotto at ten p.m., my job didn't seem right.

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Madi and I eat our last meal at the white-tablecloth airport hotel restaurant. Pooling the rest of our money, we split a plate of spaghetti. We talk about Madi's move back to Portland in the fall.

"Once I get settled in, you can visit me. You can meet my friends and see the house. Come for Halloween!" she says. Madi's friends are all in a band. They wear funky clothes and read interesting books. I don't know them, but I see them: cooler, prettier,

smarter. In Portland, people are dating and breaking up—in Portland, Madi is getting closer to her boyfriend. Looking down at the folded hotel napkin in my lap, I know I've never had a boy and it heats the back of my neck.

“I want to visit, I just don't know if I can,” I tell her.

“What do you mean?”

“I don't know if I'm ready; I don't know if I want to.”

“But I want you to come. It'll be fun,” Madi says.

“I don't feel like I'm good enough.”

“Don't say that.” She pleads.

“That's not fair,” I answer.

Madi lays down her fork, but I keep mine grasped in a fist.

“Everyone just wants me to be happy now; to be better now. And it's just not fair—it's too much pressure.” My voice cracks and the words catch in my throat. “I can't do it for everyone—I just can't.”

We are crying and Madi's voice is shaky, “I just want you to be happy. It makes me so sad that you're not.”

Madi snuffles as I watch her move food across the plate. The heat fades from my neck and a chill settles down my shoulders and across my arms as I hear my harsh words. Goose bumps under my sleeves scratch against my sweater. I place my fork across the plate of pasta and my stomach tightens with guilt.

“Look, I want to come—of course I want to come—I just don't know if I can. I don't know now,” I say, bending my neck to catch her eye.

We pay with our leftover Euro coins. As we walk out, I grab Madi's arm and she graciously links mine around her waist. “This sucks,” I say and she nods. “Super shitty,” she says. We moan and then laugh.

We wander back through the wide terminal-like hallways. The corridors are paneled with mirrors that reflect the airplanes twinkling across the sky. Under pink lamplight, we get drinks at the bar and we're sleepy. Across the room, two Italian women lounge sideways across armchairs with their shoes off. They're laughing and we guess they're old friends. When I close my eyes, the Italian rolling off their tongues pulls me

back to Ruta, to the topless old women lounging on the boat ramp at Punta Chiappa. They were old friends too.

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I remember the first night in Ruta when we had trouble finding the market. The small grocery was stashed beneath an underpass marked by a plain door and simple sign. I remember the old man in a long white coat who sold us house-made beef ravioli. Knowing we only spoke English, he spoke in slow, smiling Italian. We cooked the fresh pasta with olive oil and salt and drank bottles of Italian beer. The balcony door was open and the warm air moved around me silently. I saw the next two weeks linger before me and knew it was time to begin again.

## Bibliography

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**Beard, Jo Ann. *Boys of My Youth*. New York: Black Bay Books, 1999. Print.**

Jo Ann Beard's selection of essays was one of my favorite books from my readings. Because her book was a collection of essays, I was able to look at the structure and approach of each essay for practical examples of how I might structure my own essays. I've looked at her different tactics to beginnings and the different ways she uses tense. Within her essays, she often shifts forwards and backwards in time in sudden and undefined ways. For example, on page 21, she introduces a shift into the past by saying, "Their house has a face on it, two windows with the shades half down..." As you read further, you can tell she is talking about her mother and aunt in the present tense but from years ago. She also does scene shifts mid-paragraph—something I find hard to do.

In "Out There" she describes a time in her life when she was interpreting events and experiences as signs and symbols. I've read essays and memoirs like this before and they often seem clichéd or silly. She embraces and fully enters her fragile state of mind at the time in a way that draws the reader in with her. I wasn't left in an external position that I could judge from; I was seeing and feeling the signs myself. Beard often separates her mind and her body. She'll say, "I'm already back in Iowa", when we know she just thinking it, but as a reader I moved there myself. It's a powerful technique that uses only a few words.

**Cary, Lorene. *Black Ice*. New York: Vintage Books, 1991. Print.**

I had a remarkably hard time finding memoirs on boarding school experiences. As one of the very few I found, Cary's memoir about her experience at St. Paul's was invaluable. Through the beginning of the memoir especially, Cary uses a lot of proper nouns: street names, building names, and neighborhoods that mean nothing to the unfamiliar reader but establish a rich and real setting. Especially in the way Cary positions herself as "an other" at St. Paul's, she does a good job of making the whole



community into a character. I like Cary's idea of "abrupt sentimentality" (pg 36). On pages 70-73, Cary uses the physical space and structure of boarding school to show the non-physical boundaries she felt and experienced. She uses this technique to show social organization.

She also ritualizes school life in the same ways I'm trying to do. In my own experience, I find exposition really awkward and clunky and have struggled to write about my time in boarding school. Cary offers a lot of great examples and techniques I'm eager to try out myself. I like the sections in which Cary writes about girls and boarding school—I have things to say about this too—and the way she uses lists and routines to characterize life on page 82-83. On page 126, Cary does something ingenious with memory. She finds a way to use a memory that's unclear and hazy in her mind. She writes about how the memory presents itself in her mind today. There are a lot of memories that I want to write about but they are hazy in my mind. This will be a really interesting technique to try out.

On page 210, Cary continues to talk about memories: what they're like and how she doesn't always trust them. I love the way she talks about a high school reunion on page 223. It reminds me so much of my experience and prompted interesting ideas on how to work experiences from reunion into an essay on Thacher.

**Conway, Jill Ker. *When Memory Speaks: Exploring the Art of Autobiography*. New York: Vintage Books, 1999. Print.**

Conway's book examines the history of memoir writing. Learning the history of auto-biographical writing is helpful in understanding how my own writing fits into this history and its trends. In particular, the chapters on "Feminist Plots" and "Assertive Women" make interesting points on what it means to write as a women and how I understand myself as my own heroine. Do I have agency or do the events of my life just happen to me? Conway makes an interesting point on page 137, about the power of maternity and birth in women's narratives. She suggests, "Many male narratives neglect to mention the birth of children and illness, lest it undermine the image of male power the author seeks to project." As the book suggests, there are important ways my own

narratives will fit into the tradition of female writers in ways I don't think about or see myself.

**Dillard, Annie. *An American Childhood*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1988. Print**

Though the subject matter of Dillard's memoir wasn't as compelling to me as the other works I read, she portrays childhood in a very clear and effective way. Throughout the first half of her book, she uses a combination of an adult voice and a child's perspective to remind the adult reader what childhood was like. On page 22, she describes her realization that the "inside" and "outside" meet; that there is a connection between her mind and the world outside it. It's a powerful moment in a child's life and she captures it well.

I enjoyed the way Dillard introduces the reader to her family through the theme of humor and jokes. As she retells their jokes, she tells the reader about them. Dillard also shows good examples of how to intertwine her various voices. On page 88 as she remembers the boys she grew up with, she transitions from a memory played out in scene mode to commentary by her adult voice. I like how she combines these two perspectives and makes them into one. It's a seamless meshing that I'm eager to experiment with.

Dillard's chapters jump around and she doesn't overwork her transitions. She uses dialogue—often left in paragraphs—as an effective tool for characterization. There is a great example of this on page 16 where she remembers a causal conversation she had with her mother about a movie. These few short lines of dialogue powerfully characterize her mother and their relationship.

**Dunham, Lena. *Not That Kind of Girl*. New York: Random House, 2014. Print.**

Through my research, feminism and what it means to be a woman writer has been at the forefront of my mind. After reading Conway's text—which focuses heavily on feminist auto-biography—and after a fall quarter that had a large academic focus on feminism, I wonder how my voice measures up as I consider myself as a woman writer. This interest in how a modern day feminist writes about her life and also an increasing struggle with revealing hidden parts of myself and writing honestly, lead me to Lean

Dunham's *Not That Kind of Girl*. Dunham's book is an example of fearless writing and she writes with an awareness of her place in feminism. I was eager to read her book alongside Conway's history of women's autobiography. I like the way Dunham tries to write without a women's voice—favoring her “own” voice—but with women and herself as a woman as her subject matter.

As I've been writing, there are certain stories I want to tell that require full honesty but I catch myself feeling shy and self-conscious. Dunham's book is a great example of candor. As she bears personal details, her voice is powerful and I think the power comes from the courage the reader knows she writes with. She writes honestly and with a matter of fact style that suits her “confessions.” Her sarcasm and wry humor also help to lighten and universalize her personal, more private stories. Her honesty is inspiring.

**Fuller, Alexandra. *Don't Lets Go to the Dogs Tonight*. New York: Random House Trade, 2001. Print.**

As part of my research, I also went back and re-read a few of the memoirs and collections of essays that had the biggest impact on me when I was younger and just starting to write about myself. I wanted to go back to remember what I loved about them and see if I feel the same way now. I re-read Alexandra Fuller's *Don't Let's Go to the Dog's Tonight* and was again interested in both the way she uses specific, often cultural, details and the way she writes about her mom with a mix of reverence and brutal honesty. Fuller writes about food and the daily rituals of her childhood with detail. Her precise language transports the reader to that setting. I think her memoir is so popular because it brings her time in Africa to life. Fuller finds a way to present her family with equal measure of tenderness and criticality. When I write about people I know very well, it's hard for me to paint a full picture and I easily fall into the trap of highlighting one side of people more than others.

**Goldberg, Natalie. *Long Quiet Highway: Waking up in America*. New York: Bantam Books, 1993. Print.**

I picked up *Long Quiet Highway* at a bookstore in Marin. When I took my first creative writing class in high school, we read Goldberg's *Writing Down the Bones* and that book was highly impactful. It was my first glimpse into what it meant to be a writer: what the daily practice of writing meant and what the life of a writer could look and sound like. In many ways, *Long Quiet Highway* is a memoir about memoir writing. Part One centers around her early life and her vocational call to writing. Her insights and revelations about what it meant to write and how she wanted to use her own life as material were inspiration during a part of my writing process when I was feeling a lull in my passion and purpose. She writes, "Writing became my vehicle for transformation, a way to travel out to that nowhere land. And because writing is no fool, it brought me right back in. There was no place else to go, but moving my hand right across the page gave me a way to eat my landscape, rather than be eaten by it" (pg.31).

I was also impressed with the style, tone, and transitions in her later chapters. I love the way she effortlessly switches subjects, time frames, and in and out of narrative into scenes. Her various scenes of conversations in restaurants inspired an important part of one of my essays.

**Lammott, Anne. *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*. New York: Anchor Books, 1995. Print.**

Though Lamott's book isn't focused only memoir writing, its ideas are helpful. Lamott explains that each of us has an "emotional acre" all our own and that each of us can do whatever we want with that acre. Much of what Lamott writes about creating and using characters effectively helps me think about creating myself as a character. Lamott asks the reader, "How would your main character describe their current circumstances to a close friend, before and then after a few drinks?" (47). This exercise helps me distill my message. Her ideas in the "Plot" chapter were interesting and offered advice on craft. On page 87, Lamott describes her process in revision—physically laying out the pages of her book and moving the pages to try out different scene combinations. I'd like to try this exercise.

**Moore, Kathleen Dean. *Riverwalking: Reflections on Moving Water*. San Diego: Mariner Books, 1996. Print.**

I like Moore's organizational principle of creating a book of essays that are written alongside bodies of water. Each of Moore's twenty essays inspires different ideas of format. In her first essay, "Willamette" Moore shifts subject matter eloquently and uses italics to section off personal bits of narrative that sometimes happen in "scene mode" or read like journals. "Aguajita Wash" is punctuated by lists of species that replicate journal entries and lists Moore and her children kept on road trips. Perhaps my favorite story, "Klickitat Creek" shifts its focus like a microscope lens. Moore titles different sections with different levels of magnification: "1X Magnification" describes the pond and marsh as part of a greater ecological setting; "10X Magnification" follows the detailed movement of newts; "10,000X Magnification" dives into the biochemistry of the newts and their scientific existence. Very creative and often poetic, Moore's stories were a pleasure to read and to draw inspiration and ideas from. Particularly, I admire her fresh first sentences and eloquent, graceful endings. Similar to Jo Ann Beard but often less blunt and emotional, Moore's narration is a feminine voice I relate to and find real.

**Sanders, Scott R. *Writing from the Center*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997. Print.**

I knew immediately while reading Sanders' preface that the themes and purpose behind his book of essays match many of my own. The twelve essays in *Writing from the Center* focus on the Midwest, its land, and culture. Sanders writes, "Although I speak of the Midwest, my deeper subject is our need to belong somewhere with a full heart, wherever our place may be, whoever our people may be. I want to explore the places I've been in and what it meant to belong to the different places I write about."

Sanders masters the metaphorical landscape. The land he describes is rich with emotion. In terms of subject matter, Sanders' work varies between sections of deep emotional impact—like when he sees his dead father's spirit in red-tailed hawk—to passages that are more historical in focus and tone. Stylistically, I admire his tone and

attention to detail. The more I write in the course of this project, the more I realize that my stories will be more emotionally personal. I've noticed I like his personal stories more which has helped me to further develop the goals of my writing.

**Smith, Alison. *Name All the Animals: A Memoir*. New York: Scribner Book Company, 2005. Print.**

On page 19, Smith describes her childhood in terms of tenets and truths. As she introduces the influence of religion, she writes, "In these surroundings you'd be hard-pressed not to believe in the existence of God. It would be like saying you did not believe in oatmeal, or motorcars, or the laws of gravity." This simple sentence prompted me to think about what I would substitute for the word "oatmeal."

Smith uses a lot of visual symbols and physical objects in her writing. Her writing prompted me to question which physical objects and images are especially potent in my life. For example, the statue of the Virgin Mary becomes a power physical symbol and image for her. On page 52 specifically, I like the way she uses photographs to call up specific memories and events. Though religion isn't something I'll be writing about, I like the way Smith weaves religion throughout her writing. At times she conflates religion with truth. She uses phrases like "bible truth" while at other times she rejects the religion she was raised with. Her family's Catholicism becomes a type of litmus strip for her behavior; the more she rejects it, the further she moves away from her parents. On page 126, Smith talks about the quality of her memory. She explains that as she looks back in time, she can't remember many of the details because her mind at the time was so absorbed in her research on homosexuality. I too have memories that seem to stand alone; I have memories that are very specific and detailed but they feel out of context and hard to use because I can't remember other things happening at that time. I like the way Smith works around this by acknowledging the things she should remember but can't. I think this is a good strategy for providing detail without actual memories. On pages 202 and 224, Smith talks about and personifies "goodness." I like the way she works with abstract concepts like this.

**Spragg, Mark. *Where Rivers Change Direction*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2000. Print.**

*Where River's Change Direction* by Mark Spragg made a giant impact on me when I first read it. Then and now, I'm so impressed by Spragg's use of imagery and detail. I love the way he connects his story with the land. Each chapter is layered with deep emotion and power but still doesn't feel overbearing. For Spragg, the land was his childhood and he transports us into that world as he takes us on trails, on horseback, and into the wild. I've always admired Spragg's use of understatement and matter of fact style. My own style and taste in writing has been shaped by this book and each page offers twenty lessons in language and craft.

**Wolff, Tobias. *This Boy's Life: A Memoir*. New York: Perennial, 1990. Print.**

Wolff does some interesting things with time. On page 121, his voice and perspective suddenly zoom forward in time. Woolf transitions smoothly from "scene mode," to reflection, to reflection that jumps forward in time and references events in his adult life like fatherhood and war. I'm also really interested in Woolf's structure and organization. He divides his memoir into sections. Each is divided into untitled and unnumbered chapters. The chapters are then divided into sub sections that are blocked off by short breaks in the page. Woolf's transitions between these subsections are really impressive. He seems to find the perfect way to end each section and start the next. Among his approaches, I like how he sums up a section by recapping it into lessons on page 177. I also really enjoyed the last paragraph on 191. On pages 232-233, I like the way Woolf plays with time and uses repetition.

**Zinsser, William. *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*. Boston: Mariner Books, 1998. Print.**

Each of the book's sections offers interesting insight and advice. Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s chapter "Lifting the Veil," offered a lot of insight on how to position myself as a writer, as a subject, and as a narrator. Gates explains that with memoir writing there

is always a danger of self-indulgence and sentimentality. Gates suggests that sentimentality can be battled with wit, irony, self-deprecation, and honesty about pain and fear. A memoir is the unfolding of the ego and writers must remove themselves to the periphery and deflect their presence. Annie Dillard continues this discussion when she recommends that “I” can be used as the subject of the verb but not as the object. Dillard also writes about her concept of “a child’s interior life” (a theme she also discusses in *An American Childhood*). Her ideas are interesting and I think the image of the mind having an interior landscape and an idiosyncratic topography is inspired.

On page 135, Alfred Kazin makes an interesting point about the beauty of individual words. This inspired me to think about words whose sounds have a mystical meaning and represent ideas and themes. I realized that words like Ojai, Ohio, Woodside, etc. have these types of special, specific meanings. Toni Morrison makes an interesting point about the role facts play in memoir writing. Morrison writes that there is a difference between “fact vs. “fiction” and “fact” vs. “truth.” Morrison emphasizes that “facts” can exist without human intelligence, but “truth” cannot.



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- Auslander, Shalom. *Foreskin's Lament*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2008. Print.
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