

Corona

Cutter Wood

Corona

by
Cutter Wood

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Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts in the Expository Writing Honors
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April 2, 2001

The din of the lunchroom lets us eat quietly. Every seat at our table is taken, save one. The empty chair sits next to Vaughn, across from me. As we eat, a few words pass between us. Then we are silent again. He looks up to me, begins to speak.

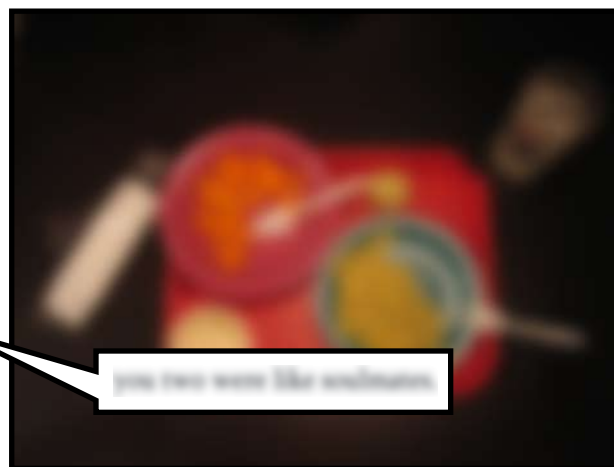


I can't believe you're not crying.



A moment's pause. I fill my mouth with food, swallow without chewing.

You two... you two...



you two were like soulmates.



Some people hold the belief that shitting, somehow, is deeply related to writing. I suppose I can understand that. You are born into this absurd world, burning to make sense of the mess around you. You take in your first food, your first little taste of life, you process and digest it, and a day or so later, you grace the world with your first great work, written in some indiscernible language on the inside of your diaper. And, if you're lucky, your writing progresses from there.

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It is late, and I am sixteen, driving an eclipse through the night. Black back country roads and a friend to keep me company. Rounding a curve, the car loses traction, wheels grating against gravel, and we speed into a telephone pole. When I come to, the light is on in the car. There is the acrid smell of smoke, of burning plastic. Music is still playing. The two of us get out, put our hands to our heads. The car is demolished, crushed, wrecked, dead, and somehow we are still breathing. The pole, now snapped, a cracked matchstick, the only thing that kept the car from diving into a gully. I remember he was suddenly tired, kept trying to lie down in the middle of the road and rest. I couldn't speak.

The next morning...

when my mind moves again, waking...

and I open my eyes...



ugh...

It's horrible.

When I find my brain is constipated, when, in pain, I struggle to place my thoughts upon paper, this is when I flee to the dark. I turn off every light, close my eyes tightly, and only then can I write. Somehow, I can unburden myself better in the dark. Without the distractions, I begin to see more. I am no longer blinded by the world around me.

I have developed an obsession with the dictionary. A word crosses my path and I need to know its spellings and pronunciations, its meanings and etymology. I begin to see connections, shared pasts, places where things overlap. Stories sprout in my mind.



corolla
(kuh-rol'-uh)

noun

the petals of a flower



a sedan manufactured
by Toyota



I am in the backseat of a car with a girl on my lap. Her name is Morgan. Morgan Ryder. We have both been drinking. I am trying, trying desperately and failing, to tell her about the eclipse, my eclipse. I am failing. Words that should be screamed are spoken softly. I am wincing with pain and shame. I am trying to talk to her, about cars, about not making my mistakes, about not letting her life be written in skid marks. I was so lucky, I keep saying. I could have died. He could have died...



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I tell her about the night of my accident, how the police arrive first, then the ambulance, the firemen, how the scene pulses with flashing lights.

I tell her that this is when the people begin to drive by. Everyone I have known or will know. They drift by, their cars crunching softly over the gravel, their eyes falling on me. I can feel their eyes on me and standing there alone by the dead eclipse, I burn with shame.



I guess there are people out there whose lives are filled with a burning desire to put words on paper. It comes to them easily, words flowing quickly to the page. I am not one of them. For me, it is a process of profound, intense pain. I write only by some strange, masochistic force of will.

I do not burn to write. I burn when I write. I overheat. My palms get clammy. My shirt gets damp. I open my windows and still the sweat pours down my sides.

I've begun to wonder if shame is a child of writing, or if maybe it's the other way around. I can't help but feel, as I scribble away in my puddle of sweat, that something about writing is oddly shameful.

And shameless.

I don't write as much as I'd like to now. The only writing I do regularly is for a small newspaper. I write the horoscopes. I write for all those people out there who believe they can find some of their life's meaning in the movement of the sky.

By the time we're in third grade, just about everyone has learned to write. We've fully made the transition from shit to words. Most people continue to move on from there. But some of us, we're still somehow stuck in that third grade classroom, still somehow struggling with our words. What possesses a person to be a writer, to make of his time here on earth a life of words? Why can I not move past the third grade? Why am I still laboring over my letters? Others have moved on. Why haven't I?

Of course, by the time we're in third grade, just about everyone has learned to love, too.

Childhood is the time of our taming. They teach us first where to put our waste, and it goes on from there. We are taught to say please and thank you. We are taught not to speak with food in our mouths. We are taught to write just so, so our letters fall neatly between the lines.

I remember third grade, the pulpy green paper with its blue and red lines, the teacher in the front of the class showing us just how we should write.



Vaughn and I are best friends now. We race at recess and play together after school. In class, the desks are arranged in twos, and when the seats are assigned at the beginning of the year, I cross my fingers, hoping, praying to hear his name paired off with mine. It is not Vaughn. It is a little blond-haired girl named Sarah Hanley.

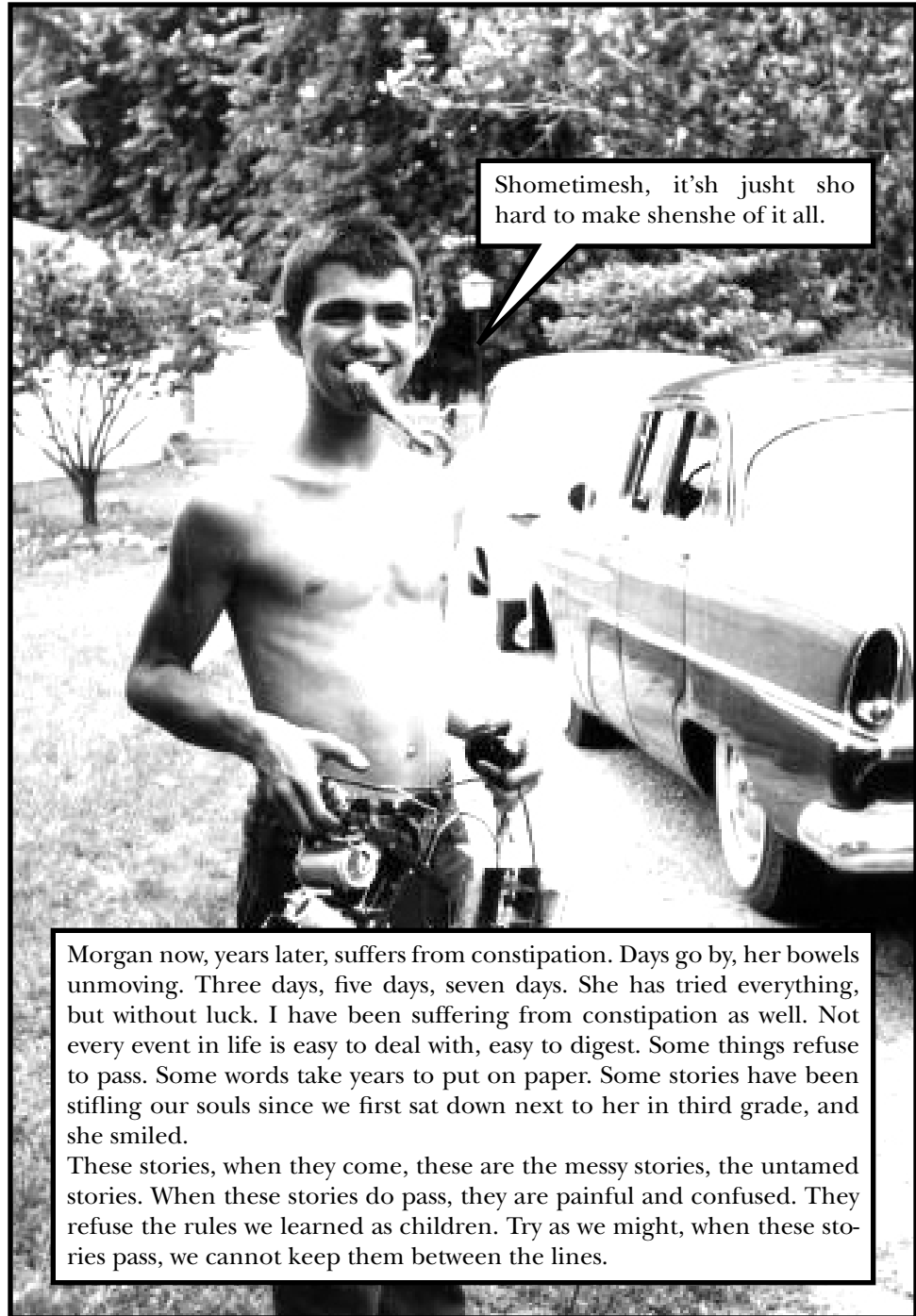
I am the elementary school spelling bee champion. I beat Jeremy on memorandum, Ryan on receipt, Sarah on gelatin. She tries to spell it with a J. Was it that moment, that moment right there on that platform, when I won? Was it when I watched her walk away head down? When the teacher handed me my prize, a dictionary and thesaurus? Was that the moment I fell in love with words? Or was it something else?



At the funeral of a young girl, the flowers can be suffocating. The more innocent, the more flowers. As if flowers could fill that void, that space in which her body lived and breathed. Her funeral was horrible. We all stood in a line, waiting to see her. A line that wrapped around the pews. A line that spilled out the door and down the street. Outside we stood in the sun, and it seemed that we were not waiting to see the body of a young girl. We pretended our path would not end at a casket. People smiling, laughing, greeting one another in the sunlight, the sidewalk shadowed only now and then by those leaving the church, bodies hunched, faces streaked. Everything changed when we stepped inside. It was darker, the rooms crowded and stuffed with flowers. The air was heavy, thick, warm. Slowly carried toward her by the crowd, I tried to breathe. People broke down. Tears fell everywhere. I stood, tucked away in my suit, sweating.

It seemed odd to me that we cut flowers to fill her funeral. It seemed sad that two weeks after the service every bloom picked for her had died. I remember thinking I should plant something for her, a hardy flower that would not die, that would live on year after year. I imagined at the return of spring, when the day we all knew was edging closer, we would see it at the side of the road, and remember her.





Shometimesh, it'sh jusst sho
hard to make shenshe of it all.

Morgan now, years later, suffers from constipation. Days go by, her bowels unmoving. Three days, five days, seven days. She has tried everything, but without luck. I have been suffering from constipation as well. Not every event in life is easy to deal with, easy to digest. Some things refuse to pass. Some words take years to put on paper. Some stories have been stifling our souls since we first sat down next to her in third grade, and she smiled.

These stories, when they come, these are the messy stories, the untamed stories. When these stories do pass, they are painful and confused. They refuse the rules we learned as children. Try as we might, when these stories pass, we cannot keep them between the lines.



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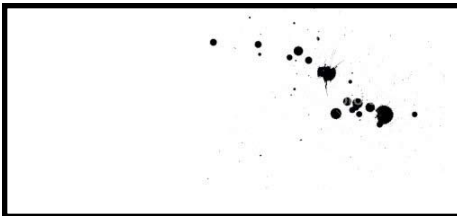
I return home late. My mother tells me that someone called. She couldn't make out what they said their name was. John? Vaughn? Don? I don't try to return the call.

I sit down on the couch, begin to read.

He shows up at my door a little before midnight.

Morgan has been in a car accident. She was driving her corolla when the car drifted off the road. It lurched to the right and she overcompensated, pulled it too hard to the left. The car spun across the road, through a telephone pole, came to rest against a house. She is in the hospital, but she is okay. Her passenger, Sarah Hanley, did not survive.

All Fools Day



They looked up and they did not understand the darkness. They did not understand the sun or the eclipse. What fools they were. They gave it their own meaning, made of the eclipse an omen.



corona
kuh - ro' - nuh

noun

an outgrowth of the corolla - visible on
some early blooming flowers, such as
daffodils

the atmosphere of the sun - visible
only during an eclipse, as a white halo



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Before that winter and the spring that followed, before the eclipse and the co-
rolla, before the accidents and the funeral.

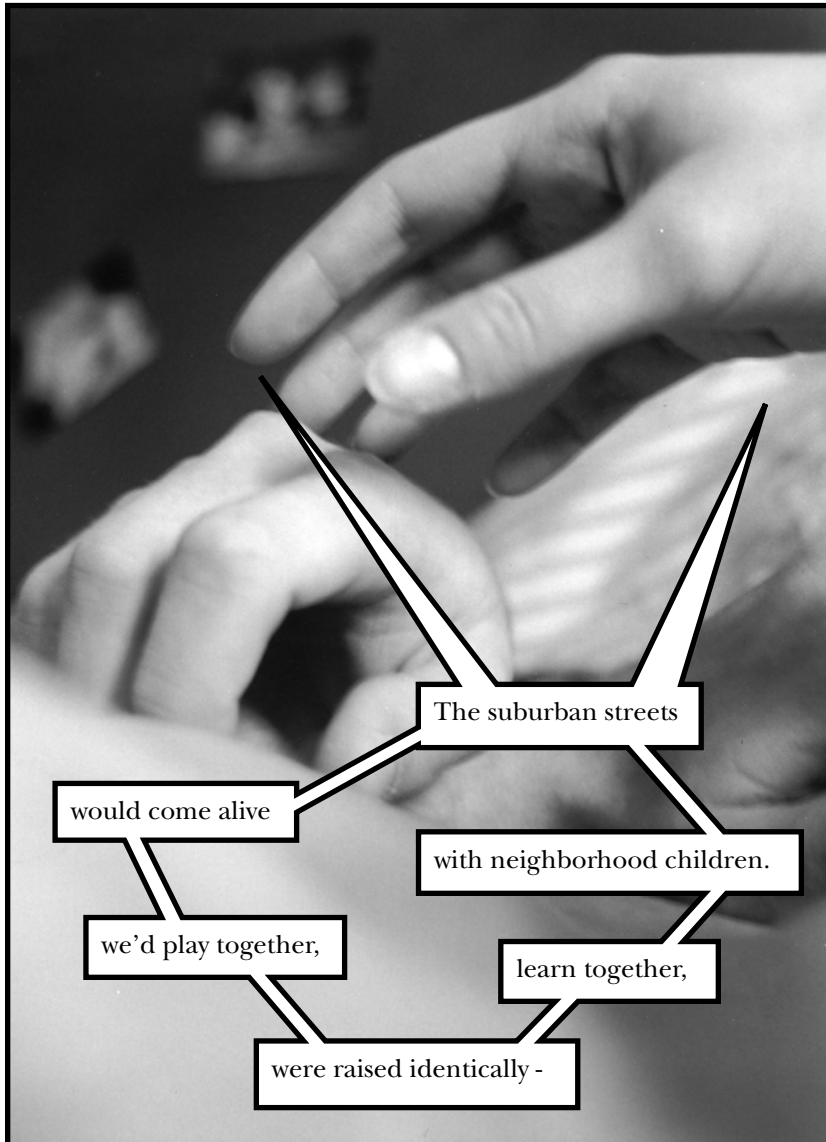
Before everything, Sarah writes a poem in the school literary magazine. *Sail On,*
Silver Girl. She writes the words for two voices. The poem is paired with a picture
of two girls dressed up in fancy clothing. One of the girls gazes up from the page,
a wineglass in her hand. It is Eve, Morgan's little sister.

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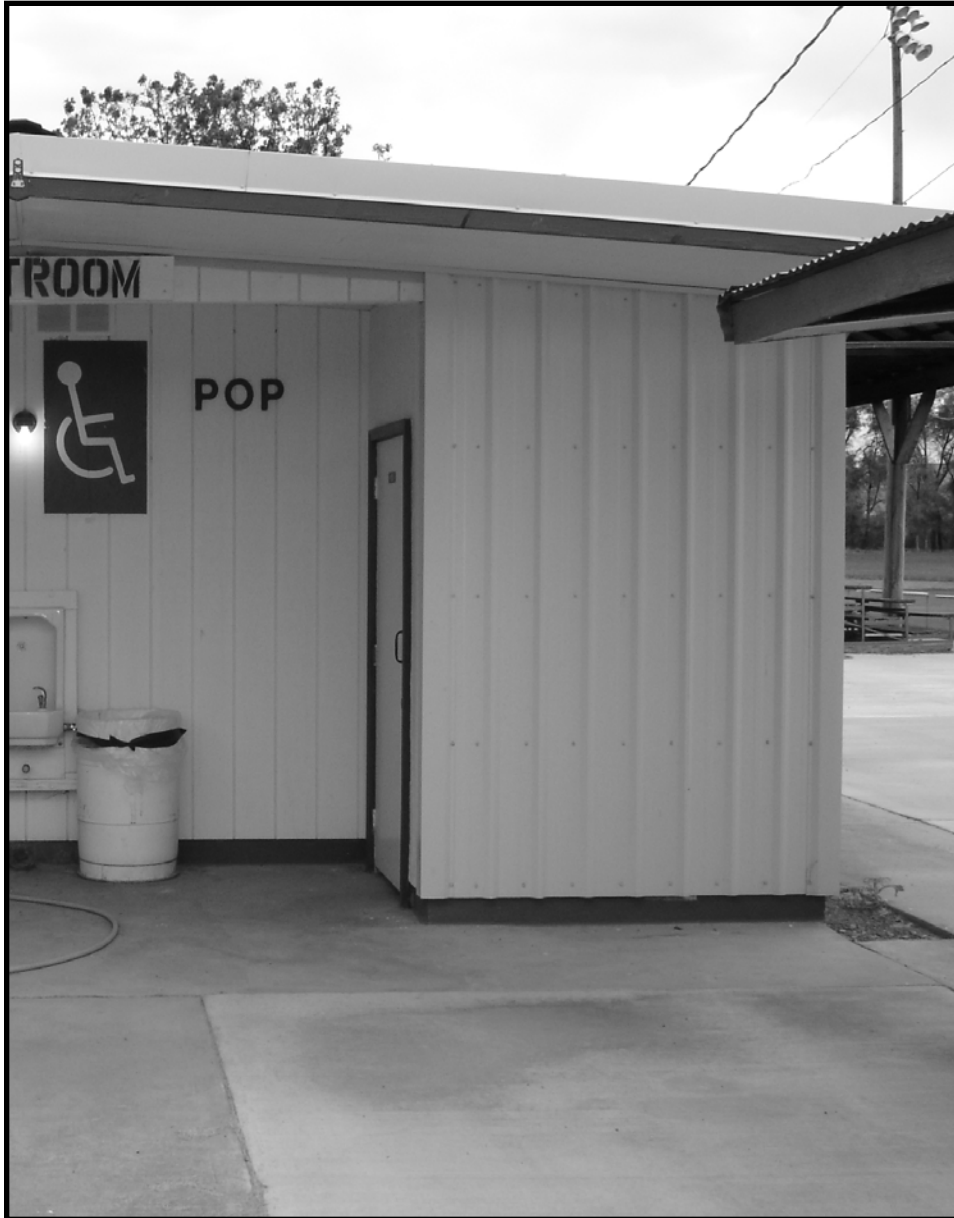
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In comics, the page is broken into boxes. Between each box is a white space called the gutter. It is in this gutter that we take the fragments and connect them. We bind them together, we make a story out of them. In comics, this connection has a name.

Less than a year before the accident, Sarah's mother, Ann, divorces her father. She finds another man and leaves the family to live with him in Florida. Before they depart for good, Ann and her boyfriend come into my mother's restaurant for dinner. I wait on them. They have wine. They seem very happy.



My desire, my need for the dictionary grows daily it seems. I sit in my chair poring over the book, searching for the definitions that surprise me, skipping through the pages one word to the next, hoping to find that little bit of meaning in between the lines of text.



I run into Sarah's father at the library. We shake hands. We are both searching the shelves, but cannot find what we're looking for. We stand next to one another, lost. We will shake hands once again. We will be tucked into our suits, standing in a church.



She leaves a space where she once was. We search, we struggle, trying to fill it, and we hear a word echoing in the new emptiness.

Closure.

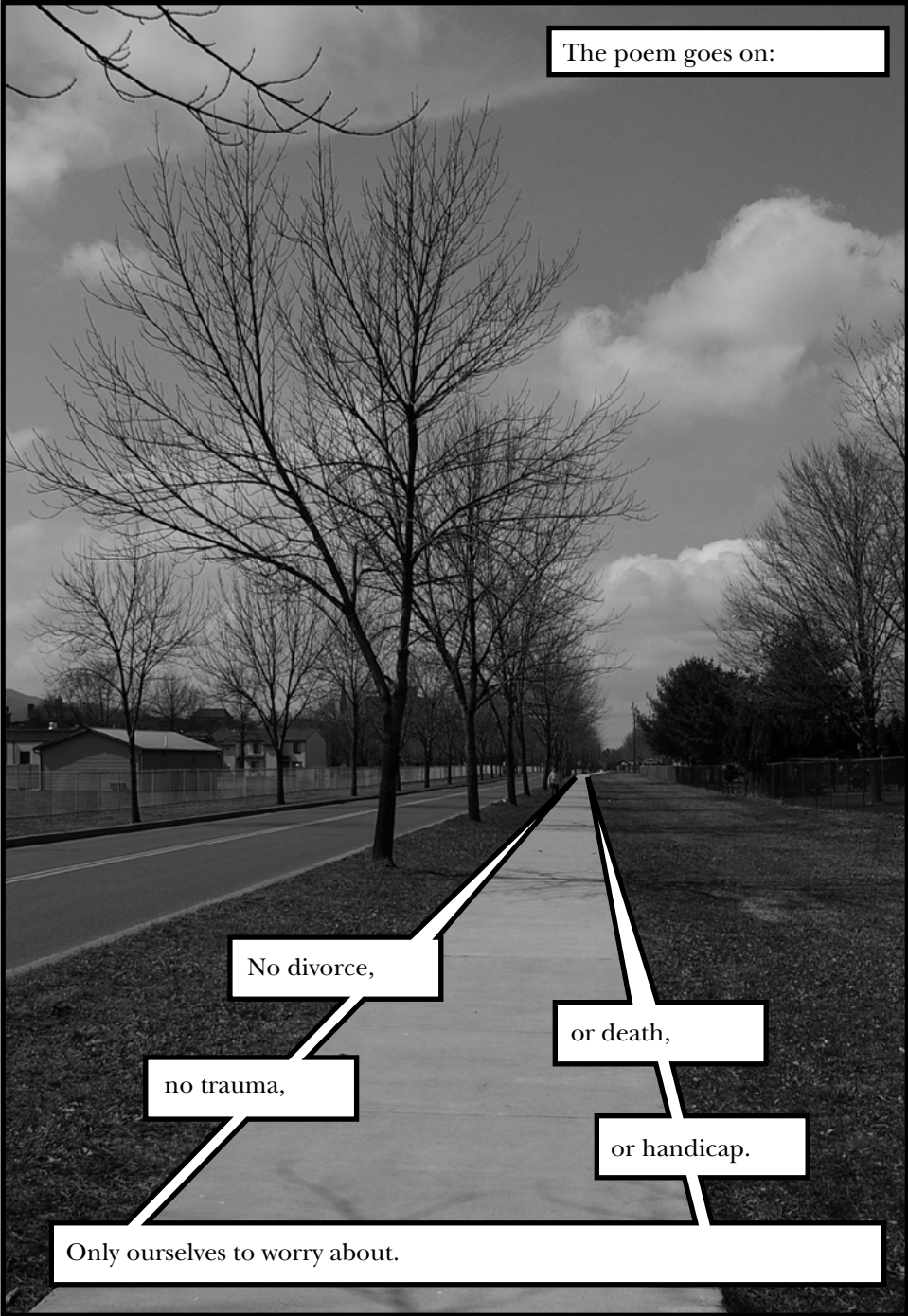
I'm just trying to...

we tell people who ask.

it's hard...

we say to them, struggling

...but I think I'm finally feeling a little closure.



The poem goes on:

No divorce,

no trauma,

or death,

or handicap.

Only ourselves to worry about.



The drive to the Ryder's house, taken on the right day, the sun overhead, wind at your back, is pleasant. I leave the city on Springrove Road, follow it, winding through the hills, out into the country. And just before it ends, I take the gravel drive that shoots up a hill to the right. There, on top of that small knoll overlooking the road, is the house where Morgan lives with her family. Her parents, Peter and Patty, her older sister Katie, her younger sister Eve.



religion
re - lij' - uhn
noun

a system of beliefs and values

from the latin, religare, to
bind fast, bring together

I am alone when I read the poem that Morgan has written. I finish it quickly and hide it in the darkest corner I can find. The first words are, "The day God took a nap..."



She crashes on a Sunday, of course. She is driving home. She is not a hundred yards from her driveway. Her mother and her sisters walk out the door of their house, and stand together, looking down at the road, at the telephone pole, the ambulances and fire trucks, at the car. Patty runs down the shale back, across the grass. She collapses at the side of the road, senseless, sobbing. Katie and Eve stand on the hill, quiet and exposed, watching their mother fall apart.

On all the streets of the city, the churches are throwing open their doors to the warm winds and the faithful. Of course she crashes on a Sunday.



Waiting for dinner at the Ryder's house, I lie on the bed in Eve's room. I am lying on my belly, my head hanging off the end of the mattress, and I notice, crumpled in a corner against the wall, a piece of paper. I reach down, unfold it. The handwriting is Eve's.



April 1, 2007
Today my sister Morgan got
in a car accident. Another
girl named Sarah

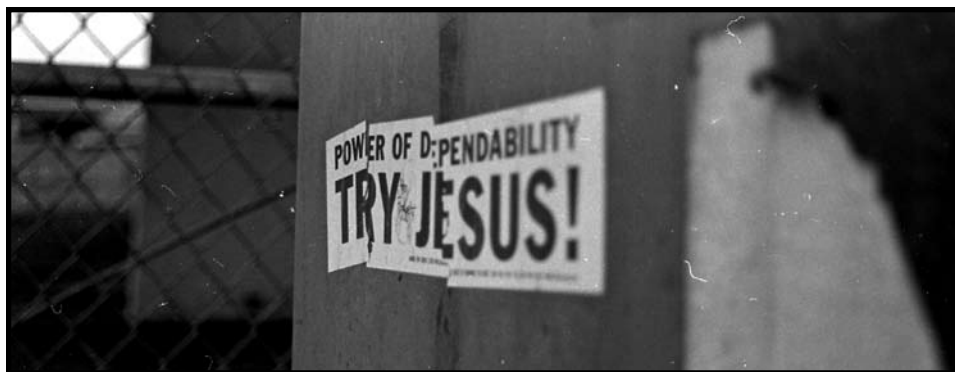


Vaughn is the one late that night who shuffles into my mother's restaurant, who finds her at the bar drinking a martini, who tells her I have crashed.

Vaughn is the one who calls my house on a Sunday night not quite two months later, on the first evening of April.

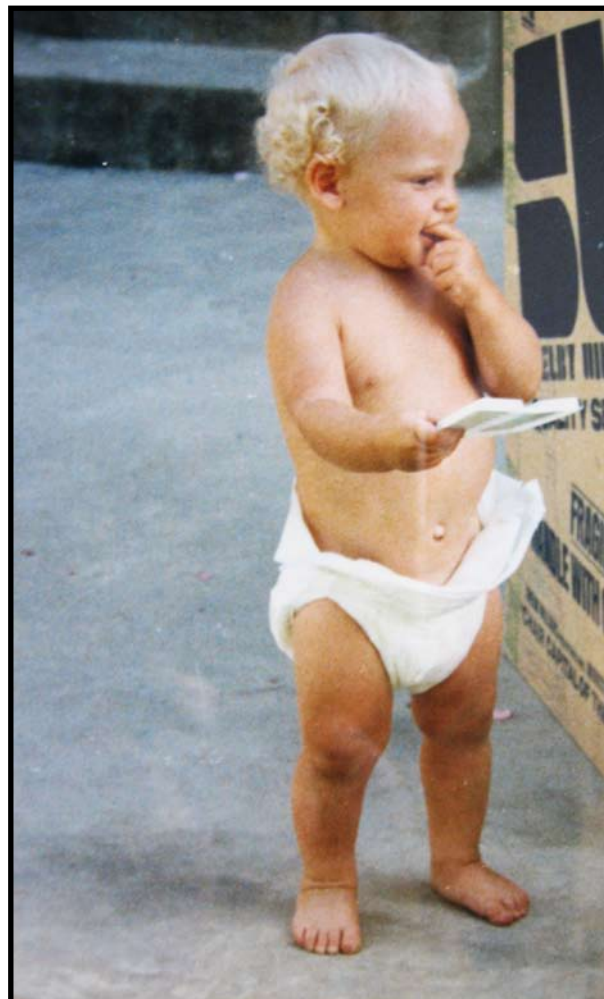
Vaughn is the one, the day after at lunch, who looks to me, chewing, mutters through his food.





He is the messenger of these days, the bearer of bad news. He is the figure who appears, dark clouds close behind him. It is no fault of his. A blackness seems to dog him.

It is third grade and Vaughn is my best friend. I go over to his house after school. His mother is living in the living room. There is a bed set up there, and we can't play video games because she is sleeping. He misses school for three weeks when the cancer kills her. I sit next to Sarah in class and look over at his empty seat. He turns to God, then. He needs and he believes and the doors of the church open for him. He is the first one to feel the fracture.



Morgan leans against me on the steps. We have been drinking. She is crying. She tells me about when she regained consciousness, about how she just kept screaming.



Where's Sarah?

No one would look at her.

I wonder if she could already feel, even then, in that first moment, an emptiness?

I wonder if she knew then that the accident had not broken only Sarah.

I wonder if she knew then that a car crash does not happen all at once, that the shattering spreads slowly, that it takes years to fall apart.





Summer 2004



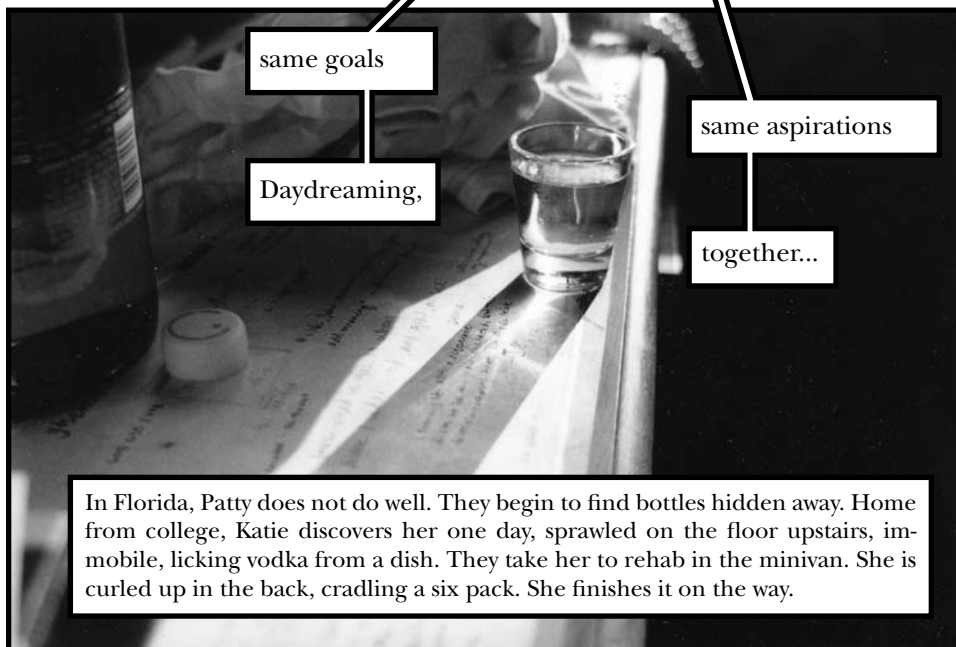
Morgan and Katie leave for college. Eve is about to begin high school. Their mother, Patty, can no longer take it. On Springgrove Road, one telephone pole stands out from the rest. It is lighter, less-weathered. She cannot leave her home without facing again that spot at the side of the road. The road to her own house haunts her. The family moves to Florida.



It's a poem about people whose lives are broken apart:



I wish we were still close.
We were so much alike,



same goals

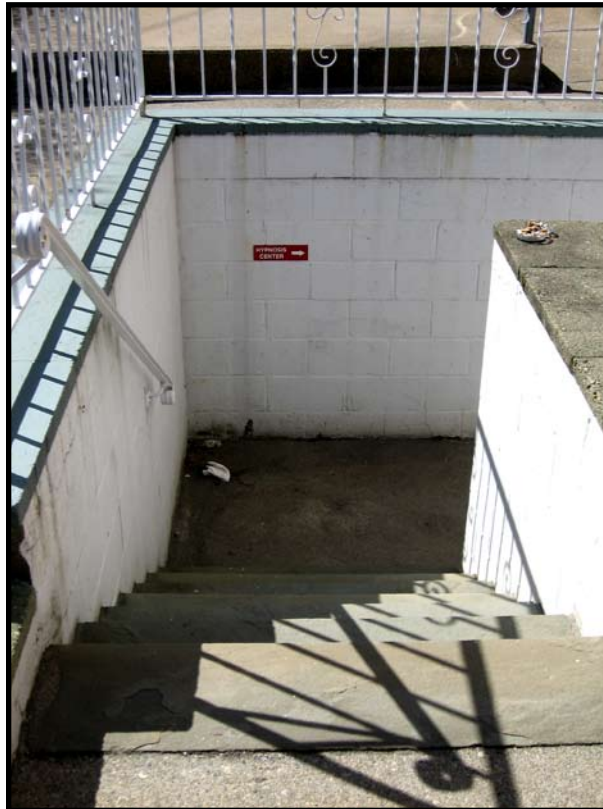
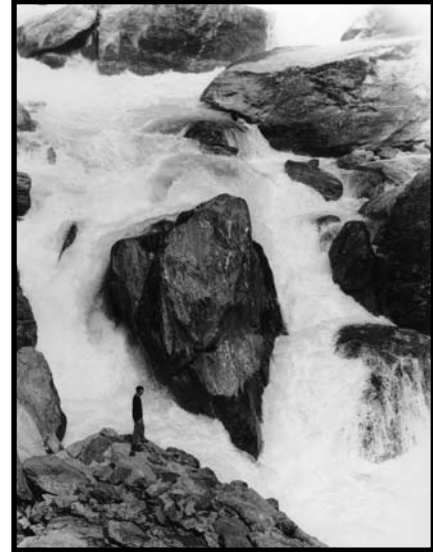
Daydreaming,

same aspirations

together...

In Florida, Patty does not do well. They begin to find bottles hidden away. Home from college, Katie discovers her one day, sprawled on the floor upstairs, immobile, licking vodka from a dish. They take her to rehab in the minivan. She is curled up in the back, cradling a six pack. She finishes it on the way.

None of the treatments work. Patty can't do AA. You need to put your faith in a higher power, in God. She can't. Nothing works. Not the time spent drying out. Not the drugs that they give her to regulate her hormones. Not the drugs that they give her to make her ill when she drinks. None of the rehab programs can make her stop. Finally, in a last ditch effort, they take her to the Betty Ford Center, a nearly month-long program. The program is designed so that after two weeks, the family comes to spend five days there too. Peter, Katie and Eve fly out to California. Morgan can't make it.



Eve is in high school in Florida when Patty's alcoholism gets out of hand. She speaks of her mother with disgust, can barely stand to be around her. One day at the Betty Ford Center, they are doing a group exercise in which each person has to name one thing they need. Eve stands, says to the group,

I need God, because he is my rock.

This is the first time the family has heard her speak of religion.

It was Sarah's mother who was the angriest afterwards. It was Sarah's mother who wanted to sue, Sarah's mother who wanted Morgan to suffer.



While Vaughn goes to the bathroom, I sit in his bedroom, looking through a pile of papers. I find a folder and open it. The pages are mostly empty, a few words jotted here and there. In the back is a pocket, and I see a piece of newspaper tucked into it. I pull the paper out, unfold it. I can hear the sound of the toilet flushing in the bathroom, and when he comes back into the room everything is as it was. I pretend I am using the computer.

It was her obituary.



Let me collect myself



Pull yourself together

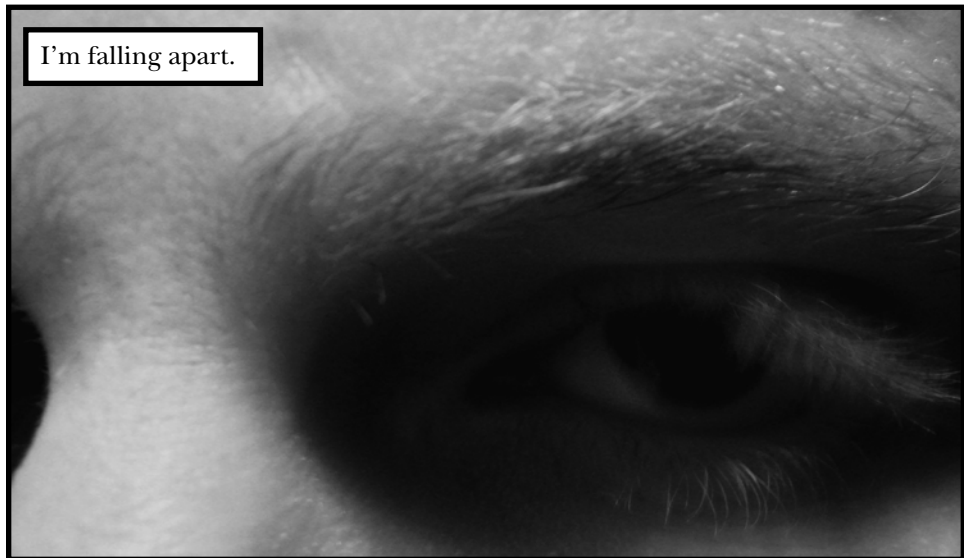
My god...



we say,

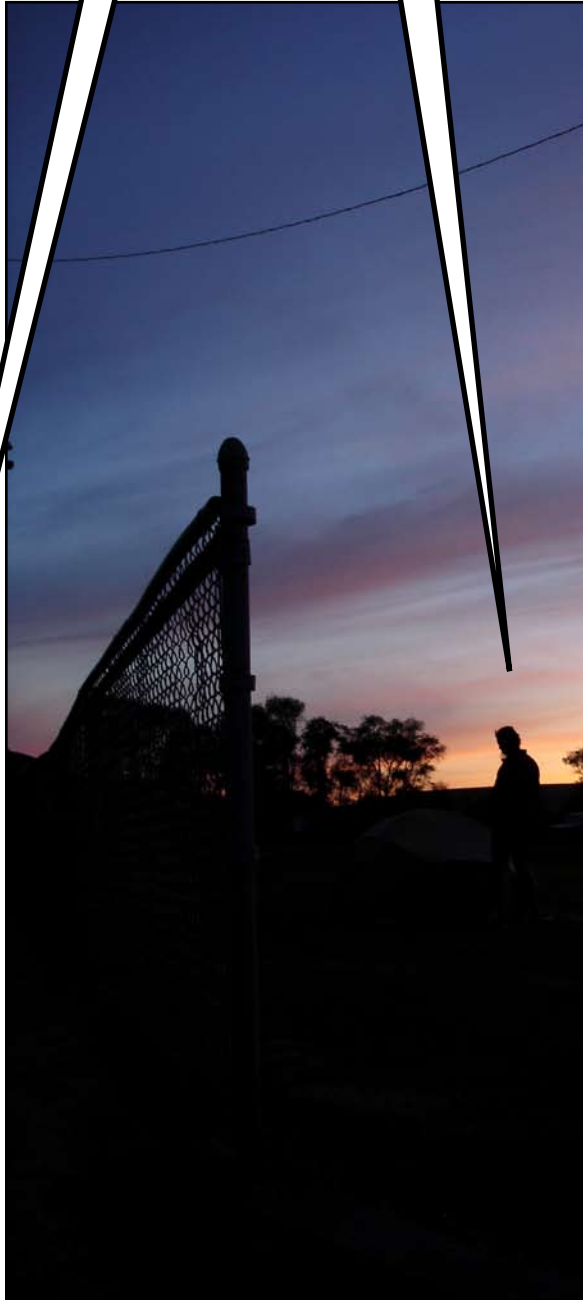


we say.



I'm falling apart.

The story, the page is broken...



...into boxes.





Between each box is a white space, and, in that white emptiness, we take the fragments and connect them.

We bind them together.

We make a story out of them.

We give them a definition, we give them a little meaning.

In comics, this connection has a name.



Closure.





We search the gutter.

We search
the sky.

We try to fill the empty
spaces where our lives
have pulled apart.

We try to bridge the gaps, to mend the tears.
We do not succeed. But it is in those empty spaces, in the shattered places of our lives, that
if we are lucky, we find a little meaning, we find a story.
We find a poem.

It ends:

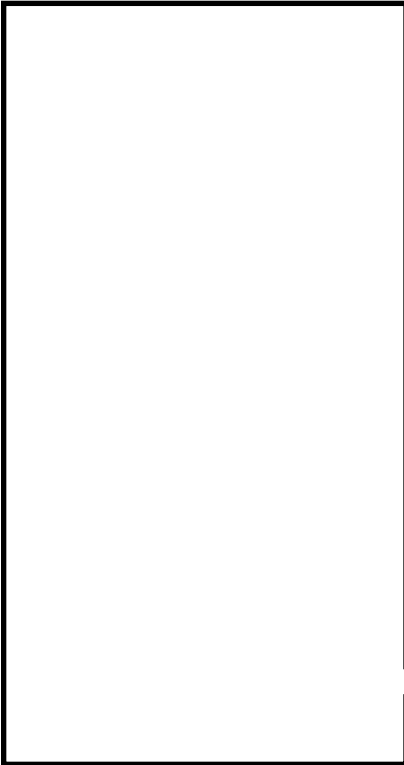
Bloom forever, bright rose.

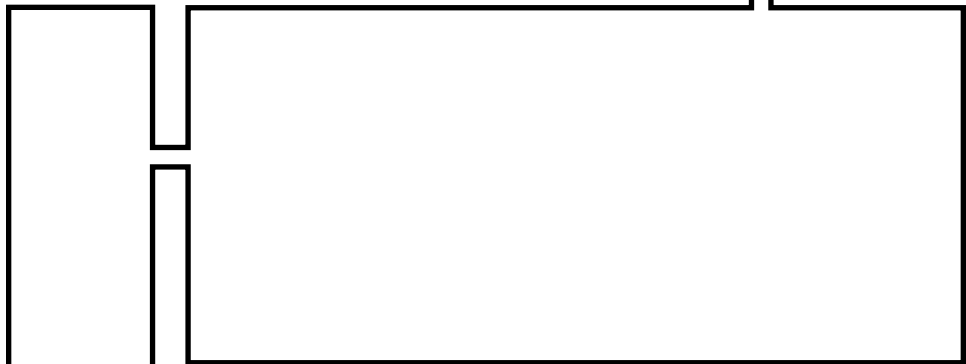
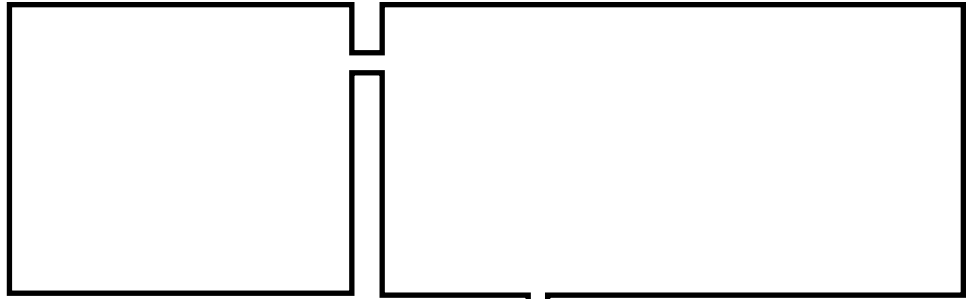
Sail on, silver girl.

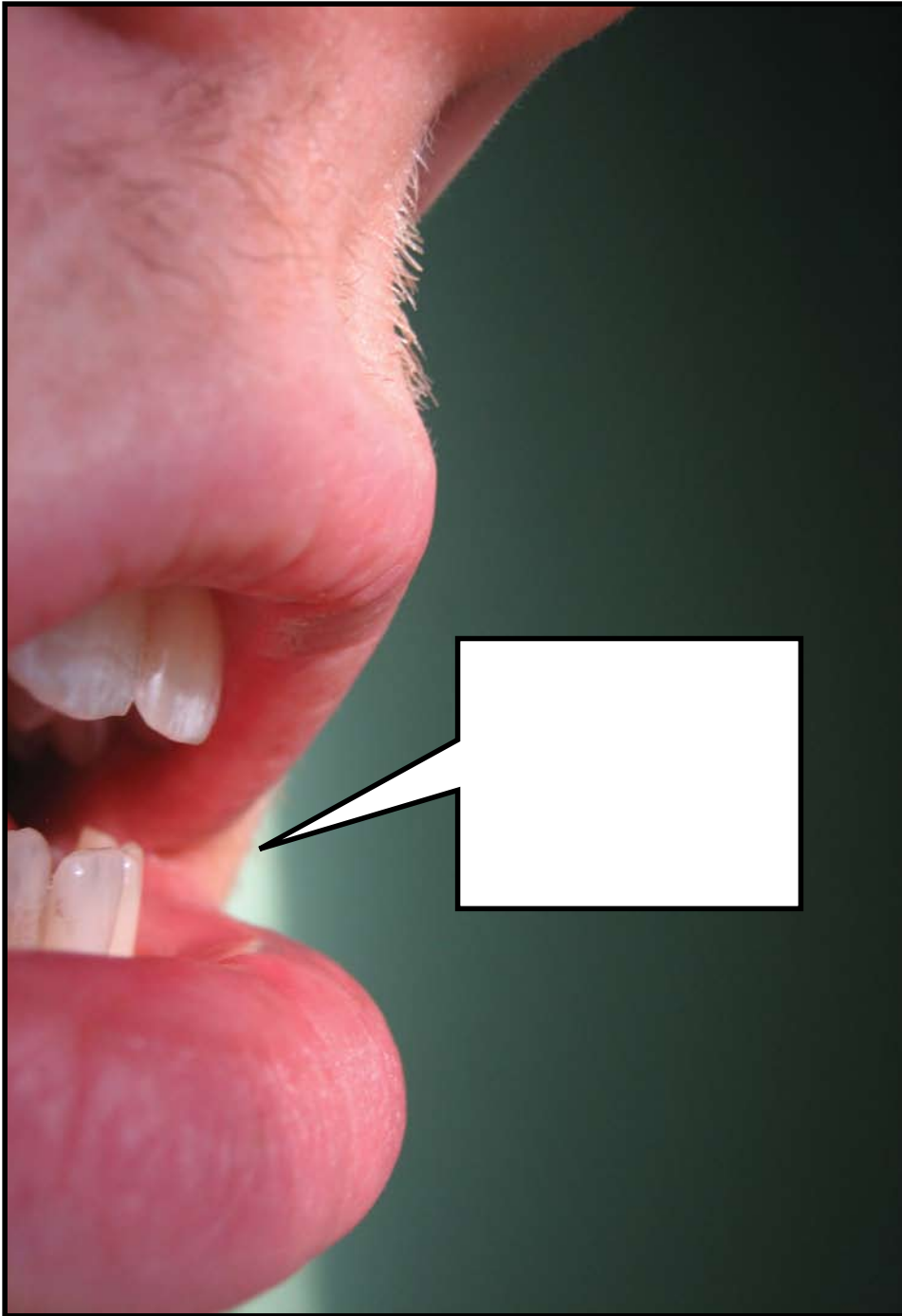
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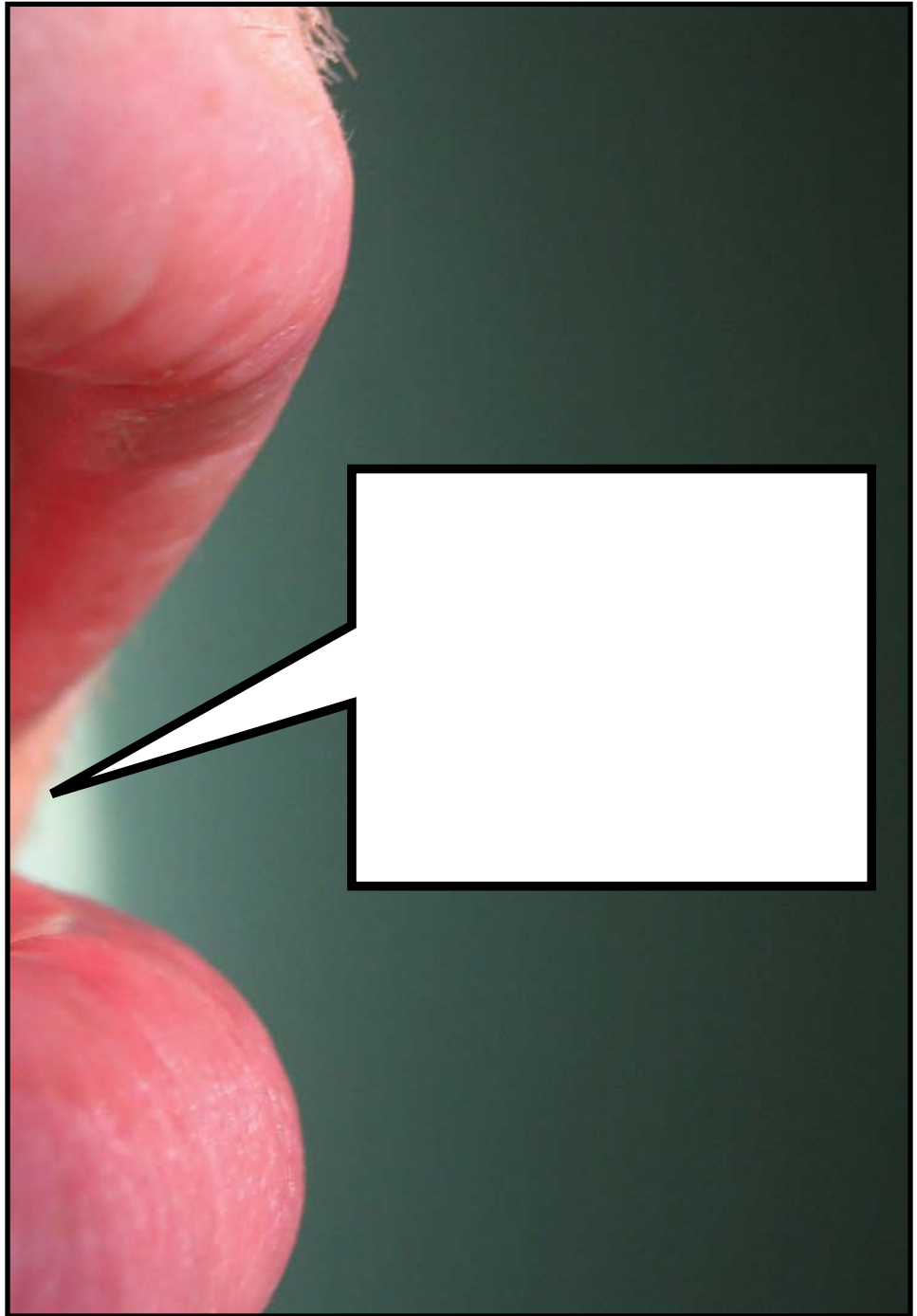
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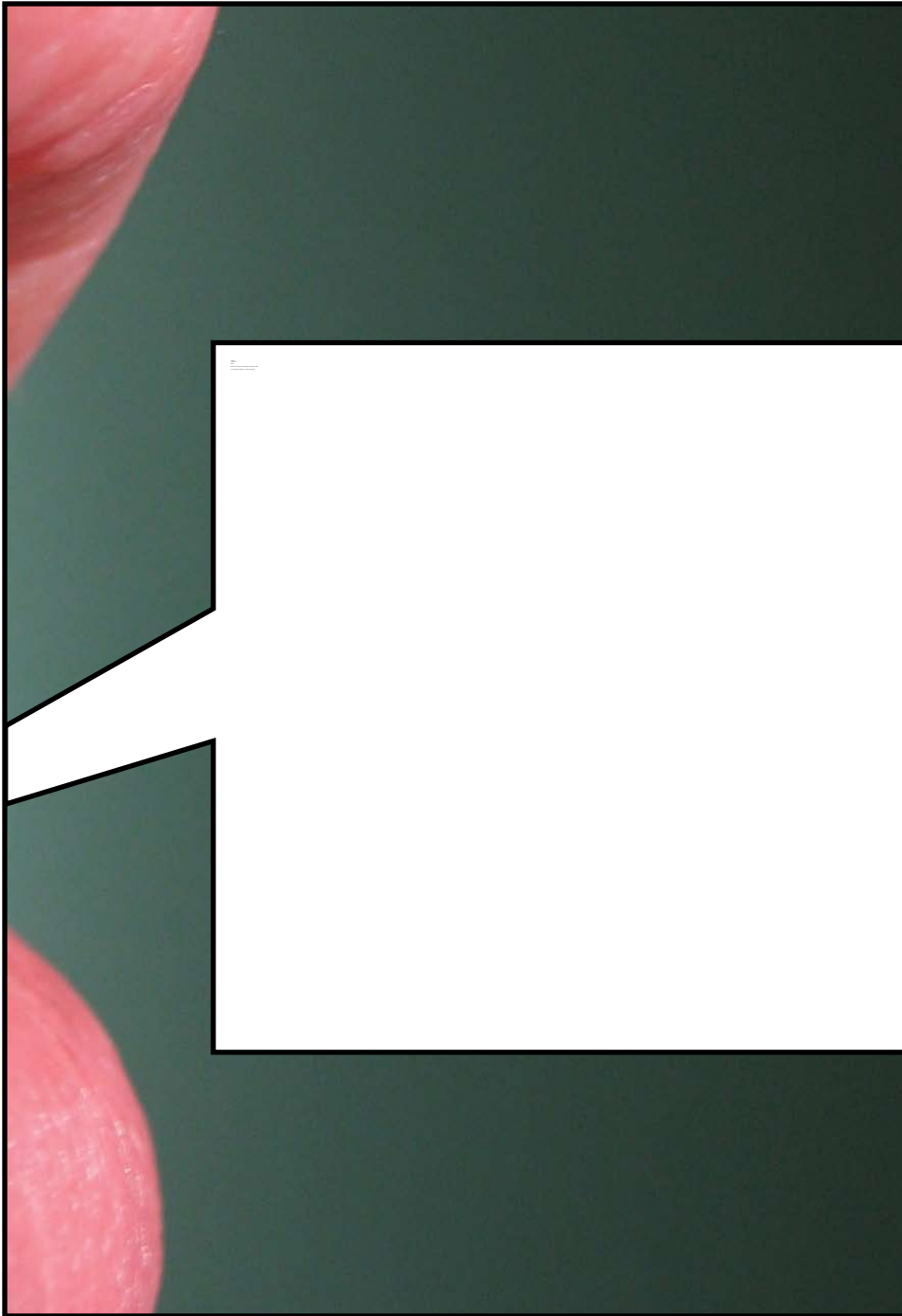
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aphasia
a - pha' - sia
noun
Partial or total loss of the ability to articulate ideas
or comprehend spoken or written language.

aphasia

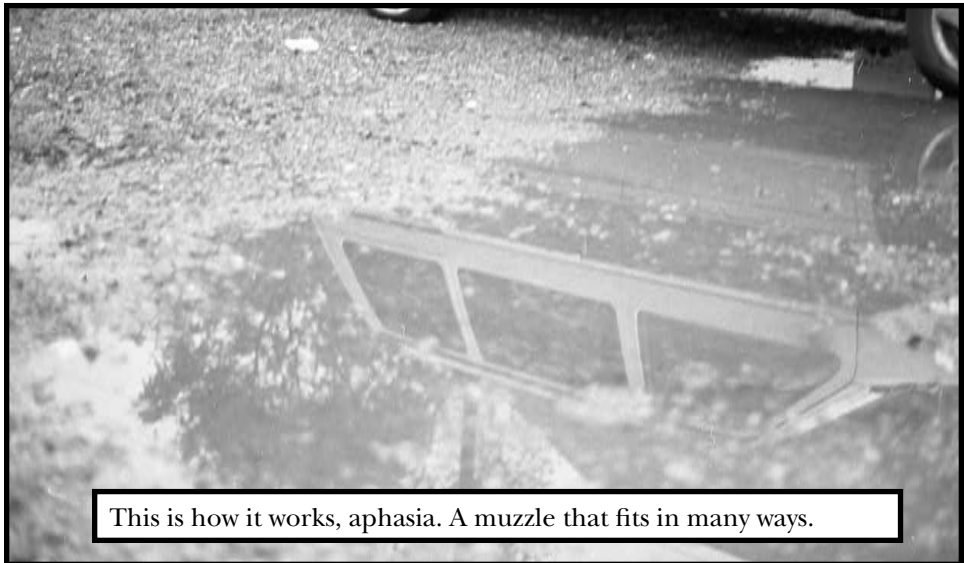
a - pha' - sia

noun

Partial or total loss of the ability to articulate ideas
or comprehend spoken or written language.

We sing together as children, our music teacher, Mr. Raymond, trying to explain to us the concept of harmony. We only care about singing. So we sing, just simple songs, just the childhood rhymes we know by heart.
When I sing high notes Sarah giggles at the way I raise my chin.

Some people lose the use of their verbs. Some lose all the words in a certain category, so that try as they might, they can never again talk about flowers or certain days of the week. They use circumlocutions, approaching their subjects in a roundabout way, in angles and reflections, working around the words they have lost.



This is how it works, aphasia. A muzzle that fits in many ways.

There are men and women who can only speak in short, chopped phrases. They are doomed to lives of hindered words.

I remember the accidents the way I remember my childhood, with few words. Brief flashes. Images. Sudden pictures pressed into my mind.

There are people who cannot repeat a phrase and people who cannot help but repeat it.

Vaughn attends a Christian college outside Philadelphia. *The city of brotherly love.* He goes to classes, learns, readying himself, he tells me, to be a teacher.

There are even those who can read perfectly but, somehow, are almost wholly unable to write. For them, the very act of writing is an act of real, physical pain. Every word becomes a battle, every sentence, a war.

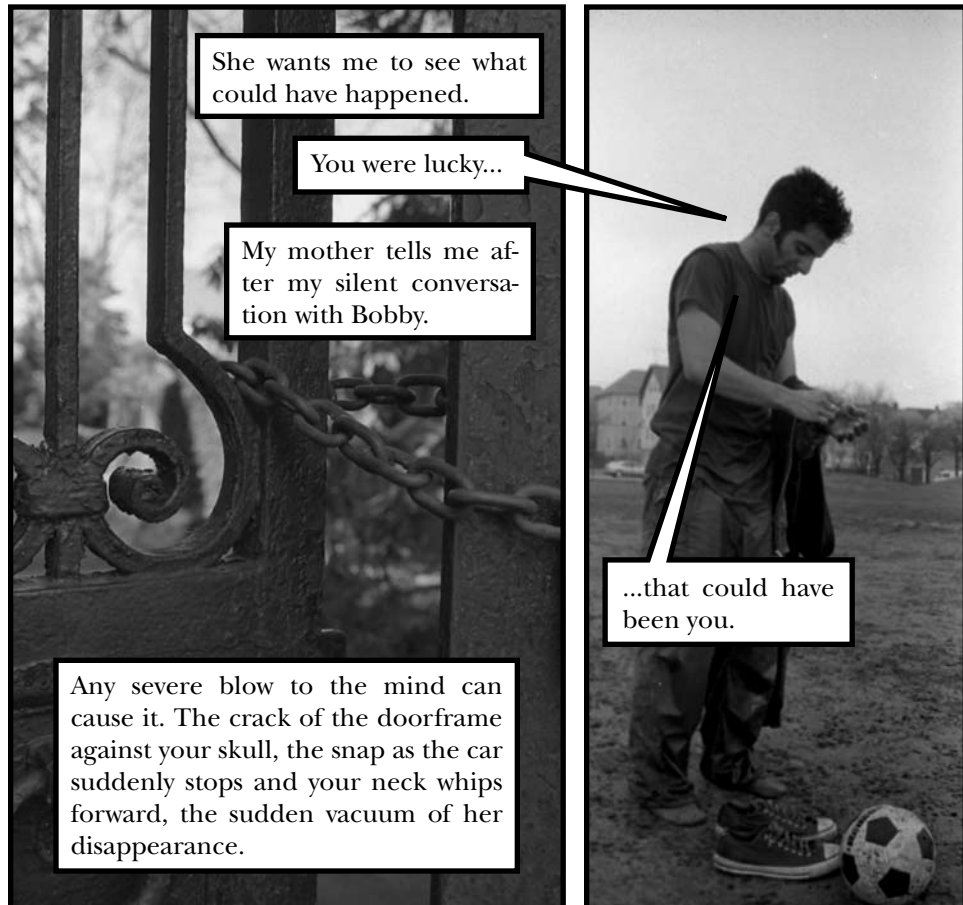
Hit the gravel, cracked pole, a lunch and flowers.

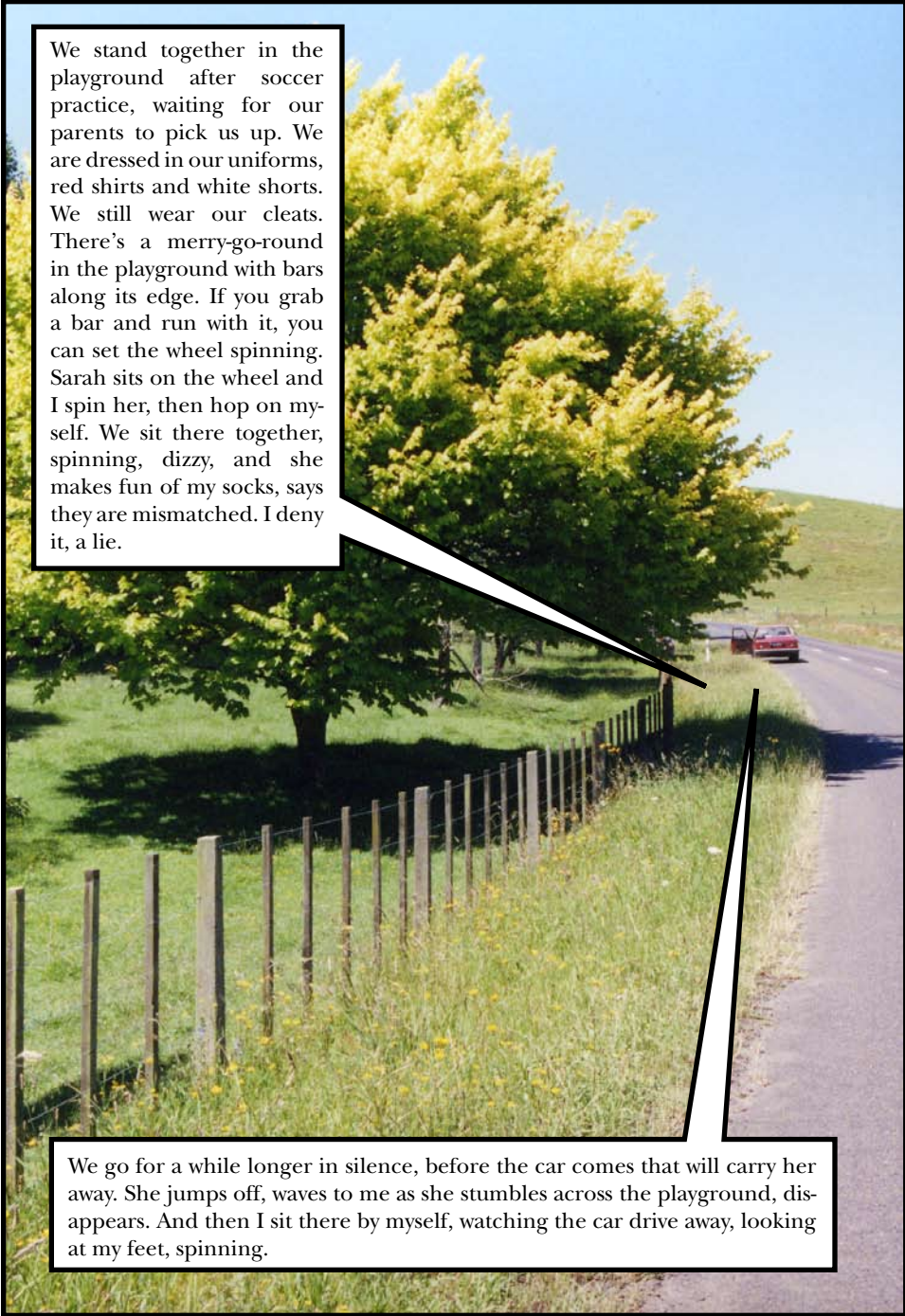


I do not talk about it. Not to Vaughn, not to my other friends, not to my family. I try again and again to write it. I sit down at my desk, and I wait, eyes closed, fingers ready, and nothing comes. I have no words.

It is a stroke, cutting the blood flow to the brain, suffocating it. It is a tumor, an infection. In some cases, it is a car accident, a sudden crush of wood and metal and glass, that steals a person's words.

After my accident, my mother makes me go see a young man named Bobby. Years before, he had fallen asleep in a car and woken without words in a hospital bed. The words he had left were thick, swollen in his mouth. Our conversation is horrible. A mutual muteness.



A photograph of a rural landscape. In the foreground, a wooden post-and-rail fence runs diagonally across the frame, separating a grassy field from a road. The field is filled with tall green grass and small yellow wildflowers. A large, leafy tree with bright yellow-green foliage stands prominently in the middle ground. In the background, a paved road curves to the right, with a red car driving away. The sky is clear and blue, and a green hill is visible in the distance.

We stand together in the playground after soccer practice, waiting for our parents to pick us up. We are dressed in our uniforms, red shirts and white shorts. We still wear our cleats. There's a merry-go-round in the playground with bars along its edge. If you grab a bar and run with it, you can set the wheel spinning. Sarah sits on the wheel and I spin her, then hop on myself. We sit there together, spinning, dizzy, and she makes fun of my socks, says they are mismatched. I deny it, a lie.

We go for a while longer in silence, before the car comes that will carry her away. She jumps off, waves to me as she stumbles across the playground, disappears. And then I sit there by myself, watching the car drive away, looking at my feet, spinning.



In childhood, things are hardwired into our minds. The prayers, the rhymes and songs we'd sing day in and out. By going back to his early years, an aphasic can briefly find again the words he lost. He is unable to name the pen with which he struggles to write, but can still chant the words he sang as a boy.



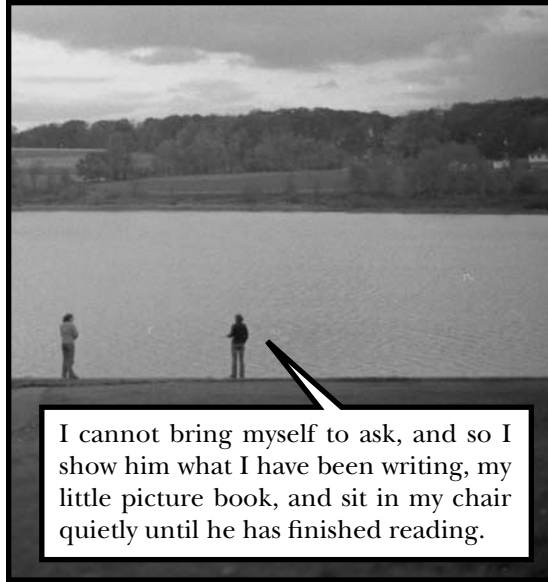
*Sticks and stones
will break my
bones.*

But words will never hurt me.

He wants to teach elementary school, he tells me. Vaughn wants to go back, back to show and tell, back to the cafeteria lunches and the timid friendships, back quietly to those old hallways, those old stairwells, those old classrooms where we'd sit in pairs at our little desks and read stories that were more pictures than words.

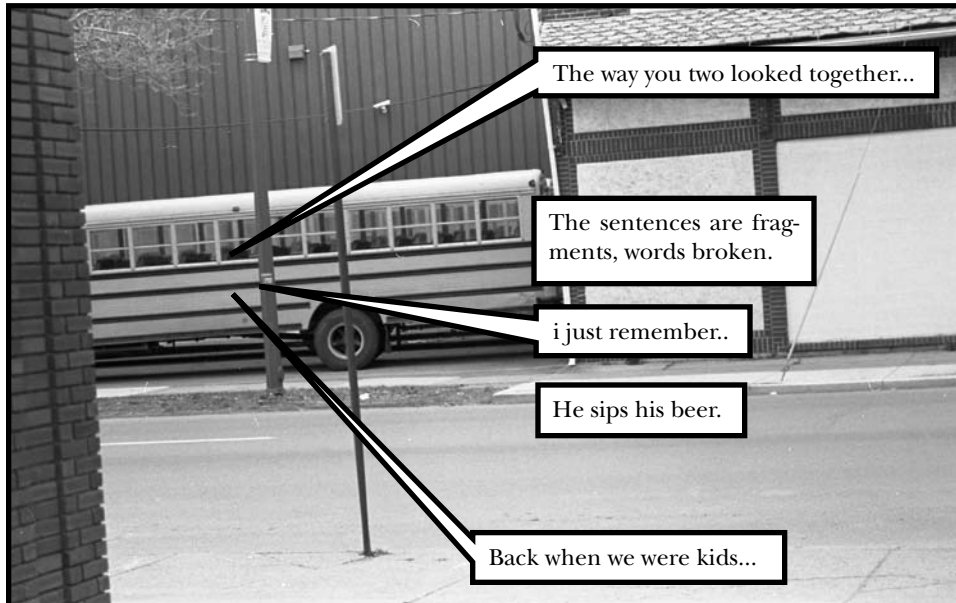
Winter 2005

My parents have moved out of our house into a third floor apartment a block away. Vaughn sits on the couch in the living room. I sit in a chair next to him. We are drinking beer. I have spent five years trying to find the words to ask him about her, about the accidents, about that day at lunch when he said what he said. The last two beers are in our hands, and I have not asked him.



I cannot bring myself to ask, and so I show him what I have been writing, my little picture book, and sit in my chair quietly until he has finished reading.

Then, somehow, the words are there, and I do ask him. I want to know why, the day after April Fools Day five years before, he told me she was my soul mate. It takes him a few moments to answer. He sits forward, looks at the bottle in his hands, breathes.



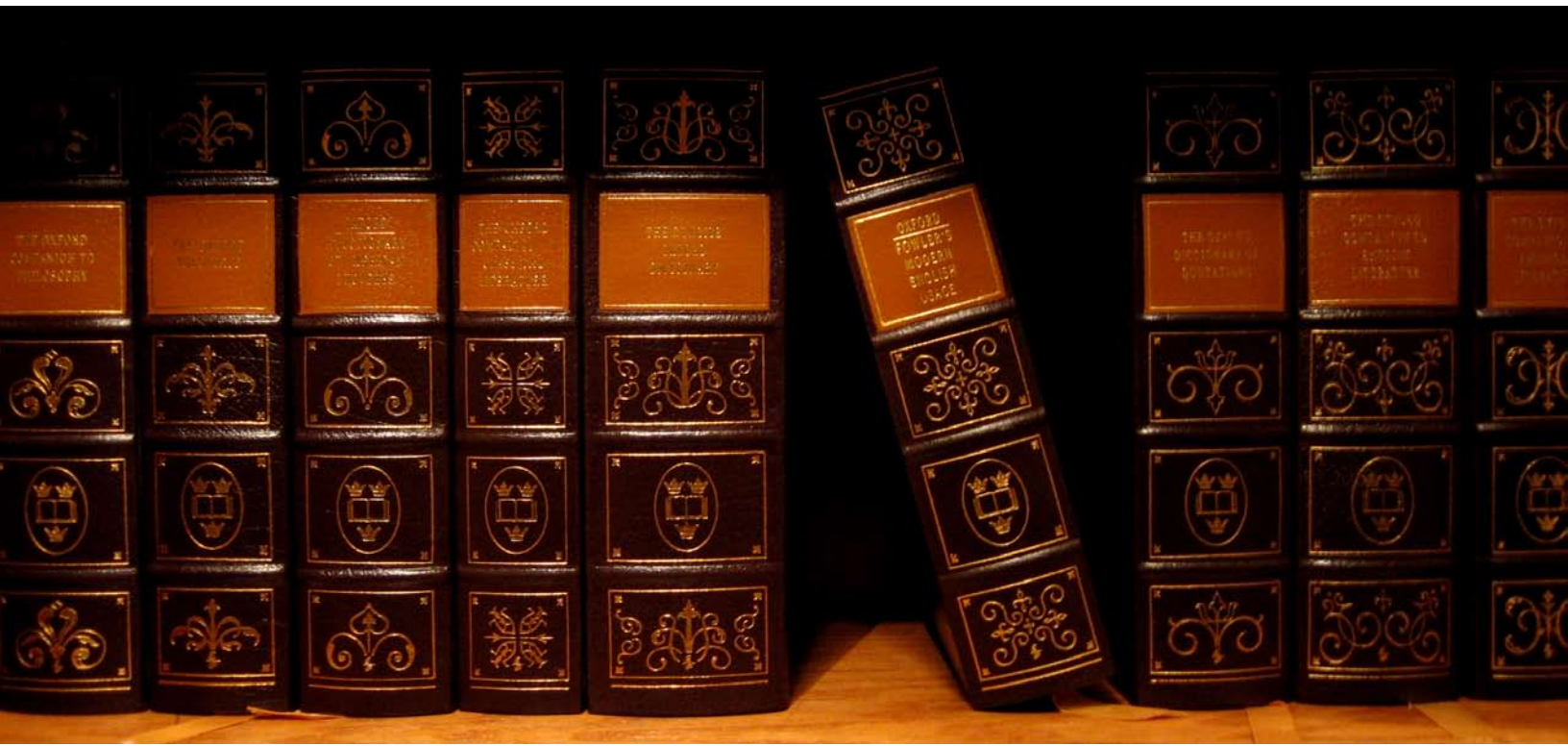
The way you two looked together...

The sentences are fragments, words broken.

i just remember..

He sips his beer.

Back when we were kids...



THE HISTORY
OF ENGLAND
FROM THE
CONQUEST

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OXFORD
FOUNDER'S
MODERN
ENGLISH
USAGE

THE HISTORY
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The names in this work have been changed to ensure the privacy of those involved in the events.

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