Rigorously Unrevised, Unapologetically Uncensored: An Experiment in Creative Nonfiction Writing

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Messiah College is a Christian college of the liberal and applied arts and sciences. Our mission is to educate men and women toward maturity of intellect, character and Christian faith in preparation for lives of service, leadership and reconciliation in church and society.
I.

when I was in middle school I never realized how uncomfortable the orange seats in the auditorium were—they have no padding at all and within the first five minutes you begin to squirm to try to find a comfortable position but there aren’t any comfortable ways to sit—the seats are so close together that if you try to cross your legs, your knees whack the seat ahead of you—the backs of the seats hit directly beneath your shoulder blades—and they don’t have armrests either—but I didn’t realize these things when I was in middle school because I rarely sat in the seats—I was always on stage doing something—but last night I felt the hardness of the seats and could suddenly empathize with the supportive parents who came to middle school chorus concerts and drama programs to support their children—my eighth grade language arts teacher had written a play and some of my mom’s students were performing in it—so we went to see the play and that meant that I had to sit in a hard orange chair—and at the last there watching the play I kept having flashbacks to my middle school performances—I tried out for the drama club when I was in eighth grade—they were going to perform Oklahoma—I had never been in a real play or a musical before but I always harbored a secret desire to act—since I’m shy I was attracted to the possibility of pretending that I was someone else—in showing everybody that even though I was shy I had enough oomf and courage to get up onstage in front of lots of people and perform in a play—a way to receive recognition—for people to notice me and be surprised by the hidden talents of heather ross—it was one of those unspoken, irrational desires—I did act in a couple of class plays in elementary school—in fourth grade I got to be the mother of a distraught family who lost their thanksgiving turkey—and in fifth grade I got to be rosa parks’ lawyer and wear a pair of my music teacher’s green high heeled shoes for the performance—and also in fifth grade there was a play for all the fifth grade classes—which was about 100 students—the play was the trial of the big bad wolf—and I wanted to be hogney dangerfield—he was the lawyer of the three little pigs—it wasn’t a starring role but it was a pretty important one—and keith spicknell was the only other kid who auditioned for the part—keith spicknell lived right down the road from me—he his dad gave me flute lessons—but I didn’t like keith very much—and I felt sure that he wouldn’t get the part—so I felt confident when I auditioned—but when the results were posted I found out that keith had gotten it—I was just a member of the chorus—and I convinced myself that it was because hogney dangerfield was a male and keith was a boy and that they wouldn’t give a girl a male part—and even though I felt insulted that they turned me down just because I was a female, my reasoning did at least help to soothe my wounded ego—and then in middle school and high school keith got several important roles in plays and I later had to concede that maybe he had gotten the role in fifth grade because he was the better actor—but at the time I figured that my acting ability had nothing to do with my rejection—and when I was in eighth grade I decided that I was going to be brave and try out for oklahoma—because while the elementary class plays had been fun they still hadn’t fulfilled my dream of becoming a star—so I picked up the audition information—and at home I practiced singing the audition song which was oh what a beautiful morning—which is a very high song intended for a soprano and my voice is so low that I sometimes prefer to sing the tenor part if the choir director will let me—but I practiced the song anyway and forced my voice to hit notes that I didn’t think it was capable of hitting—and I practiced the monologue until I had perfected every inflection—and then the morning of the audition came and I spent the day feeling queasy—after school I walked to the auditorium feeling like I was about to face my executioner—I had been nervous before but I couldn’t ever remember feeling as nervous as I felt that afternoon—the auditorium was swarming with aspiring young actors—and I joined the throngs of them on the stage as mr. hamsher gave us the directions about how the tryouts would operate—and to my horror I realized that I was going to have to audition in front of all these people—somehow when I thought about auditions I had never realized that I would be auditioning in front of all my peers—it didn’t bother me to think about performing in front of them because if I got the part it meant that I was a good actress and they would have to respect me for it—but in auditions everyone is at the same level—and no one had to respect me because I hadn’t proved my talent yet—and as I sat through the other auditions my stomach began to lurch and by the time mr. hamsher called my name I was so nervous that I could barely breathe at all—but I stood up and walked to the center of the stage like I was supposed to do—and I delivered my lines with as much gusto as I could muster under the circumstances—and I sang oh what a beautiful morning the best that I could even though my voice cracked in the middle of it—and when I was finished I smiled nervously at mr. hamsher and hoped that he would smile back but he was so busy writing on his clipboard that he didn’t even look at me—and when everyone was done auditioning he told us that the
results would be posted the following Friday—and I spent the week hoping that I had gotten a good part—and when the next Friday came I went straight to the music room to see the sheet that was posted there—I scanned the paper looking for my name—but it wasn’t anywhere—not only had I not been given a lead but I hadn’t been given any sort of part at all—not even a member of the chorus—only about four kids had been cut completely but I was one of them—I could have volunteered for stage crew but I felt so wounded that Mr. Hamsher had cut me that suddenly I didn’t want to have anything to do with Oklahoma—after eighth grade I didn’t try out for any more plays—I decided to stick with large group activities where I wouldn’t be singled out—and no one got cut from the chorus—even if you were tone deaf there were enough other kids that they could cover you and no one would know the difference—and even if the audience could tell that somebody was out of tune they wouldn’t be able to tell who it was—I sang alto in the middle school chorus—we had two performances each year—a winter concert and a spring concert—I stood with all the other tall girls in the back row with the boys—there were three times as many girls as there were guys in middle school chorus—most of the boys thought that singing was for wussies but a few guys agreed to sing in chorus because it got them out of study hall with mean teachers who would give detentions if anyone talked—I stood between two of my best friends in chorus—we probably talked more than we should have but Miss Prussner never yelled at us—Miss Prussner didn’t seem to care what we did as long as there were warm bodies on stage attempting to produce music—she tried to get us to sing songs that had different parts for the altos and the sopranos but she didn’t practice the parts separately with the different sections of the choir which meant that many of the altos ended up straying into the soprano part by default because they couldn’t figure out the notes to the alto line—and if there was one thing the chorus didn’t need it was more sopranos—Emily good and Jodie Buffenmyer would have covered for the entire soprano section by themselves—they both had loud shrill voices and they liked to compete with each other to see who could sing louder and to show off to the rest of us that they could sing well—no matter how loudly the rest of us sang, Emily and Jodie could sing louder—and Miss Prussner never said anything to them although after my concerts my parents often wanted to know who the two loud sopranos were and why Miss Prussner didn’t ask them to stop singing so loudly—and I sometimes wondered the same thing—I realized that our chorus wasn’t very good but I loved singing anyway—our concerts were predictable—Miss Prussner thought that flashlights were good props which meant that every concert involved a song in which we waved our flashlights around the auditorium and into the eyes of the people in the audience—and she liked us to do motions when we sang—maybe as a way to channel our energy—I had trouble with motions because I lacked coordination and the ability to distinguish my right hand from my left—in one of our spring concerts we sang tradition from fiddler on the roof—and we were supposed to bob up and down while bringing our arms up in a smooth motion—but I couldn’t get my arms to move smoothly—no matter how much I tried my arms instinctively bobbed with the motion of my knees so that I jerked like a robot—maybe that was part of the reason Miss Prussner had me stand in the back—maybe it had as much to do with my lack of coordination as it did with my height—and Miss Prussner’s trademark wasn’t just the flashlights and the motions—what I think she was best known for was the way she concluded the Christmas concert—we always ended the concert with singing let there be peace on earth—and we held white candles and passed the flame from person to person as we crooned let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me—and as the flame was passed from person to person we swayed back and forth to indicate how sincerely we meant the words—and the concert ended with the house lights coming on to reveal a crowd of earnest eighth graders beaming angelically at our parents with melted wax all over our hands.

2.

today when I glanced at the calendar I realized that our last day of Thanksgiving break is December 1st—and that reminded me that we cut down our Christmas tree on the Saturday after Thanksgiving—it’s become a tradition in our family—we go to Elizabeth tree farms and climb on the sleigh pulled by the horses into the patch of Christmas trees—we bundle up in hats and mittens and scarves because we know that it could be a very long undertaking to find the right tree—and somehow it always seems to be an abnormally cold day when we go to pick the tree—we ask to be let off at the Douglas fur section because mom and dad are convinced that those are the best shaped trees with the right colored needles that stay alive for the longest length of time—and then we wander around, scrutinizing each tree—sneakers squishing in the mud—and when someone finds one that they like we put a plastic bag on top of it so we can go back later and compare it to other trees that we find—we want to make sure that it’s not too tall because our family room has low
ceilings and tall trees won’t fit in a room with low ceilings—but we don’t like the tall skinny trees anyway—that kind always seems snooty to me—like a tall, thin, mean schoolteacher who wears her hair in a bun and scowls at her students—mel and I like short dense trees with lots of needles the best—but we have to make sure that we don’t pick one that’s too fat—one year we picked a tree that was so fat that it broke three Christmas tree stands before we found one that could hold its weight and then dad vowed that we would never get such a fat tree ever again—it’s a competition in my family to see who can find the best tree—we have high standards—there can’t be any big gaps—it has to look good from at least three angles although we can fudge the fourth angle because that part will go against the wall anyway—and there are secret tricks to picking a good Christmas tree—dad always examines the trunk to make sure that it’s straight—one year we found a tree that we all liked but then dad examined its trunk and declared that it was crooked than a dog’s hind leg which meant that it wouldn’t be straight inside the stand—and mom always checks the inside of the tree to make sure that it’s not already full of dead brown needles—because if the tree is full of dead needles by the beginning of December that means that it’ll be in even worse shape by the end of December—by Christmas morning we’d have a bald tree and our presents would rest on a sea of brown pine needles—but usually we can find a tree that fits our criteria—it’s just a race to see who can pick the best one first—and usually it ends up being a competition between me and mel—we each have a tree picked out and like the people who try to sell used cars, we talk fast and furiously about the virtues of the tree we selected while mom examines the shape of the tree and checks for dead needles and dad declares whether or not the tree will fit in the stand and whether or not the trunk is straight—and usually it’s mel who wins the contest and then I sulk for a few minutes until I sense that I might be about to get in trouble for destroying the holiday cheer and so then I do my best to snap out of it—vowing that next year it’ll be me who picks the Christmas tree—one year mel hugged her tree before dad cut it down and then they all insisted that I hug the tree too even though I didn’t feel attached to it because I hadn’t chosen it—and in the picture mel is squeezed up against the trunk—face pressed into the pine needles—joyful victorious smile bursting at her cheeks—and then there’s me—my hands gingerly wrapped around the prickly tree—smiling with the forced smile that always seemed to appear on elementary school picture day—the one where it’s obvious that I’m smiling because I’m supposed to and not because I have any desire whatsoever to be photographed at that particular instant—but fortunately my bout of crankiness doesn’t usually last long—mel has to help dad cut down the tree even though he always insists that he can do it himself—he kneels on the ground with the plastic bags we used to mark our favorite trees—he puts the bags on the ground because in theory they’re supposed to protect him from the mud but inevitably when he stands up there’s mud caked on his knees anyway—and when he kneels he lowers his head so he can see the trunk but then his butt sticks up in the air and I always want to laugh at him but I know that that would be very uncharitable so I usually stifle my laughter and watch as he drags the saw back and forth and back and forth over the tree trunk—the saw is usually too dull and so it takes a lot of work to get the cut started—and mel stands and strains to pull at the tree while dad saws at the trunk—and then dad sometimes starts grunting and breathing hard and mom starts to panic that he’s going to have a heart attack on the spot—and he mutters at her from under the tree that he’s fine—and then mom tells mel to help him—and at that point I start trying to distract mom so she’ll leave dad alone until he’s made more progress on the cutting—and before too long the tree crashes to the ground and it’s mel and my responsibility to carry it because mom won’t let dad do it since he already exerted enough effort just to get it cut down—and the sleigh comes back around again to pick up families with newly cut Christmas trees—and we tag our trees and the people driving the sleigh toss it onto the back of the sleigh and then we climb on board—maybe it’s not really a sleigh—it’s probably more like a glorified hay wagon without the hay—it has a bench on each side where you can sit and the Christmas trees go between the two benches—but it’s pulled by horses so that’s better than if it were being driven by a worn-out tractor which is often the case with haywagons—and we get back to the shop where we started and go inside and pay for the tree and drink free hot chocolate and eat miniature candy canes—I guess the hot chocolate really isn’t free considering that the Christmas trees cost about 6.75 per foot and that adds up to a lot of money—but it feels like it’s free so I can pretend that it is—and then after the tree is paid for mel and I hoist it up again and stagger to the car with it where dad secures it to the top of the roof for the ride home—and then it’s mel’s responsibility to help dad get it into the tree stand and into the family room—and once it’s inside we put on Christmas music—the same music we’ve listened to for the last 22 years every time we decorate the tree—mel and I have to wait upstairs until dad and mom put the lights on the tree—that’s because they always used to fight when they put up the lights—I guess it’s tricky to get the lights spaced evenly—and I guess they didn’t want us to see them fight about the Christmas tree but we knew that it happened and we sometimes sat at the top of the stairs and listened to them—we thought it was funny but it seemed that the fight was an earnest one each year—but
eventually the fireworks died down and the lights got put up—colored ones—always colored—we never had white lights even though as I grew older I decided that I liked the white ones better—and then after they had put up the christmas lights mom had to decorate the tree with her set of shiny red plastic apples—I don’t know where those apples came from—probably they were a gift to her many years ago—but there were a dozen of them and she insisted that all 12 of them go on the tree—she wanted to claim the best spots on the tree for her apples before mel and I got downstairs to help decorate—she claimed that the apples provided symmetry for the tree—but by now those apples are so old and in such bad shape that I got mom a set of glass balls on year for christmas so she could still have her symmetry but that the symmetry could be expressed through shiny glass balls instead of chipped red apples—and years later mom and dad have finally learned how to put up the christmas lights without too much squabbling although mel and I still aren’t allowed to be downstairs while they’re putting them up—and once the lights are hung and the symmetry is set, mel and I come downstairs and help hang the other ornaments—when we were little we could only reach the bottom couple of feet around the tree which meant that all our favorite ornaments were densely packed around the bottom of the tree and that the ornaments at the top of the tree were very sparse—and years later mom and dad told us that when we went to bed the night after we decorated, they would rearrange our ornaments so the tree looked better balanced but we never knew the difference and always felt proud of how well we had decorated it—and now when we decorate mom tells us each year how much our decorating skills have improved and we always complain that we’re both in our twenties and we hope that our decorating skills are better now than they were when we were little kids—and even though our decorating skills have gotten better, our taste in ornaments has not—we hang the same things on our tree that we’ve been hanging on it for our entire lives—with the exception of the apples and the entire collection of puff pillow animals that one of our great aunts made for us—we don’t hang those anymore—but we do hang the crumbling play-dough ornaments we made in elementary school—the cross stitch snowflake my second grade teacher helped me make—the ornaments we got for free in mcdonalds happy meals—the tacky ornaments that we received as gifts that we like only because of their sentimental value—mel and I have a favorite ornament—it’s a large plush angel who looks like a muppet—she has yellow yarn hair and her eyes pout into a scowl—and somehow she manages to pull off a pot belly even though she’s at least 15 years old and spends 11 months of the year smashed in a box with all the other ornaments—our favorite uncle gave us the angel as a joke once—and we instantly loved her because she’s so hideous—because she reflects my uncle’s goofy personality—and we also know that mom doesn’t particularly like the angel, which makes it all the more fun to hang her at the front and center of the tree each year—and we tell mom that we’re wise to her tricks and that we’ll know if she moves the angel when we’re sleeping—mom tells us that we’re going to have to set up some sort of arrangement so that when mel and I each have our own christmas trees to decorate, the angel will spend alternate years with us—one year on mel’s tree and the next year on mine—like the child of divorced parents—but there are some genuinely nice ornaments too—and when all the ornaments are hung—the good, the bad, and the ugly mixed together with the lights and christmas balls—it’s time for dad to crown the top of the tree with the angel—dad doesn’t hang ornaments on the tree—he tends to exit the room when we begin to paw through the boxes and giggle at the hideous ornaments that we refuse to get rid of—but he does come back to put on the angel—he reaches his arm high over his head and places the angel on the very top branch but even though he’s tall the tree is taller and he can’t tell if she’s straight or not—so then he has to listen to his wife and daughters tell him to move the angel a little to the left, no, a little more to the right, no not that far—and then finally the angel is straight which means that the tree is decorated—until at least until new years when mom takes down all the ornaments and packs them away and dad drags the dead tree out to the curb and leaves it there for the garbage man to pick up—I always thought it was such a sad sight to see all the discarded christmas trees littering the curbs the weeks after christmas—and then we have to wait until the next year to start the ritual all over again—but this year things will be different—this year mom said we aren’t going to cut down a christmas tree—we’re going to get an artificial tree instead—they’ve been threatening that for a few years now but mel and I never believed them—but mom says it takes too much work and too much time to cut down a live tree—she says she and dad are getting too old for that—so instead of cutting down a tree we’ll piece together a tree out of a box—a tree with plastic needles that will bend but not break—that won’t turn brown even if we left the tree out until valentine’s day—and I know that I should be happy that we’ll have any sort of a tree at all—and that mom and dad will still argue about the lights and mel and I will still insist on hanging the angel front and center—but it won’t be the same and I’ll miss competing with my sister to see who can win the christmas tree contest—I guess that an artificial tree reminds me that nothing can stay the same forever, much as I wish that things could—and today I started thinking that someday our holiday traditions will change even more drastically than moving from a live tree to an artificial
one—we’ve never had a christmas without all of us home—and now that grandma has moved in we have five instead of four—but once mei graduates from yale and once I graduate from here there might not be five anymore—there might only be four or three—unless one of us gets married and then there might be more than five—and I want to preserve the traditions I know and love—to insist on live trees and family christmases and opening presents one at a time on christmas morning and eating orange danish for breakfast and watching charlie brown’s christmas and the grinch on christmas eve—and I think what hurts me more than the move from live to artificial trees is the indication that this is the first break in tradition—I don’t want our family to get any smaller and I don’t want it to grow any larger—I want things to remain the way they’ve been for the last 22 years—to keep dad from growing so old that he can’t cut down a tree anymore—to keep myself from growing up and having to establish my own traditions when I’d rather stick with the ones I’ve always known—and christmas is supposed to be a happy holiday and usually it is but sometimes it makes me nostalgic for the things that are still happening in my life but that I know might not happen for much longer—so far most of our traditions are still in tact but I wonder sometimes how much longer they can last—and right now it’s just an artificial tree but next year it might be an empty place at the dinner table—and knowing that things are changing makes me want to cling even more tightly to what I know and love—as if I could hold them—preserve them—capture time and make it stop.

3. something happened in middle school so that one day my friends at church liked me and then the next day they didn’t—I went through sixth and seventh grade with a group of close friends—heidi and katie and mindy and lolli and kerri—at church we were inseparable—telling secrets and laughing at inside jokes and teasing each other—none of us went to the same school but we still found things to talk about—we knew who had crushes on who—and when I thumb wrestled derek they were as excited as I was—we had sleepovers at each other’s houses and we exchanged christmas presents and we went to the beach together—I thought we were close but then one weekend there was a missions trip to philadelphia—I didn’t go on the trip but the rest of my friends did—and I don’t know what happened on the trip but it must have been momentous because when they came home they shared a new bond and it was clear that I wasn’t bonded to them anymore—at first I couldn’t tell if they were really giving me the cold shoulder or if I was just imagining it—but then I saw them together at the mall without me and as if that wasn’t proof enough, at christmas time they all gave each other presents but they didn’t even give me a card—that was when I realized that they really didn’t like me anymore even though I wasn’t sure how they could hate me because I didn’t go on a missions trip—but when it became obvious that I had been excluded I didn’t know what to do—I didn’t have other friends and I didn’t want my parents to know what was going on because no kid wants to admit to her family that she isn’t popular—for a while I tried to talk to my friends and hoped that they would start to like me again—but when that didn’t work I decided that if they didn’t need me then I didn’t need them either—and the year ended dismally and lonesomely—but I knew that I would soon be promoted to the senior high where a new youth pastor had just been hired—I hoped that he would do something to revive my crumbling youth group experience—but nothing could be farther from the truth—phil had been fired from seven churches before he came to ours—you would think that should have given the search committee an indication of the kind of person they were hiring—but we had been without a youth pastor for so long and the leaders of the church were so desperate to corral its youth that they must have hired the first candidate who volunteered to shepherd us—in my mind a youth group was supposed to do things like rake leaves in the community and visit nursing homes and sing christmas carols—we were supposed to grow in our relationship with god while at the same time growing in community with other people—we were supposed to have sermons and sunday school lessons but we were also supposed to play ping pong and board games and eat snacks—we were supposed to go on retreats to isolated log cabins in the middle of the winter and play cards and eat spaghetti and have a speaker who would offer a weekend of lifechanging advice—at least that’s what happened in my friends’ youth groups—but in my youth group we didn’t rake leaves for our neighbors even though there were plenty of leaf-laden yards within walking distance of the church—we didn’t go christmas caroling in nursing homes even one of them was located less than a quarter of a mile from the church—we didn’t go on retreats to log cabins in the middle of winter—and we also didn’t take missions trips—I knew some kids who went with their churches to places like bolivia to help with orphanage work—I knew other kids who took missions trips within the u.s. to help build homes for poor people—but we never did any of that either—well, that’s not true—there was one service opportunity available in my youth group—phil instituted a trip to new york city for two weeks each
summer—the members of the team went to New York to do street witnessing—they stood on street corners and visited central park and handed out tracts and tried to witness to the heathens who lived in the city—but I didn’t go on those trips because I didn’t want to do street witnessing—I didn’t envision myself as the kind of girl who could go around handing out tracts to strangers—and I felt resentful that I never had the opportunities that other kids seemed to have—and I resented phil’s obliviousness to the fact that our youth group didn’t do the kinds of things that most other youth groups did—and I especially resented phil because he didn’t know or care who I was—he couldn’t distinguish me from the 200 others in the group—he sent me a birthday card one year—at least he sent me someone’s birthday card—I received it right around the time of my birthday—but when I opened it I discovered that the wrong name was written inside the card—but instead of learning to know the kids in the group, phil wanted our group to grow even bigger—all he seemed to care about was that we witnessed to our friends and brought them to the church—his big kick was friendship evangelism—the idea that you were supposed to become friends with someone with the sole purpose of leading that person to Christ—it was like a friendship with ulterior motives which didn’t really seem like a friendship at all—and once you became friends with that person you were supposed to invite her to the rallies that we held once a month in the gymnasium at a local elementary school—and at those rallies we had to play basketball or volleyball or even worse we had to participate in relay races where we had to rush around the gym balancing hard boiled eggs on spoons and pick a mystery item from a brown bag and eat whatever it was—I never ever wanted to play the games but phil insisted that we wouldn’t have a good time if we didn’t play—so I played too and hated him every minute—and when we finished the games, we had a guest speaker—a speaker who presented the plan of salvation and who informed our new friends that they would go to hell unless they accepted the good news of Jesus Christ and prayed the sinners prayer—and then our friends were supposed to pray the sinners prayer and then they were supposed to start coming to the church and then once they began to attend they were supposed to start the chain of friendship evangelism for themselves and bring more of their friends—at least that was phil’s vision but his vision failed—instead of growing larger like it was supposed to do, the youth group started growing smaller because the kids who were members of the youth group didn’t like what phil was doing and didn’t share his vision so they stopped coming—phil never asked us what our vision for the youth group should be—never asked us what we wanted in our youth group, probably because he thought he knew best—he geared all his sunday morning talks to friendship evangelism except for the mornings when he tried to make us feel guilty about what we were doing wrong in our lives—one sunday morning I walked into the youth room and saw a large cross at the front of the room—and then phil launched into a sermon about nailing our sins to the cross—he told us that we had confessed sin in our lives and that god couldn’t work through us unless we confessed the sin to him—and then he passed out index cards and pens and told us that we should write our sins on the index cards and then come up front as we felt led and tack the cards to the cross—and then soft music started playing and I began to squirm—I felt desperate to get out of there—I wanted to run away and never come back—but all around me people were gliding forward, tenderly tacking up their cards to the cross and there was no escape—some of the girls were crying—and when I saw their tears my body tensed and when I looked down I noticed that my legs were trembling—maybe it was because there was sin that god wanted me to confess but I refused to parade in front of the youth group and tack up my card just because phil told me to—so I stuffed the blank card into my pocket and traced the pattern on the carpet with my shoes until finally the music stopped playing and kids stopped going forward and phil told us we could go home—but for the most part phil didn’t think that it was his responsibility to make sure that we were receiving spiritual nourishment—he instituted mandatory d-teams for that—d-teams were wednesday night discipleship training groups—instead of spending time with all the members of the youth group we spent time only with the few select people who were members of our d-teams—I felt so disconnected from the youth group that I wanted more than anything else to stay home but I didn’t feel like causing an uproar in my family by refusing to go to church—so I went anyway—we weren’t allowed to pick who was in our d-teams because phil thought that by letting us choose our groups it would foster disunity and cliques—so he assigned us to be members of specific groups—and that meant that we were supposed to share our deepest secrets with people who we didn’t know very well or like very much—and what made matters even worse was that I was placed into the group with sandy who was phil’s wife—and every week sandy forced us to share prayer requests—I didn’t usually have any prayer requests that I wanted to share but then sandy looked at me askance and raised her eyebrows as if to indicate that how dare I have the audacity to think that I led a perfect life with no problems that they could pray for—so I usually gave really lame prayer requests—I was fortunate enough to have an ingrown toenail once and that got me through at least three weeks of prayer requests until finally the toe healed and then I had to come up with something else to pray about—one week sandy wanted to know which of the fruits of the spirit we most needed help attaining—at
that moment I was so frustrated with sandy that I said I needed patience—and then we all had to gather around each other and put our hands on each other and pray—I was shaking so much that I was afraid that they could feel it when they touched me—we don’t do things like touch each other in prayer in my church and I was completely weirded out that sandy wanted to touch me and wanted others to touch me—she was violating the invisible wall I had built around myself—and sandy shared phil’s passion for friendship evangelism—every week she wanted to know which friends we were witnessing to—the other girls in my group all had stories about who they had witnessed to and what great things were going on in their schools—how god had blessed them by providing them with so many opportunities to share christ—and I slunk lower and lower as they talked because god hadn’t blessed me that way—and when sandy came to me I made up a name of a friend that I was praying for and said that I would witness when the time was right—but I never witnessed to that friend because the friend didn’t really exist—I only created a name to keep sandy off my back—and on the weeks when I managed to find an excuse to stay home from youth group, the next time sandy saw me she cornered me and demanded in an accusing voice, where were you last week, heather?—and when I told her what I had been doing she looked like she was disappointed in me even if there had been a valid reason for my absence—but I think my biggest complaint about youth group was that I felt so awkward and so out of place there but instead of helping me to fit in, phil and sandy’s programs only made me feel worse—I planned my outfits strategically so that I was wearing something cool on wednesday night because I wanted so badly to be accepted—and I hid in the bathroom if I got to sunday school or youth group early—I knew that if I hid there I would be safe but that if I waited in the youth room I would have to mingle—but I had no one to mingle with—and if I couldn’t find another kid to talk to, then one of the adult leaders would take pity on me and try to strike up a conversation but I didn’t want other people to view me as the pathetic kid who didn’t have any friends and who had to hang out with the adult leaders instead—but it must have been obvious to the adults that I was a social outcast—phil did finally figure out who I was because he sent me another birthday card in addition to the one that he sent to me with the wrong name on it—in that card he told me that I shouldn’t feel like I don’t fit in with the youth group because I DO fit—and when I read his card I was furious that he was implying that I didn’t fit in because I had never said anything to him—and his observation was right but I was hurt that he had noticed but wasn’t making an effort to help me out of my plight—I guess other people must have expressed their frustration with what phil and sandy were doing to our youth group because eventually they got fired—it was right before my senior year and fortunately I wasn’t in sunday school the morning that phil announced his resignation because I’m not sure that I would have been able to contain my joy—when someone called my mom and told her the news I started doing pirouettes around the living room—I hoped that life would improve once he was gone but just when he left my church announced plans to rebuild—our church of more than 2,000 people had outgrown its current facility even though none of that growth was due to the rapidly shrinking youth group—and the announcement made me feel sadder than I had felt in most of my life—I felt sad because this was the only church building I had ever known—I despaired the senior high youth group but until my friends ditched me and until phil and sandy came I had loved my church—and even though I didn’t love the church much anymore I still loved the building because each room had a memory—in elementary school I attended classes in the grey carpeted downstairs room with the sliding partitions—where we sang father abraham and where I made a cross stitch snowflake christmas tree ornament for mom and dad and where I laid my head in my first grade sunday school teacher’s lap while she stroked my head and told bible stories to the class—and in junior high I attended classes upstairs in the blue and green carpeted rooms—where mrs. scott made us read stories about people in the old testament sleeping with multiple wives and where charlie used to tease me and offer me candy and tell me that I was a wonderful young lady—and there was the orange carpeted choir room where we prepared for the christmas cantatas and where I auditioned for my first solo in sixth grade and where I could escape from the horrors of the senior high room—that room was downstairs—it had yellow floors and cement walls—there was a long hallway to the two-stalled bathroom—I learned to know that bathroom well because it was where I hid when I didn’t want to socialize—and then there was the red-carpeted sanctuary—the sanctuary where I first took communion—it was when I was a little girl and I asked mom if I could take communion and she asked if I knew what communion meant and I told her that the crackers were a symbol of god’s body and that the juice was a sign of his blood and then she told me yes, I could take communion—I was baptized in that sanctuary—I was baptized when I was 12 years old and the night I was baptized I got my period but I couldn’t wear a tampon so I wore a pad and it got soaked when I stepped into the baptismal and I was afraid that the pastor was going to look into the holy waters and see blood seeping out of me and be so repulsed that he would have to stop the whole service to get the water changed—and in that sanctuary was the balcony where I liked to sit during missionary conference so I could count the foreign flags instead of listen
to the preacher—every time I sat up there I wanted to blow bubbles or throw paper airplanes to see how many people would notice—and in that balcony I read books during the service until mom told me I was too old to read books in church—then she appeased me with candy from her purse until I could listen to the sermon or at least pretend that I was listening—that church had the library where I checked out the books that I read during the service—and when I got older I checked out frank peretti library books instead—and that church had the kitchen with the red floors—the kitchen where we made cookies in elementary school pioneer girls—the kitchen where the choir members congregated after singing in the service to eat donuts and drink hot chocolate and socialize—that church had the toddler room where I once got cooed into babysitting on a Saturday morning when there was a church function and the only way I could get the kids to stop hitting each other and to be quiet was to read to them and the only book that they ever wanted to hear was called bye bye potty—that church had the fellowship hall where I would go with my mom on tuesday mornings when she had study and share when I was little—and in that fellowship hall I ate sugar cubes that were supposed to be for the coffee and tea and I thought at first that I was being devious but it turned out that mom didn’t mind that I ate the sugar cubes and she even gave them to me so I didn’t have to sneak them when the other ladies weren’t looking—and when I thought of having to leave this memory-laden place to start over in a new building I wanted to cry—and to make matters worse the board decided that we needed a new senior pastor for our new church—so pastor dave, who had been there as long as I could remember, got depromoted to associate pastor and they hired dr. miller to take his place—I resented dr. miller from the start—not because of who he was but because who he was not—he wasn’t pastor dave and I could never forgive him for taking pastor dave’s rightful place—I left for college before they installed dr. miller and before they started construction on the new building—but when I came home it was there in all its splendor—it cost 11 million dollars—it’s so big that it has not only one but two gymnasiums inside—and cops direct traffic on sunday morning so there isn’t a traffic jam—and because it’s so big it’s also impersonal—in order to go into the nursery you need to wear a badge with your name on it so people know that you’re authorized to go inside and play with the kids—and when you walk in the front door people shake your hand and smile and say thanks for coming today, we’re so glad to have you—maybe that’s supposed to make you feel welcome and maybe it does make some people feel welcome but it makes me feel resentful—like I don’t belong there—I don’t want to be handshake and welcomed into a church if it’s the one I’ve attend for my entire life and the people shaking my hand don’t know that—I want people at my church to smile and say hi heather, it’s nice to see you home from college—but nobody knows who I am—especially since I don’t attend the college sunday school class with my former friends—when I left for college somehow my name got dropped off the mailing list because even though the other kids from the church receive newsletters about what’s going on in the college class I never got any of those—I didn’t get any care packages either, even though the other kids did—the first time I came home on a break I went to the college class but instead of having a lesson we had to play bible pictionary—my word was revelation—how are you supposed to draw revelation—so I stood helplessly in the front of the room, red dry erase marker in hand with no idea what to draw—the time was ticking but I still stood there and people on my team started yelling at me to draw something but since I didn’t know what to draw my face began to burn—probably I matched the marker that I was holding but I still couldn’t draw anything—and when the time ran out I slunk back to my green padded seat and felt embarrassed all morning—I walked out of that classroom and have never gone back—but since I refuse to attend sunday school anymore I feel lost in the throngs of people—my church is the largest church in the area—probably the most expensive—and certainly one of the fanciest—when one of my friends first saw it he looked around at our plush carpeting and decorations and raised his eyebrows and asked, where’s the bellhop—and we think we’re justified in building a church this size because we’re growing—but we’re growing because people come to us from other churches—we’re not taking in many people who are unchurched—but if I return to that area when I graduate I will not go there—I want to attend a different sort of church—a smaller one—where people know who I am and what my name is but who don’t attack me like sandy did—where you don’t need a parking attendant to park your car on sunday mornings—where you don’t need a map to navigate from the sanctuary to the nursery—where there isn’t forced discipleship and where people won’t pry into my life by asking me to share information that I’m not willing to share—a place that’s safe—a place where I can ask questions without fear of condemnation—but I’m not sure that such a place really exists—when I first came to messiah college I went church hopping—looking for the perfect fit—but I don’t go to church at all any more—I’m afraid that all churches are really like the one I left—the church failed me when I needed it and I learned to get along without it—so now I do.

4.

"I think we ought to only read the kind of books that wound and stab us. If the book we are reading
doesn't wake us up with a blow on the head, what are we reading it for? So that it will make us happy, as you write? Good Lord, we would be happy precisely if we had no books. And the kind of books that make us happy are the kind we could write ourselves if we had to. But we need books that affect us like a disaster, that grieve us deeply, like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves, like being banished into forests far from everyone, like a suicide. A book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us."

I read these words for the first time in a creative writing class with Beth two years ago—and in the margin of the book I made exclamation marks—I didn’t mark the passage because I agreed with it—I marked it because I was appalled by it—horrified that someone thought we should read books that wound and stab us—and that in turn we should write books that wound and stab others—it seems like the antithesis of what a nice Christian writer should do—when I first read it I wrote an indignant reaction paper, declaring that Cixous was out of her mind—actually those words weren’t really hers—they were a quote from Kafka I think—but Cixous agreed with them—and she said other things that made me cry out in dismay—things like how when we write we need to die—but tonight I wanted to return to Cixous—to read her words two years later to see if my response to her has changed—and I think that it has—although I’m not sure I can articulate the change—I don’t understand completely—but maybe I understand more—she makes sense and yet she doesn’t—a jumble of truth and confusion—and tonight it makes me wonder how to mix real life with writing life—how to live a happy life and be a good writer—how to glorify god through writing if the gift of writing is most effective when it makes people feel like there are axes inside of them—is that good—is that right—is that necessary—sometimes it is—writing should lead to truth—but at what price should we portray truth—because truth can be like that axe—recently when I showed some of my writing to my sister and asked her what she thought mom and dad would say about it she told me that they would want to know the answer to three questions—they would want to know, is heather happy—does heather love Jesus—and does heather love me—and her questions made me think—probably my writing would serve as an axe inside my parents—and maybe Cixous would say I should aim for that—from reading some of my writing they probably wouldn’t think that the answers to any of those three questions would be affirmative—but I want the answers to be affirmative—I want my parents to know that I love them—and that I think I love god most of the time although I’m not always sure—and that usually I’m happy— I don’t want to be the kind of writer who can only cause people to hurt—I also want my writing to heal—to reaffirm there’s already so much pain in life that sometimes I wonder if I’m doing any good by dredging up my own pain and spilling it onto paper for everyone to read—but I want my writing to lead to truth even if the truth is painful—and I want my writing to be truth—because truth is the most important thing of all—Cixous says that truth is what writing most wants—what writing most needs—and there’s truth in pain—truth in harshness of life—but all truth isn’t like that—at least I hope that all truth isn’t like that—god is supposed to be the source of all truth—and if all truth is god’s truth does that mean that all truthful writing pleases god—even painful truth—and I don’t know if my writing is truthful at all—how do I know when I’ve found truth—and what is the purpose of expressing it—and does god want all readers and writers to want to die like Cixous does—I want to be able to write in such a way that I express truth—to be able to convey truth so that it will make axes grind inside of someone if there are axes that need to grind—but I also want the ability to convey other truths—joyful truths—but how do I express that truth in a non-cheesy way—writing isn’t supposed to be so difficult—it wasn’t always this hard—when I wrote five paragraph essays in high school about abortion and gun control and euthanasia it was easy to write—I thought I knew what truth was and I didn’t have trouble expressing it—and when I wrote essays about the scarlet letter and romeo and juliet writing was easy too—and so I thought I’d major in english in college because words came naturally to me—but the longer I spend in the college and the more time I spend writing the more I learn about how difficult it is to write—it’s hard enough to learn the technical rules of writing—to learn about grammar and citation and word choice and thesis statements—it’s harder to find important topics to write about when no one assigns them to you—it’s even harder to motivate yourself to write when you’re convinced that you have nothing worthwhile to say—but most of all it’s hard to write truthfully—to express the deepest parts of yourself in order to express truth—and sometimes I think I’m not brave enough to be a writer—to look for truth and to write about it however I find it—to risk rejection and misunderstanding and pain—writing is a very solitary activity—and sometimes I love it but there are also times when I hate it—and sometimes I hate myself for my need for affirmation—I want to be able to write anything I want without worrying about what other people will say about me or about my writing—without fear of judgment and condemnation—so I struggle—but usually my need to write wins out over my need for affirmation and I write what I think regardless of what anyone else will think—and then I fight against what I’ve written and wonder why god has both blessed and cursed me with this desperate need to express
myself on paper—my need to express the inexpressible—and I wonder what I'm supposed to do with this gift—what I'm supposed to write—if there are boundaries and what they should be—torn like asher lev—torn between loyalty and love and desire and need and guilt.
Crackers to Commencement: Writing on Rites of Passage
Heather Ross

In the early 1900s, a Belgian anthropologist, Arnold van Gennep, coined the phrase “rites of passage” to discuss culturally prescribed changes in societal or developmental status. Van Gennep states: “The life of an individual in any society is a series of passages from one age to another and from one occupation to another... Transitions from group to group and from one social situation to the next are looked upon as implicit in the very fact of existence so that a man’s life comes to be made of a succession of stages with similar ends and beginnings” (2-3).

According to van Gennep’s definition, each rite of passage involves three stages: separation from the community, a transition period, and a return and reincorporation into society. Thus, a rite of passage not only brings about a new stage in someone’s life, but also a new identification with the larger community.

Some rites of passage are universal in all cultures, such as birth, marriage, puberty, and death, but each culture commemorates these rites differently. For instance, in one Nomadic society of hunters and gatherers from the Kalahari Desert, a male cannot take a wife until he has killed a large animal such as a giraffé, antelope, or buffalo; the male begins to prepare for this Rite of the First Kill at age 12. In this same culture, when a female menstruates for the first time, she is carried to an isolated hut and sequestered there while women and old men dance and sing the First Menstruation music. In contrast, the Muslim Hausa mark entrance to puberty through celebrating a male’s circumcision and keeping secret a female’s first menstruation (Fried 69-75).

Rites of passage are not limited to birth, puberty, marriage, and death, nor are they always marked through specific rituals or ceremonies. Often, “firsts” are considered rites of passage: first step, first car, first kiss. My own definition of rites of passage is broad; I extend it to include any event that has in some way profoundly impacted the way we think or act. What matters most about a rite of passage is not the rite itself but the emotions and consequences that result from the rite. Many rites of passage are common to a large number of people; other rites are unique to one individual—but the emotions that result from rites of passage are universal, and thus still incorporate an individual into the greater community.

This semester I decided to write about rites of passage that I have experienced in my own life. It seemed like a fitting project for the last semester of my senior year, and as I approach graduation and prepare to face another series of rites of passages, I wanted to reflect on the ones I’ve already experienced. And as I leave Messiah College, I wanted to connect with this community by sharing some of my stories, which I suspect are fairly universal. For as Willa Cather once said, “There are only two or three human stories, and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before” (quoted in Sheehy 19).
For the last few years, she's watched enviously as her sister loads her book bag with new pencils and notebooks on cool September mornings and fills her lunchbox with apples and Oreos and sandwiches wrapped in plastic. On the mornings that it's her mom's responsibility to transport the neighborhood kids to school, she sits in the front seat in her pajamas, carefully plucking the marshmallows out of the Lucky Charms cereal mix in the Tupperware container, listening to the kids in the back seat talk about teachers and homework assignments. When they reach the school, she gazes with envy at the swings and sliding boards in the playground as the neighborhood kids scramble out of the car and join the other kids' games of four-square and kickball. Her own house seems quiet after the laughter and bouncing balls of the playground. Back home, she watches Sesame Street and colors pictures, curious to know what goes on in that big building each day, and anxious for the time when she can find out.

Finally, today it's her turn. She perches on the couch, book bag cradled in her lap, the taste of toothpaste fresh on her tongue. Her hair is combed, her shoes are tied, and she waits for her mom to finish smearing peanut butter on slices of wheat bread for her lunch. Her mom snaps her lunchbox closed and smiles. "Are you ready to go?"

She jumps off the couch and rushes for the front door. "Don't forget your lunch!" her mom calls. Sheepishly, she collects her lunch from the kitchen before climbing into the front seat of the car. The ride seems long; she squirms impatiently as they glide around turns and pause at stop signs. At last they pull up to the cheerful red brick building. She hesitates, suddenly uncertain about this whole idea. "Mom? Will you go with me?"

They step out of the car, and she reaches up to take her mom's hand, clinging to her lunchbox with the other hand. The playground is deserted this morning. Only a few children dangle from money bars or teeter on seesaws. The rest have gone inside to meet their new teachers and classmates.

Her mom guides her through a brightly lit hallway that smells of wax and rubber cement and raincoats, past colorful bulletin boards and smiling teachers. "Here we are," her mom announces, leading her into a classroom at the end of the hall. They step inside, and her eyes dart around the room, trying to take in all that she sees. Bright blue and orange and yellow chairs surround long rectangular tables. Rows of cubby holes and hooks line the back of the room. A corner is piled with toys; a bookshelf is stuffed with books.

She still graps her mother's hand, though her grip loosens when she notices the books. They explore the room together, strolling the perimeter and examining coat hooks and toys. Soon the teacher walks over, skirt brushing her knees, and welcomes them. The teacher and her mom talk, but she's so consumed with gawking at her surroundings that she doesn't hear what they say. But then her mom squats down beside her. "I need to leave now," she says, her voice sorrowful, and after a hug and a promise to pick her up after school, she's gone.

Standing alone in the center of the patterned blue carpet, she wonders who will sit beside her today. She wonders what will happen if she has to go to the bathroom during class. She wonders if her mom will forget to pick her up after school.

She wonders and she waits, uncertain and afraid, but later that morning, the girl who sits next to her offers to share her cookies, and when the bell rings and she steps into the afternoon sunlight, she sees her mom waiting, just like she promised. The next day when she returns to the red brick building, she kisses her mom's cheek before she jumps out of the car and races across the playground to claim the empty swing before someone else does. And when the bell rings, she scuffs her new saddle shoes in the mulch to halt her swing and joins the crowd of children pouring into the building, ready to pick up her crayons and begin a new day of learning.

The child hesitates, grubby fists grasping rubber handlebars. A purple t-shirt reveals bony elbows; flowered shorts reveal scabby knees. One sandaled foot remains planted on the cracked sidewalk, the other rests lightly on the pedal. The coolness of the evening offers a welcome respite to the sweltering July heat.

He stands beside her, his left hand firmly grasping the back of the seat, his right hand wrapped around the handlebars next to hers. She gazes up at his face, uncertainty radiating from her eyes.

He wants to scoop her off this banana seat, to draw her close, to let her bury her nose into his chest; to bury his nose into her shampooed ponytails. He wants to hug her tightly, to make her feel safe. But he can't always hold her. He can't always protect her.

He smiles reassuringly. "You won't fall. I promise."

She begins to pedal, jerkily at first, then more smoothly as her feet yield to the rhythm of the bicycle. He jogs beside her, calling out encouragement. "You're doing great!" "That's it, keep pedaling!"
In a few minutes, he starts to pant. She turns her head and peers at him with concern. “Daddy?” “Don’t look at me,” he tells her between huffs. “Keep on pedaling, Kiddo. I’m fine. And you’re doing great.”

Together, the two figures weave their way down the street. They pass children catching fireflies, a woman yanking at a stubborn weed, a man shoving a lawn mower. But she doesn’t notice any of it. Her eyes remain fixed on the crumbling sidewalk; she focuses on moving her feet up and down.

Suddenly she realizes that his hand isn’t beside hers anymore. She doesn’t hear his labored breathing. He’s gone.

But then she hears his laughter. “You did it! You’re riding all by yourself!” she cries. “Keep on pedaling!”

Her face lights up with joy when she realizes that she isn’t going to fall. Her feet continue to pump; her eyes narrow in concentration.

He stands on the sidewalk behind her, watching her form grow smaller and smaller as she wobbles away from him, pink handlebar streamers fluttering in the breeze.

3.

Her tights are itchy. Her fingernails scrape at the tingly spot on her knee, but her nails are short and the material is thick, so her knee continues to tingle. The tall man in front of her wears a plaid blazer, and since she can’t see around him, she tries to count how many up-and-down lines are in his blazer, and how many side-to-side ones. When she tires of counting, she pulls a hymn book from the pew rack in front of her and pages through it, her mouth making the shapes of the letters in the words she doesn’t know.

Suddenly she hears soft piano music, and when she looks up, she notices men clad in dark suits standing at the end of each row, balancing plates heaped with tiny crackers, just like waiters in restaurants.

Like an impatient woodpecker, she taps frantically on her father’s leg until he leans down so she can whisper in his ear. “Can I have a cracker?”

“No today,” he answers. Then he pauses, reconsidering, and asks carefully, “Do you know why we’re eating crackers?”

Eyes wide and solemn, she nods, proud that she can answer this question. “The cracker is like Jesus’ body. And the juice is like his blood.” She remembers hearing about this in Sunday school.

As the plate creeps down the aisle toward them, he searches her face. His expression is solemn, his eyes tender. He looks like the picture of Jesus in her Bible, the one where Jesus draws the lost lamb over his shoulder.

She waits expectantly.

He takes the plate and holds onto it for a moment, weighing the decision, and then with a slight shrug, plucks two crackers, keeping one for himself, handing one to her. “Don’t eat it yet,” he whispers. “The pastor will tell us when it’s time.”

She stares with fascination at her cracker, which is about the size of her thumbnail, turning it between her fingers, rubbing it until its dust powders her skirt like flour.

“And Jesus said, ‘Do this in remembrance of me,’” the pastor says, holding up the cracker.

She peers at her father to make sure that it’s okay to eat the cracker now. He nods, and she places the sweaty cracker between her lips. It tastes dry and stale. The crumbs cling to her throat.

When the men pass the plates of plastic cups filled with dark liquid, she peeks at the plate as it goes by, surprised to learn that each cup rests in its own cubby hole. Her father hands her a cup, and without him even telling her to be careful, she knows to clutch it with both hands so she won’t spill a single drop. She peers into the liquid, trying to see her face in the thimble of grape juice.

“And Jesus said, ‘Do this in remembrance of me,’” the pastor repeats, holding up a cup.

This time she knows that it’s okay to drink. She tilts her head back and swallows the warm grape juice, washing the crumbs from her throat.

They sing a few songs, the pastor says a blessing, the organ plays some music, and people stand up, collecting their coats and their children, talking and laughing, clogging the center aisle.

She doesn’t exactly know what has happened today, but she knows that it’s important. Because after that day, every time there’s crackers and grape juice in church, she’s allowed to eat and drink, too—just like the grown ups.

4.
The first time we took Mel there, I immediately knew that I wanted to go back. I was intrigued by the big lake, the cabins with their curtained doors and bunk beds, the woods with overgrown trees and rock-lined trails. But probably the biggest drawing card was the smiling grandmotherly woman in the kitchen who offered me grape Kool-Aid.

But I wasn't old enough to go to camp then. You had to be ten, and I was only eight. So I spent two years listening to Mel's stories, dreaming of Kool-Aid and bunk beds, and wondering why Mel always got to do everything first. If I complained to Mom about it, she just told me that my turn would come too.

And eventually it did. I made my packing list a week in advance. I started loading my suitcase with shorts and bug spray on Friday afternoon, even though I wasn't leaving until Monday night. And then my five days at camp swirled together in a magnificent blur of hayrides and songs and French toast andinner tubes. I took cold showers, read by the dim light of kerosene lanterns, and learned how to saw wood—and loved every minute.

I climbed into the car on Saturday morning, dirty, tired, and full of stories. Mom and Dad enjoyed my prattling, but since Mel had already gone to camp, they knew about the Slop Collar and the swimming test and the Sadie Hawkins game and the pancake eating contest. They weren't as impressed with my tales as I had hoped they would be, and I felt vaguely disappointed that what was new to me was old to them. As Dad guided the van through the curvy mountain roads, I wished for a little sister so I could brag to her about camp.

At home, I developed my roll of film and tacked the pictures onto my bulletin board so I would see them as soon as I woke up. I wrote weekly letters to my counselor, and when she finally wrote back, I read the letter every night until I had memorized it. And lying in bed before I fell asleep, I replayed my favorite memories of camp and dreamed of the next year when I could return there.

5.

Shame. Perhaps what I remember most is the shame. No one could know.

My body was leaking.

The school nurse had warned us about this in fifth grade. She had handed the girls puffy, palm-sized pink packages, along with colorful pamphlets full of drawings and descriptions. She made it sound like it was something exciting. When it happened, we would become women. We would be able to have children.

But when the boys came back to the classroom and saw our prizes, they didn't seem to think it was exciting. They laughed.

It happened to me the night Clinton was elected. I was 12, a sixth grader. I spent the evening huddled on the sofa, blanket pulled up to my chin, swimming in shame and fear and blood.

The next day, I carried a purse to school for the first time. And at lunch, as I slunk to the bathroom, praying that no one else would be there, I bore within me the heavy burden of my womanhood.

6.

My white knuckles cling to the steering wheel, hands molded over the leathery ten and two o'clock bumps, just like the driver's ed book suggests. We've rolled down the windows, but the August night is muggy, and sweat collects along my hairline.

Dad drove me here, to this church parking lot located a quarter of a mile from our house. It's the Hosanna church, the one that routinely sends flyers through our neighborhood, inviting us to attend special events like Christmas programs and Vacation Bible Schools. We've never gone to any of these events. But even though we boycott their worship services, I'm delighted to borrow their parking lot for my first driving lesson. If we went to our own church parking lot, someone might recognize me there.

Dad and I trade places, and he explains the basics. "When you drive," he tells me, "you use your right foot for both the gas pedal and the brake pedal." I scrunch up my nose in confusion. "Wouldn't it make more sense to use both feet?" I wonder. He just smiles and assures me that after I've been driving for a little while, doing it this way won't seem strange at all.

Once he's given me the general idea of what to do, he makes sure that we've both securely fastened our seatbelts. "Okay," he says, "you can step on the gas now."

I take a deep breath and look left and right to make sure that no cars have appeared. But the parking lot is as empty now as it was ten minutes ago—void of cars, void of people, void of anything I could possibly hit. My sneakered foot fumbles for the gas pedal, and when I find it, I apply timid pressure.

The car begins to move—much faster than I had ever intended.

Flustered, I pull back my foot. My eyes drop to the speedometer, and I realize that the red needle hovers between five and ten miles. "This feels so fast!" I exclaim.
Dad nods solemnly. "Never forget this feeling," he replies. "How about you step on the brake now?"

So I do. I move my foot from the gas pedal and plant it onto the brake. Even though the car had only been creeping at ten miles an hour, it rocks at the sudden cessation of motion. Dad rubs his shoulder and announces that I just gave him whiplash. "Next time," he suggests, "why don't you try to lower your foot gently?"

"But you didn't tell me to do that!" I protest.

A smile quivers around the corners of his mouth. "No, you're right. I didn't."

I inch my way around the parking lot, stopping and starting, hiccupping and jolting, eventually upping my speed to twenty miles per hour. Dad introduces me to turn signals and windshield wipers, to headlights and high beams, and I'm convinced I'll never remember any of it. I'm primarily interested in the car radio, but Dad tells me that I can't listen to the radio and drive for several more months.

After half an hour of the Hosanna parking lot, we're both ready to call it quits for the day. Dad lets me drive home. Even though I panic when I see another car on the road, I manage to stay in my own lane, and we make it back to the house without crashing into anything. Heaving a sigh of relief, I shut off the ignition. And together we walk into the house.

My skirt brushes against my shin as I bend to scan the spine labels on the lower shelf, mentally singing the alphabet song so I'm sure to shelves the K's before the L's. When I find the right spot, I cram the book into place, struggling to fit it onto an already overstuffed shelf. I pause for a minute, examining some of the surrounding titles. There are several that look interesting to me, and I make a note that I need to browse this section more thoroughly sometime. I pick up a book and flip through the first couple of pages. As I shift my weight, the floorboards creak underneath my feet. I look up guiltily, afraid that Sylvia will catch me and scold me. I know I'm not being paid to look at books. I'm being paid to put them away.

Eventually, I'll learn that Sylvia doesn't mind if I linger over books as I shelve them—that it's perfectly acceptable for me to crouch in the children's room and page through forgotten childhood treasures. Eventually, I'll learn that it's okay for me to relax at the circulation desk—that I don't have to be on-task every single minute, especially on Friday afternoons when business is slow. Eventually, I'll learn that I don't really have to dress up when I come to work—that it's okay for me to wear jeans, and that even Sylvia wears jeans sometimes.

But I don't know these things today. It's my first day working at the library—my first day working at the first job I've ever had—and I'm determined to do everything right, paranoid that I'm going to make a mistake—desperate to please, and terrified to fail.

So I hastily shove the book back into place and grab a stack of biographies that belong in another room, tiptoeing through the library like a child playing hide and seek.

I don't know what to do with my arms. It feels strange and uncomfortable to let them dangle at my sides, but I don't want to appear angry by folding them across my chest. I resent that I have to be here in the first place—I'm only here because Mom insisted that we come—but I don't want to make a scene. Not tonight. Not during our final hour together. So I hold onto the chair in front of me, noticing the bad acoustics in this gymnasium, my program crumpled beneath my palm. "Lord, You Have My Heart" melts into "Great Is Thy Faithfulness," and although we don't sing during the unfamiliar praise chorus, Mom's alto grows strong and secure when she hears the opening strains of the comfortable old hymn. I follow her lead, and soon Dad adds his bass voice to our alto ones.

We sit down and listen to a scripture reading from Psalms, and my frustration at being held captive with a bunch of new students and parents slowly dissipates as I listen to the familiar passage. Then Dr. Sawatsky stands to address us, carefully straightening his coat before striding to the microphone. He looks so dignified in his oval spectacles and dark suit, and he speaks with a rich, majestic voice, offering confident assurances and stately prayers. I keep my eyes open during the prayer and glance around me. But when I notice that Mom and Dad have dutifully lowered their heads and closed their eyes, I feel ashamed of my wandering gaze and shut my eyes until I hear him pronounce the final Amen.

He begins his speech, offering us solemn words, welcoming us to the Messiah College community, sharing promises of the joys and challenges that lie ahead. He tells us that there is a time and season for everything, and that this is a start of a new season in our lives. I cross and uncross my legs, kicking off my sandals and then sliding them back on, aware of squeaking chairs as people shift their
weight and shuffle their feet. The woman ahead of me honks her nose and digs in her purse for another tissue, which she smears against her eyes. I peek at Mom, who gazes up at the podium, eyebrows furrowed, absentmindedly rubbing her finger along the edge of her program. Dad stares off into the distance, his face vacant, his blue eyes dull and empty.

With only a few minutes until the end of the service, we begin to light candles, passing the flame from person to person. Soon flickering candlelight fills the gymnasium with eerie shadows and elongated silhouettes. Suddenly, melted wax drips onto my finger. Startled, I glance down and notice that a puddle has collected on the cardboard candle holder. I spend the last few minutes of the prayer concentrating on keeping my fingers away from the burning translucent liquid.

The prayer concludes, and he makes his announcement. “It’s time to say your farewells.” He steps away from the podium, and gentle strains of “Lord, You Have My Heart” fill the air. Next to us, a young woman with a mascara-streaked face hugs her mother, and a young man clasps his father’s hand.

We stand up slowly, and I twist my program in my hands. We gaze at one another in silence. A lump rises in my throat, but I gulp it away. Suddenly, they look so old. I’ve never noticed the grey in her hair or the lines in his face. I watch as Dad’s adam’s apple slowly slides up and down when he swallows. Mom’s face is flushed, her eyes sad.

We face each other awkwardly, our silence muffling the tearful goodbyes all around us.

“Do you need anything else?” Dad asks. “You have enough extension cords and printer paper?”

I need plenty of things, but none of them are related to electronics. I need to know that I’m going to make friends and that my classes won’t be too hard. I need to know that I can succeed on my own. And I need to tell them that I love them, and to hear them say that they love me, but we’ve never done that before, and I don’t know how to do it now.

I nod and try to smile. “Yeah, I think I’m fine.”

“Are you going out with Mel tonight?” Mom wonders.

Mom knows that we’re going out tonight. She was there when we talked about it. But I explain our plans to her as if she hadn’t heard our discussion earlier that afternoon.

A steady stream of parents continues to surge toward the exit signs. We can’t wait here all evening, but it’s beginning to feel like we might.

Finally, Mom holds open her arms and we hug clumsily. “Call if you forgot anything important,” she says.

“I will.”

“Have fun,” Dad tells me. “But remember that the goal of the first semester is to get invited back for the second one.” Proud of his wit, his dimples surface and his eyes twinkle. He gives my shoulders a quick squeeze before bending over to scoop up his belongings.

We don’t say goodbye. Mom and Dad link arms and merge with the crowd of departing parents as I stand beside my folding chair, watching their forms grow smaller and smaller as they shuffle away from me.

I clench the phone against my ear, listening to his breathing, feeling the hammering drumbeats of my heart. My legs quiver with tension. My palms are so wet that I’m afraid the phone will slip out of my hand.

The apartment is silent, except for the refrigerator humming and the pipes clanking. I sit on the carpet in the back bedroom, Indian style, hunched over like I’m battling stomach cramps, picking fuzzies off the rug. I’ve spread sheets of paper across the floor—things I want to make sure to tell him. But although I’ve written the words, I don’t find them easy to say.

I need to hear him speak. I need to know what he’s thinking. I need him to tell me that he’s okay, that he doesn’t hate me.

But he says nothing.

In the silence, I remember. I remember the times when he changed his car radio to the Oldies station, even though he didn’t like the Oldies very much, because he knew that was my favorite kind of music. I remember the afternoon I convinced him to ride on a swing, even though he complained that he hadn’t done that since he was a little boy, and we swung side by side, hands gripping rusty chains, toes pointing at treetops. I remember the cool summer evenings when we sat by the creek, admiring the inky sky and winking stars, listening to the creek gurgle and the ducks quack. I remember the first time he wrapped his fingers around mine, the first time he shyly draped his arm across my shoulders. I remember the journal he gave me for my birthday, the photograph he gave me for Christmas, the roses he gave me to apologize for hurting me.
I picture his dark eyes, the way they mirror his joy and sorrow so I can tell what he's feeling just by glancing at his face. I imagine how his eyes must look right now. But I can't bear to think about that. I close my own eyes and feel my throat constricting.

"I'm sorry," I finally whisper.
"Don't say that." His voice is quiet, a blend of bitterness and pain.
"But I am sorry. I want you to know that." I'm desperate to make him understand.
But he doesn't understand. He can't understand.
It's not that there's someone else. It's not that I've lost interest in him. It's not that I think I'm too good for him. It's just that we're different. We have different interests. We have different beliefs. And our dreams clash. I'm not ready to settle down. I don't know if I want to spend the rest of my life in Pennsylvania like he does. I crave the chance to travel and write and explore. I need the freedom to pursue my questions—and he can't offer me that freedom.
My choice must be right.
But it feels so wrong. Today is Valentine's Day. Things like this aren't supposed to happen on Valentine's Day. I never meant for it to happen like this.
I cling to the phone, waiting. He heaves a shuddery sigh, but he doesn't acknowledge my second apology.
"I guess this is it," he says at last, his voice an octave higher than usual. I imagine him standing in the stairwell where he usually goes when he talks to me, one hand gripping the phone, the other hand balled into a fist and stuffed into his pocket.
I don't want to hang up. I don't know if I'll ever see him again. We were friends for eight years before all this happened. I don't want to lose that friendship, and I'm terrified that I will, but there's nothing more to say, no way for me to hold onto him unless I agree to marry him—and I can't do that.
"Take care," I choke.
His voice breaks when he says goodbye. And then I hear the dial tone ringing in my ear.
I drop the phone back into its cradle and bury my face into my hands.
He's crying. I made him cry.
My shoulders begin to heave as hot tears slide between my fingers.
I got what I wanted. I got my independence.
But I feel like shit. And I wonder if independence is all it's cracked up to be.

10.

I got the worst sunburn of my life at Mel's college graduation. I wore a black dress, and because the ceremony was at 10:00 in the morning in the middle of May, I didn't think about smearing my skin with sunscreen. For two weeks afterwards, my neck had a purplish hue, and I could peel long strips of skin from my shoulders. My English teacher teased me that we should put a warning sign on my desk so other students would know that they might be sitting on flakes of Heather.

That was the year of graduations in my family. My high school graduation occurred a month after Mel's college graduation. But mine was in the evening, and my dark robe covered my scaly neck and shoulders so I couldn't burn them again. I marched across the football field as the band played "Pomp and Circumstance," the tassel on my hat swaying with my brisk steps. The night was warm, and I squirmed in the heat, wishing I could have worn shorts and sandals instead of a skirt and nylons. I sat beside one of my best friends, and as I glanced at her periodically during the ceremony, I was astonished to see tears dripping down her face. All I could do was beam with elation on this humid June evening. I wasn't one of those kids who hated high school and couldn't wait to get out. I had enjoyed high school, and I was sorry that it was over. I knew I would miss the spring musicals, my French classes, the lively bantering with my English teacher, the time I spent with friends before and after school. But even stronger than the sense of loss, I felt a sense of expectancy. I couldn't wait to go to college. I couldn't wait to explore life outside the confines of Lititz, Pennsylvania.

But now, four years after Mel's college graduation and my high school graduation, I'm faced with my own college graduation, and this time, my feelings are much more jumbled.
Sometimes I'm excited. I'm excited when I think about my term of voluntary service—the chance to bang nails or hand out green beans or teach English to refugees—the chance to go somewhere new and do something different. I'm excited when I think about starting my graduate work—the chance to focus exclusively on writing, and to focus on writing exactly what I want to write. I'm excited about the possibilities.

Sometimes I'm sad. I'm going to miss the long afternoons of working in the archives with Dori,
filing countless index cards and telling her about my struggles with classes and relationships and life plans. I'm going to miss the games of Skipbo and the evening walks I took with Vanessa. I'm going to miss blasting the Indigo Girls with Keely and leaping onto Jill Colleen's back for spontaneous piggy back rides. I'm going to miss my weekly meetings with Helen in her office, where we talked about both writing and life, and where I learned that professors can become friends.

Sometimes I'm afraid. I wonder if I'll ever manage to pay back my college loans. I wonder if I'll find a job that combines my passions, or if I'll get stuck working somewhere I hate. I wonder if I'll be able to take care of myself—to cook something besides Easy Mac and frozen dinners, to check my car's oil and change its flat tires. I wonder if I'm going to live a solitary life, or a lonely one.

On graduation day, I'll stand in Starry Athletic Field with my classmates and friends—the people I've studied and worked and played and lived with—the community I've grown to love—and we'll receive our diplomas, and we'll pose for photographs, and we'll laugh, and we'll cry.

And once the ceremony concludes, we'll walk off the field, and we'll scatter across the world.