Piecing Together Tom

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I.

Memorial Day, 1997. No school. Picnics. Potato salad. Tim marches with the Boy Scouts in the town parade. Dad is home, relaxing, planting the gardens full of tomatoes, peppers, parsley, petunias. The tiger lilies lining the backyard stare down the pale humans with their wild orange petals.

The smell of the hot dogs and hamburgers on the grill teases me as I sit on the back steps of the porch. The lid is off, and Dad flips the burgers, rolls the crowd of hot dogs. The fat oozes onto the gas fire, spitting and sending flames around the formed meat. Closing the lid with a clank, Dad spreads the newspaper in front of his Marine Corps T-shirt and plaid shorts. All I now see are his pale muscular legs, and the receding hairline crowning his forehead.

Tim rounds the corner of the garage with Tom in tow. One year of college has drastically changed my “Teddy Bear.” Tim is the same height as Tom, but he weighs thirty pounds more, mostly muscle. His hairstyle mimics the military cut—mandatory for ROTC at Virginia Tech. Tom’s long black hair hangs to one side of his head. He looks thin and rigid, wearing baggy jeans and a too-big T-shirt that barely hides his boxers when he sits. Tom’s blue-brown eyes dissect whatever he perceives; Tim’s brown eyes warm to any situation. They glance at me as they approach the patio.

“Hey Dad?” Tim calls.

Dad lowers the front page, and his weathered face appears. “Yes son?”

“What sort of story can anyone tell about her or his life when its end is as yet unknown? Is it possible to translate the chaotic ebb and flow of experience into a narrative form with a beginning, a middle, and an end?” --Jill Kerr Conway, When Memory Speaks, page 3

My inspiration for the preceding paragraph came from Helen Fremont’s description of a family barbeque in After Long Silence.

In Writing the Memoir Judith Barrington breaks memoir writing into three general components: scene, summary, and musing. Scene jumps into the action of a story, allowing the reader to discover truths in the same manner the writer did.
“I'm gonna run to E-man's house with Espo. Izit O.K.?”

Tom looks hard at the willow tree. It is tilting towards the house, and will no doubt someday fall down. An expert said that the roots were only on the surface, and that a storm could easily take down massive tree.

“Sure,” Dad smiles. “When'll you be back? Dinner's gonna be soon.”

“In a couple minutes. I wanna wish Bill and Judy a happy Memorial Day. Plus a bunch of us are makin' plans for later.”

My brothers walk to the front of the house where Tim waits for Dave to pick him up. I can see them through the porch and the pine tree. A guitar solo of classic rock’n’roll announces Dave’s arrival, and Tom disappears into the garage.

Tom emerges from the garage between the cascading clematis. He grips a wooden baseball bat in his right hand. Without saying a word, Tom walks past me, by Dad, and to the slate stone path between Tim and Tom’s gardens. Thud, thud, thud, thud, thud. He's smashing the ants that crawl over and through the gardens, onto the walls of our house.

Dad looks up, annoyed by the noise Tom’s making. “Don’t you have anything better to do?”

Borrowing Tom’s hint, I go inside searching for a book. Tom scowls and keeps pounding the ants into the earth, trying to keep them from scaling the cement foundation and decimating the wood that lies under the vinyl siding.

Creating a scene involves dialogue, which I believe serves two important functions. First, dialogue rapidly transmits the facts of the story. Secondly, dialogue develops characters without pulling the audience away from the action.

Judith Barrington writes that one must “not attempt to fill in the background” on everything (57).

To consolidate details, Dave/“Espo” takes on characteristics of a few of Tim’s high school friends. This provides a general overview of the friendships Tim had, and emphasizes Tom and my lack of companions.
Early summer days breed arguments. Feelings of excitement and boredom bump into each other like thunderclouds, sending humans into frays with insignificant beginnings. Perhaps while passing the salad, Mom asked Tom to remove his elbows from the table; Tim may have teased Tom about his “sloppy” clothes as he helped himself to corn-on-the-cob. I may have called Tom a nickname he had outgrown when requesting the ketchup bottle; Tom may have “lectured” Dad about how much time he spends on the computer when Dad announced his after dinner plans. Maybe Dad called Tom’s friends “junior-high” in response. Comments gave birth to bickering, which ushered in argument.

The screen door slammed as Tom’s form disappeared down the front steps. I sank into the living room chair for a few minutes listening to my parents as they finished clearing the table.

“If he wants to go, let him. I’m not goin’ to have him talk to me like that in my house.”

“Honey....”

“Susan, there’re rules here, and everyone’s going to live by them.”

“I agree.”

“It’s his choice.”

I have found that generalization is a safe way to tell the gist of what happened without pointing fingers at loved ones. No one is held specifically responsible, yet the situation is still presented to the audience.
I shook myself. “I’m not going to take this anymore,” Tom swore as he stormed out of the house. He shouted over his shoulder that he wasn’t coming back. The only time I had “attempted” to run away happened about six years earlier. I had spent two hours evaluating which T-shirts and books to carefully squeeze into two bags. What was practical? What couldn’t I live without? Deciding to tell Mom I was leaving instead of writing a note to be found on my pillow, I went to the back door and stood on the top of the green painted brick staircase. Mom looked up from digging in her flower garden, asking what I was up to. I told her I was running away. She laughed at me, and with that laugh I realized how easy and safe life was within my family. 

But when Tom faced the hurt, he immediately fled. Trying to imagine what had driven him feel so abandoned made me sick with worry—was it something I’d said? I jumped up, and headed for the door.

“Sarah, where do you think you’re going?” Mom asked.

Tears choked me. “I’ve gotta find Tom.” He’s my brother. He’s hurting, I’m hurting.

I heard Dad reassuring himself that it was “his choice,” as I raced across the front yard. Tom already had made it to Central Ave. I crunched up my toes to keep my off-white sandals on as I headed to the mouth of Sweetwood Court. There I looked down toward the “little stores”—a candy shop, a deli, and a barbershop.

In the Acknowledgements of The Liar’s Club, Mary Karr mentions that she had family members read the memoir before it was published. I had my brother and mother read various drafts, asking them for responses to how I had portrayed them. Each affirmed the project, and learned things they did not remember. For example, Mom felt awful about laughing at my pathetic attempt to run away. I assured her it hadn’t traumatized me.
Tom’s figure moved quickly up Woodrow; I followed, sandals slapping my heels and blistering my toes.

Halfway up Woodrow, I couldn’t run any further. Walking up the final hill, I lost sight of Tom as he turned right onto Park Ave. Desperate with love, embarrassment, and guilt I walked in that direction. I couldn’t see him anywhere. Was he hiding, sneering at me from behind something? Where would he go to find refuge? I tried to compile a list of friends who would take him in on a moment’s notice. Frowning, I struggled to remember last names I had never known. Soon I reached the Caldwell post office; my search had been futile.

I had a quarter in my pocket, and dialed home. *Maybe, maybe he’s gone home.*

“Hello?” I could tell Mom was worried.

“Mom, did Tom come back?”

“No,” softly slipped across the phone lines. “Where are you?”

“I’m at the post office. I lost Tom somewhere on Park.”

“Stay there. Tim will come and get you. He’s looking for Tom in the car.”

“Mom, I wanna keep looking.”

“Wait for your brother. It’s not safe for you to be alone.”

“Ok.”

As I sat down on the post office steps, I began to envision Mom’s fear that

In all of the memoirs I have read, the authors incorporate the specific names of the objects they reference. As Judith Barrington points out, “cultural references, such as current movies or pop songs, historical events, … fashions in clothes … food fads, or modes of transportation, all provide clues about the setting of your story and place it in the public world” (143). I believe the names of people and places, also draw readers into a piece of writing. The readers can either relate to the exact name (for example Celine Dion), or have an easier time imagining the equivalent object, such as side street they are familiar with.
some skeezy man would appear and try to kidnap or rape me. Finally, the green Sundance pulled up; Tim’s wrinkled brow hovered behind the passenger window as he unlocked the car door.

“Come on, Boo.”

I got in. “We hafta find him. Do you think he’s at Anthony’s?”

Tim shrugged. “Who knows where he is. He could be anywhere.”

We drove in circles around our house.

“Do you think he’s hiding from us, Bear?”

“I don’t know.” Tim turned down Elmwood Terrace. “It’s up to him to come home now.”

II.

Summer blossomed, and I witnessed it alone. Tom, who had been my sometime companion of the summer before, now only returned home for the luxuries of clean underwear and microwaveable pizza. Not having a job to tie him down, he slipped out of sight for hours or days at will. Tim flitted here and there with friends. Mom frantically tried to catch up on home-improvement projects. Dad worked more overtime than usual and went to sleep earlier—the construction industry was booming. I babysat out of boredom; having no social life negates the need for much money.

I missed Tom. The previous summer we had been bored together—thrust into

Memoir writing gives the author leeway for irony, which will not be apparent to anyone except the writer. In the narrative Tim and I are driving down Elmwood Terrace—I have come to believe that Tom was actually inside a house on this street when Tim and I were giving up.
such a state because of the limbo-space we occupied between private school and public high school, child and adult. Throughout the past school year we had remained friends, fighting just enough to remind each other that we were brother and sister. Late on a Friday night we would watch old, B-rated movies like "The 'Burbs" or Mystery Science Theatre 3000 while eating four-cheese pizzas and White Castle hamburgers.

Now sitting in my room, reading or listening to the radio, I felt like a black hole existed where my brothers’ room once had. Tom kept the door shut and expected any visitor to knock, though he was rarely there. Now, instead of trying to find seashells in "grunge" (a mixture of shell shards, sand, rocks, and mollusks), Tom was out with his new friends—the druggies and troublemakers of the high school.

Only once or twice did I push open the door when no one responded to my rapping. The air was stifling (he kept the two windows closed through the humid New Jersey heat). In the dim light I could see piles of clothes and an overflowing trash can. I shrunk back into my pink paradise where everything appeared as normal. Still, even there something was missing. My companion. Tom.

III.

When Tom and I were in junior high we never got along. Our fighting became so incessant that my parents made us pray every night at dinner that we would become each other’s best friend. We began to respect each somewhat until I discovered Tom

The third section of this piece consists of flashbacks that fill the audience in on the past relationship between Tom and I. In general, flashbacks are ways to include significant events that do not happen within the selected timeframe of a memoir.
smoked. And lied.

For about six months Tom would occasionally come home smelling like cigarettes. He denied smoking: “It’s just my friends,” or “Carlos’ parents smoke and they gave me a ride.” I couldn’t imagine my brother puffing his life away.

Then, out of the blue, during Western Civilization the previous February someone told me they had seen my brother smoking at “the gate” behind the school. I denied the claim and upheld the virtue of my brother. But something began to poison me with doubt.

That afternoon I slipped into the guest room, where Tom’s green backpack lay on the floor. Everyone I had ever seen smoke kept their cigarettes in the front pocket of their knapsack. I unzipped it quietly, and found only pens, pencils, and homework assignments on odd scraps of paper. Guilt swallowed me as I set the backpack as it had rested. Never before had I violated this unspoken rule among my siblings—to not snoop in each other’s belongings—and for the rest of the afternoon I could not find peace of mind. I had to talk to Tom.

He was looking at seashells on his bed when I entered the crowded room my brothers shared. I stood penitently in front of him.

“Tom…”

“Hey Boo. Look at this shell. See the operculum—found it two weeks ago. I haven’t been able to identify it yet.”
I glued my eyes on the miniscule brown “trapdoor” of the shell. “Tom?”

“Yeah?”

“Can I ask you a question?” His blue-brown eyes sought mine. “Do you smoke?”

His expression never altered. Swiftly denying the accusation, he asked me why I thought this. I told him about my classmate.

Tom turned my story over thoughtfully, “Oh, he’s just tryin’ to cause trouble. If you ever doubt me again, Boo, just come and ask. We’re straight up wit each other.”

About two months later, my eyes took in what my ears refused; I saw a cigarette dangle from his fingers and gray vapor seep from his lips. “I’m addicted,” he told my parents, and all they could do was prevent him from smoking in the house. Tom would smoke on the front or back steps of our house, and then walk the stale scent through the house as he returned to his room to blare Biggie or the Lost Boyz. To this day, a whiff of cigarette smoke conjures up my brother at age 17.

IV.

I cleared the last of the dinner plates from the dining room table in the dull October light. Mom had barely spoken a word as we both put away the spaghetti sauce and noodles. Propping a basket of bread against my baggy flannel shirt, I brought the last load into the kitchen. I felt fat after indulging in my favorite meal, and tried to hide
my figure under the most indistinguishable loose clothing possible.

"Mom, when do you think Tom’ll be home?" It had been a long day, and I had only spoken to a dozen or less people at school.

"I don’t know," she murmured without turning from the sink where the dinner dishes sat in the sudsy water.

Sensing she didn’t want conversation, I left Mom and silently walked up to my bedroom. When you’ve been living in a house your entire life, it’s easy to avoid the creaks when you want. I preferred silence to the heavy, slicing arguments between my brother and my parents which had increased over the months.

An hour of quiet, of peace, enveloped the house. The Smith family was at its normal evening tasks: Tim studied at college, Mom corrected fifth grade papers, Dad alternated between church work and computer games. Tom was “out” as usual and, in my room, I shut the world out. About a year ago, Tom would have been just on the other side of the wall that separated our rooms, doing homework or going through grunge. Most likely I would have gone over to talk with him, or we would have had a music war. He would turn his stereo up with Metallica, and I would try to drown it with Celine Dion’s “It’s All Coming Back to Me Now.” The noise disturbed everyone, and usually Tom and I fought about who started it when my parents would put an end to the exploding percussion and shattering vocals. Typically all was forgotten twenty minutes later when Tom and I would most likely sneak down to the
basement to wide-eyed watch MTV or make fun of an 80s movie.

But, the noise had disappeared into a hush that increasingly erupted into yelling matches between my parents and Tom. Like a virus, these arguments would suddenly break out after lying dormant. The arguments would send me running. First I ran to the location of the epidemic, taking Tom’s side or Dad’s side. Trying to dissuade each in turn, getting lashed out at by both victims. We were all hurt, and further infecting each other. I found sanctuary crouching on my bedroom carpet, either pressing an ear to the floor to hear all of the fight or turning on my radio, hoping no one would open the door my back held shut. Tom found the antidote elsewhere, anywhere else, in the infamous “out.”

The phone rang twice. I ignored it; the calls never were for me anyway. Usually a telemarketer wanted one of my parents. My parents made few phone calls, and had only censored conversation. Tom embarrassed us into silence.

Mom’s sob caught my attention. I put down my American History book, and listened intently. I couldn’t make out anything at first.

Dad’s voice reached me: “I’m going to the station to get him right now.”

Keys tinkled, the front door opened and shut.

Mom’s footsteps mounted the thirteen steps upstairs. In seconds her sniffls would pass through the mouth of the stairway, and take the three steps across the landing to my door. Numbly, I thought about how I could distinguish which family

As Linda Spence notes, memoir writing “often helps us make sense of and peace with our own lives” (Legacy xv).

Description plunks a reader into a room, a social situation, a frame of mind.
member was climbing the stairs by the sound of their steps. I stretched the moments before Mom would knock on my door by trying to hear in my mind the different rhythms. Dad’s steps were like a kettledrum, Tom marched up the steps in a rapid staccato, and if I remembered correctly, Tim (who hadn’t been home in two months) rushed up the stairs in an abrupt drum roll. Mom’s snare-drum trot stopped as she reached the top step. A sharp knock-knock came through the white door.

“Come in.”

Mom entered, the red pen she used to mark papers still in her right hand. She was trying to calm herself, but her eyes leaked diamonds down her cheeks. I avoided her face; when she cries sympathy hammers at the core of my soul, each blow shattering me until empathy floods my eyes and rains down my cheeks.

Mom perched on top of my pink floral bedspread. “Sarah....”

I memorized the pale facial features of the long deceased man. He stared at me from the page of the history book lying on my desk.

“Tom’s been arrested.”

“What?” I turned towards her.

“Your father just went to the station to pick him up.” A tear slid down her face.

“What for?”

“Drugs...marijuana...those immature kids he is hanging out with. He’s the
only one over eighteen. Those kids, those stupid Junior-Highish kids… Jerome and the Clark boy. I don’t know why he is hanging out with them. They’re so immature….”

More tears raced down her face, following moist tracks.

“Mom, don’t cry.” I wanted to comfort her, I wanted to control the squall raging within me. It wasn’t what she wanted to hear.

“Oh, Sarah. This is just horrible.”

Sobbing, she stepped out of my room, and suddenly a wave of guilt hit me. I followed her down the stairs without thinking of a single comforting comment to say.

“Mom…” I faltered.

“This is just terrible.” She turned her face towards heaven. “What did I do wrong as a parent? What did I do wrong as a parent?” She looked at me. “I shouldn’t have sent you to that school.”

I said nothing.

Suddenly she turned from me and moved towards the back bedroom, where she did her schoolwork. Her voice was brusque, “I have report cards to do, and the grading isn’t finished yet.”

I fled to my room. The front door opened: harsh voices, sobs, and accusations shook the house. I walked miles and miles away from the chaos ensuing below, but only succeeded in wearing my plush carpet thin. Five steps to the dresser, turn, five
steps to my desk. Another voice penetrated—I could no longer hear the words, only the tones—rigid and sharp like a knife. I needed more room; I needed to walk faster. I shut my fold-out desk, kicked my backpack away, pushed in the chair. Six steps to the closet, turn, six steps to the desk, turn….

Thick silence suffocated the house when the voices died down; thick silence blots out any memory I have of the actual argument. I’m sure Dad threw up his hands and left the living room in utter disgust, in an effort to hide his pain. Mom’s bruised love probably alternated between comforting and confronting Tom. Paralyzed in the anxious agitation of pacing and panicking over the Tom’s future, my family’s future, I waited for him to come and confess.

Tom stood before me. “I hafta get a lawyer. Some cop recommended somebody.” He pulled a slip of paper from the pocket of his sagging jeans.

“Tom…” Tears skied trails through my make-up.

“Why’re you crying, Boo? It’s not like this is goin’ ta affect you.”

I should have seen past my hurt, and recognized his. Though he didn’t look upset, the lack of emotion should have cued me into how deeply he felt about this. He too felt rage and embarrassment; those emotions cowered under the cover of his taut lips and hard eyes. Perhaps there also was concern for me tucked in there, behind the

Silence is incorporated in my writing via three routes. I add description in the middle of dialogue, I use ellipses, I skip a line on the page. I believe silence can add to the selectivity of memoir writing. Silence has the ability of pulling a reader out of an intense scene yet forcing them to contemplate the situation. “Stepping out of the scene” lets the reader experience the action by forcing their imagination to fill in the gaps the writer does not provide.

Musing, a Judith Barrington term, is when a memoirist comments on the action. Musing allows for the writer to tie in their overarching theme. It also permits the writer
tough-guy image.

“We need to call Tim,” Dad said as his head peeked in my doorway. I had read a paragraph in the last three hours.

“Honey…” Mom worried a step behind him. “I don’t want to upset him. He’s under so much stress down there with classes and the Corps of Cadets.”

“Susan, we discussed this. We’re going to let his brother tell him later.”

They went to separate rooms. Dad picked up the kitchen phone and dialed. I could hear him begin to pace a split-second before he said hello.

“How are you Shane? Yes, fine. Is Tim there? Susan, pick up. Sarah, are you getting on the phone or not?”

I went into my parent’s bedroom, and after saying, “Hi, Teddy Bear” listened as my parents talked with my brother.

“Where’s Tom?” Tim asked.

“Out.”

V.

Late Fall and Winter estranged us further. By November my fury mellowed into mortification—my brother had been arrested ... how would this affect how people perceived me, treated me? I told no one about Tom’s arrest. Then, one night a thoughtless friend began to tell five other friends what she overheard Tom brag about to adopt a different tone of voice. They can step out of the scene and comment on it from a perspective of a self less emotionally involved, or even a self years older.
in Latin IV. I shot her a look of death, and lied about Tom ever being arrested.

Humiliated and simmering with rage, I later lectured Tom about how his actions were making the whole family look bad. Tom leveled his menacing gaze, “Watch what you say ... I could ruin your reputation just like”—snap.

Mom and Dad took my side in the argument, and told Tom he could not treat his sister like that in our home. Tom’s response: “What! Are you kicking me out? I’m getting thrown out of my own home!” He laughed bitterly. “I can’t believe this!”

Tom leaned toward me, “Thanks Boo.”

Broken, I retreated to my room. Wrapping my poncho liner around my body I tucked myself underneath my desk with a tissue box, listening to my brother shuffle around in his room, feeling the impact of the front door slamming shut in my chest, knowing my brother had just disappeared into the night. I wrestled with guilt and God, questioning, crying, exhausting myself to find peace.

Over the next few weeks, Tom came home only to find clean clothes. I, however, saw him every day in first period Woodshop. Sitting at the scroll saw Tom turned his back on me; I huddled on the hall floor, trying to focus on the teddy bear Christmas ornament I was carving for Tim.

Fear became an overcoat I could not take off. I worried that something terrible had happened to Tom each morning until he would slip into class. Each time the teacher asked me to take attendance I cringed as moral dilemmas washed over me.
Do I mark him late? What if he cuts class? He looks pale, skinny ... is he sick?

Even the nights when Tom would sleep at home, fear clung to me. When would another fight erupt? Would Tom disappear again? Would he tell us where he was going? What was he telling the people he stayed with about my family? Would he make it to the job he’d started so he could begin paying Dad back for his lawyer fees? Would he keep coming home, or would he simply never return one day?

I lived in a shadow until I broke down and shared Tom as a prayer request to a group of friends at youth group. They listened wide-eyed, and quickly shared this juicy “need” with everyone. Being the prayer-request-of-the-week afforded me healing in an ironic manner. After a week or so, everyone at youth group had found more “urgent” prayer requests. I learned that others would forget what I could not.

VI.

Looking out my bedroom windows I could see my brother. He lounged on the red creaky picnic bench, suavely leaning his arms on the unlevel tabletop, stretching his lanky Paco jeaned legs out onto the grass he had just finished mowing. Dad paid him $10 to mow the lawn. My brother never got to see the money—it just went towards his lawyer’s fees.

His pale lips were surrounded by a black goatee. He slowly took a drag on his cigarette. Parliament Menthol Light. Or, Newport. His eyes did not seem to notice the mechanical motion of his fingers flicking the ash off of the tip of his cigarette. He

Summary—another of Judith Barrington’s words—moves an audience quickly through a chunk of the memoirist’s life. It pulls them out of the combat, and allows the chosen events to congeal toward the overarching theme of the piece of writing.

William Zinsser writes “the writer of a memoir must become the editor of his own life. He must cut and prune an unwieldy story and give it a narrative shape” (24). In this piece, two major events of these winter months were kept out of this piece because they did not specifically fall under the theme of my brother and my relationship.

When Tom looked over this section, he made a number of corrections. I had forgotten how much Dad paid him to mow the lawn. I also did not remember what brand of cigarettes he smoked.
been kicked out of the Seven 11 parking lot a couple of months ago. After a brief stint at the bowling alley, Tom’s crowd turned to Lower D’s. I tried to forget the cops stopped by there frequently, and I tried to think of something casual to say.

“Boo, you goin’ out tonight?”

“No, Britt and Kristen are coming over. We’re gonna watch a movie.”

“What movie?”

“Don’t know. We’re gonna go to Blockbuster first.” I watched him purse his lips around the thin off-white tube and suck the air through. “Tom....”

“Yeah....”

“Can I see one of your cigarettes?”

“You wanna smoke one Boo?”

We both knew he was kidding. “No, I just want to see what one looks like.”

Reaching in his side pocket, he handed me a cigarette. It was small, light.

Only 20 fit in a pack that cost almost $4 because of the New Jersey tax.

“The plastic around the pack is good for collecting seashells,” Tom noted as he replaced the cigarette I had examined. “I just have to make sure I don’t throw it out later.”

“Really? Find any good shells last weekend?”

“Naw. Didn’t really have time.”

I knew he only went to Seaside, also known as Sleezaside, for hotel parties. I
just prayed it was only alcohol and tobacco he was consuming. Rae-Anne pulled up; Los and Crack Baby were already in the car. Waving his cigarette, Tom stood up.

"Boo, you think you could pick me up later when I call?"

"Yeah, just not too late."

The concluding chapter of Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* consists of a single word: "Tis" (363)—a word that promised a brighter future. The final line makes the reader aware that the story has not ended, that life's story will go on.
Sarah Cathleen Smith


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Summer came. I watched him survey his handiwork each time he finished mowing the lawn. He would sit at the picnic table and smoke. Why was he so remote? When would he next disappear for days on end without a word? How could friends of a few months replace a family of years? I did not know someone I had spent seventeen years with.

Knowing he would soon make a phone call and then go "out" for hours or days, I hurried down to the first floor, out the front door with the large gold locks, and sat on the cool front steps. The sun was setting behind the hill; the bees were flirting with the fuchsia and rhododendron. I could hear Tom's conversation from the kitchen:

"Hello ... is Rae-Anne there? What's up ... chilling ... yo, you want to go out ... can you pick me up ... yeah, yeah ... peace."

The next minute, he pushed the screen door open. Eying me suspiciously, he seated himself. He pulled out his cigarettes, and after a flick of the lighter a cloud of gray exited his mouth. With a nod of his head he said, "I'm almost out, Boo. Got to get me some more."

I tried to ignore his hard, frenzied eyes, "Where are you going?"

A breath of smoke. "Lower D's."

Lower Dunkin Donuts was the local hang out for high school thugs. They had
wouldn’t even glance at the rolled tobacco as he lifted it to his lips. Vaguely, he contemplated the exhaled smoke, pulling his mouth into a sour (almost painful), meditative curve.

His eyes were so far away, so thoughtful. I wanted to know what he was thinking, sitting outside, feeling the pleasant spring breeze under shady trees. Inevitably, his eyes would focus on a piece of nature. A moth, a bee, a bug on a blade of grass.

Peering from behind my faded pink curtains, I knew he was only half seeing what his gaze pierced. Perhaps he was reviewing the different species of Epitoniidae. I knew the metaphysical limitations of our backyard could not contain his mind. Though his hair was cornrowed and trapped under a bandana, he reminded me of Dostoevsky as he rubbed the scar he, Kev, and Los had burned in their left forearms—their symbol of brotherhood. Tom hung out with the ghetto revolutionaries; he had left the Christian subculture of my parents. Since Mom and Dad both worked long hours, the only Siberia they could impose was the lonely backyard with a lawnmower and the sky for companions every week for about an hour and a half.

I ducked out of the view of the window. The sun was hot, and if Tom saw me his voice would harshly ring out cutting insults. Accompanied by his smirks, cries of “you’re fat” and “priss” would shatter Saturday afternoon.