

THE
PLACES
WE
SLEEP

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Caroline Brooks DuBois

HOLIDAY HOUSE



NEW YORK



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For my parents, Jim and Rebecca Brooks,
and my 3 Rs, Richard, Rosabelle,
and Rowan, with love





Nobody sees a flower really; it is so small.
We haven't time, and to see takes time—
like to have a friend takes time.

~Georgia O'Keeffe

SEPTEMBER

1.

It arrives like a punch to the gut
like a shove in the girls' room
like a name I won't repeat.

It arrives like nobody's business, staring and glaring me down,
singling me out

in the un-singular mob
that ebbs and flows and swells and grows
in the freshly painted, de-roached hallways of Henley Middle.

It arrives like a spotlight,
like an intruder in my bedroom,
like a meteor to my center of gravity.

It arrives.
And my body—
in cahoots—allows it.

Just.

Like.

That.

It arrives
and textbooks, full of themselves, weigh me down.

 This backpack holds the tools for my success,
yet I'm unprepared for IT:

No change of clothes,
no "girl supplies,"
no friend to ask

 because Camille is nowhere nearby,
no know-how,
no nothing.

(Did I mention, it arrives like a double negative?)

What was Mom thinking
by not thinking
to prepare me
for IT?

2.

The bully-of-a-bell taunts me,
rings its second warning
to those of us clogging the halls:

Follow the arrows, Dummy, on the walls!

Remember your locker's secret code: 22 06 07

Right,
 Left,
 and then Right again,

as if that cold metal box
 holds all I need to survive
 yet another school.

If I could just locate Camille—
 the only person I can talk to,
 the one friend I've made
 since we moved to town in June—
she might know what to do.

But no sight of Camille's flame-red hair,
 and I'm pushed through the rush
 of arms and legs and sideways scowls.
 My insides turning black and blue;
 my sense of direction confused,
 just as the other new student—Jiman—breezes by,
 head up and confident.

I stop to stare at her
 before stumbling in
 to Ms. Dequire's room.
Late again! And her mouth forms its red-stained frown:

“Tardy, Abbey!”

I find my seat, resist the urge to draw, instead
head my paper:

Abbey Wood

Math

September 11, 2001

}).

I sit through that morning hour,
a dull ache in my abdomen
blossoming like a gigantic thorned flower,
jotting down mathematical formulas
I'm told are the key to my future.
Even with a math teacher for a mother,
my focus wavers in and out . . . until
another teacher bursts in and whispers
in the ear of our teacher,
who stops teaching to wring her hands.

“Something’s happening—in New York and in D.C.,”
she informs us.

The tension is tangible.

“Some planes have crashed!”

But we don’t know
the half of it yet.

And to my shock,
we are soon released
 from school.

Whatever's happening must be terrible.
But I can't curb my relief:

Early dismissal!
 Set free!

Free to trod off,
 free to go our separate ways
 like it was any
 other
 September day.

4.

 The buses pull up like salvation on wheels,
like rays of sunshine to my gloom.

 And Camille, my single friend in Tennessee,
is AWOL, so I sit up front on the bus and sketch.
Up front, with the kids from the elementary school next door.
Up front, with my back to kids my own age,
who are talking
and shouting

and pushing and shoving
and vibrating with questions about what's happening.
Up front,
where the driver is crying!

Crying!

. . . about what's happening in New York?

*New York is where Mom's sister,
my Aunt Rose lives
and Uncle Todd,
and my cousins Jackson and Kate!*

If anyone has cause to cry, it's me—
but I'm sure they're okay. New York is huge.

It's not just that—my secret is now announcing itself,
and I have nothing to tie around my waist
and I'm wishing I hadn't worn white.

Maybe a few others have reasons too,
like the kid halfway back so short nobody sees him,
or the sixth-grader who sits near the football boys
and tries like mad to make them laugh.

Or Jiman, new like me,
who also sits alone
but doesn't usually seem to care.

How will I walk away
 from this bus, my back
 to all these nosy faces,
 eyes staring from windows,
 arms dangling,
 mouths jeering?

But I do.

And Mom's car is in the drive! The high school
 must have been dismissed, too.

5.

It's the way she clutches the phone
 and that unspeakable expression on her face—
 her voice attempting to comfort
 someone who is NOT me.

She glances, half-smiles out of habit
 as I walk into our latest house.

But only her mouth smiles. Her eyes
 are hollow wells of worry. Her eyes
 miss the BIG change in me.

I need her
 to hang up and follow me
 to the bathroom,
 to talk to me
 through the door,

tell me, “Abbey, I’m here,”

but she doesn’t.

I count to ten.

Breathe deeply.

Count again.

Is she talking to Aunt Rose? Uncle Todd?

Is it about New York?

Her voice quivers and doesn’t sound like her own.

What’s going on there?

6.

I soak my underclothes in soapy warmth
and think of the sink in my art teacher’s class,
with its every-color splatter, and paint brushes
rinsing free of paint.

The TV buzzes loud from our den
with news of a magnitude I can’t comprehend.

Why can’t Mom hear me
crying for her, needing her, screaming in my head—
the kind of screaming
a mother should hear?

7.

She finds me in bed,
sketchbook propped in my lap.

“Something’s happened . . .” she whispers.

I rise and shadow her
 from room
 to room,
questions stick in my throat.

“My sister!” she chokes,
tossing random shirts
 and pants toward a suitcase
 and swiping at her eyes
 with a pair of socks.

I pick up clothes where they land,
fold them neatly,
place them gently
into her bag.

“What’s going on—” I begin,

but she’s distracted and tells me,

 “I have to request a sub,”
replacing my words with hers.

I rearrange the photos of relatives on her dresser
and stare at a recent one
of my cousins.

Mom pauses packing for a few seconds,
looks directly at me and tries to explain
with plain language, straightforward,
seemingly simple:

Your Aunt Rose is missing.

Still, I stare,
my face a fill-in-the-blank,

my brain shuts down, my words dry up.

Missing?

Missing from her desk, her office in New York,
the towering building in which she worked,
but the building in which she worked,
her office, her desk are *also* missing,
as in—no longer.

Missing?

How can a building just give up,
be gone? How can people just disappear?

Mom is preparing
 to drive to New York—
 which is half a map from here—
 to be with my cousins,
 Jackson and Kate,
 who are thirteen and eight,
 and with my Uncle Todd,

while Dad and I
 will be *missing*
 her.

But not the same kind of *missing*.

My Aunt Rose is *missing* from the 86th floor
 of a building that's smoldering and *missing*
 most of itself.

I visited her office once,
 with my cousins and Uncle Todd.
 See, my Aunt Rose and I,
 we see eye to eye. We click.
 She gets me. That day, she let me
 sit in her chair and pretend to be Boss,
 so I bossed everyone: *Be nice! Make art!*
 Aunt Rose agreed, "Let's decree
naps, music, candy—and raises
for everybody!"

A framed landscape I'd drawn
decorated her office's white wall,
 which I guess
 is not there
 anymore.

8.

“All?” I ask.

“All planes are grounded,” Mom repeats,
her voice gone monotone.

“As in, not in the air?” I ask again.

She nods, looks out our window
to the empty sky. “Who knows
what's coming next!”

After planning her route, she hesitates—“Your dad
will be home soon”—and then kisses me,
grabs her final necessities,
and loads her car.

I remind her to wear her seatbelt,
to call when she gets there,
then I wave goodbye,

but she's already in math-teacher
problem-solving mode.

In comparison, my problem shrinks
to beyond microscopic, so I befriend
the bathroom.

Beneath the sink, Mom's supplies
loom like a commercial
for a product I can't decode.

The folded, illustrated instructions,
black-and-white line drawings
of a woman who smiles with knowledge
she won't share
with a girl like me.

The woman, all curves and experience,
could help me if she wanted,
but she doesn't. And nothing Mom owns
works for me.

These bathroom walls offer no advice,
the green carpet as useless
as grass in a house.

The bulbs around the mirror glare,
illuminating my ignorance.

I'm the star of this one-character show,

but my freckles look like dirt
and the trash can fills up
like failure

—and Mom is driving out of town this very minute.
She is going,

going,

gone.

9.

I call Camille,
visualize her phone
echoing in her empty home.
If she's shooting hoops, she won't hear.
If she's not home, she won't know
that I've called, since I leave no message.
I'm just a phone ringing,
echoing in somebody's home.
Unanswered.
Unheard.
Alone.

10.

Later that evening,
from my savings
I pocket seven bucks

and catch a ride with Dad, who's camouflaged in fatigues.
 Since Mom's left town,
 he's on a mission to buy us food
 so he won't have to feed me MREs—
 the military's version
 of instant meals.

On the drive, he doesn't speculate
 on what President Bush should do—
 or mention anything about anything really.
 I guess we're both in shock.
 His silence fills the car. He steers
 us toward the store, as if that's all
 he remembers how to do.

The rest plays out like a nightmare,
 a slow-motion blur of shame,
 that begins with me slinking the aisles
 of mysterious hygiene products,
 skipping over a box like Mom's,
 hoping not to see anyone I recognize,
 looking no one in the eyes,
 and avoiding Dad, who's lost in his head
 and wandering frozen foods.
 Then I snatch a box of pads from a shelf
 and dump too much money at the first register I find
 and turn and run
 with the guy calling after:

“Hey there!
You! GIRL!”

Dad,
with his special-op skills
and his empty hands
and an unreadable expression on his face,
regards me with my purchase
so visible,
so obvious.
So!

And his voice turns to whisper
as he finds his words
and shakes his head:
“Today is like nothing
I’ve ever seen.”

I freeze at first,
but of course I know
he’s talking about New York,
Pennsylvania,
and D.C.

Not
me.

Cursive
plumes
of
smoke
drawing
an
upward
line.

People exiting,
fleeing,
men and women
workers and visitors running,
stumbling, dazed,
afraid.

Then,
a THIRD plane slams the Pentagon—
fueling angry flames.

C
o
l
l
a
p
s
e
of the first tower.

A FOURTH plane smacks
ground in another state.

The
coll-
apse
of the second tower.

These
things
we
can't
un-
see.

12.

Morning arrives
regardless
and finds me Momless.
Planes fell from the sky!
You'd think they'd close the schools.
But not here.

Dad says they're aiming for "normal"—
as if middle school is ever that.

I bet there's no school for days
in New York.

So like any other Wednesday, it's
sun up,
get up,
get ready.

One foot in front of the other.
“You know the drill!” Dad barks.

But has anyone found Aunt Rose?
Images from the TV footage replay in my head.

I yank the spotted sheets from my bed
and feed them to the washing machine.

Twice, I scour my hands,
but the feelings don't wash away.

Usually Dad
is THE ONE out of town,
on a mission—a top-secret this or that.

But here we are together—him, me, and the silence
at the kitchen table.

Just the three of us!

I picture Mom driving north, biting her nails into oblivion.
Dad sounds nervous when he speaks in my direction:

“Do you . . . *need* anything?”

He must’ve seen through my grocery store charade
and called Mom last night.

Yes! I want to shout

with two competing thoughts: *I need you. I don’t need you.*

Then I second-guess myself:

Does he mean breakfast?

“I’m good. I’ve got . . . what I need,” I mutter,
trying to disappear,
and hoping he’s not talking about
what I think
he’s talking about.

Seconds later, he jumps when the phone rings,
acts surprised that it’s Mom, hands me the phone
too delicately, as if avoiding contact.

Mom’s distracted—so many miles away—
but tries to sound positive.

I can tell by her voice that she knows:

“Abbey, sweetheart . . . welcome!

It’s your entry

into womanhood!”

But as I sit there clutching the phone,
lonely
is all I feel.

13.

As if it couldn't get worse,
Dad returns from his bedroom
holding a book—A BOOK!—
with a faded, outdated cover.

“Your mom told me you should—uh—
read this, I guess,” he grunts
in his serious Sergeant's voice.
Then he stands there staring into his coffee.
And I stare at the book
as my face
ignites.

Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret.

Margaret looks more secure
than I've ever felt.

“It was your mom's,” he offers,
planting his palm gently on top of my head,
as if he could press down
and hold me at this height
forever.

14.

In my backpack,
 I conceal the girl stuff
 like foreigners among the pencils,
 gum wrappers, and notebooks.
 Like flags of surrender
 like wings separated from the butterfly,
 like little white handkerchiefs,
 like folded notes
 never to be postmarked.

The word *SANITARY*
 imprinted loudly in my head,
 making my skin crawl.

What's sanitary
 about this silent
 siege
 on my body?

15.

In Ms. Dequire's room, some boys
 actually sound elated: "Did you see them fall?"
 "KABOOM!" they say, making planes
 with their hands.

I avoid eye contact, look away, escape
 into my head. But at a school this small,
 you can't escape being new.

I scan the halls for the other new girl, Jiman,
and am struck by her solemn appearance,
eyes cast low and serious.

Does she know someone in New York, too?

I wonder to myself
What did Aunt Rose do?

Was she aware,
unaware,
have time to prepare?

Type an e-mail,
make a call,
run or scream or cry,
take the elevator,
take the stairs,

have time to think, to blink,

time to wish, to wonder,

did someone help her,
was she alone,
did she whisper a prayer,

close her eyes,
glimpse the pictures
on her desk
and on her wall?

And where

is she now?

16.

Like a shadow on an overcast day,
staring at my own two feet,
I walk at a distance behind Camille,
steal peeks at her and her teammates,
her friends from before we met.

She doesn't know I'm back here
and there're twenty-some people between us—
or she'd wave me into her crowd
and link her arm through mine.

She's just one of those people—
everybody likes her,
except maybe The Trio,
who just like each other.

Jiman walks by herself like me,
the smile she's worn since August is gone,
her eyes dart side to side
as she takes
careful
nervous
steps.

While battling my locker,
 I overhear Camille's other friend,
 her neighbor Jacob,
 say, "Where's *Whatserface*,
 that new girl who's always drawing?"

And Camille,
 in her singsong voice, reply:
 "Her name's Abbey. Learn it. Use it!"

 Then teasingly,
 "She could teach *you*
 a thing or two
 about art!"

I smile despite myself.
 I've never made such a good friend
 so quickly.

17.

Even with Camille,
 I can't shake what I feel:
 I'm still *that girl*—
 the one who doesn't belong,
 not fully alone,
 but surrounded enough to have to try
 to fit in, to blend,
 like oil paint
 and water.

Art

has always been my thing
 from school to school,
 but maybe here in Tennessee,
 maybe now,
 it's not enough.

I want to be known.

I want to be
 seen.

I'm used to
 the adjusting,
 starting over, the beginning
 again, others passing by me
 staring through me,
 or asking

Who're you?

I worry about people speaking to me
 and worry just the same
 when they don't.

Sometimes, I think
 I might blow away
 like autumn leaves,
 like ashes from a fire,
 like sheets of paper
 from a spiral
 as I trip and stumble,

try to hold it together
like some pre-teen
Humpty Dumpty
just beginning
to crack.

18.

I lug my backpack
to every subject,
the zipper's smile—
tight and toothy—
protecting my backup
stash. I minimize
my movements, aim for
inconspicuous, stay
in my lane, hope no
one notices how
every hour or two
I leave class.

Then
Ms. Dequire
actually complains
to the whole class,
“*Again, Abbey?*”
and sighs
dramatically.

19.

Some kids at Henley
resemble kids from my previous schools,
from each state
where Dad has been stationed.

I used to rattle off
all of my schools
like a chant I'd memorized for class
or a mnemonic device
like "The Presidents Song."

But the schools are beginning to blur,
and I think I've forgotten a few.

It's hard to keep my own history straight
now that the school count
totals over eight.

From first grade until now,
I've known six Blakes—
five that were boys
and one Blake girl.

I hear that name *now* in the hall,
and turn, expecting one of the Blakes
from before.
But it's a new Blake,
a new face
to learn.

Maybe there's another Abbey here already
at Henley.

At my last school,
most of the parents
were also Army,
just like Dad.

But Henley's far from the base.

Mom planned it that way this time,
to live like the longtime residents
in a civilian neighborhood,
without the coming and going
of people and their stuff
that occurs when you live
on a base.

It might've been easier
to be just *one*
of many Army Abbeyes
in a school
filled with other
Army kids.

20.

It took me exactly one week, four days precisely,
to meet *The Trio* of Henley Middle:

Sheila, Angela, Lana

Angela, Lana, Sheila

Lana, Sheila, Angela

The first few weeks, I confused their names.
But now, like everyone else,
I know their flawless faces
and can place their voices
from around any corner.

When they saunter down the hall,
hip-to-hip-to-hip,
you have to scoot way over
to let them pass.
They *won't* see you.

If one wears teal, the others do too.
If one skips lunch, the others do too.
If the football boys sneeze, The Trio coos, "Bless you!"
If one scoffs at you,
the whole school
scoffs too.

21.

On the bus, I update Camille.
tell her about Aunt Rose—
at least all I currently know—
which is
nothing.

We scrunch down low in the seat,
knees against the bench in front of us
as if holding it up.

“That’s terrible!” she exclaims.
“My parents are donating their blood.”

“And there’s something else,” I whisper,
“I
got
IT!”

Then my only friend in Tennessee
studies me as if I’m somebody
she’s just met.

“IT?” she whispers back.

“IT!” I confirm.

And after a pause, she beams:
“I could tell you were different!”

“That obvious?” I groan.

“It’s just that I *know* you!” She grins.

I stare at her briefly,
not sure how I got so lucky.

“Pretty sure The Trio have it, too,” she adds.

“Great!” I roll my eyes.

“I’m in a club!”

We erupt in laughter—
the kind that turns to tears—

as others on the bus
stare at where we sit,
but I don’t care
because we’re just two voices floating up and out
the half-lowered,
rectangular
windows.

22.

Down the aisle of the bus, I wobble
with a smidgeon more confidence than before,
and just as I turn to wave at Camille,
who makes a *Call me*
gesture with her hand,

“Army brat!” is spat
 from the mouth of somebody I pass.

That’s how we described ourselves
 at some of my other schools—but *this* doesn’t feel
 like *that* now, this label that’s not my name.
 I spot Jacob, Camille’s neighbor,
 and a pack of smirking boys at the back
 who start to snicker.

To my surprise, Jiman
 suddenly seems to see me,
 looks directly in my eyes and semi-smiles

just as I bolt past her.

Or did I imagine that?

Maybe she was smiling
 to herself.

The confusion I feel
 is for real
 and can’t be erased
 from my easy-to-read
 open-book
 face.

23.

At home, I perch on the corner of the couch,
 behind my hair and my latest sketch.
 I draw when I can't handle my thoughts, imagine my art
 hanging somewhere cool, like the school's hallway,
 with a circle of friends surrounding me,
 saying, "Nice work, Abbey!"

Dad sits like the Lincoln Memorial,
 upright in his reclining chair.

He's purchased some "female gear"
 and deposited it, in a brown paper bag,
 on my bed while I was at school.
 Beside it, he's placed a new sketchbook.

Neither of us mentions this.
 Instead, we choose to stare straight ahead.

Still no sight of Aunt Rose's face on the TV.

The 24-hour coverage shocks and shocks:
 the Twin Towers collapsing into themselves,
 the dark cloud hovering, people fleeing,
 and the planes crashing over and over again,
 as if perhaps *this time* by accident
 but aimed so perfectly.

"I just don't get it," I whisper.

“They’re terrorists,” Dad tells me,
matter-of-factly, but his voice catches
and he coughs
and switches the channel again.

New York has never seemed so close—
yet Mom so far.

On another station, they say:
“We’ve been attacked on our own soil.”

I know a few things about war,
from Dad—
Germany, Hiroshima, Vietnam,
but not *here*.

“You shouldn’t be watching this.” Dad finally snaps
it off, grabs his combat boots to polish
since it’s something he can do with his hands.

I know he wishes he were there,
in New York. Instead of here,
with me.

24.

On the phone,
Camille makes small talk and tries to cheer me up:

“You move a lot! That’s all *Army brat* means.
It was probably one of those jocks at the back.
Or one of The Trio—Angela was back there.
She’s probably just jealous.”

“Yeah, right!” I sigh
and kick a pillow from my bed, thinking of Mom
and Aunt Rose and Uncle Todd and my cousins
in New York, and trying to recall
if the voice on the bus belonged to a girl or a boy.
I don’t mention that Jacob was among them
since I know how Camille feels about him.

“How do people know my dad’s Army?”

“Henley’s small, Abbey,
and lots of people around here are Army.
Plus, it’s obvious—
you’re a world traveler.
You’ve been places.
Look at me! I’ve never
left this Podunkville.”

“Yeah, but at this rate, *I’ll* have whiplash
by high school.”

25.

My dictionary offers up all it knows:

1. brat /brat/ - noun. somebody, especially a child, who is regarded as tiresomely demanding and selfish in a childish way

2. brat /brat/ - noun. the son or daughter of a serving member of one of the armed forces

*which is really nothing,
more or less what I already knew.*

26.

In a dream,
I'm falling,
like a body from a building,
falling away from something I need to hold on to,
falling from an unfathomable height,
falling away from others,
from the faces I recognize—
pushed to the edge of bleachers,
out of group pictures,
squeezed to the back of lines,
staring from a car's rear window
as we drive away again
from everything
I think
I know.

27.

We fold name tents today.
 Some teachers still don't know our names.
 One called me Amber twice the other day,
 and the gym teacher just calls me "You!"

Crease the paper hot-dog style.
Write your name big and bold.
Place it at the front of your desk.
Use it in each class.

I write ABBEY—colorful and cheerful.
 But it might as well say *New Girl*
 because that's what half
 the class calls me.

I notice Jiman's composure
 when she's called upon, how she shakes her hair
 from her shoulders, lifts her head up
 like she doesn't mind being new and unknown.
 And when a teacher mispronounces her name,
 Jiman simply corrects her, without apology,
 but respectfully, politely—and even
 the teacher seems impressed.

28.

Our teachers try to discuss
what's happened—the attack
on our nation.

In Art, Mr. Lydon asks us to *paint* our emotions.

I choose red and black
to smear across my bone-white paper
because that's how I feel.

He pauses behind my easel and studies my work,
my hands become birds and I start to tremble.
But when he moves on, I feel invisible.

Camille paints the shape of the Pentagon with colors that run
off the page.

Tommy watches Sheila paint New York's *new* skyline.

Assuming the role of *Most Talented*,
Jiman paints the coolest flag I've ever seen,
with abstract stars and stripes outside the rectangle.

But then in the lunch line,
one kid says to another, right in front of her,

“They should all go back to where they came from!”

And I see Jiman freeze,
 a carton of milk squeezed
 in her hand

and I think I hear her whisper

I am Muslim

but also American.

Later in Social Studies, we read stories
 about the man who crossed a tightrope between the Twin Towers,
 the man who parachuted from the north tower,
 and the man who scaled the south one.

Mrs. Baker asks,

“Who here has visited New York?”

My head pounds

as I try *not* to think of Mom

so far away.

Then Camille, with her talky-talk mouth,
 can't help but proudly inform the class:

“Abbey's mom is there right now.”

Someone coughs, “Big deal!”

Thanks, Camille!

for building my fan club

one card-carrying member at a time.

“Do tell, Abbey!” Mrs. Baker prompts me,
 after glancing again
 at my name tent.

Through clenched teeth
 I inform the class,
 “My aunt is missing—”
 and everyone turns and stares
 and demands to know more.
 Suddenly I can’t swallow, can’t breathe,
 feel my heart speed up
 a few beats.

I have a captive audience!
And I’ve forgotten how to speak.
And the sound of my own voice
out loud in the classroom
is terrifying.

29.

I have to ask for the hall pass *again*.
 Each and every bathroom knows me now.
 This is the one where *Sheila Loves Tommy!*
 is scrawled on a stall door.

 Before, I’d never considered the disposal
 boxes, their creaky lids, the loud crumpling
 that paper makes, the dispenser by the sink

hanging loose from the wall, the mirrors reflecting, or mocking me—hung too high to help, if I need to check my clothes.

30.

In Music, we sing “America the Beautiful.”
I feel dizzy and mumble the words
and find myself wondering
what “God shed His grace on thee” really means.

Across from me, Camille sings her heart out,
eyes closed, face beaming, mouth wide—
fearless personified.

That is so like Aunt Rose!

A tear runs down my cheek,
and I shove it aside.

Aunt Rose lives and breathes music.
It’s not what she does for money
but what she does for love. She once
told me, “Abbey, I’d rather sing than talk.”
Plus, she hums nonstop—
and plays more instruments than I can count: piano, guitar,
violin, harmonica, and even drums.

Mom always says, “Rose is the creative one,
and I’m the mathematical one.”

I want to be just like Aunt Rose.

Once in their New York apartment, I broke a maraca
while marching in a pretend parade
with my cousins Jackson and Kate.
The tiny pellets scattered
from one end of their apartment to the other—
rolling away lickety-split.

I can still hear Aunt Rose proclaiming:

“Let the music spread.
Little seeds for new melodies!”

A sob now catches in my throat.

That’s just how she is!

Or should I say—was?

My mind
is
stuck
in
present
tense.

31.

The past seems so far from today.
 But only one month ago,
 we were at the beach.
 And my cousins and I
 built a towering castle of sand
 as tall as Kate.
 Until the tide came
 and stole it away.

32.

On the school bus
 after school,
 I spy Jiman
 who appears comfortable
 sitting alone.
 I sketch her,
 wish I could be
 more like her.

Jiman,
 an illustration of confidence.

I repeat her name in my head.

Jiman,
 a portrait study in nonchalance.

She's new to Tennessee. Just like me.
She sits alone. I sit alone, too,
but a microphone and spotlight
seem to amplify and highlight
my every unsure
move.

I wonder if Jiman
notices me, wonder if she observes
the war the football boys wage
on the weak.

I glance quickly
in their direction.
They are all eyes
and busy mouths
when they spot me
and bust out laughing
and whisper things,
then laugh some more.

I let my hair fall
curtain-like across my face.
Show's over! I think
and push forward and off
that rotten,
stinking
bus.

33.

I used to think “stationed”
 meant staying put,
 like the word “stationary,”
 but I was wrong.
 It’s more like a brief rest,
 then a forwarding address,
 and time to learn a new zip code
 —and way of life—
 all over again.

If it weren’t for Camille,
 I’d be ready to pack up,
 disappear. Be gone.
 But this time, when my family moves,
 I have so much to lose.

Our current house is painted
 a greenish-brown, and it’s at least
 twenty miles from the base,
 which is now on
High Alert!

“Security’s tight!” Dad explains.

He’s awaiting his orders.

I can’t recall all of my previous bedrooms.
 This one here is pink.

So random it seems, the places we sleep.
I place a thick towel between me
and my clean sheets.

I've been staring at this ceiling
since the beginning of summer,
since back in June,
when Dad got stationed in Tennessee.

Mom and I are stationed here, too.

The last state was South Carolina,
and before that
it was
Colorado.

34.

Today Ms. Dequire
sends me to the school nurse,
convinced I have a bladder infection,
and I can't find the words
to disagree.

Her closet of a room is papered
with rainbows and food charts,
and she explains, "Abbey, I'm here to help."

So slowly I begin,

“I got my—” thankfully she knows where I’m going with this
and pulls out a picture of the pelvic region
from a drawer in her desk.

She names a few body parts.

And I cringe at each.

Then she points to the two
fallopian tubes, and my mind drifts
to the Twin Towers and New York,
where Mom now sleeps.

Finally she asks, “Do you have any questions for me?”

I pause . . .

then begin, “I *have* been wondering
when it *all* will end . . .”

And for a second or two,
the nurse just stares, as if I’m asking
about something else entirely, as if I’ve asked
something too personal, a question for which
there’s no answer. Her hesitation
makes me fidget with the hall pass.

“My mom . . . just left . . . and I—
I’m just ready for it to end.”

I drop my shoulders
and begin to cry in this tiny room
with this total stranger.

Then, guess what?

The nurse, smelling of powder and bread, hugs me,

and it feels good,
and I hug her back—
and I believe she needed it, too.

And we sit there hugging like idiots
for a full minute or two.

Then she hands me a tissue and says,
“It’s monthly, about four to seven days each cycle.
That’s not too bad, is it?”

35.

In the bus lines after school, when Angela and Lana
point to me and announce,

“New girl’s got a DISEASE that Nurse can’t cure!”

to everyone who’s around to hear,
including Jacob and the back-of-the-bus boys,
Camille marches up
in their puffed-up, lip-glossed faces
and says exactly what she thinks:

“If anyone’s got a disease, it’s *you!*
A disease of the heart.
Doctors say yours are missing.”

And that’s why
Camille is my all-time best friend—

even over Makayla in South Carolina,
and Lisa in Colorado.

I'd even go so far as saying
we're like blood sisters,
but without the blood,
unless you count the colors of red
flushed through our faces right now—
hers shining like courage,
and mine a mixture
of embarrassment
and pride.

36.

On the bus,
Camille beams,
pumped up by her victory:

“Did you see their smiles vanish?”

“You have a way with words,” I agree.

“I do, it's true.” She closes her eyes,
lays her head on my shoulder—
affection comes so easy
for her.

I take in the moment, soak it up.
This is what having a true best friend feels like.

“Why doesn’t Jacob
ride the bus much?” eventually I ask,
remembering her other best friend
and all the boys
who witnessed the scene
just now.

“He does. Sometimes.” Camille yawns
catlike in the afternoon sun.

Camille and Jacob have been friends
since forever, even though he’s a year older.
They play basketball or soccer in her backyard
most afternoons—and have done so for years.
And although I haven’t known Camille
for near that long, and I don’t play sports,
I knew the minute we met at the community pool
this summer that we’d be good friends too.

She bounced right up to me at the snack bar,
dripping water and out of breath,
and exclaimed, “I love your swimsuit!
I’m Camille. Who’re you?”

That’s all it took!

We just knew.

I pause my thoughts

when we come to my stop,
 say goodbye to Camille
 and jump up to leave.

But once again,
 I'm caught off guard
 as I file forward
 to exit the bus

and a boy's foot juts out

and trips me up.

On purpose?

*Maybe
 it's
 new kid
 target
 practice.*

It happens so quickly,
 I barely catch myself.

As I collect my stuff,
 he mumbles to himself, "Didn't even
 see you there!"
 like I don't
 exist.

37.

Dad tapes the MISSING flyer
 Mom sent of Aunt Rose
 to the refrigerator,
 beside a permission slip,
 shopping lists,
 and photos.

*Are you really missing
 if you don't wander off in the woods,
 get snatched in the mall, or run away?*

I can't help but think of stranger danger
 and *America's Most Wanted*.

Uncle Todd took that picture.
 Aunt Rose is smiling at him, in their kitchen.
 Jackson and Kate make faces behind her.
 I can almost hear her voice—she was saying:
 “Hurry up! Take the picture!
 My cookies are burning.”

Then afterward, she dashed to rescue
 the sugar cookies from the oven.
 A treat because *I* was visiting!

She didn't know then
 that now she'd be missing.

I study her face, fear her features
 will fade until the picture
 is all that's left
 of that memory.

On news shows,
 fences are papered with flyers like Aunt Rose's,
 like yard-sale signs or concert posters.
 The flyers multiply like a quilt of worry
 sewn by loved ones: pictures from weddings,
 graduations, birthdays, ordinary days—
 faces smiling,
 smiling,
 smiling.

All those happy faces.

}}.

On a certain show,
 I hear a phrase
 for the very first time:

“Human remains.”

And it sounds like humans
 who stay behind—a hopeful sign of people alive.

Then the true meaning sinks in—

They may not find Aunt Rose.

Without warning,
there's pressure in my chest
like I might explode.

I call the New York apartment,
hoping to hear Mom's voice,
but Jackson answers instead.

"She's out for groceries, I think.

You want to speak to my dad . . . or Kate
or—" then his voice dies out,
and I realize he was going to say "my mom,"
so quickly I tell him,
"I'd love to speak to Kate."

"Sure."

And then . . .

after a lengthy pause,

"Hi, Abbey," says a tiny voice on the other end.

We speak for a bit
but after a while,
I can't think of anything
much to say,

and the silence
slinks in.

“Tell my mom I called, okay?”

And the words “my mom”
feel terribly wrong,
like I’ve said or done
something hurtful.

39.

Dad sits down at the bottom of my bed.
It sags with his weight.
He wants to talk.

*Please don’t be about my period.
Or the pads he bought.
Anything but that!*

“There’s a chance . . .” he begins,
“. . . that I may get mobilized.” He holds
Mr. Poodle, my purple stuffed dog, in his hands
and turns him around and around.

“If you mean move again,
I won’t!”

“Nope. Just *me* this time around.”

Then, I'm all smiles.
A huge, dumb grin in fact—
so relieved it won't be me or Mom,

happy not to be leaving Camille . . . not yet at least.

“I just want to prepare you,” he says,
trying again, seeming confused
by my happiness.

Then he just sits there
turning that poodle around
in his big,
strong
hands.

40.

“Artists have a story to tell,”
Mr. Lydon informs the class.
“They keep telling it
until they get it right.
They must take risks.
Trust themselves!”

Jiman, across the room,
listens intently to Mr. Lydon
and dares to paint over her first attempt,

trusting herself, her instincts. New paints,
clean brush—and she's in her element.

I watch,
how one painting hides another
layered just beneath it
and even another
beneath that. The way a face
can hide a person's entire life,
a story no one knows, a history untold,
until someone seeks
to share it.

I get up and cross behind Jiman, drawn
to her painting. She pauses brush midair.
Heads turn, ears tune in
and a hush falls over the room—

but I scurry on,
the moment gone, the status quo resumed,
my courage dried up like ancient paint.

41.

For P.E.,
we all stumble and push into the locker room
to claim any private spot to change
into our gym clothes. The walls seem to sweat
with our arrival. Some girls seize

the mirrors, brushing and pulling
 at their hair. Angela and Sheila assume
 center stage and strip off their shirts and pants,
 not bothering to cover or hide themselves.
 Sheila's bra is lavender, Angela's is pink.
 Sheila has breasts already and flaunts them.

“Ohmygod, I'm a cow,” some girl whines.
 “Moo!” another laughs.

Some of us wait in line for a stall, like Camille,
 who stopped changing in front of others
 on the day Lana remarked:

“I don't know why *you* need a bra.”

Everyone is edgy and impatient;
 you'd think we were waiting to be fed
 the way we eye one another. But we wait
 like *good girls*, not cutting in line.

Lana stands too close behind me,
 rolling her eyes and trying to grab
 Sheila and Angela's attention.

When a door swings open
 and Jiman steps out,
 Lana shoves me toward her,
 says, “Geez! Go in already!”
 then wrinkles her nose at Jiman,

who looks the other way
and doesn't let Lana
get to her.

I lock the door and yank off my jeans—
exposed,
in my plain underwear.

I follow my new feminine ritual
of protecting my gym clothes from myself,
but take too long,
 my movements jumpy and jittery.

Through the door, a slice of yellow
is all I can spy of Lana's shirt.
Then her shoe begins to tap,
 tap,
 tap
and her voice begins scoffing, megaphone-loud,
"Hurry up! WHAT
are you *doing*
in there?"

42.

Later that week,
Ms. Johnson gives us each a yellow ribbon
since we're studying symbolism,
and we're sent outside to find a suitable tree

somewhere on the school's property
around which to tie our hope.

I notice Jiman is absent,
hear rumors that someone spray-painted words
on her parents' restaurant,
and I wonder what they wrote
and why they would do it.

Sheila and Angela tie their ribbons
around the same tree,
and when Sheila commands:
"Tomorrow, Ange,
let's wear red, white, and blue,"
Angela responds, "Sure, Shee-Shee."

For a second, I wonder
if I should wear those colors too.
Then I look for Camille, who waves at me
as she heads off on her own,
her ribbon fluttering
wild and free.

Beside the ball field,
I find a solitary tree with drooping leaves
and lots of low branches.
Last summer, I would've called it
the perfect climbing tree

—but I'm no longer Abbey

who climbs trees.

The Trio would say,

That's for babies!

I extend

my arms around its width,

and the bark is rough and scratches me

as I tie a lopsided bow

and whisper,

“This is for you, Aunt Rose.”

43.

My period ends—finally!

Over. Period.

The end!

In the first grade,

Mrs. Bennet taught me:

“End a sentence with a full stop

so the next one can begin.”

And after seven long days

that felt like years,

I am me again

I guess, but

I feel like

one huge

question

mark.

44.

After a few days,
Jiman is back at school.
On the bus,
she settles
directly
in front of me.
I say her name
in my head
the way I've heard
her say it.
It's lovely
and suits
her.

Up close,
she looks smaller.
I stare at the back
of her head. Her hair
waves in mahogany layers
and smells of lemons.
She holds her chin high again
and doesn't hide.

I am the new kid who
cowers, emotes, reacts—
and the boys at the back
can sense that.

Camille
 is a “car rider” today,
 so I’m extra afraid
 to shift or make a sound.
 I try NOT
 to breathe
 too loudly.

Jiman sketches
 and seems content,
 even dares
 to open a window
 and let the wind
 rearrange her hair.

I smile despite myself,
 imagining us as friends—
Jiman, Camille, and me!

That’s when the boys sit up,
 take notice of my goofy grin.
 Too late to hide it behind my hand
 as they start to chant

Ar-my!

Ar-my!

Ar-my!

BRAT! BRAT! BRAT!

Then it hits me
like a putdown on a playground:
I've been invisible
at more than one school
but never a target like this.
To all, my biography reads
as whatserface, newcomer, girl
from somewhere else
other than here.

I stand to flee
and see a picture
Jiman was drawing
unfinished in her hand
of a little leafless tree.
She turns to look at me
with maybe care
or concern
on her face.

Tears cloud my vision
and my feet do a tango
with my backpack
and everyone observes it all
with their bulging eyes,
as I stumble up the aisle,
trying like mad
to escape
my never-ending

social
demise.

45.

Mom

remains in New York.

A sub teaches her math classes
at the high school.

Jackson and Kate must need her.

Uncle Todd must too.

I don't know what's happened to Aunt Rose.

At night, Dad and I stare at the TV,
eating macaroni and cheese.

A woman reports, "New York is crying,"
and I look at Dad for his take on this.

He keeps watching.

I imagine big tears spilling
from skyscraper windows—

falling and splashing
and washing away

the soot and ash

and cleansing

the streets and people

and Jackson and Kate

and Uncle Todd

and Mom

until everything sparkles—

bright and shiny,
like
new.

46.

A few days later,
Mom comes home to us.
She squeezes me until I can't breathe
and drops her bags and collapses
 into Dad's arms,
 and then onto our couch.

I sit on the floor at her side.
"How're Jackson and Kate?"

She brushes the hair from my face.

"Todd can't stop looking,"
she says, mostly to Dad,
who stands and paces,
and leans hard against the wall.

To me, she whispers,
 "I love you,"
and kisses my hair.

Gently, she turns my face to hers.

My tears are stuck
 somewhere deep inside.

Perhaps I'm Abbey
 who no longer cries.

Then, as if waking
 from a dream, she asks,
 "How have *you* been?"

The football boys on the bus
 spring to mind
 and their unwanted attention,
 and how my period arrived,
 and how I just want to find
 a place to belong.

I glance at Dad
 still holding the house up
 and answer
 with the first words that come:
 "I've survived," I say, sounding
 like a more mature Abbey,
 even to me.

Then—
 an aching
 moment
 of SILENCE

f

a

l

l

s

over us

like a heavy blanket of rubble

and my cheeks burn with what I've said

and I cannot breathe

with the weight of my stupidity.

Aunt Rose

Dad looks from me to Mom

and then back to me, then tries

to change the subject.

“It’s okay,” Mom whispers,

patting the couch

for me to sit

beside her.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t here.”

I rest slightly against her,

closing my eyes.

If I don’t open them

ever again, I could be *that girl*—

the one in our home videos,
 the one with pigtails,
 who skins her knee and cries to be held,
 who doesn't know about terrorists,
 whose aunt is still alive,
 who holds her mom's hand.

That version.

That girl.

That one.

47.

Murmurs escape
 their bedroom—
 details they won't share
 about Aunt Rose. I know
 from the sound of their movements
 Mom is unpacking, pulling
 clothes from her bags,
 dumping them onto the bed.
 She seems to have misplaced something
 or left something in New York.
 The few words I catch
 are like pieces of a puzzle,
 a code to crack: "... right here ..."
 Panic rising in her voice,
 "... must have lost it!"
 Then Dad's voice trying to calm her,
 and then hers again: "God! Where is it?"

Now she's crying, now weeping,
 and louder still. She's gasping
 and saying, "... the letter ... the last thing she wrote ...
 Todd gave it—to me."

I freeze, motionless in the hall, listening ...
 as if my stillness
 will help her find
 whatever she's missing.

And in that stillness,
 I imagine my uncle,
 the firemen and rescue workers,
 even Jackson and Kate
 searching through metal and concrete,
 their hands scraped and dirty,
 bloody, searching for something,
 anything to grab onto,
 to pull up and out
 of the darkness
 and into the light
 of breathable
 air.

48.

I yank my thoughts back from New York.
 Here in Tennessee, I could be "Abbi" or maybe "Abs."
 A talented artist, like Jiman. I could be an athlete

like Camille or Jacob—no trash that!
 Just somebody people know.
 I'm so over just being *new*!

From here forward,
 one thing's for certain,
 I'll be *Abbey*
who gets her period.

And maybe I'm imagining things,
 but Sheila, Angela, and Lana
 have begun to regard me a little differently,
 like there's a neon sign on my head
 that everyone can read: *Look at me!*
 And I know Camille didn't tell.
 Maybe my trip to the nurse
 tipped everyone off.

In the halls,
 some boys glance at me, glance at my body

. . . or perhaps
 it's all in my head.
 and no one
 is thinking
 anything
 about me

 at all.

49.

At least
I've found a friend like Camille.

Camille,

who loves basketball
whose limbs are lean and athletic
whose red hair waves out of control
who sings without fear
who talks without self-censorship
who doesn't seem to care
what she wears
or who likes her
or how she moves between groups
or through the halls
or what anyone thinks,

My friend.

50.

In the cafeteria, locker room, halls,
on the school grounds outside,
everywhere kids are discussing
what will happen next—
which U.S. cities are potential targets,
if the president makes an easy mark,

if they will bomb Oak Ridge,
which is not too far from here.

Maybe it's all in my mind,
but I think this school's coming together a bit
in the wake of such a tragic event.
Some cliques are un-cliquing.
Maybe I'm even starting to fit.
I saw a member of the Geek Club—
kids who play chess and take Advanced Math—
talking with a cheerleader yesterday in homeroom
and planning a community vigil.
Even Camille's neighbor Jacob
seems to see me
as we pass between classes.
He once even asked about my aunt.

And today at lunch,
the-one-and-only Sheila
sits beside ME, actually confides in *me*,
while opening a lime yogurt,

“My mom and dad and I are *never* going overseas again.”
She scans the room for her counterparts,
then continues, “Our travel agent
is changing our summer destination
to Charleston, where we can at least
trust the waiters and chefs
not to poison us!”

Then for some reason,
she stops talking

long enough to glare
over where Jiman sits.

“Cool!” I say, trying to relate to her plans.
Though I’ve lived many places,
I’ve never thought of them
as *destinations*.

Red, white, and blue banners
have taken over the school’s walls.
One reads “We Love America!”
It’s like how everyone felt
when Henley’s basketball team
scrimmaged Hargood Middle—
united.

Us against *Them*.

But who are *they* anyway?
Even Mrs. Baker, our social studies teacher,
can’t explain.

When the other two-thirds of The Trio appear,
Sheila excuses herself,
doesn’t acknowledge me
as I wave goodbye
to their retreating
backsides.

51.

Football Tommy boasts
 to anyone who will listen
 how his father is buying a gun
 and a gas mask and building
 a bunker beneath their house
 where they can live for 45 days
 on cans of green beans
 and powdered milk
 and bottled water.

Camille's dad
 labels himself a *pacifist*,
 condemns both the terrorist attacks
 AND
 the imminent war.

My dad watches TV,
 observes an anti-war march
 in downtown Washington, D.C.—
 just 18 days after 9/11.
 “They’re against military action,”
 he says. And then, “It’s not my job
 to agree or disagree. Someone
 has to protect
 our country.”

OCTOBER

52.

As *if* life is back on track,
as if buildings haven't fallen, and people haven't disappeared,
as if the world isn't torn in two about going to war,
Camille and I crash at her house
to get down to solving homework equations.
We settle ourselves in her bedroom,
where sports stars beam from posters,
and pictures she colored when she was five
surround her mirror, and a growth chart
climbs up her wall to her current height.
I pull a neglected My Pretty Pony
from under her bed and braid its hair.

Camille has lived her *entire* life right in this spot—
and Jacob has *always* lived next door.

Her bedroom is *so* Camille.

We finish our math and head outside
to shoot hoops in her backyard.

After a few misses, I locate chalk
in her garage and sketch our names—
cursive and temporary—
onto her driveway:

Abbey + *Camille*

She holds the ball
to watch me draw our faces.

“I swear, you’ll be famous one day!”

“You can come
to all my art openings
in New York and in Paris.”

“Gladly!
And you can come
to *all* my games.

She dribbles!

She aims!

She shoots!” Camille announces
as the ball swishes
through
the
net.

“Any word on your aunt yet?” she asks casually—
or cautiously—
and a little out of breath.

All I can do is shake my head.

“I’m sorry,”
she says between dribbles.

And I know she means it.

}}.

Someone whistles
from a window next door.

It's Jacob.

He leans out,
waves his hand,
and calls Camille's
name.

A minute later,
he's standing beside us,
a soccer ball tucked under one arm
and a basketball under the other.

He studies my drawings
and raises his eyebrows.

But I don't know how to interpret this.

He looks at me not too differently
from the boys in the halls.

But the boys who taunt me
hijack my mind
and how he's probably overheard
what they've said.

It's hard to know how he feels,
 read what he thinks,
 since sometimes he hangs with the other athletes.
 Maybe he agrees, believes
 I'm a brat too,
 just like they say.

Then my tongue
 goes all chalky
 and suddenly no one is talking
 and I have nothing to do with my hands,
 so I smudge the faces I've drawn
 with the tip of my shoe
 and whisper,
 "Gotta run!" and dash,
 like I tend to do lately,
 leaving them
 staring
 after
 me.

54.

On October 7th,
 close to 12,000 people
 in New York City

m a r C H

from Union Square
 to Times Square
in opposition
to the administration's
War on
Terrorism.

Camille says
her dad wishes
he could join them.
She tells me that instead
he marched around
their block.

55.

At home,
some days Mom buries herself
in stacks of math tests at the table,
red slashes here and there
on her hands from grading.
I feel sorry for her students.

I walk through rooms
and she doesn't look up.
Once, she turned off the light
as she left a room
that I was in.

Other days, she slouches
 on the couch, a glass of red wine
 in one hand, a photo album open
 on her lap, Aunt Rose smiling from photos.
 I close the book when she drifts off,
 pour the wine down the sink,
 and lay a blanket
 over her.

When he's home,
 Dad lingers
 at the doorways of rooms
 and occasionally asks her,
 "Is there anything you need me to do?"
 or he studies news programs,
 as if hearing people talk about "suicide missions"
 will tell him
 how to fix this—

 and Mom.

56.

We attend the vigil
 held at the fire department.
 A patriotic song is sung.
 Flags of all sizes are flown.
 The adults are crying,
 except Mom, who is too sad

to be here. Strangers hold
 hands, hold on to each other,
 hold each other's babies.
 Dad and I don't know how
 to be sad together,
 so we smile and pretend
 to watch children
 turn cartwheels in the grass.
 I'm sure he's wishing
 I was still one of them.

57.

I'm attempting to sketch the still life
 Mr. Lydon has arranged
 in the center of our classroom.

He's explaining how you have secondary colors
because of the primary ones.

Jiman's sketch
 looks just like a photograph.
 I wonder how
 she did it.

I find nothing inspiring
 about the bowl of fruit
 but try to capture the shades of apple
 versus banana.

I bet the *fruit* find themselves boring too!

When Mr. Lydon isn't looking,
Tommy snags an apple
and chomps it.

*How are we supposed
to keep this up
with the world
crumbling
around us?*

I imagine the fruit bowl imploding, apples
spinning away, bananas
smashed—

and find myself needing to know
if everything has a purpose,
a place and a plan
on this planet . . .

Suddenly
Mr. Lydon approaches,
making his rounds behind us.

I hunker down . . .
then he's directly behind me
and I blurt out:

“What's a . . . *suicide mission*?”

Other kids are shocked
at my voice—
 probably me more than them.

Without pause—and as if it's on topic—
he says, “An act that usually takes the life
of the perpetrator as well as others,”
and then he changes the subject:
 “I believe you've found
your medium, Abbey. Colored pencils
are working out well for you.”

“Thanks,” I mumble
and turn back
to the apples and bananas,
 wondering what cause
could be worth
all those lives.
And what caused me
to let the random thoughts
out of my head.

Camille looks over
and mouths, “Your medium!”
And my cheeks turn
the Magic Magenta
pencil #7 color.

58.

In the hallway
 between Science
 and Language Arts,
 Jiman appears
 and pauses directly
 in front of me, eyebrows
 raised in recognition.
 I come to a sudden stop.
 Mirror-like, we move
 in whatever direction
 the other one starts—
 her eyes laugh at this.
 But it's no surprise that
 I'm overcome by self-doubt
 and flee before I find
 any words
 to speak.

59.

I dream
 Dad and I
 are shopping for groceries.

In the produce section,
 I spy Mr. Lydon,
 so naturally I cower

behind the broccoli, blushing
from head to toe.

He holds up a kiwi and muses
to no one in particular:
“You’d never know it’s green in there!”

Dad quirks his face
at a man pondering the color of fruit,
then fires commands at me:
“Abbey, front and center!
ASAP. Pronto!”

I creep forward,
and we push our cart
loaded with duct tape and plastic wrap
away from Mr. Lydon.

The dream then shifts
like a TV channel changing
from a cooking show to a broadcast of war,
in which Dad takes cover from gunfire
like an actor in a desert scene
but it is too real
and I wake drenched
in sweat
and
fear.

60.

Today we're driving to New York
for Aunt Rose's *memorial*.

Any other time, I'd be thrilled to miss school.
You don't have to be good at math to know

new school + new girl = new ways daily to be mortified.

Mom likes *her* school and hopes I like Henley too,
since she was unhappy in our previous states:
"Tennessee will be good for the Woods!"
But the best thing here so far is Camille.

We're headed out of this state now
to where sadness awaits.

I've never seen a dead body before,
except on TV.
And never anyone I loved.

Mom informs me there will be *no* body

and that her parents, Grandma Jill and Grandpa Paul,
will be there.

Dad drives while Mom mostly sleeps.
He curses the other cars

that drive too slow or too fast
or generally do something wrong.

He points out the sights and landmarks:
“The majestic Smoky Mountains!”

“Look—a herd of deer!”

“Check out the Potomac River.”

I watch it all slide by
and sketch the passing hills,
a barn, other people in cars,
a church.

Stopped in traffic,
Dad peers over his shoulder at me
and calls me “Abbey the Artist,”
so I tilt the sketchpad up for him to see.
“It’s my medium,” I tell him shyly,
displaying a green pencil.

“Is that right?” he asks before turning back
to the road, to the world of signs
and speed limits
and solid lines
adults aren’t supposed
to cross.

61.

A car is a good vehicle
 for daydreaming
 with stock scenery rolling by.

I summon Jacob and Camille,
 imagine them playing basketball,
 passing and shooting and doing
 all the things best friends do—
 like they did before I arrived,
 like they'll do again when I move—

 then *I* am there with them
 and Jacob tosses me the ball.

To ME of all people!

Just like I'm one of them,
 but my hands are full of art supplies
 and I drop it all—even daydreams should be semi-realistic—
 and Jacob stops playing
 to go all day-dreamy:

 “Can I help you with that, Abbey?”

But before I know it,
 we're in New York already,
 and Mom is getting out of the car
 without looking back.

And it's hard to hit *Replay*
 on a daydream.

62.

We eat Chinese,
 the three of us, like old times, but quieter,
 a restaurant we'd eaten at once for Christmas
 with Aunt Rose and Uncle Todd.

 Jackson, Kate, and I had drawn on the placemats
 and folded them into airplanes
 and sent them innocently sailing
 across the empty restaurant.

The place hasn't changed a bit,
 but the world has.

63.

The next day,
 I stand apart from my cousins
 who stare at their feet and cry,
 surrounded by whispering,
 sniffing, Kleenex-clutching adults
 and emotional hugging
 and "I'm so sorry"
 and ridiculous bouquets
 of beautiful flowers.

Jackson wears a tie,
which strikes me
as funny
 and I want to pull it,
but I know
 he won't chase after me today.

Kate, only eight, seems older than the last time I saw her—
almost older than I am now.
She stands amazingly still for her age—
no wiggling or twisting, no falling down,
no yanking at her clothes.

It's confusing to see them
without Aunt Rose,
who was always there—
dancing with us, handing us
bags of popcorn, singing silly songs,
or putting a Band-Aid
on someone's knee.

I don't know what to say,
so I say "Wow!"
and point to all the flowers,
but Jackson and Kate
just stare harder at their feet,
and wipe their faces with their hands,
as they stand side by side
like sad dolls in fancy clothes.

The words

Red Rover, Red Rover, send Abbey right over

pop into my head, but I cannot
join my cousins
or snap them out of their grief.

They're brother and sister—

and *I* am just a girl
whose mother is somewhere
nearby.

64.

Back at their apartment,
casseroles and tiny sandwiches
crowd every empty surface.

Who *are* all these people
who knew Aunt Rose?
Did they work with her in the tower?
If so, how did *they* escape?
A sobbing woman
corners and tries to hug me,
but I slip away.

I've always thought of the instruments
throughout their apartment
as my aunt's friends.

I don't even know what she did
at her job. It must have been important,
enough to die.

Uncle Todd just stares,
standing stationary in their living room,
the center of a shifting group.

He's skinnier than I remember
and his beard is growing in.

He doesn't call me "Abbey Fabulous!"
like he used to, but smiles vaguely,
as if thinking, "Who are *you* again?"

Jackson seems to shrink back
from him, as if it would hurt
too much to touch.

If ever there was a time
they need Aunt Rose,
it is now.

She was their cheerleader,
their tour guide, the captain
of their joyride—and now they are adrift.

She was the mom who lived for
roller coasters, screaming louder
than all the others, painted her toenails
a rainbow of colors, made
a family of themed costumes
for Halloween.

Grandma Jill and Grandpa Paul slump
on the couch, silent tears
trail down their faces.
I sit on the couch's arm.
Grandma smiles up at me
and grabs my hand.

We watch all the people.
Some are eating.
Some talk quietly.
Dad, for once, seems to know
just what to do and stands close
to Uncle Todd, as if to catch him
if he falls. Mom scoops up Kate
and places her on her lap
with a book in front of them,
and I'm glad she does this.

Someone plays Aunt Rose's piano.
I keep thinking it is her
and looking over my shoulder.

Was Aunt Rose the last person
to touch the keys? It angers me
that it can make music still.

65.

It's different this time
with Jackson and Kate.

Usually, we fall instantly in sync,
tumble off to build a pillow-and-blanket fort,
or write a play, or plot a rolled-sock war,
or color tattoos on our arms
for our rock-and-roll band:

Introducing The Donuts!

“You can tell *they're* related,”
our parents would muse from another room.

We just fit together—like Legos.

We were “The Three Musketeers!”

This time, though, they seem
more like names or familiar faces—
two people I see a few times each year,
to whom I happen
to be related.

After a while, they retreat
to their bedrooms
and close their doors.

Is this what *heartbroken* looks like?

On a napkin, I sketch a heart
fracturing and falling apart
into two piles of red.

On the long ride home,
we pass the same landmarks—
the same hills,
 towns,
 cities,
 bridges,
 and rivers.

I stare out the windows.
Again, Mom sleeps while Dad drives
and curses the other drivers,
 yet somehow this time
I find a little comfort
in all this.

66.

My period comes 'round again
like a nightmare

like a surprise test in Science
like a speech I have to give on a stage
like a recurring dream
with people I cannot locate
and something important I've forgotten to do
and blood on my hands that will not wash away
and a familiar stab
in my lower back.

I hug myself into morning,
doing the math:

7 days
Once a month
12 times a year

$7 \times 12 = 84$ days a year

*I want to stay in bed,
stay home from school,
skip my entire seventh-grade year—*
but I hear Mom leaving
for the high school, her car backing
down and out the drive, and this
feels like my cue
to rise.

Sometimes, lately, she forgets
to wake or kiss me before she goes.

It's okay, though;
I'm a young woman now.
I should be able to deal with this.
It's only middle-school
after all.

67.

“A portrait should capture the heart of a person.”

—Mr. Lydon

In Art, I draw my first
self-portrait:

Roundish face. No, stretch that longer—
oval, pale-moon face.

Long sweeping hair,
tree-bark brown—no, coffee brown—no, grizzly bear brown,
the kind of brown that sweeps across your face
and tries to hide what you're feeling.

Dark eyes like secrets,
like locketts that hold
how you feel about yourself
and all the places you've lived,
the friends you've left—
Makayla was the hardest to leave.