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### Pervading Substances

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TRINITY COLLEGE  
Hartford, Connecticut

Senior Thesis

*Pervading Substances*  
A collection of short stories

Submitted By

Kristin Lunghamer  
Class of 2015

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for  
the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in English Creative Writing

2015

Director: Professor Ciaran Berry

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## **Part One:**

### ***Blood***

“Ouch.”

The blood pours down the side of his leg like a quivering stream. It is thick and strong, glistening from the sun that shines upon it. His gaze does not waver from the flowing substance. As it slides down his skin towards his ankle, a distinct feeling of ownership overwhelms him. He wants it back. The blood. It is his isn't it? Why is it so eager to leave him then?

As it continues to stream steadily, the blood seems to have a separate life of its own, a life a part from the boy from which it flows. He begins to feel like the blood does not completely belong to him, especially not in a way that he can control. He continues to watch without fear or reservation, only curiously. He takes his finger and brushes it against the stream, bringing the red stain to his eye line. There is something in its liquid composition that is different from everything else he has witnessed. Like he is seeing more than only his reflection, more than red. There is something else in the thickness. Something else hidden in the blood.

He blinks and places his bloodstained finger in his mouth.

The metallic and bitter taste slithers through his taste buds and down his throat. His muscles cringe slightly in response but he finds his finger returning to the replenishing stream. He raises his finger to his mouth again.

“Jamie!” says a voice from above.

Jamie looks up to find a teenage girl towering over him. Her shoulder-length brown hair falls from her face as she places her hands on her thighs. Looming over him, she slides one hand up and places her hair behind her ear as her blue sundress sways in the wind. Her face is kind and warm. Though he feels the childish concern in her voice, her smile indicates a much more playful attitude. She kneels her tall thin frame beside him and places a light hand on his back.

“Took a little spill there, kid?” she says. “It seems you’ve been getting a little daring without your training wheels.”

Jamie shakes his head and flushes slightly. “No,” he says shyly, not meeting her eyes. He giggles and looks up at her. “I saw a ghost,” he says.

“A ghost?” replies the girl, a smile still glistening on her face. She tilts her head curiously. “You weren’t scared were you, James?”

“No,” Jamie says, with the same shy shaking of his head. “I’ve seen them before. But this one surprised me so I fell.” He looks back down at the blood on his leg. As if out of habit, he reaches down for more and moves his finger towards his mouth before a quick hand stops him.

“Jamie, what are you doing?” she says, her voice suddenly stern.

“I don’t know,” Jamie replies slowly. He looks up at her with his blue eyes hoping for the playfulness to return. It must be the blood that scares her.

Her grip remains firm and her eyes focus on the red stain on his hand.

“It’s just blood, Cece,” Jamie says.

She blinks her eyes back to him and releases his wrist. “Right. Well, let’s get you inside and cleaned up then.” She puts her hands under Jamie’s armpits to lift him but falters

at the weight. She wipes her forehead, "Jeez, Jamie you are getting big!" He smiles at her and jumps up, lending a hand down to her.

"C'mon, Cece," he says. "It doesn't even hurt really."

She takes his small hand, pulls herself up, and sighs. "Since when did the seven year old become stronger than the seventeen year old?" She brushes her blue sundress as Jamie looks up at her with a goofy grin. She reaches down for his bike, takes his hand, and leads him up the driveway and into their house.

Past the wooden door and through the foyer, Cecelia floats into the kitchen. Jamie follows behind but constantly turns his head to see if any of his blood has left a trail. His red mark of existence. Cecelia's voice calls to him from the kitchen and he hurries to her. With her back to him, he watches her pull out the First-Aid kit and run a damp paper towel under the sink. She seems so tall and uneven to him, like a crooked tree. She turns around and pats her hands on the countertop. Jamie obeys her command and climbs his way to the granite surface.

"Now," Cecelia says. "This doesn't look so bad does it?" Jamie notices her face cringe when she slides the paper towel up his leg as the blood gathers and turns the white to red. She gasps quietly and closes her eyes momentarily. "You know Jamie, even with everything that's happened with me, I still have never been good with blood."

He looks up at her though she averts his gaze. She fixes a Band-Aid to his small wound. A tiny patch of dark red stands out against the beige of the bandage. He brushes the tip of his finger over it, circling it lazily.

"You don't have to be afraid, Cece," he says.



She pats his knee and meets his eyes. "I know kid." She taps his nose playful with her finger. "Be more careful now, we've got enough to be worrying about in this house." Jamie knows she is speaking to him but it sounds like she is reminding herself. "And tell those ghosts to be more considerate of you when you're riding your bike." She winks at him and he is comforted again. All thoughts of bad blood have disappeared. "What is it with these ghosts anyways Jamie?"

"They're my friends kind of," Jamie replies simply. "They tell me things."

"And what do these 'friends' tell you?" she says.

He kicks his legs back and forth along the counter and looks down. "Well they don't always tell me things, sometimes they just make me feel. I think they just want to know that I see them," he replies.

"Well then," she says coyly and pushes some hair behind her ear. She looks to him, "As long as they're friendly ghosts." Suddenly, she looks down for a moment and seems to be catching her breath before looking back to Jamie. "Wanna snack kid? I feel like some ice cream. Don't tell mom though, she'll think I'm spoiling you." Jamie nods and laughs quietly. As he begins to move off of the counter he notices a stain in the middle of Cecelia's dress. It is wet and dark, like she spilled cranberry juice.

"Cece, what's that?" he says.

Stepping away from the counter, Cecelia looks down. Jamie watches as the expression on her face turns to distress. She brushes her fingers along the mark and sighs at the red that it leaves behind. Cecelia seems to have forgotten him. Again. Her eyes remaining focused on the red marks on her fingers. Focused on blood.

"Cece?" He cranes his head. "Is it blood?"

Her eyes blink back into focus and she shakes her head. "Oh it's nothing, Jamie. Just a stain. An easy fix." Cecelia turns around and grabs another paper towel. Just like before, she runs it under the water and dabs the spot. Jamie wonders why she is so quick to rid the stain like it is an embarrassment or a mark of weakness. She looks back to Jamie and slowly the playful smile returns to her face. Cecelia moves swiftly from him, around the counter top, and over to the refrigerator. "Ice cream for two coming right up!"

Jamie continues to swing his legs on the counter and look out the window. He watches their porch swing sway lightly in the breeze. He watches the sunlight sparkle as it hits the slivers of water that pour from the sprinklers. The scattered light reminds him of ghosts again. Little bursts of light. For a moment, he thinks he sees another one but as he leans forward to look closer he hears a sharp gasp from behind him.

Jamie turns his head around to find Cecelia grasping the handle of the refrigerator. "I think I may need to lie down," she whispers so quietly Jamie cannot be sure of what she said. He begins to feel a similar rush that he gets when he feels his ghosts: a looming mist that sends its warnings through the air. He spins around on the countertop and calls to her, but he cannot hear the sound of his own voice. She sways forward and leans against the refrigerator, her head upon the cool metal. Jamie can see that she is slowly sinking to the floor. As one final act of strength, Cecelia clutches the most recent of Jamie's drawings that hangs from the door and slumps to the ground. Jamie hops down from the counter and runs over to her. He sees the paper crinkle in her hands and hears her breath become shallow and forced. On the wood floor, she turns to her side. Jamie watches as she reaches out another hand to smooth the paper and look at the drawing. It is a family portrait that Jamie drew a few weeks back. In the scene, Cecelia is a fairy flying in the air above Jamie and her

twin brother, Charlie. Suddenly she releases the paper and lets it fall away from her. Jamie approaches her slowly.

Kneeling next to her, he calls her name and places his hand along side her face. Her eyes move beneath her lids and her mouth makes barely audible moans. Jamie sees the blood on her palm and the stain that still stands out on her dress. It is nearly dry. He places his finger on the stain of her dress and lets some of the damp blood collect on his fingertips. He stares at it. He studies it. And then just like before, he places his finger in his mouth and swallows it.

“It tastes like mine,” he says.

With his finger dangling from his lips, he looks down upon his sister. Her eyes have opened and she is staring at him. “What did you say, James?” she whispers. Jamie returns her look with silence.

“What’s going on?” says a voice from above. Jamie turns his head to the source to find a teenage boy at the opening of the kitchen. He is tall with dark brown hair, the boyish lines on his face beginning to harden. He looks at Jamie and Cecelia with dark brown eyes. Jamie feels the weight of the gaze and wonders if he has done something wrong.

“Cece fell down,” Jamie says. “She got scared of the bad blood.” He rocks back from her and sits with his legs crossed.

The tall boy’s long legs make a few strides over to them and he kneels by Cecelia’s head. Jamie watches her smile weakly at him as he examines her body. “Cecelia, is it happening again?” he says. Jamie moves away slightly. He is becoming less and less of a thought and he begins to wonder if this is what it feels like to be a ghost.

“No,” she says and starts to rise from the floor. “Just a false alarm. I haven’t eaten much today.” She leans her back up against the kitchen counter. She takes a deep breath and closes her eyes. “You know me, Charlie. So forgetful.” She flicks her wrist in a nonchalant motion and smiles weakly.

“What’s that then Cee?” he says.

She follows his gaze and sees the pancake size stain on her dress. She lifts the garment away from her body and continues to stare at it. Jamie wants to speak but cannot find the words. “Don’t worry, Charlie,” she says. “I just bumped the counter when I was helping Jamie. It’s nothing really.”

“Hey,” he says. She keeps her head down. “Hey Cee, look at me.” She lifts her eyes to his. “It’s never nothing,” Charlie says. She smiles at him feebly. Charlie helps her up and leads her out of the kitchen. Jamie is left there on the floor. He looks beside him and sees the drawing from the refrigerator. He picks up the picture and looks at it. His attention is drawn to the smear of blood on the right side of the page. The blood is already dry. Jamie finds his fingers brushing over it. He thinks about how quickly some blood dries up once it leaves the body. It no longer has that full flowing consistency. Dry and lifeless. It needs the source. It is nothing without it.

Jamie’s eyes focus on the image of Cecelia. “Where are you going?” he says. After a few moments he gets up, places the drawing to on the kitchen table, and looks to the backyard. With the taste of blood still in his mouth, Jamie pushes the screen back and exits into the warm sun.

\* \* \*

Twilight looms outside Jamie's bedroom window. He promised his parents downstairs that he would get ready for bed immediately after dinner in exchange for a later bedtime. He is tired but not ready for sleep, especially after this afternoon's events. He wants to see Cecelia. After he pulls on his pajamas and tumbles along the floor, mimicking some scenes from his recent viewing of *Batman*, he is ready. Jamie skips out of his room and down the hallway. As he rounds the corner for the staircase, he runs into a familiar large shape: Charlie.

"Easy now buddy, Mom and Dad can hear you stomping around from the kitchen," he says. Jamie giggles and beams up at him. He tries to continue down the steps but Charlie stands firm. "I'm sorry Jamie but it's time for bed."

"I don't wanna yet, Charlie," Jamie replies. "You guys said I could stay up later."

"I know, I know," he says, lifting Jamie into the air. "But we got some grown up things to talk about tonight." He begins to carry him back down the hallway.

"You're not really a grown-up yet Charlie," Jamie says as they enter his room.

Charlie sighs and does not reply. In Jamie's room, Charlie seems larger than life. Not quite a man but no longer a boy, he is out of place among the toy trains and bright blue colored walls. Before he places him on the bed, he swings Jamie around the room and tickles him playfully. Laughter echoes throughout the corners of the room.

"Shh, shh," Charlie says through a grin. He begins to pull the blankets over Jamie, securing him in place.

"Will Cece come say goodnight to me too?" Jamie asks. His blue eyes big and expectant.

“I don’t think she is going to make it up tonight,” Charlie replies. Jamie maintains his gaze in hope to sway Charlie the way he can sometimes sway Cecelia. “Listen Jamie, I promise tomorrow you, me, and Cee are going to go out and do something fun as a little end of the summer treat. OK? And you’ll get to stay up later.” Charlie looks over towards the door as the sounds of voices are heard from below. He turns back to Jamie. “But tonight, we have some boring adult things to talk about and we need you to be a good boy and sleep.”

“But Charlie, you’re not an adult,” Jamie says again. He raises his eyebrows.

Charlie sighs. “I know, but some nights, even when you aren’t a grow-up yet, you still have to be one. And for me that’s tonight, but tomorrow.” He pauses and looks out the bedroom window before looking back down at Jamie. “Tomorrow we can all be kids again. Goodnight, Jimbo.” He kisses Jamie on the forehead, turns off the lights, and departs.

Eyes closed, Jamie thinks about *Batman*. He thinks about the cut on his knee from this afternoon. He thinks about Cecelia. He thinks about blood. He sees blood. Yet, it is not long before sleep takes him.

Both steadily and abruptly, Jamie feels himself rising from his sleep. His room is dark. No light seeps in from behind his blinds as it did hours before. It is not often that Jamie wakes up in the middle of the night. He gets out of bed to use the bathroom across the hall. He flicks on the bathroom light and rubs his eyes. Moving towards the toilet, he hears a small but obscure noise. It comes from outside the open window in the bathroom. Jamie stands on the toilet to inspect the source. The porch lights are on in his backyard and a lone figure is laying in the yard. He recognizes that slim frame.

“Cece,” he whispers.

Jumping down from his post, Jamie runs out the door and down the stairs. The house is dark aside from one lamp in the kitchen and the porch lights. And the moonlight. It is full. The clock on the oven reads 1:18 a.m. As Jamie's feet reach the hardwood floors of the kitchen he lightens his steps, moving slowly and carefully through the room to the porch doors. He knows one noise could alert his mother and that would be the end for him. The porch door is already open. It is only the screen that blocks Jamie's exit to Cecelia. He reaches his hand up and slowly pulls it back, stepping on the wooden deck. Small goosebumps appear on Jamie's arms but he pays no attention. Certain that his sounds are entirely out of reach from his parent's sleeping ears, Jamie runs across the deck and over the grass where Cecelia is lying on her side. He stops for a moment at her feet. She has not stirred once, though Jamie can see her eyes are open and staring blankly ahead of her. Jamie tilts his head curiously at her before lying on his side next to her. He lets his eyes link with hers.

"Hey Cee," he says. "What are you doing?"

Though Cecelia's eyes are looking directly into Jamie's they do not seem to be seeing anything. Her normally vibrant blue eyes, much like Jamie's, look pale and vacant. One hand cups her face while the other hangs limply across her body. Nothing is reflected in those eyes. The slight rise and fall of her chest is the only indication of life. Jamie begins to think that she looks more like a corpse, or even one of the ghosts.

"Cece?" Jamie poses quietly. He reaches his small soft hand up towards Cecelia's face grazing her on the edge of her nose. "Ceeceeee," he draws out the name while taking his pointer finger and pressing gently on the tip of her nose.

Cecelia blinks rapidly, struggling to refocus. Her gaze darts from the ground to the sky and finally land on her baby brother. She smiles weakly. "Hey, Jamie baby," she says, her voice is as weak as her smile: tired and forced. With a deep sigh she regains some of her normal charming behavior. "It is waaaay past your bed time," she says, her voice only barely above a whisper. Jamie watches her nose curl up in a snuffle.

"I had to pee," he says.

"Excuses, excuses little Jimbo," Cecelia says. "You should not have come down here."

"You said we both go together if one falls down," he replies.

Cecelia seems struck by these words. Jamie can see it in the lines of her face. He wonders why she looks so sad and tired. He came down to help not to hurt. He finds that one tear slips from her blue eye and lands on the grass. "I didn't think you would remember something like that," she says.

"I never forget what you tell me Cee," he says. Jamie closes his eyes feeling the tired weight of his youth spread throughout his body. A small smile remains on his lips, satisfied with the little escapade he has found himself in with Cecelia. "Are we going to get to sleep out here for the rest of the night?"

"I don't know, Jamie," she says. "I should probably take you back to bed but I—" Jamie hears her sigh deeply. He opens his eyes to find that Cecelia is looking down at her bare stomach all the way to her toes. There is deep bruising on her stomach that stands out on her pale skin, even in the dim light. He follows her gaze down to her ankles and sees the fresh blood spotting her feet. He tilts his head back up to Cecelia's face hoping to understand but even there he finds another patch of raw skin on the side of her neck,



previously hidden from her hair. She seems to be decomposing. It may not be flowing but it is everywhere, Jamie's attention was not focused on it until now.

Blood.

"I don't think I can," Cecelia whispers, finishing a thought that has already been lost to Jamie. He begins to feel something new stirring inside him that he had never faced before in his seven years of life. He could not put a name to it. He could not articulate it. It was like watching death manifest before his eyes but through disintegrating beauty. He thought he should cry but knows that it is not a genuine impulse. Sadness and love mixed themselves into one, weaving in and out of the Jamie's feelings. Neither one trumping the other. Is this what blood does? Question emotion? Existence?

They continue to lay on the smooth wet grass in silence. Jamie attempts to keep his eyes on Cecelia for fear she might slowly fade. Into the earth or away in the wind with the ghosts, leaving nothing left behind. Not even blood. He watches carefully for the subtle blinking of her eyes, the rise and fall of her full lashes. Cecelia's eyes begin to shut for longer periods of time, the blinking becoming closing. And though Jamie still cannot define the uneasy stirring in his stomach, he knows he is afraid.

"Cee, don't leave me," he says.

Cecelia's eyes open immediately and look directly at Jamie's. He watches as her breathing becomes more defined. Her mouth opens to speak but nothing comes out. Jamie reaches over and touches the blood on her neck with his small palm. Cecelia face cringes at the encounter but Jamie does not remove his hand. Blood begins to gather on his fingers but he does not care. Cecelia moves her hand to cup his. It is cold. Still, the stirring in

Jamie's stomach begins to settle at the touch. He sighs easier and, as far as he can tell, so does Cecelia. "Cee," he begins to say.

"It is not for you to worry about, James," she says weakly.

Normally, this would not be enough to subdue Jamie's curiosity, but due to the uniqueness and utter confusion of the moment, Jamie decides to save his questions for another time. Part of him is afraid if she speaks much more she will lose her breathe, lose herself completely. He keeps his hand gently upon her neck, hoping that it is a means of holding her together. He is helping keep Cecelia in place. As long as he holds her she will not be able to fade, to leave, to disappear. He can feel the blood between his fingers and is comforted. It is her life he holds in place, in union with his own small existence.

Among the chirping crickets and light gusts of wind, the distant sliding of the back door and rushed footsteps are heard. A voice calls out to Cecelia and then to him. The outside voice reminds Jamie of the open wounds that paint Cecelia and is abruptly shifted back to the reality outside of them. He meets her eyes for a final time. A large hand pulls at his arm while another shifts Cecelia on her back. Their connection broken. Jamie feels himself being lifted by these strong arms back towards the house. The porch lights begin to blot his sight. He attempts to crane his head back at the yard for a glimpse at Cecelia. Moments later, Jamie feels a distinct change in the air as it shifts from cool to warm and he knows he is back inside the house. His is set upon the solid counter and find himself face to face with Charlie. His hair is messy from sleep but his eyes are wide and alert. "Jamie, what were you doing out there?" he asks.

Jamie brings his thumb to his mouth. He feels as though he has committed some sort of wrong. He looks down from Charlie and mumbles, "I wanted to see what Cece was doing outside."

Charlie turns his head away from Jamie and out the window, concern is evident on the hard lines of his jaw and Jamie is reminded of Charlie having to be a grown-up sometimes. Charlie's eyes are still fixed upon the spot where Jamie was only moments earlier, "I think," he says and then slowly turns back to Jamie. "I think it's time you went back to bed, Jamie."

But Jamie does not think it is time to go to bed. How could it be time for bed? He feels very much a part of what is happening with Cecelia. Charlie would not understand. His parents would not understand. Jamie jumps off the counter and begins to head towards the door. Before he can make it very far, Charlie grabs his thin upper arm quickly and holds him back. Jamie struggles and begins to cry out. The unfairness of his youth sinks down into his bones.

"Jamie, what happened to your hand?" Charlie says seeming quite horrified. He takes his brother's wrist and examines the blood on his palm.

"Blood," Jamie says. "Cece's." But that answer did not feel right to Jamie. The blood is not just hers but theirs. Do they not share it?

Charlie does not seem prepared to respond to this, exhales, and then swears quietly. Jamie watches as he looks behind him. He follows his brother's eyes and sees his mother has entered the kitchen. Her eyes are slightly red from sleep and worry. Her hair is disheveled and her clothes hang loose. She looks at her sons, registers their presence in the

kitchen, and moves to action. Jamie's head cranes as Charlie stands up as his mother comes over to them.

"Charlie, it's worse. I don't—I don't know why she didn't say anything at dinner. I'm sure her count is too low. I know she doesn't like to get treatment, but I—I just—," she puts her hand to her forehead and exhales. "I need you to go help your father. We're going to the hospital." She turns to the little boy. "Jamie, sweetie. You're all dirty. You should not be up like this. And—did you hurt your hand?" Jamie moves his hand away when he sees her focus shift to the blood on his palm.

"It's not his. It's Cecelia's," Charlie interjects. Jamie's mouth remains shut, unable to speak.

Jamie has never seen his mother look so utterly terrified. He thinks that the look on her face is how someone would look if they had just seen a ghost. Not like his ghosts, but the ones they put in scary movies. But even then, some people might be afraid of his ghosts too. He wonders if his face looks like that too because he starts to think that the girl he saw in the yard may have become a ghost.

Charlie pats his mother's shoulder gently and swiftly departs for the backyard. Jamie is left alone with this ghost-afflicted mother. He hopes that her vacant eyes remain blind as he tries to slowly sneak toward the screen door. It is to no avail. She gently brings her son to the kitchen sink. She places him next to it and turns on the faucet. His head is turned out the window, attempting to make sense of the darkness. He wonders if they will be able to hold Cecelia together like he did. He feels his mother take his bloodstained hand and a fearful violence rises within him. He jerks back when he realizes she is going to run his

hand under the water, washing it completely clean of blood. A loud no follows. The negation hits his mother in the face.

“Jamie!” she says. “Jamie, it’s okay. I am only cleaning you up.”

The boy holds his hand close to his chest. “No.”

She exhales briefly. “Jamie, why? You can’t have blood on you.”

“But—but,” he mumbles and looks down at his hand. “What if it’s all that’s left?” He says this in the most defiant way a young boy can. His blue eyes pointedly fixed upon the blood on his palm. He does not know where the words came from or how they formed but he does not regret them. He feels as though they are the only words, the only feelings that have made any sense to him all night.

His mother looks at him blankly not capable of a reaction. Her brow furrows and her tired eyes blink slowly. Jamie continues to look at her and she at him. The only sound in the kitchen is the steady rushing of water. The boy does not like the glassy stare in his mother’s eyes. He looks down and can see how tightly she clutches the dishtowel. The purple color of her veins in her wrist pulsate and stand out against the paleness of her skin. Jamie begins to think about how differently someone can see blood, inside and outside of the body. Is it really that necessary? Jamie begins to feel sick at the thought of blood. He looks down at the dry red stain on the palm of his hand.

For what seems to be like the hundredth time in much too short an amount of time, the screen door opens and closes. His father, brother, and sister have entered the kitchen. Charlie is carrying Cecelia as she leans against him. Jamie’s mother snaps out of her trance and directs her attention towards them. Jamie sees that her face has yet to change from its

previous expression. He's starting to wonder whether she thinks that every person she sees is a ghost. She releases the dishtowel and turns off the sink.

"I've called ahead and they know we're coming. Dr. Collan says to get her there as quickly as possible," says Jamie's father. He looks at the weak figure in his son's arms. And then over to Jamie. "What's going on?"

"I do not know," the mother says slowly. Jamie notices that his father's expression towards him is beginning to match his mother's. He feels as though he is not a part of their plan. Panic begins to slowly stir within him. Why is it that young boys are always left out? Not tonight.

"I'm coming," says Jamie in a small voice.

His father exhales and looks to his older son, to his wife, and then to Jamie. "Okay, everyone let's go. Sue and Charlie, take everyone to the car and get Cecelia and Jamie a blanket or something. We are out of here in two minutes."

Jamie embraces the firm grip of his mother's hands and is whisked out of the kitchen into the garage. No coat? It was not often that his mother let him leave the house this late without a coat, even in the summer. She buckles him in the back as Charlie hops in beside him, Cecelia still cradled in his arms. Jamie looks over and reaches out. Charlie smiles weakly and abruptly turns his head toward the front of the car. Jamie's eyes follow. The car door slams and the father reeves the engine, shooting them into motion. Jamie's hands grab the sides of his car seat. He is not used to such violent acceleration. He looks out the window, amazed at how fast the trees fly by, like the outside world is smeared paint. Jamie likes the way it looks, it feels. He is tired but there is a sort of excitement for a young boy up

much past his bedtime. Yet not too much because his head turns the other way and he remembers.

Cecelia and Charlie. They are so much bigger than him, but they seem so small curled up on right seat of the car. Cecelia's eyes are closed, she must be tired too. Charlie looks ahead through the windshield. It is a firm and direct look, an impatience that will not cease. Jamie begins to reach out with his right hand and lands it upon Charlie's, which is placed firmly atop Cecelia's knobby knees. Charlie's fixed gaze is breached at the touch. He looks over to Jamie briefly, attempts a smile, and turns back. Jamie wishes someone would look at him longer than a few seconds. Cecelia would if she could.

Jamie looks back out the window. Soon the moving images of trees and pavement transform in front of him. The ghosts have returned. They float by fast and slow, illuminated against the dark landscape. Jamie can always see them better at night, their bright wispy frames are suited better to the darkness. He looks back to the twins. Cecelia is beginning to glow and Jamie feels the same fear he felt in the grass of their backyard. He sees the ghosts and watches as some of their figure falls away from them. Their misty fibers spread throughout the air. Jamie grabs at them but they elude his small hands and find their way to Cecelia. The glow around her body grows stronger and Jamie understands. He looks down at the dry blood on his hand and clenches his fist.

*Goodbye.*

The ghosts dance around the car and follow it further into the night.

## **Part Two:**

### ***Let Me Back In***

In the haze of the morning sun, a teenage boy sleeps on the couch. He breathes steadily and softly but every so often he stirs slightly as if he has a chronic itch that will not subside. He stirs slightly enough, that if someone were watching they might be concerned he was having a bad dream. Though the being watches him is not entirely tangible. A transparent figure floats above the boy, her cloudy frame rippling in the soft light. The sun that pierces through the blinds diminishes her glow and distorts her image. She watches the sleeping boy as his left arm dangles over his eyes and the right one rests on his stomach. Beneath it, he holds a thin sheet of paper.

*Wake up! Wake up!*

The boy moves and stretches. The transparent figure lowers herself to the foot of the couch and waits for him. His eyelids flutter and he moans softly. He rubs his eyes and lifts both his arms above his head. When he moves them back down, his hand touches the paper. He raises his eyebrows and rubs his eyes again before picking it up and gazing at it. Within its cracked and deteriorating frame, the paper displays a crayon drawing of three stick figures: two boys, one small, one big, and a girl that floats above them, like a fairy. There is an array of colors and rough lines throughout the drawing. They are all smiling in a grassy and sunny landscape. The boy's eyes return to the right corner of the paper where the faintest spot of red remains that is not crayon but something more substantial, something that was once very real. Something that once held life. He rubs his finger along its outline, careful not to touch it.



“Cecelia,” he says and sighs.

The figure at the end of the couch smiles at the sound of her name. She wonders if the boy can see her now, though the sunlight tends to render her invisible. She reaches her thin transparent fingers towards him.

“Oh Jamie!” a voice calls from the kitchen. Cecelia retracts her fingers and moves away from Jamie, further into the light and invisibility. “You’re awake! What are you doing down here this early?” When Jamie recognizes the voice as his mother, Cecelia watches him as he immediately places the paper under the couch. He runs a hand through his hair and turns to his mother. “I must’ve fallen asleep down here,” he says.

“May I ask why?” she says. “Out late?” She raises her eyebrows.

“No Mom,” Jamie says, hiding his face in the side of the couch. “OK, well, yes but it’s not what you think. I didn’t intend to sleep here.”

“You know James, I know it’s the end of summer and you want—“

“Mom, I wasn’t doing anything bad. I was just biking,” he says lifting his face from the cushions. “I needed some air.”

“So you’re sure you’re not hung over or something?”

A loud moan ensues. “No, Mother. Please.”

“Well, alright. You know I wouldn’t be that mad anyways if you were...as long as you got home safe and weren’t driving.”

“Can we please drop this now?” Jamie pleads.

“Yes, yes, alright. Would you like some breakfast?” she says as she moves around the kitchen. Jamie nods and makes his way over to the kitchen table. Cecelia follows behind him. A playful smile resting on her blue lips.

For the rest of the morning, Cecelia watches and waits in the kitchen for Jamie and his mother to finish their breakfast. Their conversation has become more relaxed though Jamie's mother continues to eye him curiously. Jamie taps his fingers on the wood and bounces his right knee. His eyes suddenly dart to the couch where the drawing rests. She wonders why he is always so keen to shield it from everyone else. As if its existence would expose all of his secrets.

Growing impatient, Cecelia begins to make her presence more known, standing in the small shadows of the kitchen in front of Jamie. She watches as his eyes land on the place where she stands but quickly dart away and back to the kitchen table. Suddenly, he stands up, "I'm going to head out. Thanks for breakfast." He puts his plate away and swiftly kisses his mother on the forehead. She calls out to him about safety and he waves to her in response. He continues to exit through the kitchen, down the hallway, and into the garage. Cecelia looms behind him, swaying back and forth, hoping to grab his attention. She watches from the garage door as he grabs his bike from the floor and begins to mount it. She crosses her arms and pouts.

*Jamie.*

His back is to her and she is afraid he can no longer hear her. He stands tall and still, looking out on the morning sun that reflects off of the puddles in the driveway. She brings her hands to her chest in a sort of prayer position, holding them tightly together as her panic escalates.

*Jamie.*

"Not now," he says, turning his head so she can only see his profile. The lines of his face are hidden in the shadows of the garage. Cecelia begins to reach out to him with her

hand as Jamie throws his leg over the side of his bike. He pushes the pedals down hard and is gone within seconds. Cecelia finds herself at the edge of the garage watching him fly down the street. She wants to follow but looking up at the sun, leans against the frame and sighs in the shadows.

\* \* \*

As the night world pervades, it is not the darkness that is known to those who can see the other side but light. Light from the ghosts who have been welcomed by the night. Their wispy white frames are ignited in the darkness.

Without having to follow or ask, Cecelia knows Jamie will come up the dirt path that runs throughout the town. The trail. In life, she did not frequent it often. She blamed her bad blood for not being strong enough for long walks, runs, or bike rides. In death though, it is her place and sanctuary. It keeps her hidden in the shadows and its tunnel-like structure comforts her. And for Jamie. It is a tunnel between her world and his, a tunnel that they can both be a part of, together. A tunnel to welcome ghosts. She floats back and forth along the trail, her feet grazing the pebbles but not feeling them.

Gliding in the darkness, she grows restless. She looks behind her and before her. Nothing but black each way. She looks up to the sky. The moon is nearly full, blotting out many of the stars and illuminating the night. And then, she sees them: more wispy glowing forms, floating in the night, swirling with the wind. Ghosts. Spirits. The dead that traverse the earth. She turns her head away not wanting to think about the others and her connection to them. Though she may wish nothing more than to be separate from other the ghosts, to be dead is not to be alone. To be dead is not to be detached from eternity. There are so many of them, ghosts like her, yet none of them are as familiar as what she knew in

life. She looks down at her transparent fingers and wishes she could see the color red running through them.

The sound of tires crunching into the dirt and the rhythmic beat of the rotating chain reverberates behind her. She figures the sound would give her chills if she could still get them. She turns swiftly and awaits the image of a boy on a bike. In the spaces where the trees open up and let in the moonlight, Cecelia can see Jamie fading in and out of the light, riding towards her. His dark hair flies with the wind and his pale skin ignites with the moon. Once he gets close enough, he stops in front of her. She can see how his chest moves up and down rapidly.

“Hey Cee,” he says in between breaths.

*Hey kid.*

Silence ensues. Cecelia smiles at Jamie and he smiles back but averts her gaze. He looks above and behind him as she did earlier. “There are so many of you tonight,” he says. “It makes everything seem so bright.” He shuts his eyes tight. The horn of a train resounds in the distance like an impending storm.

*I know. I can feel something stirring.*

They both look above them. The ghosts float and dart in all directions. They are illuminated in the gloom of the night. It is in the dark that their forms can be seen completely, like clouds that spot the sky on a sunny day. Cecelia looks over to Jamie as he watches them. She wonders what he really thinks of them, of her. His eyes are wide, reflecting the images of the ghosts that loom above them. She feels her fist curl tightly.

*Jamie.*

He breaks his focus on looks at her. “Where are they going?”

*Should we find out?*

Jamie nods his head and mounts his bike again. He looks to Cecelia. She turns her back to him and sets forth, leading him further into the unknown. She knows how it excites him to be around all of this light and cloud, exploring the mysteries of the dead. Yet in the end it is not all what it seems. Though they give light, they still cannot give life. Cecelia shakes the thought and turns her head around to look at him. Her sisterly concern has not left her in death. Her brow furrows in anticipation. Through the tunnel of trees, Cecelia stops abruptly and turns up a more beaten side trail. Jamie gets off his bike and begins to walk behind her. After a brief but steep uphill, they find themselves in an open field. Cecelia looks at Jamie and marvels at his face in the moonlight. The light makes his skin look so pale as if he is one of them. Almost. She looks away, ashamed at the thought.

“Look, over there,” says Jamie. He points to the edge of the field where the train tracks lie. She sees it too: a sort of dull light. But she did not need to see it to know it would be there, waiting for them. From the light, it appears to be pulsating with life only they know the difference between what is truly alive and what is only hoping to be.

*Shall we?*

Jamie looks at her and nods. He places his bike on the ground and together they set off. Only the sound of Jamie’s footsteps upon the dirt and the grass shaking in the breeze can be heard. Cecelia’s ghostly feet slide through each blade. A contented smile remains on her lips, fully embracing the company of her brother.

“It’s been almost ten years now, Cee,” he says suddenly. Her smile fades at the reminder. She says nothing for a while and ignores his anticipating look. She stares straight ahead at the light.

*Do you trust me Jamie?*

He continues to look at her for a moment until turning his head forward. She knows he cannot read her the way he could when he was a child and she was alive. But their attachment to each other continues to evade death. "Of course," he says, and cranes his head back to her. "Is something bothering you?"

She shakes her head and pushes her hair behind her ear. The vibrant light begins to grow brighter and closer. "There must be a lot of you here tonight," Jamie says. His voice wavers slightly and she can feel the fear and excitement in it. Almost there, the glowing light begins to disperse and scatter, revealing the separate pieces, separate ghosts that form it. Cecelia watches as the other ghosts swirl around the area. She smiles. She knows how Jamie welcomes the sight of such transcendent light. He walks a few steps ahead of her and the light begins to disperse, revealing a dark limp shape lying in the grass only twenty feet or so from the tracks. Before Jamie continues forward, he turns his head to look at Cecelia. His brow is furrowed with confusion and his mouth parts in dismay. She nods and gestures him to move forward. Cecelia lets Jamie walk closer until he is kneeling next to the shape. It is a young man. He lies on his side, his limbs pointed awkwardly in different directions. His is bleeding. But what is the most significant is how the blood coats his dark skin and clothes. It stands out against the darkness and is illuminated in the moonlight. Though it is dark, Cecelia does not need the light in order to see the blood that has been spilled and neither does Jamie. Nothing could be brighter to her hollow eyes. "Did he fall? Was he thrown from the train?"

*He is leaving Jamie.*

Jamie's head turns slowly back to Cecelia who is directly above him. His eyes are wide and expectant. Cecelia can hear all of the questions he wants to ask without hearing him speak. The words pour out of those blue eyes like the ghosts in the night. She nods to him and he sighs. He turns his back to her and looks down at the man. The man coughs a few times and reaches his hand towards Jamie.

*Take it.*

Jamie hesitates but submits to Cecelia's command, firmly grasping the dying man's hand. Cecelia comes closer. She looks at the blood that has gathered around the man. Blood. It is something that has always stood out brightly to her, like a constant reminder of what separates her from the world. A reminder of what took her from the world. The man's right eye is swollen and blood streams down from his left temple. One of his arms seems broken. Blood has also gathered on the front of his shirt as well as near a gash just above his left knee. She puts a light hand on Jamie's back though her eyes remain on the flowing red substance. He begins to breathe heavily but Jamie keeps his eyes focused on the man's. The man breathes suddenly and his eyes open slightly. He coughs and blood spurts out of his mouth. He tries to speak but falters. Cecelia watches as Jamie's eyes dart around him only to find more blood has seeped onto the dirt and grass. Jamie looks back to the linked hands. Blood has left its mark on Jamie's palm, leaking onto his fingers. Cecelia watches it sparkle with light. She begins to reach out to touch before remembering that she cannot.

The sudden stab of jealousy pierces Cecelia as she stares at the blood. She wishes she could take this blood and make it her own. She wishes she could welcome ghosts like Jamie. And like many of the other ghosts, she wishes she were alive with blood to call her own. Why did it hate her so?

The man on the ground breathes one final time and Jamie releases his hand. When the blood has finally left the body, all that once gave life has departed into the air and into another realm of being. The ghosts swirl above him and he is welcomed. Cecelia and Jamie watch the scene unfold. The glow of each ghost ignites the sky like fire, only Cecelia knows there is nothing warm about this light. The new ghost jumps from the ground and joins the rest, leaving Cecelia and Jamie alone with only a body and blood. Jamie stands up abruptly and walks away from Cecelia. She moves to follow him but stops when she sees his face: pale with black eyes filled with the visions that should not be seen by the living. For a second, she is afraid she is seeing a ghost before realizing it is only her reflection mirrored in the darkness of Jamie's eyes.

"Why did you bring me here?" he screams at her. "Why do you ask this of me?" She can see the anger pulsating through him and she falls back slightly, unable to respond. "I came out here to see you, to help you. It's been ten years Cece. Ten years! How long must this carry on?" With one final look of defiance, Jamie turns and begins to run back down the hill. She watches his retreating figure grab his bike and disappear into the trees. Cecelia wills herself to follow but finds herself paralyzed by his words. It is only when she turns back around and sees the dark pool of blood that her ghostly frame shoots off into the night in pursuit.

Being a ghost, it does not take long for her to travel anywhere. And being that part of Jamie's blood once ran through her veins, she can always find him. Above the canopy of trees that cover the trail, Cecelia lowers herself to the ground and listens. The crunching of dirt pebbles echoes through the branches and Cecelia awaits Jamie. She sees him barreling down the trail, his legs pumping at full speed as if his entire will is bent on it. She opens



her mouth to speak but Jamie rides through her. Her misty being dissipates into the air before slowly mending itself back together. She looks down the trail but can only hear the fading sound of crunching dirt. She does not hesitate this time. She matches his speed and continues her pursuit.

Only seconds later, Cecelia is above him. She watches as his legs continually pump the pedals. She does not think he will ever tire.

*Jamie.*

The steady hum of the rotating chain. The crunching of dirt.

*Jamie, please.*

As she follows him, she notices the appearance of more ghosts. They have surrounded them, also following Jamie in the dark tunnel. But it is not darkness to them. In the shelter of the night, nothing could be more illuminated. Cecelia knows that Jamie sees them too but his focus does not waver. She sways back and forth, attempting to push the other ghosts away. As they reach the end of the trail and the streetlights begin to brighten, the ghosts pull back. She understands the feeling: they are beings of the night, the natural world. They do not belong in the artificial light with the living. Yet, as Jamie's wheels hit pavement, she carries on. He is hers, he has her blood, and he is hers to follow.

It is not long before Jamie reaches the house. Upon entering the garage, he throws his bike aside and enters. Cecelia is there, waiting for him in the kitchen. When he sees her he stops. His chest continues to heave up and down. She reaches a long arm out to him. Her clear white hand swaying in space. At first, he simply stares at her in silence, his chest moving up and down rapidly. Then, Jamie takes a few steps forward and points at her.

“That—that—was *not* OK, Cecelia.”

She lowers her hand and her face falls. She bows her head.

“I am still alive, Cee. I am still here. I’m not a ghost.” He runs a hand through his hair and begins to pace back in forth in the dull light. “Look at this! Do you see this?” he says, waving his bloodied palm to her.

*Blood.*

“Is that all that matters to you? Blood?” He walks over to the sink and turns the water. She begins to move toward him until he looks at her with an unchallengeable glare. Direct, dark, and mean. “It’s not yours Cee and it’s not mine either. It’s not going to change anything. It’s never going to.” He moves his hand under the sink and washes it of all traces of blood. Cecelia looks away from him and bows her head.

She hears his footsteps move past her. She looks up and finds him in the living room. Sitting on the couch, Jamie holds his head in his hands and slows his breath. Cecelia watches him motionlessly for a moment before approaching him. When she reaches him she notices that he is holding a sheet of paper in his hand. It is crumpled and thin. The white has faded and so have the colors of the crayons that created the image. It is the portrait of the three of them that Jamie drew. Ten years before.

“I wanted to show this to you tonight. I brought it out just for you. You loved this didn’t you?”

Though she cannot see his face, she is afraid tears are building in his eyes. Yet she is more afraid of the anger and frustration she hears in his voice, as if he may break and destroy the fragile portrait in his hands. He runs a hand over it, lingering on the side where the faintest trace of Cecelia’s blood remains.

“It’s all that’s left of you Cee. If I washed it away,” his finger brushes past the blood, “would you be gone?”

*Is that what you want James?*

He snuffles. Jamie leans back on the couch and lies down. He holds the sheet of paper above him and continues to stare at it. “No,” he whispers.

Jamie places the paper on his stomach and closes his eyes. Cecelia looms above him with her head tilted to the side. Her fingers brush the thin cut on Jamie’s cheek that he must have got when descending woods in the trail. Looking at his dried blood, she wonders if it is only her connection to Jamie’s blood that makes her real. But in the end, it is also the blood that separates them. She holds her fingers along where he bled. All at once, she wishes to both hold it and banish it forever.

*Goodnight kid.*

Cecelia passes through the roof and away into the night. Not to be seen by any other than those like her.

\* \* \*

The sun shines brightly and blue sky stretches from all corners of the world, dotted by a few puffy clouds. The breeze is steady when Cecelia approaches the opening of the field. The wind is something that has always felt odd to her, like it is the only thing that she can truly feel and makes her a part of this world yet an element that she has no control over. Almost how she felt about her blood when she was alive. The wind pushes through the center of her and she stands firm as to not be carried away with it. Looking up, Cecelia finds Jamie at the top of the hill near the tracks. She knew he would be here but wonders why he would return to the place so near the welcoming. He sits with his knees up and his

arms around them. He cannot see her from this distance in this light. She hesitates and looks down at her hands. She cannot even see them, only the grass below her. Cecelia thinks she would cry if she could but that is something reserved for the living. She looks up and moves towards her brother. She moves slowly, afraid of what he may say to her. Cecelia stops a few feet before him.

*What are you doing kid?*

He says nothing and keeps his eyes towards the tracks. She is afraid he cannot see her, cannot hear her. Has their connection been broken? And even though she knows she should not say it, she says it anyways.

*Let me back in Jamie.*

Jamie looks up at her. She is afraid he cannot see the sadness and apology in her eyes because of the sunlight that distorts her. And even as the breeze blows gently, she fears she may be whisked away into even more of the nothing that she already is. Jamie's hair blows in the wind and he breathes in. He looks away from her.

"I don't want this anymore. I don't," he says. At the sound of those words, she begins to think that she has never felt emptier or more transparent. Perhaps she felt that way when she was dying. When her bad blood slowly left her body and gave into the spirit world. But she can hardly remember life anymore. It is only through Jamie that she can understand these things. It is through Jamie that she can feel any memory at all.

*You don't want to see me anymore.*

Jamie keeps his head down towards the grass, plucking at some blades. "It's not like that Cee," he says. The echoing sound of the train is heard in the distance and Jamie turns

his head toward the tracks. "It's just hard sometimes, you know? I mean—" he sighs and pauses. "I'm sorry. Never mind."

Cecelia wishes he would look back to her but knows he will not. She floats closer to him and places her fragile hand on his shoulder. The train can be seen moving quickly towards them. Within seconds, its massive dark shape powers by them, creating a strong wind that shakes Jamie's hair and clothes. Cecelia holds on only a moment longer.

*Is it only the absence of blood that divides us James? Must we let it?*

Cecelia moves from Jamie and flies directly into the train, letting its force wash over her. After piecing herself back together, she stands on the opposite side of the train tracks. In the space between the cars, Cecelia watches the image of Jamie flash before her. He stares at her blankly, his blue eyes like stagnant water. She is unable to find any trace of the normal sparks in those eyes. After one final look, Cecelia turns abruptly into the woods, leaving behind the boy still stuck between the two worlds.

## **Part Three:**

### ***The Haunting Memory***

“Boo!”

As I lean up against the wall of the airport’s baggage claim area, I look down to find a young girl staring up at me. There is a playful smile on her face with a grin that displays only one front tooth. Her vibrant blue eyes and short brown hair bring me back to another life that has long since passed. Another girl just like her. Before I can fully give into nostalgia, the girl chirps again, “Boo!”

I crouch down to her eye level, “Boo!” I say. She yelps in delight before promptly running back to her family. I take a deep breath in and stand up. Leaning back against the wall, I continue to watch the people passing by. I exhale.

“Airports,” I whisper to myself.

There is something about them that causes the mind to shift through different spaces. It is like there is a distinct hum that moves through us as we move through the airport. A hum or vibration that heightens our senses and challenges our feelings. Excitement and nerves that teeter on the ambiguous edge between contentment and foreboding. We are all becoming aware of something, regardless of being able to identify it. At least that is how it is for me. And though it is a strange feeling, I enjoy my time in airports. There is so much emotion packed into one confined space and no one knows exactly how to process it all or where to place it. Love, loss, longing. People moving slowly, people in a hurry. I can see the hum move through each of them. I do not think there is something so complex as the emotion or the life found in an airport.

Slowly I feel a cool draft pass through from an open door. It is not the airport hum, but something that is a part of that hum. I close my eyes and allow chills to run through my arms. The draft continues to pass by and I feel something more than the breeze and the hum.

Ghosts.

Yes, ghosts. I have seen ghosts all of my life. In a way, I am a man haunted by memory. The memory of past lives that cannot seem to leave this world. I am their bridge between this one and whatever is next, something for them to hold on to. I open my eyes and know I am not mistaken as I watch the subtle light of a misty figure move further away from me. He looks at the white numbers of each carousel and lingers near the people waiting for their luggage. Airports are no strangers to ghosts. I have seen them here too; some ghosts are attracted to emotion and life as opposed to death and decay. Yet they are just as unsure about everything as the living when it comes places like this. In airports, they are keen and observant too. Maybe it is because they can feel the heightened emotion like I do, making it is easier to tap into and absorb. If there is anything that a ghost desires, it is raw emotion. Real, alive, human emotion. Unless, of course, you are my sister, Cecelia. Then all you really want to see and feel is blood: her means of experiencing the raw emotion of the living.

I shake my head and rub a hand over my face. I do not want to think about ghosts or blood or Cecelia now. I hate it when I let my mind wander back to things that are no longer real. But when the images of ghosts are all around, it can be difficult to ignore. Even though the daylight blots out their figures, I can still feel their looming presence. I look at down the

baggage carousels. At any moment, they will be here and I will not have to worry about the ghosts. They will leave me alone. It is only her that I have to worry about.

As I stretch my arms, I feel a small figure run into my legs and wrap its arms around them. No, this one isn't a ghost. I turn around to find my six-year-old niece, Emily, smiling up at me and giggling. "Hey, Uncle Jamie!"

"There she is!" I say and turn around to lift her into my arms. I look past her and see my brother Charlie walking towards us from the main terminal with his wife Amy and two older children, Anna and Ryan. Though he is ten years older than me, his bright blue eyes and dark brown hair do not seem to have been affected by age. I feel like I am still looking at that seventeen-year kid: strong and protective. He looks the same as he always has; he looks exactly like Cecelia.

"Look who I found, Daddy!" says Emily to her father.

Charlie smiles. "How's it going kid?" he says and shakes my hand. I put Emily down and hug him. "I'm good," I say, returning the smile. "It's really great to see you guys." This is the emotion in airports I like the most: the bliss of reunion, of homecoming. As I look at the familiar faces around me, I let it sink in. We head over to their baggage carousel and wait for the luggage. I ease into conversation with my brother, like we have never been apart.

"So you still biking the way you used to? Mom said you sprained a leg muscle," Charlie asks me.

As I am about to answer, I look across from the baggage carousel. A familiar draft whistles pass my ear. People walk past and take bags off of the carousel and through the spaces between I see her. Cecelia. Her white misty figure is dulled in the sunlight, but I can see it rippling where the small shadows fall upon her. We lock eyes. The corners of her



mouth begin to curve slightly and her hand moves up. She waves at us. A chill slowly creeps up my spine and the hair on my arms jumps up. I begin to rub them.

“Jamie?” I feel Charlie’s elbow in my side.

“Oh—yeah, what...Right yeah, I think I may have pulled a muscle.” I pull my eyes from the spot and reach down to my calf. “But, I think it’s fine now. I’ve been taking it easy.” I shrug and do not meet his eyes. I can feel Charlie looking at me skeptically but he understands my strange tendencies, my “sudden daydreams” he used to call them when I was a kid. It was always the moments when I would stare off into space unable to hear or see anything but them. If only he knew it was because of the ghosts. Because of Cecelia. I look back to where she stood only to find that she is gone.

“There it is,” Charlie says, grabbing the last piece of luggage. “All right Jamie, we’re good to go.”

I lead Charlie and the rest of his family to my car in the parking structure. We pile in and cruise onto the highway. While Charlie moved away from our hometown, I remained. I let college be my excuse to leave but I could not help but find myself settling back down here. Leaving this place completely would mean leaving behind too many memories that would not let me part from them. But Charlie needed out. After Cecelia, he needed to be away from it all, away from the memory of her. I guess grief works itself out in different ways for everyone. Some let go, while others hold on. Desperately.

Still, as we get closer to home, I can see the contented smile resting on Charlie’s lips. No matter what memories it brings him, he is able to find some happiness within the place he used to call home.

“Does that old train still run through here?” he asks. “You know, the one behind the trail?”

I pause for a moment. “Yeah, it does. I haven’t been back up there in a while. At least not in the same way I hung out there as a kid. You can still hear it from my backyard though.”

Charlie smiles and rests his head on the back of his chair. “Mom was always talking about you being up there all the time. She thought you were just gonna hop on that train one day and never come back.” He chuckles.

I shake my head slightly and think of the train. “Can’t say I never thought about it.” I smile and laugh lightly.

Charlie looks over to me curiously as if he is unsure whether or not I was serious. Still, I see him smile at me. “You look good kid,” he says. He puts a hand on my shoulder for a moment. I nod and drive on. In only a few more minutes, we arrive at my house. It is my first home. I have only lived here a few months with my fiancé, Layla, and for now, this is where we plan to make a life together. Charlie and his family have yet to see it. The excitement builds as we turn into my driveway.

“Looks a lot like where the old house used to be,” Charlie says.

“It’s close,” I reply. “We still have trail access.”

He smiles again. “Of course.”

Layla opens the front door as we exit the car. I linger in the driveway to watch everyone walk into the house. The kids run into the kitchen for food and I help get Charlie and Amy settled. The edge that I felt at the airport has faded. I walk into the kitchen to help

prepare dinner. Layla smiles at me and passes me a bowl. Watching her move easily through our kitchen eases my mind and I forget about ghosts for a while.

In this midsummer night, the light fades slowly. After dinner, we all move to the backyard to bask in the cool dwindling light. Charlie and his son Ryan run around the yard, while Emily and Anna do cartwheels in the taller grass. They move over to the wooden swing that hangs from the tree at the edge of the yard. I watch from the porch. Layla comes up from behind me with a glass of wine and places a hand on my shoulder before taking a seat next to Amy. I stretch my arms above my head and exhale. The soft breeze brushes over my fingertips tenderly.

“Hey Jamie,” Charlie calls to me. “Do you have a football or something we could toss around?”

“Yeah, we should,” I say scratching my head. “Check in the shed over there.”

Charlie disappears for a moment into the shed at the other side of the yard. I put down my glass and begin to walk down the steps of the porch. I feel another but distinct breeze move through me that is not so tender. It sends chills through my body. Ghostly chills.

I do not even have to look up to know that she is here. I close my eyes and take a breath. When I open them, I am met with the eyes of a teenage girl floating at the edge of the yard, where grass meets tree and bush. Cecelia. Her presence makes me want to scream. I want her to leave us. Why does she do this to me? Why now? I look at her with venom in my eyes. Her face remains calm and she nods her head in the direction of the shed. I follow her gaze and see Charlie, holding his hand close to his chest. Red streams

down in thin lines from his palm to his elbow. Emily and Anna scream. I look back over to Cecelia.

*Blood.*

I rush over to him in a panic. He cannot seem to be able to take his eyes off of his bloodied palm. “What—what happened?” I say, nearly breathless.

Charlie winces. “I sliced it. I sliced it on something sharp in your shed. I—I didn’t see it.”

The blood pours heavily and Charlie’s hand is completely painted in red. “I—I think you need stitches,” I whisper. I will myself to move but all my body seems to do is stare. I stare at the blood: the way it pours and flows from Charlie’s palm. Like it wants to be seen as it runs out of his body. The red stands out against his pale skin until it streams over it completely, demonstrating its uncontrollable nature. It renders us so helpless. I blink and the blood takes me back twenty years to Cecelia. The blood flowed from her just like this, but with her, it never wanted to stop. And now looking at Charlie’s blood, her twin, I feel as though I can see her in the reflection: alive. I reach down to touch it. I am overwhelmed with the need to touch it, to taste it.

“James!” Charlie says. He looks at me with his brow furrowed and his eyes wide. The fear and confusion in his eyes brings me out of my trance.

“Let’s get you to the emergency room,” I say, almost breathless. In the moments of my paralysis, Amy has come to our aid with a kitchen towel. Swiftly, we make her way across the grass and into the house. Charlie and Amy immediately walk to the garage and get in the car. I scramble to find my keys. I start to tear apart the kitchen looking for them until I feel a firm hand on my arm.

“Are you OK?”

Layla. She holds the keys in one hand and my stability in another. She looks at me with a piercing glare and I feel as though I am being x-rayed. Layla knows me too well, and though she does not know about the ghosts, she is not ignorant to my “sudden daydreams” either.

I take the keys from her. “Yeah, I’m fine.” I do not meet her eyes. Her hand remains on my arm.

“I know how you get around blood,” she says. Her stare feels intrusive like she is ready to dive into my being and exploit my weakness, my secret.

“I’m fine,” I say again.

She gives me one final look, her eyes fixed and determined, and lets go of my arm. “Tell Amy I’ll take care of the kids. I’ll be here if you need anything.”

I nod. With a few long strides to the garage, I am in the car in seconds. Charlie and Amy are in the back seat. He does not groan in pain but I can see the quiver in his eyes through the rear view mirror. He continues to hold his hand close to him as if any space between would cause him to lose it all together. I put the car in reverse and we drive fast down the street. Looking in the back seat, Amy sits next to her husband trying to cradle him and I am reminded again of my childhood. The image is like a replica of the past and I begin to see Cecelia. I begin see us twenty years ago. All three of us, driving to the hospital. Cecelia in Charlie’s arms: bleeding, dying. Me next to them. And the ghosts surrounding us. It is no surprise then, when I look back in front of me that Cecelia the ghost is in the passenger seat of the car.

*Charlie will be fine kid.*

“I know,” I say. Charlie and Amy are too concerned with each other to hear me. The hospital is not far now but I feel like I am running out of time. I am sinking further into twenty years ago when time did run out. Cecelia’s presence is trapping time in this car and it feels like her final moments of life are still hanging in limbo. Perhaps they always have been. The pieces of her existence still floating in the air and I am the only one who makes them real. I can feel her looking at me but I keep my eyes towards the road. I see her blink and slide to the back seat, hovering next to Charlie.

Dusk has settled. In the distance, the bright lights of the hospital come into view. I curl my fist tightly around the steering wheel. My foot pushes down firmly on the gas. Moments later, I pull up and Charlie and Amy jump out and I lose them in the glow of the hospital. I take a deep breath and close my eyes, hoping Cecelia has not lingered in the car. When I open them, she is gone. It makes sense. Hospitals have always been a place of hurt for her. Even in death, she would not want to venture within the white walls of sickness and injury that held her final moments of life. I switch gears and drive into the parking structure.

I hop out of my car and jog back to the emergency room. Within minutes, I am inside the foyer. I find Amy. She tells me that they have already taken Charlie in for stitches. We wait. Amy and I do not speak much. I can tell she is nervous but not too worried. I exhale and place my head in my hands. Cecelia is not here and I feel myself calming down. Still, hospitals are not my favorite places either. They are breeding grounds for ghosts. Some like to come here to welcome more ghosts. For these ghosts, being surrounded by those closer to death brings them closer to life. For me, it is always too near. So many people on the cusp of death and so many ghosts. The hospital begins to remind me of the airport. So much

emotion in one place: how does one begin to feel it all? Should we even try to feel it? Right now, I want to let it slip away.

Looking up, I begin to see more of them. Ghosts floating here and there. Like Cecelia, their misty figures are illuminated in the darkness but the glow of the fluorescent hospital lights has dulled their image. Still, I can see them. They move slowly with a hunger to find the people whose emotions are amplified or those who are closest to the end. It is strange to see the living and the dead together. It is like seeing one essence, one composition of being. We are all a part of the same stream though we cannot see it. But I can see it. I look at my hand and find Charlie's blood on it. The pervading substance. Perhaps this is how we see our interconnected being, through the blood we have and the blood we left behind. It is cohesion that we all strive for, both living and dead. And it is the blood that controls the cohesion and the connection between us. I curl my fist around the red.

Within another hour, Charlie comes through the sliding hospital doors. There is a bandage wrapped around his hand and a doctor behind him. Amy gets up immediately and goes to him. I lift my head up slowly and walk over.

"Seven stitches, can you believe it?" Charlie says. "Thought I sliced my hand off for a second there." He laughs lightly.

"I'm glad you're alright," I say. "I'm sorry about that. You must've cut it on the saw I was using the other day. I should've put it away." I look at the bandage. Some of the blood has seeped through. It stands out against the white.

"Hey, don't sweat it, kid," Charlie says. He pats me on the shoulder and I pull my eyes away from the blood.

They discharge Charlie and we head home. The stress of blood has passed and Charlie and Amy relax in the back seat. We do not speak much on the way drive back. I use the silence to calm my nerves. I do not want any more visions of the past or ghosts.

We make it back to my house. Upon entering, Layla gets up from her seat in the kitchen and comes to us. "How does it feel?" She turns to Amy. "I put the kids to bed about thirty minutes ago if you want to see them."

"Thanks, Layla," says Amy. "I'm going to go check on them." She ascends the steps and out of sight.

"Well," says Charlie. "I could use a beer before bed." I smile and nod in agreement.

Charlie walks past the kitchen and out onto the front porch. Layla grabs a few beers from the refrigerator and exits outside. Before following them, I reach into one the kitchen drawers and pull out a wrinkled and old piece of paper. I fold it up, put it in my pocket, and walk outside. Crickets chirp and there is a dull breeze to help quell the humidity. We take our seats outside where only hours before Charlie sliced his hand.

"What a night, huh?" he says.

I nod and drink. "Does it hurt much?"

"No, not too bad. I just hope it doesn't put a damper on the trip." He looks at me and smiles. "Now I can't put you in a head lock." We both laugh and sip our beers.

After about thirty minutes of conversation, Layla retreats back into the house. Charlie stretches in his chair and finishes the remainder of his beer. I remain sitting. There is one last thing I need to do before I sleep. Charlie stands up.

"OK kid, I think that's it for me." He says. He continues to cradle his injured hand close to his stomach.



“I’ll be out just a bit longer,” I say and sip. He moves to leave but just as I hear the screen door sliding open, his footsteps stop.

“Jamie,” he says and pauses. I turn to look at him. “Earlier today, when I hurt my hand...” He pauses again and I wait. “You gave me this look and I—and I can’t seem to get it out of my head.” He runs his uninjured hand through his hair. “What I’m saying is, what I mean is...” He looks directly at me. “Are you all right?”

I look at Charlie and say nothing for a moment. I feel as if I have been caught, my secret revealed. Though Charlie could never possibly know, for a moment he saw. Just like Layla, he saw my weakness. He saw that I too was seeing something else that was not there. Something that permeates and paralyzes all at once. It all comes out to me in the presence of blood.

“Yeah, yeah I’m fine,” I say avoiding his eye contact. I rub my finger over the rim of my bottle and attempt to smile. “I’m just not that good with blood. It always reminds me...of her...of Cee.”

Charlie sighs and I can feel the tension rise in him at the mention of her name. “I know what you mean...” He laughs darkly. “You know, even after all this time, I still feel her. It’s like sometimes I forget—I forget that she’s dead.” The words run through me like a train, hitting me in the chest and knocking the wind out of me. I keep my eyes on the rim of the bottle that my finger cannot seem to stop circling, like if I lift it up he will feel it all too. I hear Charlie exhale sharply. “Don’t listen to me kid. I don’t even know what I’m saying. Just take it easy. I’ll see you in the morning.” He walks inside and I hear the screen shut. I exhale regaining my ability to breathe. It is only a matter of time now.

I lean back and look up at the heavens. There is no moon out tonight but thousands of stars. Twinkling and sparkling, little white lights to decorate a black sky. The stars are like the ghosts of the sky. Though their bright sparks give off light, they are still too far from life to be considered apart of this world. It is as if they too understand what it means to shine for both the living and the dead. My head moves down towards the yard. Tonight, there is only one light that illuminates the darkness of my backyard. Once again, I meet the eyes of that slim figured girl. Eyes that were vibrant blue in life are only mere dark orbs now. They reflect nothing. She looms in the center of the yard with her hands at her side. I think she already knows what is to come.

“Cecelia,” I say.

*James.*

We let our selves take in each other’s presence as if we had not seen each other in a while. As if we will never have a moment like this again. I stand up and descend the few steps from the porch to the grass. It is wet and smooth on my bare feet. It feels like the last time. Again, I am taken back to twenty years ago, the real last time the two of us met in the backyard. Only twenty years ago Cecelia was alive, holding on to the final few hours of her life. Here we are again: brother and sister face to face in a grassy abyss, stuck between life and death.

I look at her and take a deep breath. She sees right through me even more than I can see through her. I move to speak.

*Don’t. Please.*

I sigh and look down at my hands. "You know this couldn't go on forever. Nothing is forever Cee. Things still change for me." I pause and tilt my head up to meet her eyes. "I need to let you go. And you need to let me go."

*You'll miss me kid.*

Suddenly, my throat reels and I fight to hold back tears though my eyes remain focused on Cecelia. Her face is emotionless but I know it is only because true sorrow cannot manifest through her. It is a part of being a ghost. Though each ghost may want to haunt the same person forever, it cannot persist. The living are always changing while ghosts are mere reflections of a memory, of a life, that has since ended. She moves closer to me and I take a step forward. There is only a foot of space between us now. I feel the misty breeze wash over me. She looks at my palm with Charlie's blood on it. I lift it to my face and press my mouth to the small traces of what is left. I look to Cecelia. "Why does it always taste the same even when it is not mine?"

*It is blood, Jamie. It does not have to be the same to connect us.*

I run the hand through my hair and tilt my head down, embarrassed at my childish behavior. All I see is red. Suddenly I am reminded of the paper I took from inside. I pull it out from my pocket and unfold it.

"I brought this for you," I say, lifting it towards her. The paper is old and thin from years of holding on. On the paper is a portrait of Charlie, Cecelia, and me I drew when I was seven. The colors of the crayon have faded but the image is still intact. On the corner of the page, traces of Cecelia's blood have remained from when she last touched it. The blood has persisted through time and space. Cecelia looks up from the paper to me.

*You were always so good to me.*

I nod and look down. I feel a tear slide down my cheek and fall upon the grass. I bring my hand to my cheek. The tear on my finger falls on the paper and slides towards Cecelia's blood. She reaches her hand towards it. Blood. The source that has always united us. The only thing that keeps her here with me.

*Remember me.*

The old train's horn resounds in the distance, leaving here for some other place. A gust of wind surges past and the paper flies from my hands, spirited away.



## **Part Four:**

### ***Greeting Death***

What it is that you remember in your old age?

In seventy-seven years, when you look back on the years past, memories pan out before you in an array of glowing images. They are like little pieces of floating light: the ghosts of time. Some are faded and dim, while others are vivid and clear. It is only you who can pick out the ones that matter, the ones that piece you together. When I look at those memories, I can see everything that brought me to this moment, all of the pieces coming together for one final act: a movement from one world to the next. In the past few weeks, I have felt them moving closer and closer together. I can see them more clearly. It is almost time and I am not afraid.

Though I do not think I could truly be afraid of this next step, for in my early years I was the one who was always so close to it. The line between life and death was so thin for me that sometimes I could not see which side of the tracks I was living on. The moving lights of death were my friends and my reminders, until I sent them away completely. I decided that I wanted to be on the living side exclusively, and since then, I have not seen the other side. Its glowing transparency. At least not the way I used to see it. Now, it is only in the blood I bleed do the memories that death calls forward appear before my eyes. That has never changed.

As I recline my chair on my front porch, I let these thoughts pass through my mind like a quiet stream. The warm summer breeze tickles my face and brushes along my skin. I have always enjoyed the feeling of the wind in my face. The breath of this world has always

helped me breath more fully. It is a friendly reminder of the world's continual cycle. There is something about the wind that is so tangible to me even within its invisible nature. Colorless too. Sometimes I prefer transparency. White light. The soft way the breeze grazes my face, reminds me that I am never truly alone. The other side is never that far away. I watch as the gust rattles the grass and leaves before passing. I could sit here all day and never tire. A boy rides by on his bicycle as a young girl chases after him. I smile. The wind: its breath intermingling with my breath. I guess it is just another one of those small things that brings me closer to the constant movements of this world. Closer to cohesion.

Whether it has been hours or minutes, I cannot tell. As I watch the shadows move across the yard during the sun's descent, I retreat into my home. A home that used to be filled with people is mine alone now. It is not lonely though; the memory of what was keeps the house full of life. The reverberating sound of years of laughter, tears, and conversation that I used to welcome here, pervades the silences. My ears have always been keen to hearing the memories of the past.

The sun's dimming light shines through the kitchen window as I begin to cook dinner. I throw a piece of chicken on the pan and slice up vegetables. Looking up at my back window, I watch the sunset. The colors mix together in the sky, each one morphing together to become one solid burst of light. I hear the evening train resound through the fields a mile behind my house. Though the sound is faint, I can feel the vibrations of its horn. It sends familiar chills up my arms. I take a deep breath of the air that seeps through the open window. My senses begin to bring me back to a time when they were not mere senses but a means to see beyond what was real and not entirely tangible. My senses gave

rise to something outside of this world. They were a means for me to welcome, a means to welcome—

“Ouch.”

Before I look down, I already know that I have sliced my finger. My nerves tingle with the pain of a fresh wound. I hold my finger in my other hand and wince before opening my palm. It is not a deep cut but deep enough that red begins to pour from the tip of my finger down into the cracks of my palm. I lift it to my eyes. Blood. Even in my old age, the substance continues to entice and incite the memory of all the lives I have been a part of, and all of the ghosts who have been welcomed to death. I can still see my sister Cecelia’s reflection in the glossy liquid. And each time, she is smiling at me. I bring the finger closer to my lips. Why is it so tired? Moving so slowly? My mouth opens but the finger remains unmoving only inches away from my lips. I blink quickly and move to the sink, running my finger under the water and watching the blood disappear down the drain. What use to feel like an insurmountable loss, leaves me feeling indifferent. Still, for a few moments, I stare at where the blood slid away forever.

After I finish my meal, I sit near the open window of my living room and read. The phone rings and I hear the voice of my eldest daughter on the other end. She worries about me living alone but I do not mind it. The pain from losing my wife Layla has numbed within the last few months. Besides, I know it will not be long now. Like the breeze that passes through, I can feel the changes in my blood and the call for another ghost to be welcomed is near. The final call. The clock strikes ten and I hang up the phone to the sound of my grandchildren laughing in the background. I rise from my chair and head to bed. Before sleep takes me, I think of Layla and our children. When we were young and strong.



Suddenly, my mind takes me further back to my childhood. I see myself at seven years old. I think of my older sister and brother in their youth. They are so close now I can almost hear them, feel them. The deep color of red floods my vision. I see blood.

What is it that you remember in your final moments?

My thoughts shift from my family and childhood to something much different, much less expected. My breathing eases and my muscles relax. With each last breath, a memory, or perhaps it is an emotion, surges through me. I see lights, thousands of lights, flying through space. I see how they ignite the darkness and burst with color. They dance in the sky and underneath them runs a familiar train. The lights follow it into the distance, further than I can see. Are they the ghosts? Leading me, welcoming me, to the end? My sight begins to falter and in the haze of light, I begin to feel my blood. Not as a continual cycle within in me, but as a separate substance. As it slows down, I feel as though it is saying goodbye. Goodbye to me and all of the things it ever showed me. That pervading substance knows it is the end of its time on earth. It is giving into the ghost I would surely become. Laying here in my half-asleep state, I want to see it one last time. Yet I cannot bring my eyes to open or my body to move. It is the end, the end of all things. All at once, I feel it stop and as it stops, I hear a voice that I had not heard in many years. A voice I could never forget.

*Jamie.*

If I still had the life in me, I would smile but I can already feel the transparency. I take one last breath and through my closed lids I see the images of my life flash through my mind, the last of which is blood. The voice calls out again, like a lullaby.

*Jamie, it's time.*

I open my eyes. I am in the backyard but it is not my backyard. It is the thick and grassy yard of my childhood home. I see every detail, every small fiber that creates the natural setting from the swinging bench to the small play structure my brother and father built for me. I look to my left and see Cecelia. She looks exactly the same as she always has with her wide blue eyes and dark brown hair that hangs at her shoulders. She wears the same blue sundress that she was wearing the day she died but this time there is no blood to stain it. She flashes me her bright crooked smile. She no longer looks like a ghost, hanging in the ether, searching and haunting. I look down at myself. I am young again too. I look at Cecelia completely astonished.

*I have been waiting for you kid. For a long time now.*

“Am I a ghost?” I ask her. She shakes her head and puts her hair behind her ear. She laughs and it sounds like a chime.

*No, James. Though you have welcomed ghosts in life, it is not the path for you in death. Follow me and you will see.*

She reaches her hand out to me and I grasp it firmly. Nothing has ever felt so right to me, but then again I am beginning again. At the other end of the yard, a light expands and pulsates towards us. I turn around and look behind me. There is only darkness. I cannot see anything. I look back over to Cecelia.

“Do we leave everything behind? What about blood Cee?”

Cecelia shakes her head again. She looks over to the light and closes her eyes. I feel as though she is breathing in its illuminating power as if she has control over it. The control that she never had in life. Cecelia opens her eyes and turns to me.

*How can we be leaving anything behind if it is still a part of us?*

I smile and laugh though I am not sure why. Cecelia moves towards the light and I follow her. I think about blood: the essence of life on earth and the one thing that has led us to this moment. Hand in hand, we walk forward and move away from life into the glorious light.

## **Afterword:**

### ***It's Natural To Be Afraid***

I was eleven when my fear of blood manifested before me. I sliced my finger when cooking breakfast. It was a very minimal, very shallow slice, but nonetheless, blood began to pour from it. I inadvertently held my breath while I stared at the substance before calling out to my siblings in the next room. I found myself in a living room chair and within a few moments, I was unconscious. I woke up to my father looming over me with a Band-Aid. My four siblings surrounded me as well; their faces full of comical disbelief and somewhat tired amusement. It was their breakfast I was preparing. Now they weren't getting anything.

Still, this was not the first time I had fainted. I had a few incidents that had occurred in the years prior from heat spells to losing consciousness from vaccinations at the doctor's office. In a nutshell, I faint easily due to pain and also due to the sight and slightest loss of blood. An inherited condition from my mother, and her mother before her. Clearly, this is not a traumatic nor a difficult issue, but more so an inconvenience. Nevertheless, my relationship to blood has given rise to how I have chosen to feel about the substance. And the reason why I have finally begun to explore it in my writing.

For those who know me, they may find it intriguing and most definitely surprising that I chose to write about something that I have a natural aversion to, in terms of both sight and experience. But the way I think about blood, the way I have chosen to understand it, includes the physical and the literal but also strives to go beyond that. My means of thinking about blood deal with the figurative, symbolic, and perhaps even the celestial nature of the substance. To put it concisely, I am looking at all of the ways blood is a source

of life, a means of death, and a uniting force that I believe each individual can relate to, especially in terms of other people. I can remember the times last summer that I began to toy with ideas behind blood. Firstly, it has to do with resemblance and interconnectedness. It is a connector, a common thread of life that we all have. Yet at the same time, everyone's blood is not the same though it appears and even tastes that way. I hope that the story was evocative of these kind of ideas behind blood as something not so easy to define but something that has a daunting and lasting presence which makes one think about his or her own humanity in direct relation with others. Why is it so frightening to see it outside of the body? Do I fear death more than others? What does our blood mean to us? Is it different? Does it matter? I guess most of these questions I directed at myself but they seemed to be able reverberate universally as well.

I think some of the ideas I was mulling over in my mind began to become molded more fully as I started to compile my senior thesis in Religion that I completed during the fall semester. As I began to embrace and understand core Buddhist concepts, I also began to see some distinct parallels to how I was feeling about life in general, and of course blood. I could feel the Buddhist influences of interconnection, impermanence, and attachment to sink into my bones. These three ideas, along with suffering, have become some of the most important adjectives to describing my themes about blood and how that also relates to death. All of it was begin to dictate how I wanted to understand this notion of blood and also how I wanted to portray it.

Nevertheless, I did not expect my themes and ideas to manifest on the page in the way they did. A ghost story. While I have always been into science fiction and fantasy, I have never written within that genre. I felt I was able to bring both aspects of the

fantastical elements and maintain a sense of realism within my stories. Yes, ghosts have a dominant role in the stories but they are not so much gothic spirits as they are a means to understand blood as a substance that deals with attachment. Furthermore, they are a means to explore different ideas behind death, not in terms of a definitive afterlife, but what it means to lose someone and how to let them go. I think I wanted them to be a means of saying goodbye, a means of parting with something that was vitally important to one's life. There is a permanence that blood perpetuates that I feel like is important to exploring and I think instilling this idea of ghosts helped me do that. The ghosts are a tool to depict and explore something about the themes and ideas of this thesis I cannot even articulate definitively. It makes sense then to use this medium that is not necessarily real or solidly defined outside of fiction. It created a platform for interpretation and alternative meaning. Through ghosts, I was able to allow blood to have meaning even when it was no longer present or a factor in someone's life and death.

In terms of death and dying, I thought it was important to the concept of blood to also explore certain modes of attachment, particularly to another person. What happens when someone who used to define you is no longer a tangible source? What happens when you yourself change in ways that you do not want that defining person any longer? This becomes clear in the third story when Jamie banishes Cecelia from his life: what he thought he needed he realized was only holding him back, diminishing his life. We do not need people to define us. We define ourselves. Sometimes even death cannot show us that immediately. It is all becomes about letting go instead of holding on.

In terms of literary influences, I felt a strong connection to the themes conveyed in *The Life of Pi* and *Beasts of the Southern Wild*. The insertion of religion and connectedness

found within this book and film really helped me insert parallel notions into my own ideas about blood and even death. The two quotes that reverberated with me very well were “I suppose in the end, the whole of life becomes an act of letting go, but what always hurts the most is not taking a moment to say goodbye” (*Life of Pi*) and “When it all goes quiet behind my eyes, I see everything that made me lying around in invisible pieces...I see that I'm a little piece in a big, big universe. And that makes things right.”(*Beasts of the Southern Wild*). These two ideas related directly to how I felt about impermanence, interconnectedness, and attachment that I wanted to relay through this medium of blood. They are near perfect examples of how I hope to fit into this line of thought. Other writers that have influenced me especially are Ayn Rand, her means of descriptive and definitive writing, and Ian McEwan, in particular consideration of his novel *Atonement*, for its deep exploration of how to come to terms with past actions, regardless of the ability to complete alleviate them. Both of these writers I found to write about topics that are of deep significance to the human condition, something I hope to perpetuate through my own work.

Lastly, when thinking about my writing style, I wanted to convey stillness. This is something we talked about in my senior seminar fiction class. I like the break down of pivotal moments that it feels like slow motion. A lot of action may not be happening but through the stillness the reader is not feeling that slow progression but immersed into what is happening. It brings a sort of cohesion, another idea that I have been very interested in when it comes to blood, to a moment in a way that allows for a sort of clarity even if it cannot be defined. The clarity is in the emotion that is evoked, not the definitively articulated in understanding. I think that it the main function and consequence of fiction. We are able to feel and feel quite beautifully, even if we cannot fully understand that

feeling. This is how I wrote my thesis and I hope this is also how it can be read, as a unique survey of life, sincere emotions, and the uncharted and ambiguous understanding of an innate fear. Perhaps, that is how we are able to identify the beginning of a newly discovered awareness: that it is natural to be afraid.