Excerpt #1: From *An American Childhood* by Annie Dillard

I walked. My mother had given me the freedom of the streets as soon as I could say our telephone number. I walked and memorized the neighborhood. I made a mental map and located myself upon it. At night in bed I rehearsed the small world's scheme and set challenges: Find the store using backyards only. Imagine a route from the school to my friend's house. I mastered chunks of town in one direction only; I ignored the other direction, toward the Catholic church.

On a bicycle I traveled the known world's edge, and the ground held. I was seven. I had fallen in love with a red-haired fourth-grade boy named Walter Milligan. He was tough, Catholic, from an icky neighborhood. Two blocks beyond our school was a field—Miss Frick's field, behind Henry Clay Frick's mansion—where boys played football. I parked my bike on the sidelines and watched Walter Milligan play. As he ran up and down the length of the field, following the football, I ran up and down the sidelines, following him. After the game, I rode my bike home, delirious. It was the closest we had been, and the farthest I had traveled from home...

My father forbade me to go to Frick Park. He said bums lived there under bridges; they had been hanging around unnoticed since the Depression. My father was away all day; my mother said I could go to Frick Park if I never mentioned it.

I roamed Frick Park for many years. Our family moved from house to house, but we never moved so far I couldn't walk to Frick Park.

Excerpt #2: From *Falling Through Space* by Ellen Gilchrist

This is my house. This is where I was born. This is the bayou that runs in my dreams, this is the bayou bank that taught me to love water, where I spent endless summer hours alone or with my cousins. This is where I learned to swim, where mud first oozed up between my toes. This is where I saw embryos inside the abdomens of minnows. This is where I believed that if I was vain and looked too long into the water I would turn into a flower.

This is where I learned the legend of the greedy dog. There was an old dog on a raft and he had a bone in his teeth and he looked down into the water and saw a dog carrying a bone and he dropped the one he was holding to snatch the other dog's bone away and so lost both bones, the real and the imaginary.

That's a new bridge. The one that was here when I was small had a beautiful elaborate scaffolding on top. I thought I must be a princess, of royal blood, to have such a bridge with such a magnificent top. To have such land with so many bugs and a bayou with so many fish and mussels and gars and maybe even alligators.

This is the porch that at one time ran all the way around the house. My grandfather built this house and my mother came here when she was four years old. My brother was born in that front bedroom. I was born forty miles away in a hospital and only came here three days later.

Figure 4-2. Excerpts for the Boundary (or Map) Piece
Excerpt #3: From Clear Springs: A Memoir by Bobbie Ann Mason

There aren’t any big cities around, unless you count Paducah (pop. 26,853), twenty-six miles to the north. The farm is typical of this agricultural region. A lane cuts through the middle, from front to back, and two creeks divide it crosswise. The ground is rich, but it washes down the creeks. The creeks are clogged with trash, dumped there to prevent hard rains—gully-washers—from carrying the place away. At one time this was a thriving dairy farm that sustained our growing family. It was home to my paternal grandparents, my parents, my two sisters, my brother, and me. There were at least eleven buildings along the front part of the farm, near the road: two houses, a barn, a stable, a corncrib, a smokehouse, two hen houses, a wash-house, a milk house, an outhouse. I even had a playhouse.

The gravel-and-mud country road ran in front. Sometimes the school bus couldn’t get through the mud. Before the road was paved and fast cars started killing our dogs and cats, we would sit on my grandparents’ porch and say “Who’s that?” whenever anybody passed. . . . I am proud of this ground. . . .

The farm now lies entirely within the Mayfield city limits. To the east, the subdivisions are headed our way. Behind the farm, to the south, we can glimpse an air-compressor factory. Just across the railroad, to the west, the four-lane bypass leads around town and to the parkway and to everywhere on the continent. Across the road, in a thirty-acre cornfield, which is like an extension of our front yard, is the landmark of the town.

Excerpt #4: From Virgin Time by Patricia Hampl

I must be four. I don’t go to school yet. I can’t read. People are always telling me to go outside and play. I can walk to the end of the block. That far. I must not cross Oxford Street. But there she is, standing across Oxford. I have seen her many times. And now again. Her hands are clasped behind her back, and she is swinging back and forth in a self-contained motion. She is answering the question that I have finally emboldened myself to ask her. “Grace,” she calls across the great neighborhood divide. “My name is Grace.”

“I’m Patricia,” I holler back. The next thing seems inevitable, easy: “Will you be my friend, Grace?” My brother has friends, but there are no girls on our block. She is the nearest one, as far as I know. Her hair glows in the sun. I don’t understand I am not looking in a mirror of desire, wish meeting wish. Isn’t what’s in my heart in every heart? Doesn’t Grace need Patricia?

She shakes her head, her hands still behind her back, still rocking to her own rhythm. “No,” she says. “No, no, no.” It doesn’t occur to me that, after all, she lives by remote control, too, and cannot cross the street. I only see her now as she turns from me, her honey hair swinging back and forth as she runs away, calling out No, no, no forever, escaping down the block where I don’t dare to follow.
Snapshot Excerpts

Excerpt #1: From *Elizabeth Stories* by Isabel Huggan

My mother is teaching me how to dance. It is a rainy Saturday afternoon and I am listening to the radio in the kitchen as I stand by the sink polishing silver. . . . I turn up Connie Francis singing “Who’s Sorry Now?” just as Mavis comes into the room. “Heavens, is that back?” she says. “That was popular when I used to go dancing with Tim, goodness, 25 years ago.” She comes over and slips her arm around my waist, humming. I am startled and pull away, not used to this kind of impromptu embrace, but she is determined, and begins to turn me around the floor. “Come now, Elizabeth; this is a good song. No wonder it’s come back.” “Who’s Tim?” I ask. “Was he your boyfriend before Daddy?” “Oh, I suppose you could say so,” she says. “He was a brother of a girl in our office and he used to take me dancing out on the Pier. Oh my, he could dance!” Her voice is reflective and I can tell she is seeing things I am not. The song ends and I want to ask her more but I can’t think how to start. As if she reads my mind, she volunteers some information. “We saw each other for a few years, Elizabeth, but all we had in common, really, was the dancing. And when you decide to settle down with someone, you have to have more in common than that!” She smiles and leaves me here at the sink. I am thinking about how she and Frank never dance, how he says it’s a waste of time to walk around to music. I wonder what it is that they found in common.

Excerpt #2: From *Cherry: A Memoir* by Mary Karr

The next morning, you leave the house for Meredith’s wearing the monk’s robe and what you call Leicia’s slave-girl-of-Caesar sandals, with leather thongs that wrap around your calves. But unless they’re tied so tightly that your circulation’s cut off, they tend to slop down around your ankles. Halfway to Meredith’s, you untie them and sling them over your shoulder like a string of fish.

Thus monastically clad and unshod, you walk the tar-sticky roads holding your mother’s orange-and-black yoga book. About halfway there, a roaring truck draws up on the rough shoulder holding a whole crowd of bikini-clad girls and boys in cutoffs in back, including the luminous John Cleary sitting high on the side, a blue towel around his neck. Some girl asks real loud, where’s the Halloween party, while everybody else breaks in half laughing. Somebody (you want to think it’s John) says, C’mon you guys, and the truck roars off, leaving a wake of titters that you halfway believe visible—little clicking black birds swarming from the silver truck to where you stand, eyes welling up.

At the threshold of Meredith’s icily air-conditioned house afterward, she says, Well, hey. Don’t you look all Buddha’d up.

You shove past her, saying, Lemme in fast. I’m baking alive in this thing. You dive the length of the sofa, letting your hair shield your face since crying ruined this morning’s Egyptian eye makeup.

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Excerpt #1: From My Name in Sandra Cisneros’ The House on Mango Street

In English my name means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters. It means sadness, it means waiting. It is like the number nine. A muddy color. It is the Mexican records my father plays on Sunday mornings when he is shaving, songs like sobbing.

It was my great-grandmother’s name and now it is mine. She was a horse woman too, born like me in the Chinese year of the horse—which is supposed to be bad luck if you’re born female—but I think this is a Chinese lie because the Chinese, like the Mexicans, don’t like their women strong. . . .

At school they say my name funny as if the syllables were made out of tin and hurt the roof of your mouth. But in Spanish my name is made out of a softer something, like silver, not quite as thick as sister’s name—Magdalena—which is uglier than mine. Magdalena who at least can come home and become Nenny. But I am always Esperanza.

I would like to baptize myself under a new name, a name more like the real me, the one nobody sees. Esperanza as Lisandra or Maritza or Zeze the X. Yes. Something like Zeze the X will do.

Excerpt #2: From This Boy’s Life by Tobias Wolff

I didn’t come to Utah to be the same boy I’d been before. I had my own dreams of transformation, Western dreams, dreams of freedom and dominion and taciturn self-sufficiency. The first thing I wanted to do was change my name. A girl named Toby had joined my class before I left Florida, and this had caused both of us scalding humiliation.

I wanted to call myself Jack, after Jack London. I believed that having his name would charge me with some of the strength and competence inherent in my idea of him. The odds were good that I’d never have to share a classroom with a girl named Jack. And I liked the sound. Jack. Jack Wolff. My mother didn’t like it at all, neither the idea of changing my name nor the name itself. I did not drop the subject. She finally agreed. . . .

My father got wind of this and called from Connecticut to demand that I stick to the name he had given me. It was, he said, an old family name. This turned out to be untrue. . . .

My mother was pleased by my father’s show of irritation and stuck up for me. A new name began to seem like a good idea to her. After all, he was in Connecticut and we were in Utah. . . . We were barely making it, and making it in spite of him. My shedding the name he’d given me would put him in mind of that fact.

Excerpt #3: From The Names: A Memoir by Scott Momaday

My name is Tsoai-talee. I am, therefore, Tsoai-talee; therefore I am.

The storyteller Pohd-lohk gave me the name Tsoai-talee. He believed that a man’s life proceeds from his name, in the way that a river proceeds from its source. . . .
You know, everything had to begin, and this is how it was: the Kiowas came one by one into the world through a hollow log. They were many more than now, but not all of them got out. There was a woman whose body was swollen up with child, and she got stuck in the log. After that, no one could get through, and that is why the Kiowas are a small tribe in number. They looked all around and saw the world. It made them glad to see so many things. The called themselves Kwida, “coming out.”

—Kiowa folktale

. . . . The names at first are those of animals and of birds, of objects that have one definition in the eye, another in the hand, of forms and features on the rim of the world, or of sounds that carry on the bright wind and in the void. They are old and original in the mind, like the beat of rain on the river, and intrinsic in the native tongue, failing even as those who bear them turn once in the memory, go on, and are gone forever: Pohd-lohk (“Old Wolf” in Kiowa), Keahdinekeah (“Throwing It Down” in Kiowa, the name of the author’s great-grandmother). Aho [meaning unknown; the name of the author’s grandmother].

Excerpt #4: From The Namesake: A Novel by Jhumpa Lahiri

As for a name, they have decided to let Ashima’s grandmother, who is past eighty now [and living in India], who has named each of her other six great-grandchildren in the world, do the honors. When her grandmother learned of Ashima’s pregnancy, she was particularly thrilled at the prospect of naming the family’s first sahib. And so Ashima and Ashoke have agreed to put off the decision of what to name the baby until a letter comes, ignoring the forms from the hospital about filing for a birth certificate. Ashima’s grandmother has mailed the letter herself, walking with her cane to the post office, her first trip out of the house in a decade. The letter contains one name for a girl, one for a boy. Ashima’s grandmother has revealed them to no one.

Though the letter was sent a month ago, in July, it has yet to arrive. Ashima and Ashoke are not terribly concerned. After all, they both know, an infant doesn’t really need a name. . . . Names can wait. In India parents take their time . . .

Besides, there are always pet names to tide one over: a practice of Bengali nomenclature grants, to every single person, two names. In Bengali the word for pet name is dakhnam, meaning, literally, the name by which one is called, by friends, by family. . . .

Every pet name is paired with a good name, a bhalonam, for identification in the outside world. Consequently, good names appear on envelopes, on diplomas, in telephone directories, and in all other public places. . . . Good names represent dignified and enlightened qualities. Ashima means “she who is limitless, without borders.” Ashoke, the name of an emperor, means “he who transcends grief.” Pet names have no such aspirations.
Time Sheet for Writers

Name: ___________________________ Date: ___________________________

**Directions:** Record the approximate amount of time (hours and minutes) that you have spent so far on each activity. Account for in-class time, homework time, and personal time that you have spent on these activities.

- Topic Exploration: listing, talking with a partner, thinking, etc.
- Brainstorming: Writing clusters, cubes, mapping, jot lists, etc.
- Working with a Writer's Group or peer partner: reading aloud, discussing your writing, etc.
- Drafting: individual writing time
- Stalling: complaining, moaning, doing nothing, worrying, etc.

I rate my productivity so far as (circle ONE NUMBER):

1  2  3  4  5

I haven't gotten much of anything done yet.  I've gotten some stuff started.  I have done tons of good work and am spending my time well!
Writer's Group Checklist Evaluation

Name: ___________________________ Date: ___________________________

Your preparations for and participation in today's Writer's Group have been evaluated as follows:

I. Required Pieces (up to 5 points):
   _______ Name Piece      _______ Snapshot Piece
   _______ Family Piece

II. Completed MOP (up to 5 points):
   _______ thorough    _______ partial
   _______ sketchy    _______ missing

III. Required Memoir Draft (up to 10 points):
   _______ full draft    _______ partial draft
   _______ sketchy draft    _______ missing

IV. Readiness of Products for the Group (up to 10 points):
   _______ copies of your draft for each group member
   _______ at least three specific questions typed in advance for your group members about your writing; copies made for each group member
   _______ you enter the group focused and ready to work

V. Participation in the Writer's Group (up to 10 points):
   _______ focused and on track    _______ occasional lapses in your attention
   _______ mainly off-track, unfocused, and/or not responsive

This Writer's Group session was worth up to 40 points. Your score is _______ points.

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Figure 11–3. Writer's Group Checklist Evaluation
his baby roar and tugs Hasidically at his chin. I know it's too early for him to be teething, but he is as drooly as a Newfoundland. Everything goes into his mouth. Everything gets gummed to death. We give him bagels to gum, and he works them over with a kind of frantic joy—I think he's doing his impersonation of Dan Quayle eating.

**December 2**

It has been a terrible day. I'm afraid I'm going to have to let him go. He's an awful baby. I hate him. He's scum.

**Midnight**

I'm not even remotely well enough to be a mother. That's what the problem is. Also, I don't think I like babies.

Pammy came by late in the afternoon and saved the day. Emmy dropped by with groceries. I felt like I could hardly be nice to Sam because I was so tired and he was such a kvetchy little bundle of shitty diapers and bad attitude. And then while Pammy was supposed to be keeping an eye on him, he inched his way off the futon and did a double gainer onto the floor. He just entirely lost his mind. So I was called in to comfort him, and of course I fell right back in love. I said to Pammy, "Well, there goes your standing in the community. You used to be number two for him, I think," and she said, "Yeah, and now I'm number twenty-nine, right between George Bush and the nurse who gave him his DPT's."

We sat outside, and it was so breathtakingly green under the redwoods. All the birds were singing, and Sam fell asleep in my arms. Pammy made us lemonade. It was like a glimpse of paradise. I was not exaggerating when I said earlier that when I was drinking and using I couldn't take decent care of a cat, so all this feels like a small miracle—and not even such a small one, maybe a medium-sized one in plain brown paper.

I saw a "60 Minutes" show a few years ago about Lourdes, with Ed Bradley interviewing a family of three who came to the shrine every year—a devoutly religious mother of about thirty, a much much older father who could barely look at the camera and who couldn't say one word because he was so terribly shy, and a little ten-year-old girl with spina bifida who was in a wheelchair. They came to Lourdes every single year, and Ed Bradley was kind of badgering the parents for being so gullible. He said to the little girl, who was so weak she had to be firmly strapped into the wheelchair, "What do you pray for when you come?" and she said, looking at her father really
lovingly, "I pray that my dad won't always have to feel so shy. It makes him feel so lonely." Which stopped old Ed in his tracks for about ten seconds. But then he looked back at the mother and said something to the effect that "year after year, you spend thousands and thousands of dollars to come here, hoping for a miracle," and she just looked at her kid, shook her head, and said, "Oh, no, Ed, you don't get it—we got our miracle."

December 3

Sam was baptized today at Saint Andrew's. It is almost too painful to talk about, so powerful, so outrageous and lovely. Just about every person I adore was there. They were the exact people I would invite to my wedding.

Everyone cried, or at any rate, lots of people did—all those old faces of the people at my church, and all the younger people, too, and my family and best friends, everyone clapping and singing along with the choir. All these old left-wing atheist friends singing gospel music. The singing was extraordinary, the choir of these beautiful black women and one white man, singing to Sam and me. A friend of nearly twenty years, Neshama, from Bolinas, described the two of us as looking very tremulous and white and cherished. Out of this broken-down old church, out of the linoleum floors and the crummy plastic stained-glass windows, came the most wonderful sounds anyone had ever heard, because of the spirit that moved the day.

Sam was just great, although I must say I took the liberty of dosing him with perhaps the merest hint of Tylenol beforehand so he wouldn't weep or whine too much during the service. He wore the baptism gown that my cousin Samuel had worn fifty years ago, very Bonnie Prince Charlie, very lacy and high Episcopalian, with a plain little white cap.

For the huge party at Pammy's afterward, he changed into his one-piece cow outfit. It was a wonderful party. Everybody mingled like mad, except me, and everyone got to hang out in the garden because it was such a beautiful day. I kept feeling that God was really showing off. The party felt like the secular portion of the show.

I've always kept the various parts of my life compartmentalized, but today all the important people from all aspects of my life were finally brought together: my sweet nutty family, in droves; my reading group; people I have worked with at magazines over the years; old lovers; and the women I have loved most in my life. It was my tribe. It felt like Brownian motion, all of these friends who had been strangers to one another bumping off each other in the garden.
steroids while Sam was a baby on spirit. I had to hide in a back room with him practically the whole time because I was too overwhelmed, amazed, and profoundly grateful at how loved Sam is and how loved I am. It made my stomach ache.

Now I am sitting here on the futon in the living room, Sam asleep beside me, the kitty sniffing at him with enormous interest as if I had accidentally brought a perfectly broiled Rock Cornish game hen to bed with me. I have spent so much of my life with secret Swiss-cheese insides, but I tell you—right now, Mama, my soul is full.

December 5

Pammy showed me a picture that someone took at the baptism of her holding Sam out toward the camera. He definitely looks like he was blown away by the proceedings, too, somehow sort of blank and surprised at the same time, like he had just that moment been plucked from a huge pie.

All these people keep waxing sentimental about how fabulously well I am doing as a mother, how competent I am, but
I feel inside like when you're first learning to put nail polish on your right hand with your left. You can do it, but it doesn't look all that great around the cuticles. And I think that because I'm so tired all the time, people feel like I'm sort of saintly. But the shadow knows. The other night I was nursing the baby outside, underneath the redwoods, and you could see the full moon in the clearing of the treetops. Everything smelled so clean and green, and the night birds were singing, and then I started feeling a little edgy about money or the lack thereof. I started feeling sorry for myself because I'm tired and broke, kept thinking that what this family needs is a breadwinner. And pretty soon my self-esteem wasn't very good, and I felt that maybe secretly I'm sort of a loser. So when my friend John called a few minutes later from L.A. and mentioned that a mutual friend of ours, whose first book was out (for which he had been grossly overpaid, if you ask me), had gotten a not-very-good review in Newsweek recently, all of a sudden, talking on the cordless phone and nursing my baby in the moonlight, I had a wicked, dazzling bout of schadenfreude. Schadenfreude is that wicked and shameful tickle of pleasure one feels at someone else's misfortune. It felt like I'd gotten a little hit of something. It made me feel better about myself. "Do you have it?" I asked innocently, and he said that he didn't think so because it was a week or so old. I then found myself clearing my throat and saying in a flat, innocently curious voice, "Why don't you go look?" So he did, and returned to the phone with it, and I said, nice as pie, "Now read it." And when he was done, I said, "Man, that was like Christmas for me." Then we laughed, and it was okay for a minute.

God, it was painful though, too, and the hangover was debilitating. I was deeply aware of the worm inside of me and of the grim bits that I feed it. The secret envy inside me is maybe the worst thing about my life. I am the Saddam Hussein of jealousy. But the grace is that there are a couple of people I can tell it to without them staring at me as if I have fruit bats flying out of my nose, who just nod, and maybe laugh, and say, Yep, yep, I get it. I'm the same. Still, I feel like it must drive Jesus just out of his mind sometimes, that instead of loving everyone like he or she is my sibling, with a heart full of goodwill and tenderness and forgiveness, I'm secretly scheming and thinking my dark greedy thoughts. I say to him, Bear with me, dude. He does give me every single thing I need, but then I still want more, and I picture him stamping around like Danny DeVito, holding up these gnarled beseeching hands of frustration, saying, "Oy fucking wh."
I.

Through the small tall bathroom window the December yard is gray and scratchy, the trees calligraphic. Exhaust from the dryer billows out of the house and up, breaking apart while tumbling into the white sky.

The house is a factory.

I put my pants back on and go back to my mother. I walk down the hall, past the laundry room, and into the family room. I close the door behind me, muffling the rumbling of the small shoes in the dryer.

"Where were you?" my mother says.
"In the bathroom," I say.
"Hmph," she says.
"What?"
"For fifteen minutes?"
"It wasn't that long."
"It was longer. Was something broken?"
"No."
"Did you fall in?"
"No."
"Were you playing with yourself?"
"I was cutting my hair."
"You were contemplating your navel."
"Right. Whatever."
"Did you clean up?"
"Yeah."

I had not cleaned up, had actually left hair everywhere, twisted brown doodles drawn in the sink, but knew that my mother would not find out. She could not get up to check.

My mother is on the couch. At this point, she does not move from the couch. There was a time, until a few months ago, when she was still up and about, walking and driving, running errands. After that there was a period when she spent most of her time in her chair, the one next to the couch, occasionally doing things, going out, whatnot. Finally she moved to the couch, but even then, for a while at least, while spending most of her time on the couch, every night at 11 p.m. or so, she had made a point of making her way up the stairs, in her bare feet, still tanned brown in November, slow and careful on the green carpet, to my sister’s old bedroom. She had been sleeping there for years—the room was pink, and clean, and the bed had a canopy, and long ago she resolved that she could no longer sleep with my father’s coughing.

But the last time she went upstairs was weeks ago. Now she is on the couch, not moving from the couch, reclining on the couch during the day and sleeping there at night, in her nightgown, with the TV on until dawn, a comforter over her, toe to neck. People know.

While reclining on the couch most of the day and night, on her back, my mom turns her head to watch television and turns it back to spit up green fluid into a plastic receptacle. The plastic receptacle is new. For many weeks she had been spitting the green fluid into a towel, not the same towel, but a rotation of towels, one of which she would keep on her chest. But the towel on her chest, my sister Beth and I found after a short while, was not such a good place to spit the green fluid, because, as it turned out, the green fluid smelled awful, much more pungent than one might expect. (One expects some sort of odor, sure, but this.) And so the green fluid could not be left there, festering and then petrifying on the terry-cloth towels. (Because the green fluid hardened to a crust on the terry-cloth towels, they were almost impossible to clean. So the green-fluid towels were one-use only, and even if you used every corner of the towels, folding and turning, turning and folding, they would only last a few days each, and the supply was running short, even after we plundered the bathrooms, closets, the garage.) So finally Beth procured, and our mother began to spit the green fluid into, a small plastic container which looked makeshift, like a piece of an air-conditioning unit, but had been provided by the hospital and was as far as we knew designed for people who do a lot of spitting up of green fluid. It’s a molded plastic receptacle, cream-colored, in the shape of a half-moon, which can be kept handy and spit into. It can be cupped around the mouth of a reclining person, just under the chin, in a way that allows the depository of green bodily fluids to either raise one’s head to spit directly into it, or to simply let the fluid dribble down, over his or her chin, and then into the receptacle waiting below. It was a great find, the half-moon plastic receptacle.

"That thing is handy, huh?" I ask my mother, walking past her, toward the kitchen.

"Yeah, it’s the cat’s meow," she says.

I get a popsicle from the refrigerator and come back to the family room.

They took my mother’s stomach out about six months ago. At that point, there wasn’t a lot left to remove—they had already taken out [I would use the medical terms here if I knew them] the rest of it about a year before. Then they tied the [something] to the [something], hoped that they had removed the offending portion,
and set her on a schedule of chemotherapy. But of course they
didn’t get it all. They had left some of it and it had grown, it had
come back, it had laid eggs, was stowed away, was stuck to the side
of the spaceship. She had seemed good for a while, had done the
chemo, had gotten the wigs, and then her hair had grown back—
darker, more brittle. But six months later she began to have pain
again— Was it indigestion? It could just be indigestion, of course,
the burping and the pain, the leaning over the kitchen table at
dinner; people have indigestion; people take Tums; Hey Mom, should I
get some Tums?—but when she went in again, and they had “opened
her up”—a phrase they used—and had looked inside, it was star-
ing out at them, at the doctors, like a thousand writhing worms
under a rock, swarming, shimmering, wet and oily—Good God!—
or maybe not like worms but like a million little podules, each a
tiny city of cancer, each with an unruly, sprawling, environmentally
careless citizenry with no zoning laws whatsoever. When the
doctor opened her up, and there was suddenly light thrown upon
the world of cancer-podules, they were annoyed by the disturb-
ance, and defiant. Turn off. The fucking. Light. They glared at the
doctor, each podule, though a city unto itself, having one single
eye, one blind evil eye in the middle, which stared imperiously, as
only a blind eye can do, out at the doctor. Go. The. Fuck. Away. The
doctors did what they could, took the whole stomach out, con-
ected what was left, this part to that, and sewed her back up, leav-
ing the city as is, the colonists to their manifest destiny, their fos-
sil fuels, their strip malls and suburban sprawl, and replaced the
stomach with a tube and a portable external IV bag. It’s kind of
cute, the IV bag. She used to carry it with her, in a gray back-
pack—it’s futuristic-looking, like a synthetic ice pack crossed with
those liquid food pouches engineered for space travel. We have a
name for it. We call it “the bag.”

My mother and I are watching TV. It’s the show where young
amateur athletes with day jobs in marketing and engineering

compete in sports of strength and agility against male and female
bodybuilders. The bodybuilders are mostly blond and are impec-
cably tanned. They look great. They have names that sound fast
and indomitable, names like American cars and electronics, like
Firestar and Mercury and Zenith. It is a great show.

“What is this?” she asks, leaning toward the TV. Her eyes,
one small, sharp, intimidating, are now dull, yellow, droopy,
strained—the spitting gives them a look of constant exasperation.

“The fighting show thing,” I say.

“Hmm,” she says, then turns, lifts her head to spit.

“Is it still bleeding?” I ask, sucking on my popsicle.

“Yeah.”

We are having a nosebleed. While I was in the bathroom, she
was holding the nose, but she can’t hold it tight enough, so now I
relieve her, pinching her nostrils with my free hand. Her skin is
oily, smooth.

“Hold it tighter,” she says.

“Okay,” I say, and hold it tighter. Her skin is hot.

Toph’s shoes continue to rumble.

A month ago Beth was awake early; she cannot remember why. She
walked down the stairs, shushing the green carpet, down to the
foyer’s black slate floor. The front door was open, with only
the screen door closed. It was fall, and cold, and so with two hands
she closed the large wooden door, click, and turned toward the
kitchen. She walked down the hall and into the kitchen, frost spi-
derwebbed on the corners of its sliding glass door, frost on the bare
trees in the backyard. She opened the refrigerator and looked
inside. Milk, fruit, IV bags dated for proper use. She closed the
refrigerator. She walked from the kitchen into the family room,
where the curtains surrounding the large front window were open,
and the light outside was white. The window was a bright silver
screen, lit from behind. She squinted until her eyes adjusted. As her eyes focused, in the middle of the screen, at the end of the driveway, was my father, kneeling.

It's not that our family has no taste, it's just that our family's taste is inconsistent. The wallpaper in the downstairs bathroom, though it came with the house, is the house's most telling decorative statement, featuring a pattern of fifteen or so slogans and expressions popular at the time of its installation. Right On, Neat-O, Outta Sight!—arranged so they unite and abut in intriguing combinations. That-A-Way meets Way Out so that the A in That-A-Way creates A Way Out. The words are hand-rendered in stylized block letters, red and black against white. It could not be uglier, and yet the wallpaper is a novelty that visitors appreciate, evidence of a family with no pressing interest in addressing obvious problems of decor, and also proof of a happy time, an exuberant, fanciful time in American history that spawned exuberant and fanciful wallpaper.

The living room is kind of classy, actually—clean, neat, full of heirlooms and antiques, an oriental rug covering the center of the hardwood floor. But the family room, the only room where any of us has ever spent any time, has always been, for better or for worse, the ultimate reflection of our true inclinations. It's always been jumbled, the furniture competing, with clenched teeth and sharp elbows, for the honor of the Most Wrong-looking Object. For twelve years, the dominant chairs were blood orange. The couch of our youth, that which interacted with the orange chairs and white shag carpet, was plaid—green, brown and white. The family room has always had the look of a ship's cabin, wood paneled, with six heavy wooden beams holding, or pretending to hold, the ceiling above. The family room is dark and, save for a general sort of decaying of its furniture and walls, has not changed much in the twenty years we've lived here. The furniture is overwhelmingly brown and squat, like the furniture of a family of bears. There is our latest couch, my father's, long and covered with something like tan-colored velour, and there is the chair next to the couch, which five years ago replaced the bloodoranges, a sofa-chair of brownish plaid, my mother's. In front of the couch is a coffee table made from a cross section of a tree, cut in such a way that the bark is still there, albeit heavily lacquered. We brought it back, many years ago, from California and it, like most of the house's furniture, is evidence of an empathetic sort of decorating philosophy—for aesthetically disenfranchised furnishings we are like the families that adopt troubled children and refugees from around the world—we see beauty within and cannot say no.

One wall of the family room was and is dominated by a brick fireplace. The fireplace has a small recessed area that was built to facilitate indoor barbecuing, though we never put it to use, chiefly because when we moved in, we were told that raccoons lived somewhere high in the chimney. So for many years the recessed area sat dormant, until the day, about four years ago, that our father, possessed by the same odd sort of inspiration that had led him for many years to decorate the lamp next to the couch with rubber spiders and snakes, put a fish tank inside. The fish tank, its size chosen by a wild guess, ended up fitting perfectly.

"Hey hey!" he had said when he installed it, sliding it right in, with no more than a centimeter of give on either side. "Hey hey!" was something he said, and to our ears it sounded a little too Fonzie, coming as it did from a gray-haired lawyer wearing madras pants. "Hey hey!" he would say after such miracles, which were dizzying in their quantity and wonderment—in addition to the Miracle of the New Fish-tank Fitting, there was, for example, the Miracle of Getting the TV Wired Through the Cool New Stereo for True Stereo Sound, not to mention the Miracle of Running the Nintendo Wires Under the Wall-to-Wall Carpet So as Not to Have the Baby Tripping Over Them All the Time Goddammit. (He was
devoted to Nintendo.) To bring attention to each marvel, he would stand before whoever happened to be in the room and, while grinning wildly, grip his hands together in triumph, over one shoulder and then the other, like the Cub Scout who won the Pinewood Derby. Sometimes, for modesty's sake, he would do it with his eyes closed and his head tilted. Did I do that?

"Loser," we would say.

"Aw, screw you," he would say, and go make himself a nice tall Bloody Mary.

The ceiling in one corner of the living room is stained in concentric circles of yellow and brown, a souvenir from heavy rains the spring before. The door to the foyer hangs by one of its three hinges. The carpet, off-white wall-to-wall, is worn to its core and has not been vacuumed in months. The screen windows are still up—my father tried to take them down but could not this year. The family room's front window faces east, and because the house sits beneath a number of large elms, it receives little light. The light in the family room is not significantly different in the day and the night. The family room is usually dark.

I am home from college for Christmas break. Our older brother, Bill, just went back to D.C., where he works for the Heritage Foundation—something to do with eastern European economics, privatization, conversion. My sister is home because she has been home all year—she deferred law school to be here for the fun. When I come home, Beth goes out.

"Where are you going?" I usually say.

"Out," she usually says.

I am holding the nose. As the nose bleeds and we try to stop it, we watch TV. On the TV an accountant from Denver is trying to climb up a wall before a bodybuilder named Striker catches him and pulls him off the wall. The other segments of the show can be tense—there is an obstacle course segment, where the contestants are racing against each other and also the clock, and another segment where they hit each other with sponge-ended paddles, both of which can be extremely exciting, especially if the contest is a close one, evenly matched and with much at stake—but this part, with the wall climbing, is too disturbing. The idea of the accountant being chased while climbing a wall... no one wants to be chased while climbing a wall, chased by anything, by people, hands grabbing at their ankles as they reach for the bell at the top. Striker wants to grab and pull the accountant down—he lunges every so often at the accountant's legs—all he needs is a good grip, a lunge and a grip and a good yank—and if Striker and his hands do that before the accountant gets to ring the bell... it's a horrible part of the show. The accountant climbs quickly, feverishly, nailing foothold after foothold, and for a second it looks like he'll make it, because Striker is so far below, two people-lengths easily, but then the accountant pauses. He cannot see his next move. The next grip is too far to reach from where he is. So then he actually backs up, goes down a notch to set out on a different path and when he steps down it is unbearable, the suspense. The accountant steps down and then starts up the left side of the wall, but suddenly Striker is there, out of nowhere—he wasn't even in the screen!—and he has the accountant's leg, at the calf, and he yanks and it's over. The accountant flies from the wall (attached by rope of course) and descends slowly to the floor. It's terrible. I won't watch this show again.

Mom prefers the show where three young women sit on a pastel-colored couch and recount blind dates that they have all enjoyed or suffered through with the same man. For months, Beth and Mom have watched the show, every night. Sometimes the show's participants have had sex with one another, but use funny