

The Things She Touched

By Julie Ardelean

If I was damned of body and soul,
I know whose prayers would make me whole,
Mother o' mine, O mother o'mine.

—Rudyard Kipling

Part One:

Daphne got a camera for her tenth birthday. It was a bright blue Polaroid, the kind that slowly tongues out your photo on thick square film moments after it's taken. Her younger sister Quinn saved her allowance to buy a strap to go with it, a long black band through which Daphne would loop her head so the camera hung down her torso, bouncing off her stomach when she walked through town. Daphne took her camera everywhere she went that summer. She took photos of flowers, of puddles, of people walking out of the gas station, of Quinn on the swings and running in the yard. If Quinn said, "Hey Daph, look at this!" Daphne would take a picture, wait a minute for it to develop, and then examine her photo. "Oh, yeah" she'd say, "that's nice."

Daphne felt a sort of pride when she looked at what she'd taken. She would spread her photos out on the kitchen table and think of titles to pen on their white strips. She liked that photographs captured the world but also distorted it, letting her get closer than she should or warping the light. She knew there was a thin line separating what she saw in the photos from reality, but the photos felt more truthful because they made things stand alone, they took their subjects out of their context and made them speak for themselves. Mostly, it was comforting for Daphne to know that every time she looked at a photo, it would be the same.

One afternoon that summer when it was too humid to be outside, Daphne's mother

helped her hang fishing wire across her room where she could fasten the photos with clothespins. When her mother went up on her toes to pin the wire high on the wall, Daphne could see her calf muscles tighten into a small smile on the backs of her legs. Other women called Daphne's mother beautiful. She was lanky and delicate and had long, narrow feet with high arches perfect for slipping into heels. She was a dancer when she was young and sometimes when the girls would beg, she'd push the furniture to the side of the living room and call it her studio. It was one of the only times she let herself abandon her steadied precision. Without lipstick or blouse or embroidered apron tied around her thin waist, she'd put a t-shirt on over an old leotard and position Quinn and Daphne on the hardwood floor. They would put on their church shoes to practice time-steps or go barefoot to practice second position and arabesques. Sometimes their dad would come home from work while they danced and he would lean on the doorframe while he watched them, a look on his face like he was sad or in love or thought he was in love but was unsure exactly what that looked like. Daphne's mother would make eye contact with him and smile while she said things like "Heels together, girls. Good."

Daphne's mother wore a thin summer dress and black mascara when she helped her daughter pin her photos onto the wire. When they were finished, Daphne reached over and grabbed her camera from her nightstand.

"Smile, mom." Daphne's mother smiled. Daphne shot the picture and watched it darken into color. She got up to hang it with the others on the wire. Daphne lay on the bed where her mother had sat down. Together they looked at the photos swaying from the fan like Tibetan flags made from pieces of their world, and her mother pulled Daphne's legs onto her lap. Daphne loved that her mother always found ways to touch her, putting a hand on her shoulder or touching her arm. Sometimes she washed her hair in the kitchen sink, Daphne's knees on a chair and stomach digging into the edge of the counter until it hurt. But she never complained while she leaned her head upside-down over the sink because her hair created a cave that

trapped the smell of lavender shampoo, the steam rising to her face, and her mother's voice humming radio tunes. Daphne's mother spent every day that way—washing hair, vacuuming, decorating birthday cakes, helping to finish science fair projects. She was the sort of mother you read about in books and see on old television shows, creating a world in a house for a family. Whenever she stood with one of her daughters looking over an accomplishment—a solar system out of wire hangers, an empty sink from where dishes had been washed and put away—she'd slip her hand on the back of her daughter's neck, under her hair where its warm and boney and there are dips and hollow places under the skin. She'd squeeze there ever so lightly and kiss the top of her daughter's head and say something like “well that's that” before turning to start something new.

The next morning Daphne woke up early. It was Quinn's birthday, exactly one month after hers and they both had guests coming later for cake and games. Out her window, the sun was not yet above the horizon. It was the time of morning when everything familiar is draped in blues, when you are still dreary from sleep and slightly uncertain if the world will ever get its color back. The window was just close enough to Daphne's bed that she could reach her hand out into the square of blue light coming through. She put every body part in separately; right hand then arm, right foot then leg. She watched how easily she changed.

Daphne knew her mother would have white powdered doughnuts and Sunny Delight waiting—a birthday tradition. She picked up her camera and went downstairs but the kitchen was empty, almost eerie. The red light on the coffee maker was the only sign of life and it shone like the red eye of a cigarette in the night. The glass door to the backyard was left open, and through it Daphne could see her mother sitting on the deck. She wore a long robe tied around her body, her legs pulled up to her chest in the chair like a little girl. She held a coffee mug in her hand, resting its base on top of her knee and she wore no make up, no red smear of lipstick, her hair falling out of her bun from sleep. She was looking out into the back yard, not at anything in particular that Daphne could see. Daphne thought she looked older than she had

yesterday, or more sad. Daphne was annoyed that she'd forgotten to put out the doughnuts, but wanted to go sit with her and also felt she should leave her mother alone. Instead, she lifted her blue Polaroid to her face, squeezed her left eye, and took a picture.

As soon as she heard the click of the camera, Daphne's mother looked over at the door. She smiled, and the mother Daphne knew seemed to flow back into her cheeks and face. She stood and walked back into the kitchen, reaching for Daphne's hand with her own, still warm from the ceramic mug. As Daphne's mother got out plates and glasses for breakfast, Daphne watched her photo develop and thought how it was the opposite of fading though it felt the same when you watched it, how seeing her mother appear was like watching something be born and grow. It looked like her mother in the photograph but also strangely like a woman she'd never met before. She looked beautiful and tired and important in the photo, like she was caught in a moment unfiltered or unprepared for the world to see. She seemed vulnerable without her smile mastered for conversations and husbands and bedtime stories, not fragile but holding some secret just under the satin of her robe or the surface of her skin.

Part 2:

It was early morning when Quinn woke up. She turned toward her sister next to her in their bed and thought about tapping her shoulder but decided to let Daphne sleep. She grabbed the flashlight and a book about Samurai from the bed-stand next to her. Quinn was nine. She was doing a school project on Japan and she was enthralled by the Samurai, telling her family about them over dinner and drawing pictures of them. Daphne thought it was creepy that her little sister was so captivated by them, but Quinn just told her sister that she didn't understand. The samurai had an entire culture revolving around death, their entire mentality called shini gurui which means death frenzy. Every morning they would meditate on it, picture the last moment of their life however violent and painful that moment might be—jumping into

fire, getting stabbed. Every morning they would think of themselves as dead. Death was almost a religion, not a consequence but some sort of gateway.

When Quinn rented a VHS from the library about the warriors, her father was not sure if it was age appropriate. "Seems a little violent" he said, "why can't she write about those big pink flowers they got in Japan?"

"It's fine," her mother would say back to him. "It's educational. If she's interested, let her learn. Nothing worse than a sheltered girl."

What they didn't know was that Quinn thought the meditation was more interesting than the death. She had never heard of a person training their mind before. She thought about what she could do if she meditated like these Samurai did, if every morning she thought about the same thing over and over and over until one morning she could do it, until a morning when her dream would morph into her reality and she could be famous, or fly, or anything she wanted.

When Quinn woke up that morning, she thought about meditating and she made a list of all the things she could convince herself to do: steal the new leotard she saw in the studio window, pierce her ears, get a tattoo, run away. But the more she thought about it, the more Quinn felt like all the things she'd have to meditate to do, were all things she didn't actually want to do that bad. And then she started feeling sorry for the samurai warriors, thought she understood something about them that no one else did, thought none of them wanted to die.

Quinn heard the jolt of the shower turning on downstairs. It was her mother, she knew, because her father sleeps in until eight or nine when he doesn't have to be in the shop until ten. Quinn grabbed a sweatshirt because she was cold in just her thin t-shirt and cotton shorts before going downstairs. Her parent's door was open and she could see her dad asleep in the dark room, the light from the bathroom illuminated a jagged square of the bed. Quinn walked through the bedroom, careful not to wake her father, and sat on the hard linoleum floor of the bathroom. Through the thick, foggy shower door she would make out the smears of her

mother's body, the pinks and peaches and dark places between. Her mother didn't notice her in there until Quinn leaned over and shut the door.

"You're up early" Quinn's mother said.

"I couldn't fall back asleep," she answered. "Hey mom, I figured out something this morning. I don't think any of the samurai wanted to die. Isn't that sort of sad?"

Quinn's mother's hand reached out of the shower door, grabbed a towel and wrapped it around her thin body. "You don't know that, hon. I'm sure it's more complicated than that. Sometimes it's not as simple as you want to do something or you don't want to. Sometimes you just have to do it. Or you want to, but you know it will hurt. Maybe the samurai wanted to die in battle, but were scared of the pain. Maybe that's why they meditate."

"Maybe" Quinn said.

"Alright upstairs little lady. You have a couple more hours to sleep." Quinn went upstairs and crawled back into bed. She thought about the samurai, and then she thought about her mother and her mother's body in the shower, the dark triangle smeared between her legs. Quinn shined the flashlight on herself, lifted the blue cotton of her shorts and her underwear, seeing only pink skin, and she thought about all the ways that she and her mother were not the same.

Part 3:

When they were small, Quinn and Daphne shared a queen size bed in the room above the garage in their house on Sweetborn Drive. When their dad left for work in the shop, the deep grumble of his lifting the garage door woke Daphne up, so every morning she listened to him leave. It was supposed to be for storage, that room above the garage, because of the slanted ceilings and poor insulation, but Daphne's father put up drywall and painted it lavender, carpeted the floor so it felt like a bedroom. In the summers the room got so hot the walls were damp and Daphne and Quinn would lie on top of the worn sheets in just their underwear,

spread out their bodies so no piece of skin touched any other.

Quinn was taller and thinner than Daphne. She was bossy and funny and got all the attention from visitors and family friends. But at night, Quinn needed Daphne. She had nightmares and saw shadows that scared her. Once at Holy Cross Elementary her religion teacher, Mrs. Feeney, told her that Satan does not bother with bad people because he already has them in his grip. But if you are good, Mrs. Feeney said, that's when you should worry about the devil. That's when he'll tempt you and hover in your room and try to get you. Quinn couldn't sleep for weeks after that, unsure which category she fell under or which was better.

When Quinn woke her sister up she would face away from her and Daphne would smooth her hair against the pillow and tell her that old Mrs. Feeney doesn't know a thing. She'd sing her sister to sleep or tell her stories, versions of Frankenstein when the monster just wants a friend and ghost stories when the demons just need sugar for baking. Once Quinn's breaths were deep and stable, Daphne would curl back over on her side of the bed but couldn't fall back asleep. Lying there, she'd try to match her breaths with Quinn's, thinking that if their inhales and exhales were in sync, that maybe when she woke up Daphne would be a little more like her sister.

In the daylight Quinn was brave. She was two years younger than Daphne but could jump off the high dive at the neighborhood pool and won the talent show in fifth grade by singing a "I say a Little Prayer for You" and twirling around on stage so her skirt rose like a parachute and everyone could see her pretty kneecaps. Daphne sat between her parents during the show, watching her sister twirl and smile in the florescent gym light as if she were an angel, or a fairy, or just Quinn, lost in her own beautiful world completely unaware that hundreds of eyes watched her with approval.

That was all before their mother left. Their mother's name was Sylvia. Daphne knew because your mother's name is one of those things you just know without any one ever telling you, and she knew because it was written with black marker on the back of the old typewriter

her mother wouldn't sell when her dad died. She kept the typewriter in a leather bag that was a richer color brown at its seams and by its zipper than it was in the middle where it was scratched and faded. Daphne's mom said old things tend to age that way, kind of like faces, she said, but then she added that she would take the old over the new any day. She called it character.

Daphne's mother kept that typewriter on the bottom shelf of the bookcase in the living room. Her father had once told her that everything important takes place in private, so after school when Daphne was alone because her mother played golf or cards or shopped for groceries and Quinn had dance lessons, Daphne would pull the leather handle and drag the typewriter off its shelf and across the carpet to the small closet under the stairs. When she opened the door to the closet it looked like any other coat closet, a metal bar suspended across and holding their church coats and first communion dresses and her mother's khaki rain coat that looked like it should belong to a spy or someone with something to hide.

None of the guests who opened the closet door knew that if you part the clothes or crawl underneath their hems, the closet was deep and ran the length of the stairs. It was filled with boxes marked Christmas ornaments and Easter and Baby clothes, and Daphne spent hours stacking the boxes to create a desk to put the typewriter on so she could sit cross legged on the floor in the closet under the stairs and behind the coats and she could write letters and stories and lists of names she liked and places she'd like to see and boys she'd like to kiss before she died.

Daphne thought it felt good to type on a typewriter because she could see the tiny metal rod that connected every key to the stamp that pushed its letter on the page. She had to press on the keys hard like she meant it, which made it hard to lie when she typed on a typewriter and hard not to stare at what she'd written in ink on the page curling in front of her eyes. If she decided she did not like what she wrote, she could erase it with a key that blotted out the black ink by just stamping white ink over it, but she could still see the remnant of the 'b' under the white or whatever letter or word was under there, so even though she could try to

Writing Raw

All work appearing below is copyrighted by the author.

go back and erase, it was a little bit impossible.

Daphne's mother told her that something typewritten meant more than something handwritten because it was purposeful and professional and made your fingers hurt after a while, and so they became pen pals who typed their letters. Every room in the house was a country and when Daphne's mother was in the kitchen she was in Spain and she would write to Daphne about the matadores and fiestas and colorful dresses that make women look like flowers without roots, spinning in the wind when they dance in the streets. Daphne would write from the Alaskan whaling boat in the claw-footed bathtub upstairs and complain of the cold but describe the mountains and the tall, thin trees. Every week she checked out a book from the library about new places in the world she could describe to her mother.

Daphne folded her letters three times so they were long and skinny and put them in the toaster so they stuck out and her mother knew she had mail. Her mother then put her responses under Daphne's pillow because she knew her daughter liked to lie in bed while she read them. Daphne loved pretending to be around the world, but sometimes it scared her how realistic her mother's letters sounded about loving being away, and Daphne didn't want to forget that she was really there in her home on Sweetborn Drive, and this was her bed and her quilt and that sharp clinking noise was her mother downstairs in the kitchen putting the dishes away in the cabinet in her house where they all lived together as a family.

When her mother did leave, the sound of the garage door woke Daphne up. From her bed she could see out the window where her mother's sedan pulled out of the driveway and into the gas station across the street. She saw her mother get out the driver side and pick up the nozzle, her hair still wet from a shower. Daphne did not think to be worried until she went downstairs for breakfast and there was a piece of paper folded and stuck into the toaster. My letters will be handwritten now, but they will be true, it read.

For a while, Daphne thought her mother lived in the old shack in the woods where they used to ride bikes. Every time they passed it her mother talked about what a shame it was that

it had gone to ruin. She wanted to fix it up, to make it beautiful again. After she left Daphne started to ride her bike along that path by the shack every day hoping she would see her mother or her mother would see her. She swore she saw shadows moving inside the windows and thought that if her mother just saw her ride by she would come out and invite her in to live with her. Daphne's mother wrote Daphne and Quinn letters all summer, asking how they were and telling them she loved them and to practice dance moves and to be good for their dad, but she never left a return address for them to write her back. Daphne tried to tell Quinn about the shack, that they could slip her letters under the doorway, but Quinn did not believe her. She said that their mother was far away from them, that no one runs away down the street. Quinn never read her letters. Daphne waited until she left the room to fish them out of the trashcan.

At the end of the summer Daphne decided to go inside the shack and talk to her mom. She filled her book bag with oranges and sandwiches so they could eat lunch together while she would ask her mother to come home or ask if she could leave with her. The door to the shack felt wet and cold and heavy despite the summer heat and it sagged on its hinges so when Daphne pushed it open it scraped along the floor. The place had a few rooms but all of them were empty except for an old table, empty beer bottles and cans collected in the corners and a rusting lawn chair that she did not sit in but she sat beside. The light looked mustardy and splotchy because it had to comb through the dust covering the window. Finally Daphne understood that her mother was gone.

Daphne sat on the floor of the shack until eventually she heard the soft whisper of bike tires in the grass and saw Quinn through the open door. Quinn wore a salmon tank top and grey shorts and looked like their mother with her thin legs and black curly hair piled on her head.

"It's time to go home," she said. Daphne didn't move so she came over and sat down beside her. Quinn held Daphne's hand and neither talked nor moved for a while until Quinn let go and went outside. When she came back she had her backpack and pulled out two cans of their dad's beer. "He'll never know," she said. Quinn popped hers open like a coke can and

slowly drank it, the tangy flavor sticking in the back of her throat and caught in her nose, but Daphne did not open hers, only because it was her father's.

Earlier that summer Daphne had found a cigar box in the closet under the stairs. They were out of paper so she could not type, but she crawled under the coats anyway to rearrange the space, and she found a cigar box filled with letters she had not written and which her mother had not written to her. They were from her dad before her parents were married and he called her mother 'baby' in them and said she would be a beautiful wife and he talked about school and Daphne wondered who he was, this man who was her father but was not her father then, and who said things like beautiful and that it would be okay, it would be wonderful even. She was thirteen and was starting to learn words like tender and sad, not learn them but understand them, and she had never thought of her father in those terms before, but in the letters she wanted to hug him and find him and shake him back to reality all at the same time. It felt like the type of letter you could never fold three times and put in the toaster for the world to see and anyone to accidentally pick up because they wanted to make toast to go with their eggs or because they spotted it when they went in to wash their hands or because they were just curious. The letters felt unholy, somehow, like they could only live in a cigar box in the corner behind the coats in the closet under the stairs.

So when Daphne sat in the old cabin without her mother and watched Quinn sip their father's beer, she imagined her dad whose hands were stained with grease from the shop and who had eyes like old people, eyes that looked thick and glazed over, yellowed so they are soft and knowledgeable but also ugly. She imagined her dad sitting at the table for breakfast, the newspaper spread between his hands making the thinnest shield for his face, and Daphne knew that she could no longer protect Quinn, that an invisible line was being drawn between what they used to be and what they would be now.

As the summer became progressively hotter, Quinn started sleeping on the fold out in the living room. Daphne stayed upstairs though the room above the garage was muggy and

suffocating, the air thick around her body. One night towards the end of summer Daphne slipped downstairs in the middle of the night feeling restless and a need for fresh air. She walked past Quinn, whose lips were parted so her mouth was slightly agape, and her eyes closed so lightly they were still twitching, the oily skin over her lids reflecting the blue of the TV. Daphne snuck out of the living room door and did not stop at the porch or the property line, but walked to the lake half a mile away. Even the breeze was warm as she walked, it sent plastic cups skipping across the street, stopping and spinning over a sewer drain. When she got to the lake, the water reflected a perfect crescent moon, “God’s fingernail” her dad always called it. But that idea always unsettled Daphne a little, made her wonder where the rest of his hands were and what they were holding and what about when the moon is full.

There was something refreshing about being alone outside in the middle of night, like for just a second Daphne was the only person alive, the only person seeing this, not lonely but lucky. Full. Like there was a secret door opening at her feet when she sat on the damp wood of the pier and dipped her toe in the still water so it rippled out. Daphne knew she could do anything she wanted and no one would know, that she could have something only hers and she would not tell Quinn or let her father find out. She took off her shorts first, a blue cotton pair of Quinn’s, then twisted her shirt off of her head so she stood in her underwear and bra before finally removing those, sitting on the edge of the wood and using her hands to lift and seal her body into the cold water.

Daphne didn’t swim at first. She let her hands float above her and her pointed feet drag her to the bottom of the lake. She felt weightless and blind, unable to open her eyes against the cold rushing and enveloping and picking her hair off of her shoulders so it could fly around her face like she was medusa or a ghost or an angel dropping to earth. The peace lasted only a moment before Daphne’s lungs began to swell in her chest without oxygen, bounce off her collar bone so it felt like they might lodge in her throat and choke her. She wondered if she wouldn’t make it above but she kicked and pulled until finally her head broke the surface and

her body bobbed in the black water. That's when she saw Marcus standing at the end of the dock wearing jeans rolled up above his ankles and a white undershirt. Marcus was their neighbor. He had freckles and dark hair and would go to high school this fall.

"What are you doing here?" Daphne asked.

"I followed you."

"I wanted to be alone."

"What's the difference? You didn't know I was here." then he paused—"I heard about your mom."

"What's it to you?"

"Nothing, I guess. I never knew her."

"Right," Daphne said. Her voice sounded sharp in the night, harsh against the sounds of the water lapping against the posts of the dock. They were quiet for a while. Marcus did not say anything but Daphne watched him look at her, then the sky, then the water, then at her clothes piled on the wood at his feet. He did not look at her again until finally he did, his eyes narrowed and his mouth twisted so he looked like he was angry or thinking or disgusted, but mostly sorry. Daphne wanted to look away but she didn't, she watched him as he took off his shirt, tossed it on the dock and then unclasped a thin chain around his neck and draped it carefully over his t-shirt. He undid his belt, took off his jeans and then his underwear until he was completely naked standing in front of Daphne at the end of the pier, his body pale and gray in the night. He lay down on the dock so all Daphne could see were the soles of his feet and he could not watch her as she climbed the rusty ladder onto the dock and lay down next to him, two naked glistening bodies a foot apart. They did not talk to each other but eventually Daphne reached over and set her palm on Marcus's hand. She did not hold it, and he did not hold hers, but they were touching and for that night they were no longer Daphne or Marcus but just a girl and boy, each as vulnerable as the other, both just as worried of getting a splinter from the old wood or being seen or falling in or falling asleep.

Part 4:

The house on Sweetborn Drive where the girls grew up was large and creaky. Its white paint splintered off the wood beams like the bark of a birch tree and Quinn and Daphne used to sit on the front steps and peel away at the paint until their dad or Marcie would see them from the window and shout out to stop ruining the one and only house they got to live in. Marcie moved in a couple months after Daphne started high school. It had been just Daphne and Quinn and their father alone in that house for a couple years, since their mother left to get gas one morning in her green sedan and never came back. For a while their father thought she'd for sure come back eventually since she left some of her clothes and she'd taken his prized red toolbox filled with things like screwdrivers and drill bits, a crescent wrench and needle nose pliers. When she was first married, Daphne's mother used to sit on the stairs in the garage while her husband went through that toolbox and found what he was looking for before going to work on the washer or the kitchen sink or whatever it was she asked him fix up for her.

Once in the winter when Quinn was just a toddler and Daphne was home from school on account of snow, their mother grabbed that toolbox and some scraps of wood from outside. She spread old newspapers out on the kitchen table and helped Daphne make a bird-house that Daphne's dad said was a waste of time, making a home for birds that had been gone for three months. But her mother just winked at Daphne and told her it's never too late to make a decent home. Daphne's mother didn't know all the right names of the tools, but Daphne sat quiet anyway and listened to her lay every one out on the table, and make up its name and job. Daphne watched her mother squirt the glue out on two pieces of wood and squeeze them together so the thick liquid bubbled out the sides. She watched her mother put the house together piece by piece, explaining her every move and finally letting Daphne paint it however she wanted—yellow walls with a red roof and a big red star under the circular door. Daphne loved that birdhouse and used a wire hanger to tie it to a tree out back so she could see it through the window over the kitchen sink. Her dad called her mother a real engineer, his own

Sweet-Sylvie, a genuine carpenter. He told her she could probably have that red toolbox someday, when he gets one of them big stand-up kinds he wants, the kind with all the drawers and locks and compartments. Daphne thought that's probably why her mother took the toolbox with her, because she felt like it was a little bit hers to take.

When Daphne's mother left to get gas and forgot to come back home, her father went out in the garage. His claw hammer was in its place under the tray in the toolbox that was long gone from their house, and so he grabbed the baseball bat instead and he went out back he smashed Daphne's birdhouse with it. Daphne and Quinn watched from the kitchen window as he very carefully untwisted the wire from the branch, placed the house on the ground oh-so-softly like it was an infant baby or had a bird in it that he didn't want to disturb. Then Daphne's dad used his old baseball bat to smash her house to pieces with a violence that was spastic and sudden as a bolt of lightning, when, for just a second, it lights up the night sky as if it were day, and makes you feel equal parts scared and relieved to see that the your room is really the same at night as it is in the morning.

Daphne never asked her father about the birdhouse just like after she took that baseball bat and gave it to the neighbor boys, her dad never asked her about that. He must have known she'd gotten rid of it because he said that in accord with Daphne's example he was going to go through the house and give away all the stuff they don't use anymore to the rummage sale at Holy Cross Parish. Daphne didn't help him finds things to donate, but she noticed that all the things he did donate were her mother's—sweaters and jewelry and her sewing machine and old shoe-boxes filled with cards and photos and keepsakes. He was not cruel about it but quick and secretive, like every item he put in a trash bag labeled 'Holy Cross' might hurt his daughters or make their mother's leaving more permanent. He left a few things of hers he thought the girls should have—a pearl necklace, a typewriter, a few books. Daphne never thanked him for letting them keep those things, but he never apologized for breaking her birdhouse, so she

guessed it was a silent sort of forgiveness they had.

When Marcie moved in Daphne thought her father had gone and picked the woman most opposite her mother. Marcie was chubby and loud and wore too much blue eye shadow that made her look desperate like she was trying to attract something but wasn't exactly sure what. Quinn told Daphne that opposite is exactly what their dad would want and how could anybody blame him? Daphne told her sister to shut her mouth and stomped out of the room but only because she knew Quinn was right and she hated her mother for making them live with a girl like Marcie who laughed too much and whose voice was pitched like wind pushing through the tight space when you don't shut your window all the way. Eventually Daphne decided to look past those things since Marcie was making her dad smile and sing to himself while he grilled out dinner or hung around the house. She didn't understand Marcie but she thought that it was probably better that she not understand a woman like Marcie. Daphne watched her father tease his new girlfriend and watched how Marcie tried to make the girls like her by picking them up mascaras at the drug store and asking them if they had any boyfriends. Daphne thought Marcie was cheesy and pathetic but she also thought that Marcie seemed real happy with her hair curlers and Sudoku books, happier than her mother had ever seemed, and Daphne wondered if Marcie's life couldn't be enough, somehow. Not for Daphne, but for somebody else. She thought she'd like to meet that person that this was enough for, but then she thought she had met her, in Marcie, and that she had not liked her. Daphne watched her father's girlfriend kneeling in the garden out back planting radishes and cucumber where her mother used to plant those things, and Daphne thought that she would rather build things or even destroy them, than pretend they were nice and hers when in reality they were not nice and they were not anyone's at all.

Part 5:

Daphne had been living with her fiancé in an old apartment in Chicago for only about a month. He'd gotten a job writing short ad blurbs about pedicure deals and two-for-one golf outings, and she resold books and took night classes to get her teaching certification. It was just turning fall and when Daphne went to the grocery store there was a bin of small flower-pots the size of tea-cups in the check-out. Each tiny pot was painted the color of its plant: carrots in an orange pot, baby sunflowers in yellow, basil in green. Daphne picked out five and placed them on the windowsill in her new kitchen, a tiny herb-garden overlooking a gray alley. She was careful to water them, to open the curtains so they could get sun, she even bought a small bottle of paint and wrote the names on the lip of each tiny pot—basil, rosemary, sage, thyme, parsley. She was embarrassed at the tinge of accomplishment she felt when the tiny green leaves began to poke from the pockets of black soil; Daphne felt as if she had created them for herself, made life in the ten by twelve square footage of her kitchen.

Daphne grew up a few hours away in a small town where her dad had a garden the size of her apartment's kitchen. He grew cucumber and tomatoes, radishes, bell peppers, herbs. Once he dug up an old brass knuckle while he was gardening, swears Johnny Dillinger dropped it there while running from cops across Indiana. He spent the afternoon cleaning up the brass knuckle, wiping the dirt away and trying to shine up the metal. He placed it on his dresser next to a baseball he had signed by the Yankees in 1961, his two ties folded up nicely for special occasions and a photograph of Daphne's mother—his most prized possessions.

For years Daphne's father justified having that framed photo of the wife who left him by saying that it was his favorite picture of his baby Quinn and that he can't help it that Sylvia is in it. No one fully believed him but no one had the heart to ask him to take it down, and the girls secretly liked that it was there every time they snuck into their father's bedroom. Sylvia was in her early twenties in the photo, standing on the beach in a yellow bathing suit holding Quinn, barely a year old, on her hip. The picture was taken up close so it looks almost like she is naked except for the thin line of yellow sneaking in the bottom of the picture, and she is looking at Quinn instead of the camera so you can see the mole on the side of her mouth and one on her

collar bone. She looks beautiful and young and happy in the photo, like she belongs there in that frame where she cannot get away and she can never change and she can never be real.

When Daphne's father married Marcie, a simple woman he met at the church fish-fry one Lenten Friday, she asked him to please take that yellowing picture of his ex-wife down. "It feels like a ghost in the room" she said. So he took it off his dresser and put it in a box in his closet until Quinn took it out and upstairs, and put it in a shoebox under her bed.

At first, Quinn was the family member who best dealt with Sylvia's leaving. She admitted it first, called it what it was first; she didn't imagine her mother's return or make up stories about where she could be; she didn't break anything. She changed in smaller ways, a compass faintly broken so that it points just slightly northeast instead of north. When she was in eighth grade she started walking to the gas station across the street from their creaky Victorian and filling up cardboard cups with steaming cappuccinos that burned her tongue and made her look mature. She started smoking in high school, gave up dance, focused on school and boys and drinking on the weekends with her friends. She didn't stand out as hurting or different or affected, but she was harsher, more obsessive, less oblivious of her power.

Neither of the girls lives on Sweetborn Drive anymore in that one-streetlight-town. Daphne moved to Chicago with her fiancé and Quinn moved to Bloomington on a scholarship to Indiana University, but dropped out after her second year, claimed she'd rather have an authentic experience than read about one in a textbook. You can't read about music, she told Daphne on the phone, if you haven't experienced it for what it really is. That was a couple years ago when all Quinn needed to feel mature was doping up and placing records onto their dad's old turntable.

Daphne was watering the plants in her kitchen when she got the call to go get Quinn. It was Zane who called, Quinn's latest in a long line of boyfriends. He said that Quinn was going crazy, that she was saying things that didn't make sense, talking about the Underground Railroad and birds that die jumping out of their nests. She hallucinated that she saw people in

their house and Zane hates that he has to call Daphne like this, but frankly her sister needs help. Daphne knew her little sister had been getting into harder drugs lately, but chose to imagine it was all in the realm of controlled. Controlled. Quinn had called Daphne 'controlled' once, used the word like an insult. Daphne thought it weird because she didn't feel like she was controlling anything or holding anything back. She almost laughed to herself when she used the word on the phone with Zane. "I thought Quinn was under control" she had said, as if Quinn ever muzzled a single thought or did anything half way. "Nevermind" Daphne immediately corrected herself on the phone, standing at her kitchen window and running her ring finger up and down the shaft of her basil plant; "I'm on my way. I'll be there this afternoon."

When Daphne pulled into her little sister's driveway she imaged Quinn sitting on the couch with Zane, skinnier than the last time they'd seen each other. Daphne worried that her sister would be angry or broken in a way she could not relate to. So she was relieved when Zane answered the door in shorts and a stained Northwestern sweatshirt, bowl of cereal in hand like the day was ordinary. Daphne had met Zane for the first time last Christmas at her dad's and he seemed nice enough. She had said so to Quinn as they washed and dried the dishes from dinner.

"Do you like him?" Daphne had asked.

"Did I choose him? I seem to forget," Quinn said, which made Daphne stop to look at her. Quinn smiled without facing her sister and softly nudged her arm into Daphne's. There was something noticeably cold about the way Quinn moved as she dried the dishes, a broken hesitation in her hands as they ran along the edge of the bowls, smoothed the dampening towel over their surfaces. She didn't seem nervous so much as extremely aware of her surroundings. Daphne didn't think enough then to question those things. Once they were finished they had stepped out on the porch to have a cigarette. They could see Marcie inside on the couch next to Zane, both laughing but at what, the girls couldn't tell. Daphne and Quinn didn't talk about anything important but Daphne liked talking to Quinn in the dark because she didn't seem so skinny when all you could hear was her voice.

Daphne started to notice that Zane was always like that—nearby but never intrusive. He was a peripheral character, a boy who was enough in Quinn’s trap to shoot up with her or give her a small pill she could let dissolve on her tongue, but he was smart enough to try to help her when she needed it, smart enough to stay in the living room when Quinn wanted to be alone. When Daphne went that afternoon to get her sister, he held the door open for her so she had to turn her body not to touch him as she walked in. The living room was dark but clean, brown marks like cracks spread out in the corner of the ceiling where there was water damage. “Yeah, I been meaning to fix that” Zane said, noticing how Daphne was looking at it. A mustard yellow mixing bowl sat on a table underneath the decaying ceiling to catch the droppings when it rains. Daphne recognized the bowl as her mother’s. Her dad gave it away to Holy Cross annual rummage sale where Quinn had gone to buy it back. Daphne thought it was odd that Quinn used something of their mother’s to catch water, to save carpet, to keep a house together in a way. Zane went to the kitchen to be out of the way while Daphne walked through the thin hallway to Quinn’s room. Quinn was in bed but was not asleep so Daphne took off her shoes and crawled in with her. “Are you okay?” she asked.

“Don’t really want to talk about it.” A pause—“I need to get out of here for a little while”

“Well, come home with me. That’s why I’m here. We could go to dad’s for a couple days first, relax.” Daphne smiled at the way her voice sounded in the room, like a child pretending to be a grownup—small, reaching for something it wasn’t sure how to grasp.

“Strangest thing happened to me the other day,” Quinn said after a while. “I ran down the street to get a pack of cigarettes and when I came out of the gas station I stopped to light one and I see Mrs. Feeney across the street. Remember her? That old religion teacher at Holy Cross. She was heavier then she used to be, her gray hair pulled into a loose braid down her back but I knew it was her. Before I knew what I was doing, I’d crossed the street and was following her, skipping every few steps to keep up with her, weaving in and out of people and dogs and garbage cans. If she turned a corner, I turned the corner; if she stopped to tie her

shoe, I stopped to watch her. For some reason I had to know where she was going, where she lived, if she had a family. We passed my apartment and my car and the restaurant where I work and the further I walked the angrier I got. I wanted to strangle Mrs. Feeney. I can't explain it, I wanted to find out where she lives and throw a brick through the window and disrupt a life that I'm sure is organized into cubbies and Lysoled clean. I followed her all the way to the marina before I was close enough to see her face and I wanted her to see mine, to remember me and to apologize for all the things she told us about God and the devil and how none of us are safe. But once I got close enough to see her and push her, she turned her head to the side and I knew that it wasn't Mrs. Feeney's profile, that I had been following a stranger, so the stranger turned and I kept going. I sat on a bench overlooking the marina and looked at the sail boats and speed boats and pontoons all slurping the water, bobbing up and down like dead fish. I knew I had lost something. I wanted to take one of the boats and leave, to lift the leather seat, take out the lifejackets shoved in there and crawl in that space so when a beautiful family gets on board tomorrow they will sail away and take me with them and not even know I am there. But I just went home. Longest walk home of my life."

After a while Daphne got up and got her sister a glass of water, packed Quinn's bag for her while Quinn slept on the bed. When she woke up, Daphne had already loaded the car and warmed up soup for the girls to eat before they got on the road. Zane kissed Quinn on the head before they left and said he'd see her in a couple days. Daphne thought they looked like a strange couple, Quinn and Zane, because Quinn was so thin and her hair needed cut and Zane used to be an athlete so his body retained some of its muscle she could make out by his arms and calves the way the sinews moved in his neck when he chewed.

It was dark when the girls finally made it past Indianapolis and started the long flat drive into northern Indiana. They knew they were getting close to home when they could see the fields of massive white wind turbines churning through the air. They each have a red light at its center which blinks off and on so planes don't fly into them and bird don't get chopped up by

their long skinny arms. As the girls drove towards the windmills, those red lights were synchronized so that they all flashed on and off, on and off in exact unison and Quinn joked that it looked like an alien invasion or a ritual. Only one of the windmills had a light that was off kilter, not synchronized like the rest. It flashed a little faster, like it was trying to catch up or didn't understand the rhythm. "If this was an alien invasion," Quinn said, "that little non-conformist would be our only hope."

When they pull into the gravel driveway of their old home on Sweetborn Drive, Daphne stays in the car to make a call. The headlights are still turned on and so she can watch Quinn walk up to the house with her hands in her pockets and a bag slung over one shoulder. Her jeans hang on her in a way they didn't used to and Daphne thinks that her sister looks tired and older than she should. We were not supposed to end up this way Daphne thinks to herself. But then she wonders if there is any way they were supposed to end up. She thinks about her tiny plants on her windowsill back in Chicago and about how easy they grow exactly like they should as long as she is there is water them and see that they are in the sun. But it makes her a little sad to think that her plants did not have roots in the ground, only roots in a flower pot that had walls and a floor, and could be moved.

Daphne makes her call and heads inside, sits at the dining room table with Quinn where they shared so many birthdays and holidays. Marcie says hi from the kitchen and comes in to sit a bowl of cherries on the table. "I picked them all from the trees by the railroad," she says, and Daphne smiles at her, but Marcie knows there is nothing else she can do so she goes upstairs to lie down.

"You know what I think the saddest thing is?" Quinn asks Daphne.

"What, Q?"

"We could never leave if we wanted to, like mom did. Facebook, email, all that stuff—there is no where in the world we could go and not be known." She slices a cherry in half with her thumb nail and flicks the seed out on the table.

“Yeah” Daphne says, picking up her sister’s dejected seed and dropping it into an empty dish. The two sisters sit and eat and pit cherries until their dad comes downstairs, until long after they’ve stained their hands so they look like they’re bleeding, and they try to clean them before dinner, they suck on their fingers and wash them in the sink, but they are still dyed red.

The End

Julie Ardelean bio: Julie Ardelean was born in Indianapolis, IN and is a graduate of DePauw University where she was recipient of Roy and Anna Kennedy Prize in Creative Writing for Fiction. She has published both prose and poetry in various small publications both online and in print. Currently she works for an education non-profit by day, but continues to write whenever she can. "It Died in Chicago, the Same Way it Came" is a short story which takes place unsurprisingly in Chicago, a city where things are simultaneously being born and being broken nearly every moment. The story is simply about two people who used to love each other who - quite simply - realize that they do not love each other anymore. It is, for all intents and purposes, the end of a love story and an honest exploration of the great sadness when we cannot will ourselves back into the people we used to be. "The Left" is an excerpt of a larger story, "The Things She Touched," which are both attached to this email. "The Things She Touched" is the story of two sisters, Daphne and Quinn, whose mother leaves them and their father when they are impressionable preteens. It charts their reactions, their memories, their anger, their ways of coping. Ultimately it is a story of growing up, a story of navigating the unexpected the people who wind up next to us, and a story not of the mother who leaves but of the family who is left and who ultimately stays.