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A Hundred Seeds

Group therapy opens with introductions and a listing of the group rules, every time a new person comes. We have a little system for doing both together, so the first guy might say, "I'm Danny, my drug of choice is alcohol, and you can't swear in here."

Sitting next to him is a man with cement dust covering his pants and shoes. He just got here from work and didn't have time to go home for a shower and change of clothes. He says, "I'm Max, alcohol, and what is said in here, stays in here." A few other group members nod their heads, noting the gravity of that particular rule. The introductions continue in a circle around the room, and by the time each of these men has introduced themselves, we've heard a menu of street drugs listed, and all of the rules.

I am always the only woman in the group. If recent events warrant it, I might highlight a particular rule, saying, "It is especially important, considering what happened last week, that I remind you not to come to group under the influence of drugs or alcohol." A couple of guys smirk, and the new one looks up, raising his eyebrows.

Next I tell them the announcements. "Mark can't be here for the next seven weeks because he got sentenced last Wednesday. He got 65 days in Saline County Jail, but hopes to be out in 50. I have an address here where you can write to him if you want. I think he'd appreciate it. Here is the current phone list; take a copy if you don't have one already."

These are the meth addicts and alcoholics, the men whose licenses have been taken away by the Department of Motor Vehicles. They have lost their jobs, their children, their wives, girlfriends or partners, and their dignity. They have made unbelievably stupid mistakes and didn't learn from them. They have driven trains, dump trucks and forklifts with drugs or alcohol in their bloodstreams. One has driven through the back wall of his own garage. Many of them display distended bellies due to their swollen livers, and most of them come in smelling of tobacco smoke. These are my guys, and I'll never tell you their real names.

Most Americans traveling to Akumal fly into Cancun and take a ride down a four-lane highway 105 kilometers south. The four-lane is new; it used to be a poorly maintained bumpy road. Even then it was worth the trip for the local culture, access to Mayan ruins, and saltwater bays edged by coral reefs that teem with manta rays. Tourists stay in hotels, villas or

casitas with hammock-filled patios facing the ocean where the sun seems to solidify out of the depths every morning, while locals live in cement block rooms across the road, their view obscured.

At the time that my cousin Julie went five years ago, there was no sidewalk lining the main road into and out of town. Citizens, tourists, employees of the hotels, children and dogs all shared the street with the vehicle traffic. I try to tell myself that this lack of an adequate walkway means something, along with the fact that one has since been installed, but that knowledge is a fragment of a bird's egg that can't be reconstructed even if all of the pieces could be collected. There was no sidewalk. But this is not a story about sidewalks.

Yesterday my daughter told me that insurance rates are more expensive on red vehicles, not because they move any faster but because people who own them are considered higher risk drivers. The Mexican driver in the red truck would have fallen into that category because of how drunk he was that morning. Maybe he was a great driver, sober. I wouldn't know. I don't know much about him.

Already that morning he had swerved towards a local vendor who leapt aside in time to save his own life. Witnesses then detained the driver in front of Julie's hotel, putting up a chain across the front of his vehicle to prevent him from leaving. He protested, arguing in Spanish, and began to rev his engine.

I remember, and don't remember, driving drunk. Once, when I was seventeen, I drank with a friend at a bar until it closed. We had fake ID's and our first paychecks from the Officer's Club on the Air Force Base, where we bussed tables for the big brass and smoked cigarettes in the break room. Flush with cash, we went to a bar in town, drank fast and kept ordering. By the time we left, my friend had decided I was too drunk to drive and took my keys away. She got in the driver's seat of my Buick Electra 225. Sober people might point out that she had been drinking side by side with me all night, but in the special hierarchy of drunken comrades, she was the better driver that night, and I gratefully got into the passenger seat.

Because those who get drunk together often share an absurd loyalty to one another, what she did next seems strange, even considering she was intoxicated. It still puzzles me, more than twenty years later. She drove the car to her house, said, "Good luck getting home, drive carefully," and slipped inside quietly, careful not to disturb her parents. She left the keys in the ignition and the engine idling.

A certain percentage of the population shares a trait involving the optic nerve that makes them susceptible to double vision. Those who have it, like myself, see double when they are

extremely tired or very drunk. The others never do, no matter how intoxicated they might become. The double images can be resolved by closing one eye. By retreating into monovision, the superimposition of conflicting images is reduced to one view, and no depth perception. Under the influence, it seems like a fair trade-off. I clambered over to sit behind the wheel, closed one eye and began the drive home.

Julie would not have heard the commotion in front of her hotel since she left a quarter of an hour earlier, turned the corner and began walking down the main road. Heat and light glanced off the throng of people that she walked with, each heading out for whatever their day would hold. Behind her, out of earshot, men yelled at the driver of the red truck as he revved the engine louder and louder. When the truck finally lurched forward, it tore through the chain that had been hastily strung up to stop its progress. The end of the chain swung up like a fist and crackled the windshield glass into a mosaic that must have separated his view into hundreds of separate images.

I have not learned the driver's name. The newspaper accounts tell it, and I could find it, but I'd rather not know. Certain lives contain an event so stark it becomes the tag line for that life, forever. The man who shot Reagan. The woman who drove her kids into the lake. *Everything* else they do or have done, the accumulation of small choices made every day that constitutes a life, is swept away in the gale of consequence. I know him as The Driver.

He wasn't alone in the truck. The friend sitting next to him was equally intoxicated. I don't know if they had been drinking all night or woke up and started early, but it doesn't matter. I've done both of those things myself, although drinking through until daylight was always unnerving to me. Light lengthened the distance between myself and my horizon, making the world seem less manageable and my own failings too visible. I liked it better when I passed out before sunrise.

Most people don't know anyone who has had a full-blown case of amnesia, during which people forget who they are and where they came from, and start new lives in cities several states away. But there are two subcultures in which amnesia is a common and accepted occurrence: daytime soap operas and drunks. In the former, a case of amnesia can account for a character's long absence and afford some plot twists that would be otherwise impossible. In the latter, we call them blackouts.

Blacking out and passing out are not the same thing. A passed out person is unconscious, seems to be asleep and is difficult to awaken. A person in an alcohol-induced blackout appears fully awake and functioning, but later cannot recall what they did. They might be dancing on

a piano, breaking off a relationship or driving a car, but the next day it is lost to them. The blackout might be a solid period of time, say 9 p.m. to midnight, or it may come and go so that the evening seems to have windows which open onto short scenes and then close again, with hours or minutes passing between them.

I drove home from my friend's house that night, I'm sure of it. I remember moving into the driver's seat and putting the car into drive. I know that I woke up the next morning in my own bed, and the Buick was parked in the street outside of my house. But of the two mile route through residential neighborhoods, I only recall driving one block. I wish that short segment had fallen away into the ink of amnesia like the rest of the trip home.

As drunk as he was, there is a good chance The Driver doesn't remember what happened next. Set free from the chain that couldn't hold the truck back, his view fragmented by crackled window glass, his engine wound up fast, he turned the corner and flew down the road, into the mill and hustle of hats and sarongs, sunglasses, road dust, shoulders, and sandals. The soft mammal of the human body is little obstruction to a truck in motion, and when he struck my cousin she didn't resist, thrown like a baby tossed up from a parent's arms, but left to fall without the safe catch that interrupts the descent.

The Driver hit two women with his truck that day, and kept driving until the astonished crowd overtook him, dragged him from his vehicle, held him until he could be turned over to the law. Maybe they held his friend, too, the drunken accomplice. If they didn't remember it themselves the next day, these two could read about it in the newspaper and try to fit the events into the blank spaces where memory didn't follow along. But this kind of reconstruction is as clumsy as the pasting together of the broken bird's egg. You can gather all the details you want, but you never really get it right.

In certain alcohol treatment centers, you will find a chaplain on staff. Part of an alcoholic's passage into recovery is something called a Fifth Step, an accounting of themselves and their actions, a hard cold look in the mirror. Patients struggle through this list of horrors, or find creative ways to avoid and minimize it. But an honest and thorough telling, to themselves, a Higher Power, and one other person, can make the difference between restoration of a life and further destruction. It makes good sense for the chaplain rather than a counselor to listen to these accountings because there is almost no situation in which clergy are compelled to report information that was shared under the seal of confession.

Sometimes, these chaplains find themselves

doing quiet explorations on behalf of the patients, anonymously calling county law enforcement, newspapers or lawyers to discover whether or not something might have happened, an unsolved crime, a hit and run accident or a bar fight that ended worse than most. Usually the fears are alleviated—no unsolved cases, no one was hurt—and the alcoholic can shake free of the dread that has dogged his heels. Sometimes it's the other way around, and he is forced to decide whether to turn himself in or keep moving on down the road. Being unable to remember your own behavior is a peculiar kind of affliction, a blindfold both welcomed and cursed.

I can remember little of my drive home from my friend's house. The segment I can retrieve was one block long, a shortcut through a suburban neighborhood, curved slightly and on a hill. My vision was impaired more than I could compensate for by closing one eye. Maybe the seat was not adjusted but I seemed too low, too short in the cockpit. I suspect now that my lights were not on because I barely could see at all, so I invented a navigation technique on the spot, something akin to feeling my way home. When I felt the car hit the curb on the right, I turned my steering wheel left. When it hit on the left, I turned my wheel right. I was weaving down the street like a drunk down a hallway, bouncing off the wall on one side and then the other. The remainder of the two miles home is lost to the blindfold.

When Julie was thrown to the street, so was the woman who walked beside her. Neither of them could get up, and witnesses began calling out, "Is there a doctor?" while others chased down the red truck. An American woman ran up through the crowd and quickly assessed both victims. She made sure an ambulance had been called for, and then she laid down in the dirt road next to my cousin and began to talk with her.

"I'm a nurse. You're going to be okay. Help is coming."

"What happened to me?" Julie asked, and after the nurse explained she'd been hit from behind by a vehicle, "Am I going to die?"

The nurse's name was Jana. Some names are important to know. She had come to Akumal from Connecticut to wash away layers of grief that had been pressed upon her in the form of her father's death several months earlier, and two weeks later the death of her grandmother. The noise and color of the Mexican village offered distractions that weren't equaled in the New England winterscape. The losses were still with her, but here they had reduced to the size of a round, weighted locket worn under her shirt. She would fly home the next day.

Here is what was obvious to Jana. Julie's knee was badly broken, she was having difficulty breathing, and she was bleeding from her nose.

She didn't know the extent of her internal injuries, but she knew that of the two women in the street, Julie's case was more serious. The ambulances took half an hour to arrive. The nurse stayed in the road with Julie, making eye contact with her, assuring and coaxing her. When the emergency crews arrived, she asked if any of them spoke English. No one did. As Julie was being loaded into the vehicle, she begged the nurse, "Please come with me, stay with me."

The closest hospital was in Cancun, 105 kilometers to the north. Jana climbed into the ambulance with Julie, ignoring the protests of the crew members. She watched as Julie was given oxygen. Still, Julie had trouble drawing breaths, panicking that she couldn't get air. Jana spoke calmly to her, learned her name and her husband's name, and asked, "Where do you live?"

"Minnesota." Jana agreed to call her family for her as soon as they got to a phone.

There is no Patron Saint of Drunkards. Florists have one, wine merchants have one, but drunks are on their own. And yet you will hear them say "someone must have been watching over me" because they know they were not watching over the care of their own lives, or any life that came in contact with them. The depth of pain they cause is unfathomable, but that alone is never enough to make them stop.

I'd rather not have to tell you that I drove drunk somewhere in the neighborhood of a hundred times. That I lost count of the times that I could not remember how I got home. That I went on a drunken road trip with a boyfriend during which we traveled three states in one night while drinking hard liquor straight from the bottle. As far as I know I never killed anyone. I was never even charged with DWI. But that doesn't matter.

Last year in Nebraska, a man named Robin Siefker became suicidal after an argument with his wife. He decided to kill himself using a method he invented. He got on Interstate 80 in his Dodge Ram pickup, going the wrong way. The speed limit here is 75 miles per hour, and his plan was to drive until someone else hit him. The girl who did so was on her way home from college, completely sober, and she died instantaneously. The suicidal man was taken by helicopter to a regional trauma hospital, where medical experts prepared for his arrival.

The team investigating the crash scene found an empty bottle of Jose Cuervo in his truck. They also determined he had been driving approximately 100 miles per hour when he hit her head on. The victim's mother was quoted in the newspaper as saying, "I thought maybe she'd loaned her car," after hearing her daughter's Mustang had been in an accident. "She was always helping someone else."

It took an hour to get from the accident site in Akumal to the hospital in Cancun, and every bump in the road jarred Julie, bringing new pain. She became more and more anxious about her ability to breathe, until finally Jana crouched above her and began gently blowing onto her face. This feeling of air across her cheeks seemed to soothe her and make her feel as though she was getting breath, and she rested, and closed her eyes.

When she opened them again, she scrutinized the blonde woman suspended just above her. Pain had opened all the storehouses of endorphins by now, and shock had settled into her like bats taking roost. "You're an angel," she stated.

"I'm no angel, Julie."

"Yes, you are," and she closed her eyes again.

Julie and I were graced with many same-age cousins. Five female cousins were all born within a year of each other, one of them her twin, and if you add in the other girls a few years older and younger there were eight of us. There was a kindle of boy cousins too, but during our childhood the girls bunched together. We had birthday parties and sleepovers, skinny-dipped in the lake, invented songs and skits, and wrote fan mail.

One of the songs that Julie wrote when we were children had lyrics that seemed like a declaration of bold nonsense, exclaiming in some indefinable way our intention to really do something, soon. The chorus goes like this: *I'm gonna hit ground soon, I'm gonna knock out the moon, and all the stars will fly right outta the sky. I'm gonna hit ground soon, I'm gonna knock out the moon, and all the stars will fly right outta the sky.* Singing it made us feel powerful and charged up. We were going to do something. Watch out.

The first time I got drunk was at my own house, surrounded by my cousins. Our family gatherings at that time involved such large amounts of alcohol that my cousin Tessie and I could smuggle some out of the house easily, and we drank it in the dark yard. The other girls covered for us but didn't drink themselves, and soon Tessie and I were giggling and flailing our limbs around, falling into the warm grass, laughing until we thought we couldn't breathe. I think we were thirteen years old.

In most areas in America, Julie would have been life-flighted to a trauma hospital in a fraction of the time it took her to get to Cancun. An expert team would have been assembled and scrubbed, awaiting her arrival and studying the preliminary reports about the number of victims and the severity of their injuries. The hospital I work for uses their overhead paging system to alert the team members: *Code Trauma, Level Two, Five Minutes.* Two victims will arrive in five minutes.

Soon afterwards, the sound of helicopter blades chops the air.

Besides the pilot, those helicopters are staffed with medical teams that include a flight nurse and a respiratory therapist, each with at least three years of experience and special training in trauma medicine. They provide what is called "advanced airway management," meaning they assist people who cannot breathe to continue breathing anyway.

Trauma research has discovered something coined The Golden Hour. It refers to the importance of trauma patients receiving appropriate care within an hour of their injuries because doing so increases their chances of survival by forty percent, and reduces many complications they might otherwise experience. Apparently, the human body has resources to handle tremendous violations, but those robust efforts on the part of physical systems begin to be exhausted after sixty minutes.

In Cancun, the hospital had one x-ray machine, and it was out of order. A separate ambulance had carried the other victim. She arrived before Julie did, and although her back was broken and she would require a Medivac flight to the States, she was stable. It was now approaching two hours since they'd been hit. I tell myself this matters, that if the state of trauma care in that part of Mexico had been better, or if she'd been run down by a driver in the States instead, that the outcome would be different. But this isn't a story about health care.

Julie's lungs had been filling since she was thrown to the ground. Her strong heart kept relentlessly pumping her rich blood right into her own air sacs like honey poured in each cell of a honeycomb. She had been breathing from a smaller and smaller space as the blood overtook her air capacity, and finally there was no more room for her breath. She died minutes after her arrival at the hospital.

One night I parked my car on the edge of the Missouri River and contemplated driving into the water. I felt like the devil's child, unfit for clean living, and no wholesome thing I touched could remain untainted. I was drunk, and had been almost every night for weeks. There was a sickness in my blood, something that made me weak and out of balance, something I could only remedy with a pint of alcohol and a pack and a half of cigarettes. But that cure was only temporary, and I woke up every morning puking and worried about where I'd been. I hadn't yet graduated from high school.

I rolled the windows down and turned the music up, Meatloaf's "Bat Out of Hell," and watched the cigarette smoke follow the stream of my exhalation, making breath visible. I can't remember now how long I sat there, alternately praying and crying, too scared to drown myself

in the river. The thing that held me back was the thought I might change my mind after driving in, but be unable to extricate myself, held under by the mighty current and the pull of the Buick down to the river bottom. Maybe I fell asleep there in my car, and eventually I made my way home. I would carry that sadness with me like an immigrant's trunk for several more years before I would learn how to unpack it.

On the Nebraska prairie, milkweed plants grow up next to native grasses. The plants form pods, which dry out and split open each fall, releasing seeds which are attached to white floss. This floss is what lifts the seeds into the air, carried aloft by the slightest current, and ensures their dispersal far and wide. One pod might contain a couple of hundred seeds, each attached to a floss parachute, all lying in neat alignment inside the craggy case of the seedpod.

Julie's husband was a hang glider pilot. They'd travel together to Arkansas and she would stand on the cliff's edge while he would launch himself out and up, suspended from a colorful Dacron and aluminum wing, gliding in slow motion. She would provide crew support, and photograph him in flight, but she herself didn't glide. "I really want to, and I think I will eventually, but so far I have just been too afraid." She didn't say precisely what frightened her, but I have to believe it was the landing, the way the soft movement through air might end abruptly against the uncompromising ground.

When the time of year has come for milkweed to send out its quest for continuance, I have walked the fields and roadsides to look for the pods that are ready. When they are gray or brown instead of green or yellow, and the seams along the undersides of their bellies have split open to a crevice curling in on itself, then the white down parachutes are prepared to fly. Any earlier and they will be damp and cling to one another, unable to fluff up sufficiently to grip the wind. Any later and the pods will be clamshells opened into two halves, scoured and empty.

Releasing milkweed seeds when the wind is boisterous and fit is quick work. You might try to keep them in sight but they travel fast, blown far across the field, past the silos and windmills, crossing gravel roads and county lines, seeking a resting place after the wind tires, hoping the conditions will be right for flourishing.

When the breeze is nearly quiet, releasing milkweed is like nothing else you've seen. The seeds are easily scooped from the pods, and in each hand you might hold hundreds of them, all folded so neatly upon one another that it seems you are holding two birds, small and still. Raising your arms overhead helps the floss catch whatever current might be there, and rubbing your thumbs gently against your fingers untangles the fibers from each other.

They begin to float off from your fingertips, and each individual seed hangs in the air, slowly rising or falling, making unencumbered twirls. Release enough of them, and you are standing in a column of white parachutes, the light glinting off of each one, small bright charges you have sent on their way who hang close for a few moments, content to rest on the breath of air.

When wind flexes and reflexes its muscles, hang glider pilots stand around, impotent, with their gear tucked safely away. Strong gusts can batter a glider against the cliff face, or make landing too treacherous. Even though they may have traveled far for the chance to soar here, they don't launch into wind that is unpredictable. They'll wait.

On a good day at a hang gliding site the view is all color and movement, like a million monarchs have come through, traveling to one of their overwintering habitats. Glider after glider launches, coring the thermals, fevering the sky with their bright, wide wings. If the conditions are good, they'll stay in the air for hours, tantalized by the free-wheeling release from gravity until they float to the ground soft as milkweed down.

In the ambulance, Jana had assured Julie she would contact her family, and she kept her word. When she called to inform Julie's husband of her death, she had to tell him five times before he understood. He kept saying, "There has to be a mistake."

After her return to Connecticut, Jana received a telephone call from Julie's sister. She had flown with Julie's husband to Mexico to help identify her sister's body, arrange for her cremation and collect her belongings, on the advice of the American Consulate. She heard about the American nurse who had offered aid to Julie, and she wanted to talk to her. Jana knew someone might be calling, having left her phone number with the authorities in case Julie's family had questions.

"This is Jana," she said when she was called to the phone. The woman on the phone swallowed tears, and seemed to be asking for confirmation when she said, "This is Jana?"

"Yes, this is Jana." The woman's crying came harder, like whatever thin membrane had held it in check tore open, and she couldn't speak for several minutes.

"I was told you were in Mexico with Julie when she died, and I was given your telephone number but not your name." More crying. "I am Julie's twin sister." Sobbing, now. "My name is Jana."

Robin Siefker was kept in the trauma hospital until he could be transferred to a rehabilitation hospital to help him recover further from his injuries. Upon his release from Madonna Rehabilitation Hospital in early

January, he was arrested and charged with felony manslaughter, and his bond was set at $150,000. After the victim's mother learned he had been attempting suicide when he crashed into her daughter's car, she said, "If he wanted to kill himself, why didn't he go out and drive into a telephone pole, drink a bottle of Drano?"

A few weeks after the crash, the newspaper reported that the police had been contacted about Robin's suicidal state hours before he headed east in the westbound lanes of the interstate. He had threatened suicide, and had dropped off a briefcase at a friend's house that contained instructions for dividing his property among his children. The police had been asked to check on his welfare, but hadn't yet been able to make contact with him.

What I am about to tell you may or may not be true. The Mexican justice system is reputedly corrupt, and families can barter for their loved one's freedom with power or money, regardless of their crimes. Here is what I was told: The Driver was released from jail and never faced charges. His parents bought his way out.

This next piece is true, reported in the local paper. In September, ten months after his suicide attempt, Robin Siefker was found unfit to stand trial. Prior to this he had been out on bond, but when deemed unfit he was ordered to surrender himself within two days to the county sheriff for transport to the Lincoln Regional Center or other state facility "for appropriate treatment until such time as the disability is removed."

His victim's mother filed a wrongful death lawsuit against Robin earlier this year, asking for damages which included $7,500 in funeral expenses and an unspecified amount for the loss of "comfort of society." The case is pending.

The summer after I graduated from high school, I moved into a small apartment with my brother. My employment was watching his two-year-old daughter during the day while he was at work. At night I drank with my friends, drove country roads and listened to music turned up loud. One night we climbed the fence to the apartment complex swimming pool, and swam after hours. My friends grew tired of this and went somewhere else looking for the spark that could ignite the night, but I stayed.

What is strange to me now is that I don't recall being upset about anything, or even particularly sad, but I do remember that I let myself sink down to the pool floor, and looked up at the reflection of yard lights dappling the surface of the water. I didn't want to swim back to the surface. I wanted to stay there, to let the life above me get folded carefully and put away. Getting through each day seemed so hard, and I was tired of feeling unholy.

There were things to envy about my station

in life at that time. I had parents who were prepared to put me through college, as well as a scholarship to attend the University of Nebraska that fall, where both of my siblings had been educated. I was young and it was summertime. My car was running well, I had money in my wallet and a boyfriend who was both kind and good looking. But I was at the bottom of the pool in ten feet of water, and I didn't want to come back up.

My cousin Julie's memorial service was held at the Art Center in Minnetonka where she taught classes. The large room was lined with her photographs and paintings, and filled with hastily gathered folding chairs. Those chairs were claimed by her family, her many cousins, her husband and friends, and her students. Those who didn't arrive early stood in the back of the room and lined the hallway. Many of us had known her all of her life, and one woman was there who only met her once, and only knew her for two hours. She was in the front row.

Jana, the nurse, had flown to Minnesota from Connecticut to meet Julie's family. The night before the service, she sat with many of us and answered our questions about what had happened. She described feeling privileged to have been with Julie in those last hours of her life.

I don't know why I wanted to stay on that pool bottom. I've never met Robin Siefker and I don't know why he didn't drink a can of Drano instead of flying down the westbound lanes of Interstate 80 in the wrong direction. I can't say why The Driver was completely drunk so early in the day, or where he was headed that was so important. I suspect all three of us have something in common, some dark and craggy kernel lodged inside us somewhere that poisons our blood, our thinking, and our spirits until we do senseless things, wild and frightening things, to try to shake it loose.

By all rights I should have killed myself or someone else on my blindfolded drive home from my friend's house, or any of the other countless nights I piloted a car when I was well over the legal blood alcohol limit to drive. Something saved me, as well as the people walking along my routes, and I don't know what it is. My heart opens with compassion for my brother drivers, drunk as I was, and then breaks into a hundred seeds of milkweed over their victims, my cousin Julie, age 35, and Heather Poppe, 19.

A Monarch butterfly lays all of her eggs on milkweeds, usually only one egg per plant, to ensure each caterpillar will have an adequate food supply. Here is their secret. The milkweed plant is poisonous, filled with a toxin that lends itself to the caterpillar as it feeds, making the

caterpillar toxic and therefore safe from many predators. This special poison stays with the caterpillar even after it transforms into the orange and black-winged butterfly. If you didn't know, you wouldn't guess it as you watch them glide from flower head to flower head. They are poison from top to bottom.

Among Julie's belongings were many rolls of film she had shot but not developed. Many of them are still undeveloped today, stored in her parent's refrigerator. If they are processed, it will all be over. While the dark curls of film are still trapped in the roll, there is still some possibility. They wait, undisturbed, each one a dark chrysalis.

One woman at the memorial service approached Julie's parents and introduced herself as Vicky, Julie's voice teacher. She said, "I want you to know that I think I have a videotape of Julie singing. Would you like me to give it to you? You'd be welcome to it." Yes, they wanted it, and she delivered it to them.

Last year, I saw the video for the first time. Julie is the last performer in a vocal recital. She walks out on stage, nervous, and adjusts the microphone. She introduces herself, nods to the accompanist and begins. *"I'll be seeing you in all the old familiar places, that this heart of mine embraces all day through. In a small café, a park across the way, a children's carousel, a chestnut tree, a wishing well. I'll be seeing you in every lovely summer's day, in everything that's light and gay, I'll always think of you that way. I'll find you in the morning sun, and when the night is new. I'll be looking at the moon, but I'll be seeing you."* She was always singing about that moon.

During World War II, milkweed pods were collected by the gunnysack for the war effort. Until the East Indies fell to the Japanese, life jackets had been stuffed with kapok, from the seedpods of the "silk-cotton" or kapok trees there. When the supply was cut off, the military turned to milkweed floss as an alternative. Milkweed had not been in commercial production, however, so it had to be scrounged from wherever it had happened to take root. Farmers were encouraged to stop mowing the roadside ditches, and everyone who was capable went out in search of the warty pods.

Boy Scout troops took this on as a civic project, and schools in neighboring towns competed with each other to see who could collect the most milkweed. The national campaign for milkweed collection came with a slogan, "Two bags saves one life," implying two gunnysacks filled with pods would provide enough floss to stuff a life jacket that would keep a serviceman afloat for days.

In Mayan mythology, the kapok trees are sacred. They believed that the souls of their dead climbed the tree, whose branches went up

to heaven. I have a mythology of milkweed, in which the souls of alcoholics are poisonous and dark pods, filled with white seed parachutes, trembling for their chance to rise and go to a better place. Any place. Because any place must be better than where they are now.

Something lifted me out of the swimming pool that night twenty-four years ago. A year later I would quit drinking, and two years later I would begin to study alcoholism through the Educational Psychology department at the university. My parents would throw me a big wedding, and I'd wear my mother's wedding dress. I'd get pregnant, quit smoking, have daughters, write poems. My oldest daughter would sing at Julie's memorial service. My youngest would learn to play piano, and dance ballet.

Maybe it was the thrumming of that future inside the shell of my life that pulled me from the water, the collective seeds of my days ahead insisting on themselves. Although I have done some things since then to fight for the quality of my life, I mostly just feel lucky that I was able to walk away from the poison. Lucky that I didn't pick it back up today, or yesterday, like it was an act of grace or mercy. So many of us finally find a way out that there has to be a patron saint, not yet identified, just for us. I'll call her St. Monarch, until I learn her name.

For twenty years I have been heading to the hospital's chemical dependency treatment center to sit in group therapy with those guys or other ones just like them. There is no place else I know of where people transform themselves so visibly. They enter our doors beaten in every way, often on crutches or in wheelchairs or black and blue. They come in malnourished, needing haircuts, and without hope. In a short time they look like new men, upright, clean, and able to see the possibility of a life for themselves, one in which they don't have to be drunk and high, and they also don't have to be miserable.

Many fail soon after they leave; I am not naive about that. But others take what is offered to them, a reparation of spirit, a way to live, and they go out and put it to the test. They come back to tell us about their new jobs, the ways they've been able to heal the damaged relationships with their families, how they are now able to be the dad they wanted to be for their children. They sit through victim impact panels. Some carry photographs of the cars they smashed up. Others become regular speakers at A.A. meetings, sharing their strength, hope and experience with a roomful of other seekers.

Not one of them can tell you exactly how they stay clean and sober. Some will say it is a mystery, others consider themselves lucky, and most talk about a power greater than themselves who is doing with and through them what they never could do alone. Often that Higher Power

is the group itself, a roomful of others who have been poisoned from head to toe, and know in every cell of their body what that means. They understand one another in a way the unafflicted never can.

To a man, they wish they had figured it out sooner. They regret their lost years, and carry the responsibility of the lives they have maimed and mangled along the way, the strangers who happened to be on the wrong road one day. It is impossible to go back and undo what they have done, but embedded in the recovery process is a way to begin to make amends. It isn't something we ever finish doing.

The fellowship of sobriety comes with its own language. At stores or movie theaters, I run into past clients who want to talk to me. They mention the treatment center, say, "That place saved my life." Then they usually quote a length of time, "Two years and five months," or "I have 90 days today." Sometimes they fish a medallion out of their pocket that testifies to their length of uninterrupted sobriety.

I know I did not save their lives. As part of a dedicated team, I contribute to maintaining an environment where remarkable change is manufactured. Personally, I believe there is a spiritual power at work in those rooms, something greater than the combined efforts of probation officers, weary families and our own small selves. But what a place to show up for work every day. As one alcoholic reaches his hand out to another, they are saving each other, and every day they are saving me. I feel like I work in a miracle factory, and sometimes the holiness there is overwhelming.

When a nurse who had never met my cousin laid down next to her in the dirt road, she offered us a way to begin to make sense of the loss. She stood in for us, and I don't know if I would have done the same. I have no doubt, however, that I could have been the one behind the wheel, either in Mexico or on that dark Nebraska highway on Thanksgiving Day. If so, I don't imagine I'd have wanted to be bailed or bribed out of jail. No life jacket of kapok or milkweed could have pulled me to safety again. The weight of my actions would surely drag me to the bottom.

Every year in January, the Alumni Association of the treatment center where I work throws a Chili Feed and invites everyone who has ever been through treatment with us. Between four hundred and five hundred people usually show up. There are various awards presented and speeches made, and recognition of the people sitting in that rented hall who have transformed, and are transforming, their lives. It's a noisy crowd, but before all the formal talk gets going, we observe a moment of silence for those we refer to as "the still suffering."

The silence washes the edges of the room. I

think of myself so many years ago, on the pool floor. I think of the men who have come through treatment but couldn't find their way into sobriety. I think of The Driver, somewhere in Mexico, and I say a prayer for him, and for his parents.

There is this. When my cousin was in her Golden Hour, a stranger came to be with her. She lay down in the hot street beside her, and she didn't leave. When Julie couldn't breathe, she blew breath across her face to calm her.

And there is this. From where I am now, I see the young girl that I was, out of her senses, one eye closed, billowing down the road toward the river in a 1973 Buick, so utterly and hopelessly unaware. I climb in next to her. I tell her help is coming. I don't know if she can hear me. I tell her again.