

At Home

Almost a year after it happened
I started napping in the afternoon,
unable to stand daylight, the trudge
from morning to evening. I didn't know

what to do when I wasn't forced
to work, didn't want to work, didn't
want another day. I knew each
that passed meant my life was closer

to over, but also meant hers had been
over longer. I stared at the wall, replayed
the moment her eyes went blank
or empty, or just *dead*, became that thing

I can't quite describe, tried to figure out
if she went *out* or deeper into herself
where the brain unhooked itself.
In the groggy hospital Dad said,

We're going to take you home.

She said, *I'm going to die.*

He said, *We're taking you home.*

She said, *You're taking me home to die.*

Outlaw

My father shot the neighbors'
dog, and their little girl
still plays in front of his
house in the road, cars
swerve when they see her
around the blind curve.

My father wants to tell her
to be careful, but he's the self-
proclaimed *neighborhood outlaw*.

*I'm sure they don't want me
talking to their kid.* He warned
the woman when the dog
stood behind him—bared
its teeth—while he got the mail.

She listened, said it wouldn't
happen again, then two days
later the dog growled, followed
him to the door.

Maybe I'm defending him?
He's been through so much:
buried Mom after three years
of helping her die.

Maybe he *wanted* to kill
something that was trying
to hurt him, a threat he could
end on his own terms? I'm
not saying it's right. They
have goats now, and when
they escape, almost daily,
my father walks them back up
the driveway to their house.

If he's a bad man, it's because
he's a broken man. When he

hands the woman the chewed-
through rope, the goat doesn't
want to go, but to stay,
it seems, beside him.

Freedom Isn't Free

In my hometown it will cost you
7.98 at Walmart if you want it

in blue with a rifle in the talons
of an eagle, or bannered across

a motorcycle that was *Born to Ride*.
You can drink freedom for 9.99

in Pigeon Forge or Panama City:
follow the fluorescent swimsuit

covers, beach towels proud
of the South, to the gravel parking

lot off the four-lane for a microwave-
safe mug of freedom, a shot costs

3.99 plus tax. Freedom glitters
in snow globes, even in summer,

hangs with air-brushed license plates
named *Amber* and *Tiffany* and all

the World's Greatest Grandmas
and Dads. Freedom may *Kneel*

for Jesus and Stand for the Cross,
and ask you to *Elect the Lord*

the Leader of Your Life—
freedom is never free, but you can

buy some and get some half off.

The Only Thing

On my way home from the mall,
I want to stop at the cemetery to tell Mom

what I bought: blue sneakers with orange
trim, and *Hollywood Park*, a memoir

by a singer she never heard of. I got
a fast-food hamburger and ate it

in the car. I never told my mother
I wrote books, and as far as I know,

she never saw one. She Googled me,
once, and found an essay I wrote about

being gay. She called my sister and cried,
begged her to ask me to take it down.

I didn't, and we pretended it never
happened. She loved me without looking

at me, as best she could, and it was enough
in the end, the only thing, after the broken

years, I wanted. Before they took her body
from the house, I told my sister:

she knows all the answers now. Maybe I should
be ashamed, but I'm not. I'm glad we kept

lying so late in our lives, that I was able
to help her die. What we never said

is forever now, and small in comparison
to the honest place we walked—

After My Mother Apologized for My Childhood, We Went to Brunch

I know we both had coffee, and maybe the breakfast bar. It was late enough that we could've had lunch, and a Diet Coke, maybe I had a sandwich and iced tea. We pretended like we always had, didn't think back to what was said before we ended up in the kitchen of my apartment—what she said about how God could save me, what I said about how he didn't. My rage that she wasn't crying, though I was, because she thought she was right, and I knew she wasn't, and how she stood behind the old beliefs because listening would've meant undoing, what her whole life, she had done—and I had undone—in the name of Jesus, but there was a shift when we left the living room for different rooms, after what we did say, and what we almost said, both wounding and un-wounding in tandem. Then her behind me, a break, an opening so slight in the quiet, her words, and me trying to comfort, to make her feel better, unable to accept what I'd always wanted—my whole life—and just received, but I didn't know an apology could feel like sadness, and forgiveness its own kind of grief, a new way for us to be distant. After we got the check, figured out tip, driving back to my place: *Did I really tell you to get AIDS and die?* Yes, I said, *and that if I were gay, you'd want to put me on a bus and never see me again.* Then silence, that place we always returned to, but somehow, this time, new: *There are some beautiful houses in this town,* she said, *I wish I could learn more about them.*