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## MY LANDING

### *Creative Non-Fiction*

I am eight and I get the basketball once today. Someone passes me the ball, I shoot, I miss. The other team laughs while my team kicks the dirt and shakes their heads. The old basketball goal is nailed to a tree in a vacant lot down the alley from my South Highland Park home. The backboard is just a piece of plywood, splintering at the edges, nailed to the tree slightly crooked, but the rim is real, even though it's rusty and has no net. The ground is hard, the tattered neighborhood sneakers and bare feet pounding it on long summer days. Other parts of the lot are littered with large trash piles, a broken couch and jagged beer bottles. Once I miss the shot I never get the ball again. I run around to get free—waving, waving, but no one will pass me the ball. I always miss.

I quit playing, trudge over to the shade behind the old shed at the edge of the lot, and sit on the ground. The hot day has tired me and I don't feel like playing anymore so I study the large burned-out house across the street. I remember the fire engines woke me that night four years ago. I remember the strange prancing light cast on our faces, the shouts, and the naked man barely escaping. Now the burnt house sits, most of its blackened framework exposed, and when the wind blows the neighborhood always smells like smoke. The garage is less damaged, and sometimes prostitutes sleep there in the winter since it still has a roof. There is a sunflower by the rusty mailbox.

I notice my hands are covered with dirt as I wave a fly away from my face, so I spit into my hands, and wipe them on my shorts. My two white palms staring up at me seem out of place. I turn back to the basketball game where every bounce of the ball sends a puff of dirt into the air. Burrell passes the ball underneath to Marcus in the lane, Marcus tosses it over to Jamichael in the corner, Jamichael fires back out to Burrell at the three-point line and Burrell puts it through the hoop. I clap my spit clean hands—my team is winning.

The game ends when everyone is tired of playing. Some of the guys sit down on the ground, others walk off down the alley. I study the burned-out house again. I don't see the rock thrown, but it hits me in the stomach. I am startled and look up to find a couple of the guys are standing by the goal. Only one of them threw the rock, but they are all laughing and picking up more rocks. I jump to my feet and try to get them to stop, but they don't. They just laugh at me. The rocks hurt when they hit my legs, my chest, and my hands. The guys quit laughing, start yelling insults and throwing bigger rocks, so I yell for my teammates to help me. Burrell walks over to the group, takes the broken brick out of one of their hands, turns and throws it in my direction.

I run to the tree where my bicycle is propped, shielding my head with my hands. I jump on my bicycle and pedal up the alley. They're running

after me, rocks thumping down all around me, one ricocheting off my front wheel, another off my bicycle seat. One hits me in the back of the head and I lurch forward—my grip on my handlebars relaxing. I want to give up, but if I fall they'll catch me. I grasp the handlebars with my bloody-white hands, duck my head, and pedal, and pedal, and pedal. I am eight.

I am nine and I hear guns. There are two shots at first, then another one, then two guns shooting at the same time. The shots sound like they are a couple of blocks away and there's a silence afterward—there always is. I look around, not knowing what to do. My brother, Jonathan, drags me to my feet, and shoves me toward my bicycle. "Come on, Josh! We have to get home."

It's important we get home because we aren't supposed to be on the street behind our house. We pedal hard toward our house, and as we round the corner heading up the hill, we see our mom running down toward us. She looks scared. Jonathan and I slide to a stop.

"Where have you been? Some people were shooting down the street. A man got shot, but he ran off and he's got a gun. We have to get inside now!"

We ride our bicycles up the hill with Mom running beside us, but when we get to the alleyway a strange man stumbles out into the street. He's holding a hat to his stomach, and there's blood all over his hands. He keeps his head down and when he walks he doesn't pick up his feet. He fumbles across the street toward the deep ditch where the railroad tracks used to cut through the hill on the other side of Anderson Avenue. It seems he's trying to turn away from us, but we know him. He's a drug dealer from a couple blocks over. As he stumbles across the street he drops his gun. "Go, go!" Mom is yelling for my brother and me to get to the house.

Jonathan and I start to pedal away when our neighbor runs out of the alleyway with a rifle pointed at the drug dealer. My brother and I freeze since the neighbor stands between our house and us. "Get on the ground! Get on the ground, now!" The neighbor yells.

The dealer turns, looking at the neighbor, and mutters something I don't understand.

"Get on the ground!"

The man bends forward, trying to pick up his gun. My mom screams.

"Don't do it, man! I mean it!"

The man, while still bending over reaching for the gun, loses his balance and falls into the eight-foot railroad-ditch on the side of the street. The neighbor immediately hands his rifle to my mom and climbs down into the ditch. The dealer is bleeding a lot. "I need a towel!" Our neighbor yells.

"Jonathan, go get a towel." My mom is holding the rifle and keeping careful watch over the gun lying in the street. "Jonathan. A towel! Now!"

Jonathan gets a towel, the blue one with white lace my mom thinks is pretty. Our neighbor stops the bleeding and the police arrive in a rupture of sirens and lights. My mom lays the rifle in the street, and Jonathan drags me inside.

Our neighbor is scrubbing the blood off his hands in our bathroom sink with alcohol. I'm watching, frozen, from the doorway—the drug dealer's blood swirling its way around, and around, and around the white porcelain sink, and slipping down the drain. I am nine.

I am eleven and my parents are spies. Right now my dad is up in our hot attic with binoculars, a cordless phone, and a borrowed video camera. He's sitting in the dark looking out the window, spying on the drug dealers across the street. My parents routinely video tape our neighbors dealing drugs and give the tapes to the police. The police do nothing and I don't understand.

A rickety green car pulls up beside their house. The man with the yellow pants sitting on the front porch jogs over to the car, grasps hands with the passenger a couple of times, and the car pulls away. A red car, a gold, two white ones and a gray pick-up truck all stop by this afternoon. My dad is tired of taping and climbs down the ladder from the attic.

My mom cooks cornbread, northern beans and green beans for dinner. We say grace before we eat and I stuff my mouth with cornbread. My dad is in the middle of telling us one of his Navy stories when we hear loud yelling outside.

I run to the front window and peak through the curtains just in time to see a police officer getting tackled by a drug dealer. I yell for my parents to come see what is going on. My mom calls 911 and within a minute, fourteen officers arrive, their cars filling the street. The police attack the crowd, tackling, wrestling, punching and they win.

Eight days later my parents are forced to stop their car by these same drug dealers. They survive unharmed. My dad starts carrying a gun. I am eleven.

I am seventeen and there's a gun pointed at my face—the darkness inside the barrel, the streetlights gleaming off the metal, the non-face behind the hammer. The man instructs me to turn around, kneel down and hold my keys up in the air. I'm shaking and I can't hold my hands still. Another man, his face masked, walks over and takes the keys from my hand, my cell phone from my front pocket, my wallet from my back. He opens the rear hatch of my parents' van and tells me to get inside. I'm begging to be let go in a high, frantic voice, but the man with the gun moves closer, tells me to shut up and get in. He keeps the gun pointed at my face, so I climb in the back of the van. I can feel the sweat on my chest. I'm told to stay there, and keep my head down. They say they won't hurt me, if I do as I'm told they'll let me go. I don't believe them. I know I'm going to die.

I'm in the back of the dark van for hours, sweating. The men drive constantly, listening to rap music on the radio. The street lamps and neon store signs flicker their confusing light through the tinted glass. I can only see that flickering light, nothing else. It's a small reminder of a world outside of my own—the hot, small space between the folded rear seat, and the doors with no latch on the inside. I learn to love the carpet, its soft fibers against my face as I cry.

I think of my family, my friends. I want one of them, any one of them, to be there with me, to hold me so I won't be alone. But I am alone. I try to get the jack out of the side compartment so I can break a window and jump out. But it makes a clanking noise when I move it, so I stop. I can't escape.

The men park the van and get out. It's dark and I don't think we are in the city anymore. I think they're going to take me out and kill me. The one with the gun taps on the glass but I'm too afraid to look. I push my head into the carpet hard, close my eyes, and pray, and pray, and pray. But the men don't open the hatch. They get back in the van and start driving again. Soon I see the flickering lights again, and I am thankful—blinding greens, oranges, and reds.

The men stop the van again and one of them tells me to keep my head down for fifteen minutes, then I can leave. I don't believe they're really letting me go. I think I'm going to be shot through the glass, so I squeeze my hands and arms around my head, hoping that if they shoot me, somehow it will be enough to stop the bullets. I'm trembling, squeezing, hoping, and crying. I don't want to die this way. I keep my head down as I count fifty-five seconds—I can't stay any longer. I scramble over the folded seat, pulling myself into the driver's seat. At first I can't find the keys, then I find them in a cup-holder. I twist the ignition, cram the van in gear, and press the gas pedal to the floor. I escape.

The police don't catch the men. I'm forced to deal with the reality that they're still out there. They know what I look like, and I don't know what they look like, but I try hard to remember. The one wears the mask—the other one has the gun.

I do my best to act like I'm okay, and I do a good job. After a few months, even my family thinks I'm back to normal, but I'm not. I am suspicious of everyone as I walk through the mall, and if anyone looks at me for more than a moment, I freak out. When I'm out with my friends at night, I never want to go home. I'm afraid of the dark walk from my car to the house, but I can't tell anyone because I'm afraid of what they'll think. I run from my car to my house every night, my pulse high. My mom gets upset because I cut through her flowerbed. She thinks it's because I'm lazy. I never tell her it's because I'm scared. I always twist my key in the lock, and slam the door behind me. My brother gets angry because it wakes him up. I never tell him why I do it. I am afraid of the dark. I am seventeen.

I am twenty and I can't breathe. It comes at random, and it is horrible. I'm good at hiding it though and no one knows I have a problem. The appearance of being normal helps me believe I am. Most days I can breathe just fine, but when I feel my breath slipping away, I quietly excuse myself from whatever group I'm in and hide. I don't want anyone to know. It takes over my body, and I raise my chin up gasping for air as if I'm swimming. But it's not just a breathing problem. The worst part of it all is the fear. In those moments, everything that tells me my world will be okay vanishes. I feel empty, I have no hope, I'm trembling, and I can't breathe. Most of the time it lasts about fifteen minutes, but sometimes it lasts longer.

It happens during my best friend's wedding. I never tell him. I just disappear from the ballroom, and go out on the balcony trying to breathe in the cold air. I grasp the cool railing and pretend to be looking at the stars. I can't even see them.

During a severe fit my dad finds me on my bedroom floor, gasping. He holds me in his arms. He is crying.

"Just breathe, Josh. Breathe."

I can't breathe. I am twenty.

I am nine and I am flying. It's a superpower I obtain from the bicycle ramp my brother Jonathan built. He used a cinder block and an old board he pulled out of a trash pile in the street behind our house. He propped the board on the block and now we can fly. We are the only people on the street since four of the six houses on this block are empty—their overgrown yards flooding the cracked sidewalk in green. We set our ramp up in the street, watching for the occasional car zooming down the hill—trunk booming and buzzing.

My back wheel touches ground, I set my front wheel down, apply the brakes, and slide to a stylish stop. I'm proud, but my brother scoffs at my jump. He's two years older than me and a much better rider. He gets a running start and jumps way higher than me and at least twice as long, and when he lands, he doesn't set his front wheel down immediately. He lands on his back wheel, rides out the wheelie for several feet, and then sets down his front wheel. It's not just how you fly, it's about how you land. I want to ride just like him. Jonathan convinces me to lie down in the street in front of the ramp and let him jump over me. I'm scared at first, but after a couple times it doesn't seem too dangerous. Jonathan is flying over me when we hear the guns.