

Seth Sawyers

Fried Eggs

My lovers suffocate me,
Crowding my lips, thick in the pores of my skin

Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself"

Long before she turned out to be a plate of fried eggs, Sarah was a bagel. A toasted everything bagel with cream cheese and tomato. That's still my standard order. I've gotten it in Baltimore, DC, and now Norfolk. And it's not only the bagel itself, still warm from the toaster and wrapped in waxed paper, but the process too. The walk to the counter, the glance at the bins, the order that's simple and confident. Through the whole process, she's beside me, within, rolling her eyes at my jokes, holding my hand.

She was big on food. She loved the Philadelphia roll at the sushi place on Charles Street, was disconsolate for two full hours the time they were out of fresh salmon. I went out of my way to bring her the things she liked and smiled when I thought that her being an actor heightened her senses, made her more aware of what she ate and things like the way I stood when I was drunk (pelvis out and teetering backward). I remember once, after a silly fight about something I don't remember, she made me a dinner of pasta with fresh mozzarella. The noodles were overdone, the wine was cheap, and the tomatoes cut so strangely that they fell apart on the plate before I could get them to my mouth. But I smiled and said it was good and she was none the wiser. She ate everything on her plate, joyous and drunk on the burgundy I poured from an enormous handled jug.

It seems now that I was happy all the time then. We made dates for vegetarian subs without yellow peppers and ate on the bench outside the theater building at school where Sarah spent all her time. We skipped

classes so we could lay naked in my bed, our legs entangled and our arms wrapped around each other's backs, lightly stroking, up and down.

One time I stopped by her place while her roommates were watching ER. I walked into the apartment and three girls pointed toward the hallway. "She's in her room," one said. None of them looked up from the television.

Sarah didn't hear the door open, so I eased my way in and saw a pack of Newports on her desk. She didn't smoke menthols. Didn't smoke anything before she started bumming my Camels. I crept along, listening to Sarah talk to herself. She laughed at one of her jokes that only she knew about. Then she turned and saw me. I folded her small, hard frame in my arms as she hit me on the chest, half-kidding.

Then she did her impression for me. It was for a project in theater class. The guy she chose smoked Newports, and I found out that he had a bad lisp. Or maybe Sarah wanted the guy to have a lisp. I never asked, just sat on her bed with my back against the wall and watched, laughing when she laughed, the tendons in her neck flaring when she squealed and got one just right.

She had a squeaky bed that year, so we made love on the floor of her room that night while her roommates watched TV a few steps down the hall. We moved with great intent but slowly, very slowly. We touched each other's fingers, hands, arms, shoulders, backs, and hips. My belt buckle didn't make any noise when she let it fall to the floor. We breathed quietly, and when I locked my eyes on hers it was the quietest thing I'd ever done. We dropped some pillows on the floor, and I reached up to the bed for a quilt her grandmother had made. I draped it across my back. After a while I pulled it over our heads.

"This is just for us," I whispered.

"I know," she said.

I could just make out her eyes in the dim light, steely blue but sparkling, looking back at me into something I knew only she could see. I noticed, without looking, her lips curled into a smile.

"No one's allowed in here with us," I said.

"I know."

"This is nice," I whispered.

"I know," she said.

Where before jangly nerves ate away at my stomach, everything turned

warm and soft and I knew that I was home. I knew that I had nothing to worry or think about except what was underneath that quilt. My life was there on the floor of this girl's bedroom in the space between where she and I met, and nowhere else. Then I kissed her, and it was dark and warm inside the quilt. That was when I almost said I loved her and when, later, I really did say it, she told me she had guessed as much.

On the weekends, after I graduated, we got coffee and toasted everything bagels with cream cheese and tomato from Sam's in Catonsville. We'd take them back to the town house I shared with three other guys and eat in the living room. When the cream cheese squeezed out between the two halves of her sandwich, Sarah licked it like she would a melting ice cream cone. Then she'd burp and laugh, every time, as if she had never done it before. Afterward she bared her teeth and I checked for poppy seeds.

After a night of double tequila shots at the bar one time, we came back to my house and watched TV with my roommate. When it was time for bed, I gave Sarah a piggyback ride up the steep stairs to my room. She had trouble even hanging on.

"Goodnight, kid," I shouted to Dave, seated on the couch.

Sarah didn't miss a beat. "Goodnight, kid," she said, loud, giggly, and drunken. She laughed without a break until she fell asleep ten minutes later. I fed her Tylenol in the morning and told my boss I had a flat tire when I walked into work an hour late.

Another time that summer, she came in the front door minutes after I laid on the couch for a nap. She was ready to go, ready for a talk, or if I was up to it, a wrestling match. I could see it in her face. While I laid on my stomach, she climbed on my back and let her full weight rest on me. She wiggled around, grinding her hip bones into my butt. I groaned something about sleeping and she sat up so that she straddled me. I kept an eye open and watched her lean back. I felt her hands on my ankle and then she wrenched the sandal from my left foot. The laughter started right away.

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing," she said.

I faked lazy for a few seconds as she waved the sandal inches from my face. I smelled sweat and damp leather.

"Are you gonna put it back?"

"No." Steady giggling.

I kept my eyes closed and waited to see if she'd take the bait.

"Oh, come on. You're no fun," she said.

She got up and I heard her feet on the hardwood floor, so I pushed myself up from the couch and leapt at her in one motion, arms out. She started so fast that her bare feet slipped. She screamed something and ran through the dining room, through the kitchen, down the stairs, and out the basement door. She laughed her way three or four times around the house before I could tackle her to the grass and tickle her in the spot that let me get the sandal back.

She always said I was mad that time but it never seems that way. We remembered it differently, even back then when we were still together. Maybe she remembered some expression of mine that betrayed a frustration I didn't yet know I had. Maybe she knew somehow that it could never last, that we were in our early twenties and had no idea how perfect things can be so easily tossed aside like newspaper.

But I know what I remember. It was the look on *her* face, the sheer joy I saw when she glanced back and saw me chasing her around the town house on the outskirts of Baltimore, her look that was absolutely content with warm sun on her forehead and the breeze that lifted her shirt up an inch or two from her waist.

I still own the pair of sandals that lets me remember something sweet. Their soles are shot now, worn out, and the leather, like that of an old baseball glove, is stiff from sweat and rubs away at my feet, leaving little raw spots that turn smooth and pink by the end of the summer. Sometimes your stuff is so ripe that a kind of potential energy radiates out from its insides, into your hand and up your arm, and before you know it you're daydreaming. And when I pick up the sandals, I can't imagine buying a different pair, even if they make my feet hurt. I don't care if the history they tell is skewed either. If it's skewed it's because I want it that way. The sandals carry with them the kind of memories that nostalgia bends and shapes for me, and I don't mind.

And sometimes you pick up your histories at their most painful moments. You debate whether they should be left alone, to be buried in the back of the drawer, where you keep all the mementos too valuable to throw away and way too pungent to leave lying around. But then something inside wins out and you relent.

Like eggs, for example. They're common, a staple. If you can't get away

from your history then you embrace it. You go to the door on the refrigerator, grab some eggs, and fry them the way you like them because that's the only thing that makes sense.

Because Sarah is in a plate of fried eggs too. Now, in my little kitchen, years after she moved away, I make a plate of them every few weeks, right after frying up a pan of bacon. Some people say it's comfort food, and I won't argue. I like the easy preparation, the steady sizzle, the pang that tells me I should substitute a bowl of oatmeal. So I pour the grease into the coffee can, leaving a little in the pan to coat the surface, working it into the scratches where knives and things have gotten to it. Then I crack two or three eggs, dump what's inside, and watch as the whites race around the edge of the pan until they seize up, whitened by the flame. Sometimes I toast a few slices of bread, you know, for a complete meal, but usually I just pile the bacon on the side of the plate so that there's room for the eggs. They're always over-easy now, ever since Sarah.

It took some convincing though. Every Sunday, the year after I got my degree, the year she was finishing hers, we walked to Leon's and ordered the breakfast special. Same thing every week, for \$3.85: bacon, toast, coffee, and eggs, any way we wanted them. I ordered the kind with the hard, broken yolks. We called Leon's our place and sat there for hours talking about movies and what our kids would look like. Most Sundays we sat in the same booth next to the Keno machine and drank cups of bad coffee, filling the dark and forgotten diner with clouds of cigarette smoke that swirled up to the ceiling like dreams.

Then Leon's turned into something else, slowly, without either of us catching on. By the end, the diner changed so convincingly, so thoroughly, that I can't remember it any other way. One Sunday, a couple of months before she left for New York, I sat across from Sarah and watched her finish her breakfast. We hadn't been talking much lately and everything felt sad. We rarely had sex anymore. I could feel her drifting away, and I didn't know what to do about it. I don't think she knew either.

I grabbed a triangle of buttered toast from her plate and, without thinking, dragged it across the runny, bright-yellow yolk that had pooled next to the bacon.

"What are you doing?"

I tried to smile through a mouthful of toast. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, what do you think you're doing?"

I could tell she wasn't joking. "I just thought I'd try some of the yolk."
"Get your paws off my eggs," she said. "This is my breakfast."

Something was happening, but I wasn't sure what.

"The yolks my favorite part," she said. "I can't believe you did that."

I was sure it didn't have anything to do with eggs. At some point we had decided that the distance thing wasn't going to work. I wasn't ready to move to New York, and she was set on making a go at real acting. I know now that I had no real understanding of her ambition. I knew she ached to make it on her own, in the only place where stage actors can, but I tried my best to ignore it. I only know now, years later, how blind I forced myself to be. And it wasn't until years later, too, that I found out how much she hurt when I never considered moving with her.

We broke up in February, over the phone, and by June she had an apartment in a Puerto Rican section of Brooklyn. I found out later that she was sleeping with one of my good friends in the time between when we broke up and before she left. After that I got drunk with my roommate a lot and it was half a year before I returned her calls.

Sometimes you can't even pick your stuff up it stings so much. The electric coffee grinder in my kitchen is all about Alexis. The first time I went to her parents' house, during the winter break of my third year of college, she asked if I wanted a mocha and I had to ask her what that was. She thought it was funny that I didn't know. Alexis wasn't bored with me yet, not after three dates, and she walked over to the kitchen table and kissed me long and hot, her tongue ring clanking against my teeth.

Then she loaded the beans in the top of the machine and hit the button. The noise made me jump in my seat and she laughed at that too. Minutes later the coffee tasted strong and thick with chocolate syrup. She had learned how to make them the summer before at the coffee shop in DC where she worked. One of the guys there played in an acid jazz band and wanted to sleep with her, she told me. I could tell it was something she wanted me to know, that she turned him down.

I thought about the first time we hung out, at the Denny's in LaVale, the week before. That was when Alexis fed me spoonfuls of apple pie à la mode. She was telling a story about how some guy had seen a poster or a picture in her bedroom, but I tried not to listen. Her friend Veronica, sitting across from us in the booth, interrupted her.

"But really, who hasn't seen your bedroom?" she said.

"Shut up!" Alexis said. "We didn't do anything!"

I caught Alexis looking at me to see what my reaction was. I laughed a little but mainly kept my eyes on the table. Then, a week later, as I was sitting in her parents' kitchen, I thought about how I didn't play acid jazz, or jazz, or even a few chords of acoustic guitar for that matter. I wondered, for the first time, what this girl was doing with me.

I still don't know really. What I suspect is that I stood in the way of loneliness and that she had—still does, I imagine—a thing for tall, skinny guys. The first time we did it was on the couch in my parents' basement. We tried to wait as long as we could—about two weeks—but there I was between her legs in the dark, with our clothes piled on the floor, and my dad watching TV upstairs. And then, right before, she said she loved me. I said that I loved her, too, but I was sure I didn't mean it.

And she was way cool, this girl, too cool. A closet full of Salvation Army stuff that fit her thin, curvy frame just right. Dark hair a little long down the back of the neck and cropped close everywhere else. She had tests to see where I ranked in her hierarchy too. Once she asked me how many CDs I owned. She laughed at my answer, ridiculous to her, and said she had five hundred. At *least* five hundred, she said, and then, just then, I felt as if I was in the sixth grade again, staying up late to hang out with my older brother and his friends, trying hard to laugh at their jokes about getting stoned and pretending to know what they were talking about. I felt small.

Alexis ran the coffee grinder a lot that winter. She liked making coffee for me, for a little while. We rested mugs of it on the back patio, watching the cups melt through the crusty January snow, chasing the last bitter swallows with Parliament Lights. But we mostly drank it in her bed, under the covers, with the window open just wide enough to let out the smoke.

Toward the end of break, before she went back to school, I mentioned that I had read a Graham Greene novel. She dug around in her bookcase and came up with his anthology. I could tell she was showing off, that she wanted to prove she had read important books too. Rotten with coffee, nervous from sex, I tried to read it in the bathroom. From my seat I heard the machine grinding, shattering a fresh batch of beans. I wondered what I was doing on this strange toilet, naked, trying to read a book that I was

supposed to like in this bathroom decorated entirely in blue by someone's stepmother.

For months that next semester my stomach tightened every time the phone rang twice for an off-campus call. She called just once, to leave a message that she and her new Indonesian boyfriend were at my school. They needed help, she said, in finding their way around the library. I assume they found someone.

The last time I saw Alexis was the summer after she stopped calling, at one of those outdoor bars in Ocean City where the patio is covered in sand. I was with my brother and some of the guys he worked with at the restaurant, and when I walked over to say hello she kissed me on the lips and wondered aloud about my coming out of the woodwork. She and her friends were drinking beer from pitchers and eating from a huge plate of fries. Before she left she told me where she was staying and that I should stop by. The next morning, hung over but lucid, I sat in a lawn chair outside the condo and wrote her a letter. I asked her how she was doing. I asked her how she could have said she loved me and then not called. I asked her six months' worth of questions that I wasn't sure I wanted answered. She wasn't in when I went over, so I left the letter, tucked inside a nine-by-twelve manila envelope, with her roommate. I felt like a pitiful mess the next day when she didn't call, so I went out with my brother and did a bunch of tequila shots and threw up on the beach because it was what I thought a guy who didn't care about a girl would do.

How can I tell my mom, who bought me a coffee grinder for Christmas, that it's not a coffee grinder at all? How do I let on that the mere thought of it doing its job makes my guts pucker, makes me think of the girl who wanted a tall, skinny guy who played acid jazz? When she visits will she understand when she sees it tucked away beside the microwave, its cord still bundled? Will she have any idea how much power it has over me, even though it's been four years since I've seen the girl who has one like it?

Sometimes I wonder if I have a choice in the matter. My stuff breathes life. It breathes all my best moments, all my pain and nostalgia and silliness and every three-in-the-morning, drunk-on-cheap-red-wine revelation I've ever thought myself lucky to have. So sometimes I think I might as well get used to it, that it's just as well to sit in my living room, take a

deep breath, let my eyes wander, and get busy remembering. Because it's not at all clear who owns whom, whether it's me or my stuff that's the master.

In my apartment in Norfolk I have a worn 1998 edition of Rand McNally's road atlas. I've always liked maps, with their gobs of yellowed cities that line the rivers and coasts. As a boy, studying maps highlighted with my parents' trips from Cheyenne to Preston, Idaho, and from Boise to Cumberland, Maryland, I liked how the plain, two-dimensional sheets transformed the wild into the definite. Each of the states had its own distinctive shape. Some were nervous and crowded with tiny place names. Others seemed indifferent that huge national parks lived inside them, marked by little green teepees that meant you could camp there.

Michelle and I took a map like the Rand McNally on our trip out West. I met her not long after Sarah left. I didn't mean to date someone so soon, but coffee turned into long nights talking on my bed, which turned into her staying over three times a week while she looked for an apartment, and pretty soon I had a new girlfriend. I helped her with the new job teaching middle school math, and she listened to my ideas for newspaper stories. We e-mailed each other all day, trading bad poetry, and pretty soon she had vacuum-packed tofu stashed in my freezer. I stopped cooking meat, except for when she wasn't there, which meant that I rarely cooked meat. We shunned our friends. I had someone new to go to the bagel shop with, and I tried not to think about Sarah.

That was when Michelle laughed a lot. When I went to her place she waited until she heard me coming up the steps, and then she hid in a closet or behind a door. I'd walk around the apartment, calling her name and guessing she was on the balcony smoking. Then she'd wait until I got near before she'd scream and laugh until her brown face turned red. Some nights when she'd been thinking about those days before I knew her, about the time her dad left bruises on her face for all the kids at school to see, I'd hold her in my arms until she stopped crying and fell asleep. And then, toward the end, when it felt like she didn't need me for anything at all, I missed the times when she used to hide in her apartment waiting to see if I'd fall for it again.

We spent months planning our trip. A map on her dining room wall, bright with plastic pushpins, marked our course: Baltimore to Wyoming,

in a loping northern route. Then it was south through Utah to the Grand Canyon, then east through Utah to Colorado before heading home to Baltimore. I managed two straight weeks off from the newspaper, and we left with the sun on our necks one morning in early July.

It took us a day to get to Chicago. We crashed at her aunt's house, a mile from Lake Michigan, where we ordered a deep-dish pizza. It was our first real meal since we had left Maryland. Michelle was a vegan then and had them stuff it with spinach instead of cheese. It's a specialty, I said, and why would you have them change the ingredients in a specialty? But she was the one on the phone in her aunt's kitchen, and I was the one sitting at the table, and I never won those kinds of arguments with Michelle. She explained her order three times before the guy on the other end understood. When the pizza came it was no good at all.

We camped at Blue Mounds State Park in southern Minnesota where we used our gear for the first time. The day turned cold at night and we huddled together under a thick blanket my grandmother gave me for Christmas when I was in elementary school. We ate ecstasy in a hotel room in Gillette, Wyoming, and speed-read Hemingway to each other. Inside our tent at Utah's Dead Horse Point State Park, we drank from a pint bottle of Bacardi and put it down to make love halfway through a game of rummy, a thunderstorm charging the hot air outside. We saw a double rainbow the next day, and I called my parents to tell them about it.

But before Wyoming we spent two days in South Dakota hitting all the parks: the Badlands, Mount Rushmore, the Black Hills. From I-90 we watched as South Dakota changed west of the Missouri. At 75 mph prairie gives way to rolling hills and tall grass. After three days we felt like we were finally getting somewhere, the passenger's feet out the window, matching bandanas stretched tight over our heads. I was in charge of the music, and I played it loud: the Velvet Underground, Lenny Kravitz, mid-sixties Beatles. I asked her trivia questions, and she quizzed me with math problems. When I got one wrong on purpose, she explained the answer as if I was one of her seventh-graders. We saw storms far away to the north that looked like giant beams of dark light focused on the plains. And then the park's pinnacles rose on the left side, to the south, and we knew we were in the West. We pulled off at a rest stop to get a good look at the Badlands and didn't say anything at all for a long time.

After we camped for the night, we hiked for an entire day, the sun over-

head and hot on my bare shoulders, the park's pulverized stone crumbling underneath. We hiked a huge, circuitous route and drank our water slowly on purpose. Michelle's skin shone brown and mine turned red. Halfway through I started thinking about the journal I was keeping. I wondered if it would make for any kind of story when we got back.

"You know, life is kind of like a hike," I said. "You're optimistic when you start out and it's really easy, but then, somewhere in the middle, you realize that it's a lot harder than that." I paused a few steps. "Know what I mean?"

Michelle had to stop walking, she was laughing so hard. She bent her hot forehead to the ground and braced herself on her knees while she snorted.

"That's the corniest thing I've ever heard," she said through her gasps. "Life is like a hike? Are you serious? Oh my god, and you want to be a writer?"

"No, it is," I said. "You know, you start out one way but it always ends up another way."

She was still laughing, but now she was sprawled on her back along the trail bed. I couldn't tell if she was squinting her eyes because of the sun or because she thought I was ridiculous.

"OK," I said. "Maybe it's a little corny, but I was just trying to think of similes." It *was* kind of funny, really. Life is like a hike.

I took pictures of everything: elk, bison, the mountains, the rivers, mountains reflected on rivers. In the plastic grocery bag in my closet I have at least thirty black-and-whites of Michelle driving. She looks the same in almost every one: dark sunglasses, bandana, left knee drawn up under her elbow, a dimple of a smile casting a shallow shadow on her cheek. I have a dozen shots of her eating a strawberry Popsicle. She ate them the whole trip, across several states, the pictures tell me, backgrounds through the driver's-side window different each time: grassland, high desert, brown desert.

I don't know why I'm surprised that Michelle is the map of an entire state, all seventy-six thousand square miles of it, with a giant river running through the middle, separating the bland from the striking, the calm from the angry. She's beautiful Wyoming, stark Utah, chilling Nevada. The only time I've been out west is with her. She's the entire map of South Dakota, and she's the goddamned Grand Canyon. And until I go back, she'll be the only one there.

But only one kind of Michelle lives in South Dakota. I can still look at that map and it tells a history that I like. I know that if you don't like the memories in your stuff you can throw most of it away. You can pile it in a barbecue and set fire, watching the flames work through years and years. Pictures, necklaces, used books, letters. Those are the easy ones. If you want to, and if you're lucky, you can avoid the others. You can, if you want, buy coffee that's already been ground.

Michelle loved her computer. Hated everything about sports, made fun of me on fall Sundays, but loved her laptop and everything she could make it do. But now she's the Super Bowl and the college basketball championship all rolled into a little hundred-pound half-Chinese package. Somewhere I lost ownership of the big games.

We stopped having sex that winter after the trip, and maybe she was right. Maybe we were two different kinds of people. Maybe she was right about all the things she said about me, and maybe I was right about some of the things I said about her.

She packed her things at my house a few hours before the Patriots-Rams game. That was when I tried to punch a hole in the kitchen wall. I can still see her crying, backing out of the screen door, struggling with the laundry bag that held pounds of her clothes. And yet, I wanted to give her a hand.

The second and last time we broke up was right before Maryland played Indiana for the national championship. I obsessed over Maryland's run, reading everything I could find on the Internet. That was their year and I wanted to make sure I'd have stories to tell when it came up in a bar later. But that Monday I watched the game at a friend's house, drunk, staring at a plate of buffalo wings and not caring if my team won. They did, as I recall.

They're in everything I do, these memories, these girls. Not that they're bad roommates. They don't make much of a mess, although they sometimes keep me up at night. We've had our run-ins, it's true, like any roommates, but we've got an agreement now. They stay in their part of the house, and we only run into each other occasionally. And since it is my place, and not theirs, in my own way I get to boss them around a little bit, when I'm in the right kind of mood.

Sometimes you tailor your life so that your history lives all around you.

Your memories live in a plate of eggs, and though it hurts, you fry them up anyway. Because some mornings when the floor is cold on your bare feet, and the apartment breathes silence, you almost convince yourself that fried eggs are all you have left.

Like on Sunday mornings when I fry up some eggs, over-easy, the way I like them now. I eat the whites first, with the bacon. At the end I'm left with the neat little centers. It's the part that, when you take a fork to it, opens up and bleeds all over the plate.