

ENCROACHMENT

By

MALIA VITOUSEK

Bachelor of Arts

The Colorado College

Colorado Springs, Colorado

2012

Submitted to the Department of English

The Colorado College

In partial fulfillment of

The requirements for

The Degree of

Bachelor of Arts

April, 2012

For my family, friends, and those who don't know what to say.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the English Department at Colorado College, particularly Steven Hayward, Jim Heynen, and Aubrey Hirsh for their unending encouragement and constructive criticism. I would like to thank all the writers I have work-shopped with during my time at CC, especially our Senior Creative Writing majors: Sammi Labue, Robby Casseria, Sophie Goodman, Jordan Deichen, Andrew Rowe, and Emily Young. Finally, I would like to thank my friends and family for supporting me, even though I wouldn't tell them what I was writing about.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Encroachment

1.	2
2.	6
3.	12
4.	14
5.	18
6.	26
7.	36
8.	40
9.	43
10.	45
11.	49
12.	51
13.	58

2. Artist's Statement	64
-----------------------	----

ENCROACHMENT

1.

To Connor, Lake Winnepesaukee never changed. Like all of New Hampshire, the landscape transitioned with passing of each season, but little varied from year to year. For as far back as Connor could recall, the lakeside cabins had no running water and no television. Everything the Nolans might need, they carried in a single engine boat, across the lake to Welch Island. Only the white streaks left on the surface of the water by passing boats reminded them that civilization existed.

The series of wooden cabins on the island had been in Connor's family for generations. The Nolans spent every spring and summer getting lost in the lake. Different friends and extended family would visit Welch Island throughout the season, but, at his mother's insistence, for the last week of summer the cabins were reserved for the Nolan family alone: Connor's ten-year-old sister, Maggie, and his parents, Tom and Sharon. Leaving the lake was haunted with the gray prospect of leaving fishing poles and docks for pencils and eraser marks. Though, fall also meant football.

Before breakfast on their last day at Winnepesaukee, Connor ventured to a particular rock, shrouded by pines and bespeckled by pollen. The thinking rock, as Connor called it, hung over the coarsely sanded shoreline. Connor sat atop the rock, with his feet in the water. Connor's thinking rock had been the launching point of his adventurous daydreams as a boy. On warm, heavy summer days, Connor would escape to his rock when inspiration struck or when particularly tedious chores

loomed, like sweeping the main cabin or covering the boat when his father thought the sky looked ready to rain. He sat on the rock and thought about Abby.

Abby Sawyer had been Connor's constant companion since the fourth grade. He thought about her often, about how her yellow hair moved across her shoulders as she laughed.

As the third of five siblings and the only girl, Abby's childhood was backyard games and band-aids. Growing up, Abby had been stubby and unsure. She grew up with and stuck around the boys at school. They treated her like a brother. The girls teased her disregard for and disinterest in clothes and make-up. As a tall and spirited senior, Abby moved with the effortlessness of an athlete. She had slowly grown into herself, grew out her bowl cut and found a quiet confidence. Connor silently admired her.

Over the sound of wake-generated waves slapping against the shore, Connor heard his father stomping through the camp, preparing a fire. Connor stood from the thinking rock, and moved to help him.

After a few minutes of silent scrounging for kindling, Connor's father glanced at the headline of a week-old Sports Section and said, "Pats could be good this year. Could be great." He then crumpled the print and added it to the skeleton of the fire.

"Randy Moss was a great pick-up, don't you think?" Connor said immediately.

"Mmm, we'll see," Connor's father said, busy crunching the Financial Section numbers into a ball and adding them to the fire pit.

Connor started as wide receiver during his first three years at Durham High School. He never missed a practice, but intangibles accounted for his varsity position. Connor could play. On the field he was tenacious. Caught everything. Dove for anything. He played with contagious abandon. All his life, coaches asked him to demonstrate running particular routes, or used him as an example of the type of energy the team needed.

As a boy, he and his father spent summer days playing catch. Connor would dive off the dock, extend for a dramatic grab and pop up to the surface spitting out water and smiling. Recently, Connor tossed up easy balls for Maggie to catch as she plunged into the lake. Connor spent his days on the lake fishing for bass, chopping firewood, or letting his light feet carry him the three miles around the island, trying not to snap any twigs and scare away the deer. When he needed to, he escaped to the thinking rock.

The screen door of the main cabin creaked open and swung shut as his mother passed through, balancing a large, yellowing tray with a carton of eggs, half package of bacon, leftover corn on the cob, and a sticky bowl of blueberry pancake batter. The fire roared as if in anticipation of the family's final breakfast of the season.

Every meal eaten at the lake was cooked over an open flame. Connor loved the burnt, wet smell that permanently saturated his Durham High Panthers sweatshirt. To him, everything tasted better cooked on a grease-soaked griddle and eaten outdoors.

“Who wants coffee and who wants orange juice?” asked Connor’s mother as she turned to walk back up to the cabin after placing the tray on the edge of the fireplace.

“Coffee,” his father replied. “Everyone might need some. If you want to leave before sundown, we’ll need to work all day getting this old place ready for winter.”

“Do we have any more grape soda?” asked Maggie. The only time their mother allowed the kids drink soda was at the lake, and Welch’s Grape Soda was a particularly fitting favorite. Maggie knew she had to slurp down as much as she could today.

“You’re going to turn purple,” said Sharon with a smile. “How about you, Con?”

“Coffee,” he said, though he hated the taste and secretly feared it might stunt his growth. He stood at 6’3”, and knew he needed every inch to play Division I football. Following a glance from his father, he hastily added the word “please” to his order.

Maggie flitted around the lake, full of wonder and innocence. Connor and his father hammered a long, sturdy piece of plywood between two stumps and built her a balance beam a few years ago. During breakfast she paced and hopped along the beam. After filling up on pancakes swimming in syrup, she ran to the end of the dock and jumped into the water, where she spent the majority of her days.

“Papa, do we have to go back today?” Maggie asked. “School doesn’t start for another two weeks.”

“Your brother starts training camp tomorrow. He can’t miss camp and still expect to make first string.”

Connor nodded and Maggie stuck her tongue at him before returning her focus to the beam. Connor knew he needed to be brilliant his senior year to sign to a major school. New Hampshire was not known for developing great football players, though they claim Carlton Fisk, one of the best catchers in Red Sox history. He would have to show something significant to get interest from Division I powerhouses like Michigan or Notre Dame. Connor’s father played fullback in college, but chose the army draft over the NFL draft. He had a lot of respect for Pat Tillman.

Bacon crackled on the griddle and Connor’s father used a stiff, silver spatula to scrape the grease across the surface, using it to fry corn and cook pancakes. Connor ate five pancakes bursting with blueberries, picked at the unfinished plates of his mother and sister, then stood and got to work. Connor’s mother and Maggie did dishes and swept. Connor’s father and Connor carefully removed the parallel wooden docks that stretched into the lake. Once removed, the docks were stored behind the main cabin to prevent them from cracking when the lake froze over that winter.

Connor stood in the waist-deep water, unmooring the final leg of the dock. A cool wind swept spray off the surface and onto his broad back as he lifted the last cinderblock securing the dock. The thick forest on the mountains visible across the

lake was perforated with grassy swatches that served as ski runs in the wintertime. Sunlight on the water shone and changed, like a moving tray of diamonds or a cracking mirror.

As sunlight's last fingers closed below the hills, and all the miscellaneous chores had been completed, the Nolans loaded-up their thirteen-foot Boston Whaler with suitcases of dirty laundry and trash bags, said goodbye to the summer, and took off for shore.

2.

"Shut the fuck up," said Carl Sullivan, or Sully as he'd been called since grade school, in a forcibly stern whisper to a huddle of seniors football players. "Your girly giggling will wake those bitches up."

"The sound of the buzzer or the first one screaming will wake everybody up anyway," Connor replied with a smirk.

In the middle of the night, no light shone in the Durham High Panther's sweaty wrestling room that served as a bunkhouse to forty teenage boys during their two-week football camp. The team had almost completed the first week; one set of hard practices on Friday, then they could recover over the weekend. First, however, the upperclassmen took the opportunity to prove their seniority and supremacy. In the black of the room, Connor had a hard time finding an outlet for

the electric razor borrowed from his father. It was tradition for incoming freshman to have their heads shaved.

“Do we hit the eyebrows first or the heads?” asked Jordan Duffy, the lanky back-up quarterback, incurring a muted chuckle from the other boys.

Across Connor’s mind flashed an image of himself reaching down with silver shaver abuzz and a startled, faceless freshman jolting up, and slashing his face across the blade. Connor shuddered and shook the image from his head.

“Both,” Sully said. “Cut whatever you can get your hands on.”

Sully was built like a refrigerator with a microwave for a head. Once, in the fourth grade, he had given Connor a black eye while playing red rover at recess. The Principal banned the game from the playground but the boys were enthralled with the pus-filled purple balloon enclosing Connor’s right eye, and they remained the best of friends. Now, as a lineman, Sully inflicted pain much worse than black eyes and more calculated than red rover. He recorded a series of notches etched into the corner of his bed frame counting the number of opponents’ bones he’d broken. So far, he marked four confirmed strikes.

“Let’s do this,” said Connor. “I’ll go for the head. See if I can’t make these boys nice and pretty for their first day of high school.”

For two weeks, Connor wore an “extreme mullet,” completely bald in the front, with long, loose brown curls in the back. He knew his place and submitted to the trim without any noise, a trait expected of freshman. Sully had not gone quietly,

it took several of the upperclassmen to lie across his bulging body while another buzzed a tic-tac-toe board into his skull. Connor kept his eyes down and felt his own head, like freshly growing grass.

“On the count of three everybody with a razor attack,” Sully said, flicking on the blade in his hand.

“One.”

Several of the boys got down into a three-point stance, ready to take off and pounce on their victims. With pads on, they acted as players and without them, animals.

“Two.”

Sully surveyed the gaggle of heavy sleeping boys in front of him, trying to pick out the weakest. Undoubtedly David Weaver: a lonely sort of boy who tried too hard and was small both in stature and presence.

“Three.”

The boys launched onto their prey, waking them with a roar of suppressed laughter and aggression. A confused underclassman turned on the main lights in time to see Connor attack Joey Marchand, a tall boy with a bushy head of blond hair. Joey stood up to escape when the buzzing herd approached, but Connor grabbed him around the chest and, in one fell swoop, scraped his razor from the back of Joey’s neck up to his forehead, creating a long hairless line down the middle of his head. Connor held Joey tight against his own body. Joey’s awkward shimmies to

escape were no match for Connor's carefully honed strength. Connor cut out random patches of curls on both sides of the center stripe. Around them, the air bounced with bursts of laughter and "fuck yous." Thick swatches of yellow hair fell to the ground.

Satisfied with his job, Connor released Joey, who lifted his hand to read the Braille of his hair and skull. It felt as if Sideshow Bob had gone to a blind prison barber. Joey couldn't help but laugh. Half relieved, Connor chuckled along.

"God damn, man," Joey said. "I was going to lose my virginity in this year. Once the girls get a load of this mess I'm done for."

"Don't think you had much hope anyway," Connor said, looking around to find another head of hair to ruin.

"What about you, man?" the eager Joey continued. "Abby always tags along with you and Sully. Which one of you is boning her?"

Like a spilt can of red paint, anger rushed over Connor, but he did not have time to respond. A cry pierced the room. The sound differed from the previous yelps and yells the boys enjoyed as a soundtrack to their game. The pitch and ferocity proclaimed a certain seriousness. Connor could not ignore the sound.

Connor pushed through the half fighting, half frozen crowd towards the source. Increasingly, eyes turned towards Sully and David Weaver. David had screamed. In their struggles with the razor David somehow managed to nick a

corner of Sully's right eyebrow. Sully then thrust his forearm into the boy's chest and forced him to the ground.

Jordan and another boy were lying across David's legs, pinning them to the sticky mat below. They watched Sully rather than concentrating on the struggling, kicking weight beneath them. Sully knelt on David's arms, his basketball shorts and boxers in a loose pile around his knees. Sully pried open David's mouth with one hand and took hold of his dick with the other.

Connor saw, then looked away. Turning his back, he watched at the rest of the team looking on with anticipation, disgust, and a strange willingness.

Sully squatted lower in his stance, until his balls grazed David's nose.

"TEA BAG. TEA BAG. TEA BAG," Jordan began to chant. Many others followed suit. Connor closed his eyes and tried to drown the sound with the sloshing of thoughts in his head.

Sully was Connor's oldest friend. As co-captains this season, like the parents of a half potty-trained toddler, they needed to present a united front. Connor thought the act was awful, shameful. He'd seen it done at training camp two years ago and left the room. He'd slept outside for the remainder of camp, telling everyone that it still felt like summer when he slept in the dirt. A few of the other boys joined him for a night or two to look out for the pine-shielded stars and shiver in the wind, but everyone else had returned to the wrestling room eventually.

Uncomfortable chuckles, squirms, and hollers returned Connor to the wrestling room. Sully inserted himself into David's mouth. Sully heaved slightly with fits of laughter and the feeling of conquest. He remained hunched over long enough for David to gag on the sweat and salt that filled his mouth.

Sully released him and stood. David remained on the ground, and, with fast fluttering eyelids, scoured the room for eyes to meet. He failed at forcing himself to laugh along with the cheers and jeers of the surrounding crowd. Encouraged by the noise, Sully lifted a heavy foot and stomped on David's chest.

Connor moved forward and put his arm around Sully's shoulder.

"You proved your point," Connor said into Sully's ear. "Enough showboating."

"I own you," Sully roared to no one in particular.

"Enough," said Connor.

"What? He liked it. Didn't you?" Sully turned to David, who still laid on the floor, trying to make himself smile and spitting the taste out of his mouth. Just as David began to reply with something forcibly nonchalant, Jordan interjected.

"Of course he liked it. He would have bit your balls off if he didn't."

"Enough," Connor said, "Somebody turn the fucking lights off. Everybody goes to sleep now. Morning run starts in four hours."

Connor lifted his chin and forced stern looks around the room. He avoided the crumpled boy at his feet.

3.

The boys emerged from their sleeping bags and pulled on their sweatpants and pads to run out into the still, cold morning. David stood and got ready last. He forced a joke to the boy bunking next to him about not wanting to reveal his morning wood from a tasty Jessica Alba dream. He wanted the past night's events erased from everyone's memory as much as Connor did.

They jogged out of the wrestling room and up the grassy hill, still wet with morning fog, to connect with the road circling through campus and up to the wooded pond behind it. Connor kicked rocks that skipped up the road ahead of the running herd. Connor always led the morning runs; Sully always brought up the rear. Connor had not even closed his eyes that night, and the morning's familiar trek seemed daunting. He kicked rocks to stay focused, trying to stay with the same one for as long as possible. He zig-zagged from edge to edge on the pavement and some of the boys behind him might have wondered if he was drunk.

Connor led them down Main Street. The town of Durham had two lives. One lived by University of New Hampshire students who vomited in the streets on their 21st birthdays, and one lived by the townsfolk who championed small businesses and neighborly respect, and occasionally vomited in their homes after Irish Catholic holidays or devastating Red Sox losses. In late summer and early spring, houses surrounding the college were decorated with dirt, red plastic cups, and twenty dollar, flea-ridden, plaid couches. Homes further from campus were maintained

with green lawns, lilac bushes, and American flags. In the winter, everything shivered under a wet rug of snow, and Durham's two lives were harder to distinguish.

Towards the end of the run, with the practice field in sight, Connor kicked his rock clear off the road. He skidded over to the grass, bent, and picked it up. The mass of gray sweatpants and uncovered shoulder pads stomped by him. He waited until he saw Sully's red face and heavy hoofing to rejoin the pack. Slowing his usual pace, Connor ran next to his friend. Only the labored breathing, the slap of pads on skin, and shoes on the pavement broke up the morning air. Finally, Connor asked what he'd been wondering all night.

"Why'd you do that, man?"

"For fun," Sully said. "Don't worry about it."

They looped around the track once, and filed into uneven lines around the fifty-yard line on the field for stretching, push-ups, and up-downs before breakfast. Connor continued his thought as they stood catching their breath.

"I just hope he doesn't quit," he said.

"Why would you even care?" said Sully. "He'll never play."

"We'd look like shitty captains."

"These scrubs should be afraid of us. We have to demand their respect."

“Or we could try to earn it,” Connor said before turning to face the team and shouting out, “Fifty push-ups.”

4.

After a few days of hard practices, where Connor and Sully rammed into each other on the field and reconciled the passing days’ differences, Sully’s older brother, Chris, dropped off a thirty-rack case of Keystone Light for the senior boys to enjoy after the long week of practice. Chris had graduated from Durham High the year before Sully and Connor entered, giving Sully the distinct advantage of still having players on the team who feared his brother and therefore wouldn’t fuck with him. After high school, Chris worked at their father’s lumberyard. Sully would surely join, if he didn’t get recruited to play college ball.

After lights out, Sully, Connor, and Jordan lugged the case of beer out to the pond behind campus. Practices had been brutal, but the more they drank the less their muscles ached-- or maybe the less they cared.

“How do you think the Pats will do this year?” Connor said.

“All the way. Man, I fucking hate Peyton Manning,” Sully said. “That AFC Championship Game hurt.”

“I can’t even talk about it,” Jordan added. “I’m still too pissed off.”

“It’s better to be pissed off than pissed on,” Connor said with a smirk.

“Pats are going all the way,” Sully said. “Mark my words.”

They fell silent. They were drained of thought and didn't feel much like chatting. Jordan and Sully played cards while Connor threw rocks at the pond. They mostly wanted to get drunk.

Connor wished aloud that Abby could join them. Sully agreed, saying she'd quickly figure out a game for them, or somehow know how to make the night exciting. She, Connor, and Sully met as teammates on the eight-and-under Durham Bees baseball team. She was the only girl on the team and their RBI leader.

The alcohol kicked in. Connor felt free and loose; his mind felt out of control, but contained, like an extended sneeze. He loved that feeling.

Connor got drunk for the first time early in his freshman year. October 27, 2004. He thought back on that night often, the night the Red Sox finally won the World Series.

After eighty-six years of holding their breath and pulling out their hair, Red Sox nation finally tasted champagne and silver; they reversed their curse. The bloody sock, Big Papi's late inning heroics, Bellhorn's homer off Pesky Pole, Johnny Damon's naked pull-ups and Jesus beard, Manny being Manny. The Idiots pulled off a miracle with consistency and perseverance.

Everyone in the neighborhood watched Game Four together in the Sullivan's expansive rec room. Connor's parents, family friends, and former coaches all came together. Coach Max Cain, his Pop Worner football coach, shouted with particular

drunk elation. The clang and slosh of cheers-ing Sam Adams bottles provided a background melody to the echoed shouts and sobs of finally achieving a generation-long delayed gratification.

After hugging most of the adults and each other, Connor, Sully, and Abby ran out into the street wailing, jumping, and high-fiving. The excitement elevated them and gave Connor goose bumps all over. They made their way through town towards the University of New Hampshire campus, stopping to congratulate every friend, neighbor, or Sox-hat-wearer they encountered. Campus was electric.

In the middle of Thompson Quad flames from a roaring, impromptu bonfire shot up and down like a heart monitor as desk chairs and couches were thrown on. Red solo cups affixed themselves both to the grassy lawn and to every student's hand. Sully first noticed a keg near the entrance to the dorms.

"Let's try and get some," he said, as he knelt to pick up a cup and wiped the rim clean with the inside of his Ortiz jersey. "Come on, nobody would even notice we don't go to UNH."

"They wouldn't notice you, Sul" Connor replied. "You had a receding hairline before you lost all your baby teeth."

"I'm in too good of a mood to kick your ass 'cause, but let's make this night even better. Our parents are all drunk."

Connor offered an uneasy laugh and looked to Abby. He couldn't tell if the light in her eyes reflected of the bonfire or the joy of Game Four, but something in the coal of Abby's pupils burned bright.

"I want to do it too," she said, her smile so big it seemed to pull her eyes open wider. She too grabbed a cup off the ground and made her way over to the keg. Connor hurried to follow suit.

The sounds surrounding them were of obvious, blasting joy. Choruses of "Sweet Caroline" were punctuated by chants of "Yankees Suck." Around the keg, a mass of people pushed forward and clapped one another on the back. Connor gripped his empty cup nervously as they inched closer to the middle of the huddled mass.

They'd gotten their beers, choked them down and regained the line. Fill. Chug. Repeat.

At first it felt like nothing. Then they experienced everything. Connor was joyously numb, until he saw Abby and Sully kiss. The night's glory evaporated, then he pulled Abby away and drank another beer. Sully passed out on the quad and Abby vomited. Connor walked Abby home and made sure she got inside safely. He never mentioned the kiss to either of them; it seemed like the best way to preserve their friendship.

At the windy pond behind football camp Connor polished off another Keystone. He crunched up the can in his hand and chucked it at Sully.

“I still don’t like that you did that,” he said, encouraged by alcohol.

“Did what?” Sully replied.

Connor didn’t know what he’d meant. He didn’t like that Sully had kissed Abby, though he knew it had only been once, almost four years ago, and Abby hadn’t even remembered the next day. He hated the tea-bagging too, but wanted even less to mention that incident again. As a result of Connor’s confusion, the hazy trio basked in silence.

“I’m sorry it offended you so much that I put my balls in that kid’s mouth,” Sully started, “but even he laughed it off. That kid’s all right. Maybe I shouldn’t have done it, but it’s done.”

“Forget it.” Connor said. “That’s not even what I meant.”

5.

The remaining week of camp went by in a flurry of hill sprints, caught passes, and learned plays. Though he had excelled, Connor couldn’t wait to go home. He envisioned a home-cooked meal as he turned up the street towards his house, the suspension of his old Nissan Frontier squeaked loudly as he rounded the corner.

Coach Cain’s red Dodge Durango was parked in the Connor’s front yard. The tires of Cain’s truck had skidded up the lawn, torn the earth and uprooted the grass in its wake. Connor slowed his truck to a halt at the sight of the truck. Coach Cain

had frequented family dinners during his time as Connor's Pop Warner coach, but when Connor advanced on to high school, Coach Peterson sat at the head of the table and Coach Cain made himself scarce.

Connor continued up towards his house and parked at the bottom of the driveway. He passed his keys from hand to hand and adjusted the heavy strap of his overstuffed duffle bag before walking in the front door.

"Connie, you're home!" his mother cried from upstairs.

Connor hated the nickname but didn't dare upset his mother by telling her. He dropped off his duffle of damp, decaying workout clothing in his bedroom and climbed upstairs. His ankles cracked with every step.

Connor's mother and sister greeted him with a hug, his father a handshake. After his "how are yous" with his family, and an elongated stretch of silence, Connor said, "Hello, Coach Cain."

"I told you, it's Max," Coach Cain said. "You don't play for me anymore. You can call me Max, son." With that, Coach Cain stepped forward to give Connor a hug. The smell of tobacco and familiar cologne caught in Connor's throat and he coughed and stepped away.

"Why don't you shower up?" his mother said. "I can't wait to finally have dinner with you, Honey, but you smell like the inside of your father's waders after a month at the lake."

Connor smiled at her, nodded, and went back downstairs to the bathroom he shared with his sister. Maggie sat on her bedroom floor, listening to a reading of Harry Potter on CD. Hand-drawn portraits and landscapes covered the walls of her bedroom and the ceiling shone with glow-in-the-dark stars that Connor had helped to put up. As Connor popped his head in to say hello, Maggie turned off the stereo and ran over.

“Hey! Was it fun?” she asked, hugging him around the legs.

“Tons,” he said, patting her curly brown head.

“Did you miss me?”

“Not really. I was busy.”

Her expression deflated and she turned back towards her CD player.

“Just kidding, Goof. I missed you, a little,” he continued. “Wait down here and listen to the boring adventures of Harry and Rufus until I get out of the shower. Then we’ll go upstairs together, okay?”

“Harry and *Ron*, Stupid,” she laughed. “But okay, I’ll be right here.”

“Good girl,” Connor said and patted her on the head. “Stay in your room.”

Connor allowed the water to flush and flow over him. Showers at camp were short and public, with the immediate risk of being pissed on. He didn’t feel much like lathering up, because his skin thrived under a layer of grime and grass, but he didn’t want to leave the water’s warm embrace either. He thought of the many questions

his parents would pose and the unexpected presence of Coach Cain. He waited in the water.

A few minutes after the hot water ran out, Connor pulled back the curtain and exited the shower. He looked at himself for a moment in the fogged over mirror. The reflection was undoubtedly him, but a clouded, vague version. He became aware of his nakedness and redressed in his practice-soiled sweats, with a towel flung over one shoulder, before moving to his room and getting dressed for dinner.

Though he'd seen his parents and their guest were dressed nicely, Connor pulled on an old pair of jeans and a tee shirt with "Brady" written in bold across the back. He collected his sister and went upstairs to the dining room, a hand on her shoulder.

Tom drank a Sam Adams. Sharon took baked potatoes out of the oven. Coach Cain smacked on cheese and crackers.

"How was camp, Son?" Coach Cain asked as Connor appeared at the top of the stairs.

"Long," Connor replied. "Need help, Mom?"

"You could help your sister set the table," she said. "Then we're pretty much ready to eat. I'll set everything out on the counter and people can serve themselves."

Connor grabbed a handful of forks and knives and set the table for five. Blue and yellow fish swam up and down the seams of the tablecloth. Connor lived all eighteen years of his life in the old house. He'd slept in the same bedroom, with

same solid blue wallpaper, and same framed poster of his Grandfather wearing a Bowdoin football jersey. After he finished setting the table, at his father's request, Connor stepped down into the cellar refrigerator to grab fresh beers for the adults.

Connor descended the dark stairs into the cement cellar, shivering a little with each step. No matter the season, the Connor's core temperature chilled twenty degrees as he moved from the heated house to the cellar. In the fridge stood a 24-pack of Sam Adams Boston Lager bottles and several scattered cans of Bud Light. Connor chugged two cans, careful to rearrange the recycling so his father wouldn't notice metallic blue atop the pile of brown glass. After dangling his head under the faucet and rinsing out his mouth, Connor picked up three bottles, placing the sweaty necks between his fingers and returned to the dining room.

Everyone piled their plates with beef stew and a baked potato, Connor's favorite meal, and sat at the table. Connor placed the beers in front of his father, made a heaping plate for himself, then took up the only remaining seat at the table. Coach Cain sat in Connor's usual spot, forcing Connor to sit next to him.

"I was telling your parents before you got here," Coach Cain began, "I heard you got out of camp today, and I know it's your senior year, so I wanted to stop by and say best of luck for a successful season." Cain paused and showed a smile around the room. "Then I smelled your mother's stew and couldn't resist an invitation for dinner."

After a beat, Connor's mother said, "Wasn't that nice?"

“Thanks,” Connor said, without putting down his fork.

“What position do they have you at this year?”

“Still receiver.”

“I always thought you had great hands.”

Forks scraped against plates like a shutting gate against pavement.

“Thanks,” Connor said.

“Who else looks good this year?” Connor’s father asked.

“Sully’s been lifting a lot,” Connor replied. “He’s pretty massive. Jordan will get a few snaps this year. I doubt we have a better QB.”

“Any new freshman?” his father continued. “You guys struggled defensively last year. You need a fast safety.”

“No one stood out,” Connor said.

“When’s your first game?” posed his mother.

“Two weeks from Saturday. Against Gilford.”

“The Patriots’ first game is the next day,” said his father.

“I’m almost as excited for that,” said Connor.

“I can’t wait to see what Bill Belichick has up those cut-off sleeves of his,” said Coach Cain. “He’s had a long offseason to prepare.”

“They’ll come out guns blazing,” said Connor’s father.

Connor mashed up his potato with his fork and swirled it into his stew. The meaty meal tasted wonderful after subsisting on a diet of days-old cafeteria macaroni at camp. Still, shoveling mountainous spoonfuls up to his mouth required enormous effort, and Connor yearned to rest his body between his own sheets.

“And what grade will you be in, My Dear?” Coach Cain asked of Maggie.

Maggie looked up, startled by the first question of the evening directed at her. She scooted up in her chair and, with her elbow, accidentally knocked over a full glass of ice water. The water spread across the table and dripped into the laps of Connor and Coach Cain as quick and cold as a nor’easter. Connor suddenly woke up.

“Oh no!” Connor’s mother exclaimed.

“What the fuck?” said Coach Cain.

Connor stepped between his sister and former coach.

“She didn’t mean to,” he said.

Hot tears pooled in the corners of Maggie’s eyes.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“Not to worry, Honey,” their mother said. “Connor, grab some paper towels?”

Connor continued to face the table, but collected a roll of paper towels from the kitchen. Coach Cain stood, allowing the water to drain onto his chair instead of his pants.

“Max,” Connor’s father said. “No need for language like that.” He turned to Maggie, “Say you’re sorry to Mr. Cain, Butterfingers.”

“I said it. I am sorry,” Maggie replied. “Mom, can I go downstairs?”

“That’s okay, Darling,” Coach Cain replied. “I overreacted,” he assured Connor’s father. Cain reached across the table to put a hand on Maggie’s head.

Connor intercepted Coach Cain’s extending hand. Connor grabbed Cain’s reaching arm and filled his open hand with the roll of paper towels.

“Here,” Connor said.

Coach Cain ripped off a few sheets and patted down his pants. Maggie used the corner of a paper towel to wipe her eyes and waited for a cue to leave. Sharon stuffed the remainder of the roll underneath the tablecloth, propping it up like a circus tent.

“Looks like you’re still a little wet down there, Connor,” said Coach Cain with a laugh. “I think we’re out of towels here, but you can use mine.”

“I’ll dry up downstairs. Thanks for dinner, Mom. Mags, come with me,” Connor said. He took his plate and Maggie’s to the sink before retreating.

At the door to Maggie's room Connor said, "Don't you worry, Mags. I'm glad you knocked over your glass. Go to sleep, okay?"

He locked Maggie's door on his way out then moved across the hall to his room and waited for the sound of an engine starting.

6.

On weekends when the Panther's and Patriots' played at night, Connor slept in as late as he possibly could. The ring of his cell phone brought him out of a dream about fishing from a white-beached shore and back to his New Hampshire bed.

"Abby Sawyer" appeared on his caller ID.

"Hello," he said, his voice cracking with the first words of the day.

"Whoa, a pre-teen again are we?" Abby laughed.

"No, you woke me up, actually," he said, sitting up in bed.

"It's past noon. You have no excuse to be asleep. We're doing something fun today."

"Like what?"

"We'll figure something out! I already called Sully. We'll be at your house in twenty minutes. Get your ass out of bed!"

"You're annoying. See you soon."

Connor stretched his arms wide behind his head and closed his eyes for a moment before getting out of bed. He rummaged through the dirty clothes in his gym bag, not possessing the time or desire to wash them, and smelled out the cleanest outfit. He landed on a pair of basketball shorts and long-sleeved, black Bruins tee shirt. His mother always tried to buy him collared shirts and pleated pants. Prone to stains, Connor preferred the soft movability of the Boston sports apparel his father gave him each Christmas and birthday.

Within a few minutes, Sully pulled up in a rusty brown Bronco, which Sully's father had driven and caused trouble in as a teen. Abby hopped out of the front seat and came into the house without knocking.

"Hello!" she hollered up the stairs.

"Be down in a minute," replied Connor.

"Is that Abby?" Connor's mother asked loudly. "Oh Honey, come upstairs, we've missed you!"

Connor smirked to himself, foreseeing this reaction. From his room he heard Abby bounce up to the living room and give his mother a hug. Connor whipped a toothbrush around his mouth, spit, and went to collect Abby, so they could leave as quickly as possible.

When he arrived on the landing and surveyed his living room, he knew it would be a while. His mother must have continued with her chores, but Abby rested next to his father on the sprawling couch his mother draped in a denim cover to hide

the many spaghetti stains from dinner plates dropped by Connor or Maggie. Neither Abby nor Connor's father noticed him on the landing. They watched *NESN*, the New England Sports Network, smiling and discerning the report. With a Red Sox game slated to start in an hour, Jerry Remy had a lot to say about Jonathan Papelbon's streak of saves.

"Ready for a new year, Abby?" Connor's father asked.

"I guess I'm ready for school to start. I can't really think about graduation, though. I'm going to miss everybody too much."

"Any thoughts about college?"

"I don't know. Maybe I'll apply to UNH."

"Will you try to play soccer?"

"Hopefully. I know Connor can't wait to play college football."

"We'll just have to see how this season goes for him. It's not easy to get recruited and he didn't get many letters last year."

At that, Connor decided to include himself in the conversation.

"Hey, Abby. Want to get out of here?" he said.

"Hey, stranger," she replied. "We were just talking about how exciting your season will be."

“I’ll have to catch everything,” Connor said, before adding, “Sully’s waiting in the car, right?”

“I almost forgot.” Abby said as she stood. She glanced back at the TV and added, “Great talking with you, Mr. Nolan. Go Sox.”

Connor’s father nodded.

Connor called shotgun as he opened the front door of his house.

Abby raced past him into the front seat of Sully’s waiting car.

“That’s bull,” Connor shouted after her. “I called it.”

“I got here first,” she said, cranking down the front window to talk with Connor on the outside.

“That’s not really how the game works,” Sully said.

“If you’re not playing by the rules, then I won’t either,” Connor said. He reached through the open window and opened the front door, then sat on Abby’s lap and slammed the door closed. “Drive,” he instructed Sully.

Abby panted both from laughter and the massive amount of pressure on her legs and chest as Connor leaned back and stretched into her.

“Get off of me,” she said, in a voice much higher-pitched than her usual tone.

“Get in the backseat,” he said.

Sully turned on the engine and started to reverse down the uneven driveway. With each bump of the pavement Connor bounced in Abby's lap, causing her to laugh and groan alternatively. Recognizing this, Connor exaggerated each bump.

"All right! All right! I'll get in the back, you ass," she said.

Sully put on the brakes and Connor opened the door for her. He leaned forward so she could escape and walk around to the back. Instead, she crawled over the center console between Connor and Sully, and lay down across the backseat, exaggerating her heavy breathing. The boys chuckled.

"Okay, let's go," Sully said. He looked to Connor and added, "Where to?"

"Let's go to the lake."

The twang of country music and acoustic guitars filled the truck. Connor left his window down, drinking in his last gulps of summer air. Soon the world around him would become crisp and cold like a freshly picked apple. The fall sky stretched out, cloudless and deep blue. Fall smelled like leather and dead leaves. Abby's blond hair fluttered in the backseat, wind from Connor's open window whisking her it across her face and occasionally between her parted lips. Connor watched in the rearview mirror.

They rode down Main Street, listening to the chug of the engine. After the hour and a half's drive from Durham to Lake Winnepesaukee, Connor's chest filled with boyish excitement at the first glimpse of the water.

In the dead frost of winter the lake froze over completely. Once, at the age of twelve, Connor's father woke him up early and they drove to the lake. When they arrived at Gilford Marina, instead of getting out of the car and into their boat, as they would do in the summer months, Connor's father kept on driving. He drove straight down the boat ramp, onto the ice, and clear across to Welch Island. Connor feared breaking through the ice and being trapped in frozen metal, but his father reassured him. They made the journey there and back without a crack. Connor loved the quiet white of the frozen island.

"Can we stop at Sawyer's?" Abby suggested. "They'll be closed for winter soon."

"Good call, Abs," said Sully. "I could crush some fried clams right now."

Sawyer's restaurant defined a New England summer: peppermint stick ice cream cones that melt in the sun and leave children with sticky green fingers, families surrounding shaded picnic tables, sharing fries and lobster rolls. New Hampshireites tracked the seasons by the presence or absence of the line outside and rotating blue and red sign atop the wide, one-story building.

In middle school, Abby convinced Connor and Sully that her family owned Sawyer's. She explained wearing hand-me-down coats in winter because her family was only rich when the restaurant was open. Abby had trouble keeping a straight face and the boys quickly caught on. Also, they could not help but notice her donning the same swimsuit summer after summer, despite her changing body.

They sat at a picnic bench beside the lake. Abby licked at her cone. Sully dipped his fried clams in ketchup. Connor stood and threw rocks into the lake.

During lazy summers at the lake as a boy, Connor hid and played in the woods behind the thinking rock. A trail, marked by plywood cutouts of bears painted white, cut across the three-mile island. People on the island, the four families on each corner, called it the Bear Trail. The Connolly family built the trail years ago, before Maggie had been born.

The trail marked the favorite path of Bo Connolly. The Connollys lived on the south side of the island, and they shared a man-made, sandy-bottomed boat slip with the Nolans. Both families moored their boats in the twenty-square-foot boat slip, protected by a rock jetty. Bo was the youngest of the Connolly's three children, the same age as Connor. Everyone called him Bear.

One day, when Connor and Bear were both five, Connor's mother bathed him in the shallow waters between the parallel docks. She scrubbed his hair and Connor slapped at the bubbles appearing in the lake. A family of ducks quacked by in order. Connor reached to swim after them but gently his mother corralled him back, warning him about duck ticks. A roar from Connor's father and a splash broke through the hazy air. Connor's mother grabbed him tight and the mother duck led her children into flight.

Connor's father found Bear underwater with his back against the soft, silted lakebed of the boat slip. He didn't know how long the boy had been submerged. He plunged, fully clothed, into the shallow waters and pulled the small

boy up by his white hands. Once both heads broke the lake's surface, Connor's father began to scream for help. With wood-hardened hands, he provided the support a neck should have and held the child's head above water. He cleared matted black hair from Bear's face and eyes and yelled again for help. The sounds did not make it through the wooded thicket to the Connollys. His family still did not know Bear had wandered off to go for a swim.

Connor's mother heard the screams. She pulled Connor out of the water and ran, with him on her hip, towards her husband's cries. As she sprinted along the rough path between the trees and over small boulders, she failed to notice an overgrown root and kicked into it at full sprint. She tripped, toppling to the ground and releasing Connor. He flew several feet before crashing into the earth and cutting open the side of his head. Blood from the gash mixed with water in his sopping hair and a thin red liquid spread down his face. His mother came to him, dirt and blood on her knees. His mother wiped his forehead and Connor noticed the blood on her hands. He started crying when he recognized the deep worry behind her eyes. Then the shock wore off, and the pain hit, and he wailed.

A hundred yards away, not visible through the trees, Connor's father lifted Bear out of the water and laid him onto the grassy shore. Little buttercup flowers reflected yellow light on Bear's unmoving, peaceful face. Bear wore red swim trunks with an elastic waistband. His eyes were half-open and unseeing. He looked so young, Connor's father thought, as he pressed two fingers into the soft skin of Bear's

neck. He felt no pulse and called again for help with increasing desperation. Still, no one appeared.

Connor's mother could no longer hear the call over the cries of her son. Connor wanted to touch his gash, but his mother pulled his muddy hands away. She attended to him gently, caring for his cuts and hushing his sobs. Unaware of the world around him, and consumed with his pain, Connor cried. How often, later in life, he'd wished he'd quieted himself, recognized his father's distant plea, and helped.

Bear was clean and white. His face appeared more at ease than dead. Connor's father felt the young boy's ribs crack as he pushed into his chest, attempting CPR. Connor's father breathed hard into Bear's mouth, hoping to coax a cough and spit of lake water, but the boy was silent. Connor's father kept trying. Thirty pumps. Breathe. Repeat. Yell.

Bear's father emerged from the thicket carrying a stack of firewood. He saw Mr. Nolan frantic and leaning over something. With a moment's intent gaze, Mr. Connolly recognized his son.

"What the hell are you doing?" Mr. Connolly shouted. He threw down the wood and ran.

"Thank God. Thank God you're here," Connor's father said, breathless and scared. "We need help. We need to get the Coast Guard."

Mr. Connolly saw his son, limp and inert in the grass. He dropped to his knees and took his son in his shaking arms.

Connor's father jumped up and ran to the main cabin to call the shore. He ran past his wife and bleeding son without registering them. Connor's mother realized in horror she had forgotten about her husband's calls for help. Connor yelled after his father, wanting his husky-voiced reassurance. He could not understand why his father wouldn't stop for him. Years later, Connor filled with guilt and wished his passing cries had not covered his father's desperate call for immediate help. Connor decided to silence himself.

The Coast Guard came too late. Bear was already dead. His young eyes had seen no pain, his innocence forever frozen in the boat slip.

Connor's mother cried as she placed a bandage on Connor's wounds. She wrapped him in her warm arms until he fell asleep. Connor's father spent the night on the end of the dock and awoke the next morning with a hoarse voice. He never seemed to have as many words after Bear died.

The Connollys left the lake; the place was too flooded with memories to stay. They returned the next summer and hammered white bears around the island to mark the Bear Trail. Once completed, they sold their house and never returned. The Nolans remained at the lake for that summer, and each summer following.

Connor remembered his surroundings as Abby appeared next to him. She began to throw rocks into the lake as well.

“Bet I can hit the far post on the dock before you can,” she said, pointing down the shore.

“Not a chance,” said Connor.

He flipped a rock up into the air, caught it again, then whipped it in the direction Abby pointed. A thud sounded as the pebble bounced off the post and into the water. He turned to Abby and smiled.

7.

When football season began, Connor’s Panthers lost the first game of the season. A day later, the Patriots opened with a decisive victory over their rival Jets. Cheating accusations tainted the glory of the Pats win as the NFL investigated Head Coach, Bill Belichick for filming defensive signals during a game. Belichick paid his half-a-million-dollar fine, and the season roared on. Discussing the scandal, Sully remarked, “If you ain’t cheating, you ain’t trying.”

For as long as Connor could remember, football had been a central facet in his life. He was a solid center fielder and he could hit a three-pointer when he played HORSE, but football was his game. Opponents and teammates alike felt his presence on the field. He particularly admired the sheer force, strength, and will football required, like that of a Derby racehorse. The best team won, no way around it. People outside of New England mocked Belichick’s cut-off sweatshirts, but football wasn’t a suit-and-tie sport, and Connor loved that, too.

Playing receiver required wit and adaptability. He had to read defenses, read his own players, and find ways to create enough space for the ball to find his hands. Connor had years of practice, supplemented by intensive backyard drills lead by his father.

He almost always loved the sport. He remembered an evening in middle school when he returned home late from Pop Warner. The sun nearly set, wind hit Connor's eyes and slipped through his sweatshirt. He shivered as he walked up his steep driveway. Coach Cain's red Dodge continued around the cul-de-sac after dropping Connor off. He walked through the front door, slightly red-faced and puffy eyed.

"I was starting to get worried," his mother said, as he came up the stairs.

"I'm sorry," he replied, keeping his head bowed.

"What took you?" she asked. "I hope you and Sully weren't goofing around and distracting everyone again."

"Coach Cain had me stay late," he answered, trying to get to his room.

"Why did he make you stay late?" Connor's father asked. Connor hadn't noticed him sitting on the couch in front of the television. He typically returned home from work much later.

"Oh, I guess I just didn't play well today," Connor said.

"Why not?" his father continued.

“I don’t know. I dropped a few passes.”

Connor’s father stood up and clicked off the TV. He walked across the living room and picked up a football from the toy basket in the corner.

“Come with me,” he said.

Connor dropped his backpack on the stairs and followed his father into the backyard. The temperature, and the yellowing leaves from their large oak tree, steadily dropped. Connor glanced about, relieved the grass was still colored with green and not covered with white. The backyard spread large enough to run a few passing routes. Connor followed his father towards the painted gray fence at the far edge of the yard.

“Buttonhook. Go,” Connor’s father said.

Connor took off running. After ten yards, he curved back towards his father and anticipated the pass. His father threw it wide right. Connor laid out in an attempt to catch it but missed, and landed hard on the cold earth.

“Again,” his father said.

Connor brushed dirt and bits of grass from his knees as he jogged back to the fence. Once he reached his father, he turned on his heels and ran the same route, leaning slightly to the right. This time, his father tossed the ball left. Connor adjusted too late, barely touched the ball and, again, wound up on his knees, without the ball.

“We’re out here until you can catch every pass,” his father said. “Slant right.”

Connor hustled back to his father and took off to the right. Each step more determined than the last. He caught the ball and rubbed his hands over it appreciating the touch of leather, then returned it to his father. The sky turned orange as they practiced. Sweating after a few particularly difficult catches, Connor removed his sweatshirt and tossed it aside as he ran back to his father.

“Where’d you get those bruises?” his father asked, pointing to Connor’s arms and shoulders.

“Sully,” he said. “Sully hit me real hard in practice.”

“I hope you got him back,” his father said.

“He’s a lot bigger than me.”

“Then you need to be faster than him.”

“What if I can’t get away?”

“Then you’re going to get hit.”

Connor nodded, then took off once again.

The sky darkened, making it harder to see and catch, but they did not stop. After some time, Connor’s mother turned on the backyard light and called out to the silhouetted pair.

“Almost ready for dinner?” she asked.

“Almost,” Connor’s father replied. He turned to his son. “You catch five in a row and we go inside.”

Connor’s body ached and his vision blurred. It took him almost twenty tries to get five in a row. His father did not make it easy. Each time he dropped a pass it required increasing resolve to carry himself back to his father and start again. By the time they made it to the dinner table, the corned beef was cold.

8.

Durham High’s football season sputtered. For every game in which Wes Welker and his Patriots were precise and perfect, Connor and his Panthers were clumsy and lacking. He couldn’t seem to connect with Jordan as quarterback, and the coaches didn’t trust Jordan to throw. Connor found himself useless.

On Mondays, after games, the team watched film and ran hill sprints for every turnover, missed tackle, and muffed punt. Sully called those days double-lunch Mondays. Connor did not vomit. He sweat buckets and kept his mouth shut as his coaches yelled themselves hoarse around him.

Connor worried that he needed to take the team on his shoulders and they weren’t quite broad enough. The Panthers started the season 0-3 and Connor felt as if he’d let go of more passes than he’d caught. The ball always seemed to pass just

beyond his reach. He knew he disappointed his father, though no one explicitly voiced it.

Connor worked hard to forget, to dismiss thoughts of fumbles or missed opportunities or failures. He stayed late after practice to lift weights or run routes. This was not unusual. Throughout his football life, he'd often stayed late after practice.

Connor's mother worked as a nurse at Wentworth-Douglas Hospital a town over from Durham, and frequently picked him up late from Pop Worner practice. As the last boy waiting after practice, Coach Cain sometimes invited Connor to wait in Cain's apartment across the street from the practice field. Eventually, this became a habit.

After a game one Saturday, during which Connor rushed for three touchdowns, then sat out the rest of the game (for the sake of fairness), Coach Cain approached Connor's mother and suggested he drive the boy home on weekdays, because she worked so late. Connor's mother greatly appreciated the generosity. Connor's hands shook in his pockets as his mother passed the news along to him. That night he sat in the shower for almost two hours.

Connor was ten years old the first time Coach Cain took him in his hands and destroyed his innocence.

Afterwards, Connor had felt as if he'd spent an hour spinning in circles, disoriented, close to vomiting and entirely unsure of which direction took him forward. He felt hot and sick and ashamed.

"Good boys don't talk about private times," Coach Cain had said.

Connor nodded, staring at the dirty, brown carpet and trying to remember where the door leading out of Coach Cain's apartment was.

"Good boys play football and have fun with their friends. Am I your friend, Connor?" Coach Cain asked.

"You're my coach," Connor said, without unfixing his gaze from the old and new stains on the carpet.

"Do you think I'm your friend too?" Cain continued. "I think of you as a very special friend, Connor."

Connor choked on the stale cigar smell in the windowless room. His eyes burned. He coughed and sniffled, but did not speak.

"Special friends can enjoy each other's company in a special way, Connor. But we can't talk about it with anyone, not even your parents."

Connor ached like he had been ripped open at the seams. He didn't want to tell anyone, and if he did, he wouldn't know what to say.

"If you tell your parents they will be very mad at you, Connor."

Connor hated that Coach Cain kept saying his name. The word from his mouth sounded tender but disgusting, like raw meat. Coach Cain rarely said his name in practice, but he sang Sully's praises. Sully dominated as the biggest and most powerful in the children's league, but Connor was now the Coach's special one.

"You keep being a good boy, and playing football for me, and maybe someday you'll even be a Patriot."

On the field, Coach Cain spoke to Connor no differently than the other boys: loud corrections and soft reassurances. In private, Cain told Connor he had to treat him like the other boys, although, of course, he loved Connor the most.

After showing such dedication in his winning season, the Pop Warner Association awarded Cain Coach of the Year. In his acceptance speech, at the end of the year banquet, Cain spoke of his love of the game and deep love for the boys.

At those words Connor had grabbed his father's hand.

"Dad," he began to say.

Connor's father shook his hand away and put a finger to his lips.

Nearly every day, for three years, Cain took Connor to his apartment after practice, to the room without windows, and took everything he wanted from the boy.

9.

Sometimes, when a defensive end hit Connor particularly hard, he'd get aroused. He grew accustomed to hiding it, though running and thinking became harder as blood drained away from his legs and brain. The football field existed in a womanless space like a Milwaukee Nintendo convention or a watched TV screen featuring basketball. Connor found that disconcerting.

He made out with Lauren Woods behind the gym a few times his sophomore year. She was pretty but felt the need to prove it. She'd stuck her hand past the tight denim waistband of Connor's jeans and felt for skin through his boxers and hair. In her searching, she ran a freshly cut fingernail down his penis. He pulled back. He looked at her half pained and half disgusted; he never explained his look. They stopped kissing behind the gym after that. Abby knew about it and though she didn't mention it, when they stopped she was relieved.

Sully hooked up with lots of girls. Sully would shower the closely listening locker room with his stories of conquest. He talked about them before and after practice, sometimes even in the huddle. He accrued countless girls: ones from across the New England, his brother's older female friends, and ones from their high school. All satisfied customers, Sully assured his audiences. When it came to women, Sully was loud and vague. He quieted himself in front of Abby.

Many of the eager underclassmen grilled Connor about his pick-ups. Rolling with Sully, he must get girls. Connor shrugged them off. He did just fine, he would say. He never knew where Sully had the time to meet, let alone score with, all these

beautiful women, but he didn't ask. The pickings in New Hampshire were not what you'd call slim, but Sully certainly seemed to find the best of them.

Connor took a petite and quiet freshman to junior prom in April. She wore a long blue dress and he had bought her-- or rather his mother had bought her-- a red corsage. He wore a green and brown suit with mothballs still in the pockets and only asked her to dance for the last song. She had an 11:30pm curfew so he dropped her off at home and didn't get out of the car to open her door or implore her lips for a goodnight kiss. He spent the night in Sully's den where they drank and watched baseball. Sully's date lived a few streets over. Her friends supposedly threw a party, but neither of the boys suggested they attend. They wanted to see the Red Sox win. Early the following fall, Connor overheard Sully telling incoming defensemen he fucked his prom date in the back of his Bronco. It might have happened as Connor drove his own date home.

Connor showed no interest in girls his senior year. He claimed he didn't want any distractions during football season.

10.

The Panthers season had yet to improve. They won two games in a row, then dropped three more. Collegiate interest in Connor waned. University of New Hampshire wanted him, but the prospect of staying in Durham kept Connor up at night.

Abby dominated soccer field and garnered interest from schools across the country, even Ivy League schools were impressed with her grades and admissions essays. She covered her excitement with encouragement for Connor, who seemed less hopeful day by day.

After practice some players would go to the trainer and shiver in the large tin ice-bath dubbed “the pit of despair.” Connor visited the trainer on occasion, maybe if he tweaked his ankle on a cutback or landed funny on his wrist after a hit. For the most part, he showered up and drove home. Sully loudly proclaimed that only the weak visited the trainers.

Connor grabbed a pack of ice from the trainer’s office for a nagging knee injury he acquired in the opening game of the season. He saran-wrapped the ice so tightly around his right knee that it burned, but he knew the ice wrap loosened with each step. He started towards his truck, where Sully waited, sitting on and denting the hood. Connor realized he had forgotten his biology book and doubled back towards the locker room.

The football locker room reeked from the hanging pads soaked with ten years of sweat and crusted blood only faintly masked, almost made worse by a veil of old spice deodorant and cheap aerosol air fresheners that were more likely to repel mosquitoes than cover the stench. Connor, immune to the smell after clocking four years amongst the lockers, retrieved his book without hurry. The other lockers were emptied of backpacks and school clothes, except for one.

Connor heard running water. He walked towards the bathroom, trying to minimize the squeak of his sneakers on the linoleum floor. He peered around the lockers and caught a glimpse of David Weaver furiously brushing his teeth.

David was largely unpopular with the underclassmen and unnoticed by the coaches. Connor often saw him standing just outside a circle of people talking, tossing up interjections or questions that no one caught. He practiced with the special teams but his game jersey never tasted the mud of the playing field. David laughed louder and longer in Sully's presence.

Connor watched him scrub at his teeth, then spit thick, white froth with streaks of red, blood from his raw gums. David twisted the handle and stared into the sink where blood, spit, and water swirled down the drain. He lifted his toothbrush into the stream, then carried it back to his mouth and continued to scratch at walls of his mouth like a worker stuck in a mine shaft.

Connor cleared his throat, and David looked up, eyes wide. David spit again and brought his hands to his sides.

"Sorry," David said. "I didn't know any one was still here. Are you locking up?"

"No," said Connor. "I'm leaving."

Connor turned and moved a few steps away, embarrassed, though not entirely sure why. He turned his head back to face David, without committing his body to the action.

“Good practice today, David,” he said.

“Thank you,” David replied. “Thanks a lot.”

Connor nodded and walked out of the locker room. It took leaving the room for fresh air to realize how badly it stank. Connor hopped over the wooden fence and walked to the parking lot. He saw Sully impatiently waiting. Connor turned to check if David had left the lockers yet; he hadn't. Connor hoped he'd stopped brushing his teeth.

“What took you?” Sully asked as Connor threw his backpack into the bed of the truck and unlocked the cab.

“Trainers,” Connor replied.

“The pussy palace,” said Sully.

“Whatever, man. You just don't work hard enough to ever get hurt.”

“I'm made of iron and testosterone.”

“You're made of jizz and Taco Bell.”

“Fuck you.”

“Nice comeback.”

“I'm not the one with cum on his back.”

Connor started the truck. The once roaring engine now sounded like a feeble old man clearing his throat. The streets were graying. No snow had dropped, but

darkness fell minutes earlier each day. Connor didn't much mind how short the days were. Christmas lights shone in storefronts. He dropped Sully off then, upon arriving at home, showered for the third time that day.

When Connor was ten, right after beginning Pop Warner football, he began to shower compulsively. He would sit in on the bathmat and let the waterfall pound on his head long after the hot water ran out. His mother banged on the door insisting he come out for dinner. He emerged only at the sound of his father's footsteps.

As middle school progressed, he developed a system so that his parents would no longer question or criticize his nightly waste of water. He took a short shower before dinner, then re-entered while his family slept. His father alluded to Connor enjoying pre-teen alone time. His mother thought maybe he worried about his body odor in front of his female classmates. In truth, Connor never felt clean enough. He washed his body raw.

The showering subsided halfway through his freshman year in high school. He hit the locker rooms with his new teammates and had to wash quickly because he caught a ride home with one of the upperclassmen who lived near him. At first, he showered again late at night. After months of being on his high school team, he cut back to one shower a day. Though, after October, the Red Sox winning the World Series and Connor developing a taste for light beer, he sometimes needed to shower the moment he entered the house, just to cover the stale stench of beer in his hair, breath, and clothing.

11.

On a frozen, cloudless night, after his season ended in disappointment and disillusion, Connor drove Abby up the winding dirt road to the top of Parker Hill. He'd loaded a futon, pillows, and a mass of down comforters into the bed of his truck. Together they lay in the back of the truck, watching as their breath created its own massive milky way across the sky. Sully never accompanied them stargazing.

Connor's football season, and seemingly his football career, was over. They had lost their final game and missed the playoffs. Even the Red Sox winning another World Series, and the Patriots remaining perfect, could only temporarily shake the thick fog that seemed to have fallen over Connor.

"Connor, what happened to you?" Abby asked.

"What are you talking about?" he replied.

"You've hardly said a word to me or Sully since football season ended."

"I see you every day."

"But you don't say anything."

Fresh air trapped and froze in Connor's nostrils with each inhale. He tugged at the blanket until it covered all of his face but his eyes.

"Are you worried about college?" Abby asked.

"I won't go to college."

“What? You had so many offers.”

“Nowhere wants me after how I played this season.”

“That’s not true. So it wasn’t your best season...”

Connor cut her off. “I’m horrible.”

“No you weren’t, Connor.”

If Sully were here he would agree, Connor thought. It had been a season of pressure, panic, and missed opportunities. Like the Patriots season in reverse, where Tom Brady and Randy Moss were precise and perfect, Connor played timid and stumbling.

“Your coach called terrible plays. You can’t win with a ‘run, run, pass, punt’ offense,” Abby said.

“I fucked up, not coach,” said Connor.

“He’s in charge. He runs the plays. You couldn’t control what happened.”

“I should have taken control of the season.”

“Stop beating yourself up,” Abby said. “It’s impossible to catch every ball, and your quarterback couldn’t hit the ocean with a rock. You had some amazing moments, all things considered.”

“I’ll never leave Durham.”

“You love Durham.”

"I love Winnepesaukee. I've had enough of Durham."

"Then get out."

"Would you come with me?"

"Connor, I'm going to Dartmouth."

"Oh, right. Congratulations."

"Where are you trying to go, anyway?"

"I don't really know. Away."

12.

Connor cried when the Patriots lost the Super Bowl, though not in front of anyone. When his family returned home after a sober, silent car ride from the Sullivans', he went to the bathroom, sat down on the toilet seat without removing his pants and covered his head in his arms. He'd yet to see his team lose on so bright a stage. He had been a lucky fan, the Sox claiming the crown twice and the Pats three times in his memory. In a lot of ways, he lived in the right area in the right era. He didn't cry at the loss of one game, but at the loss of *the* game. Not just because of fearful play from the Pats or fucking David Tyree, but of the implications. They were supposed to be perfect and they couldn't and they never would. The history books would show 18 and 1 in permanent pen. A coach says that each new season brings promise, but *perfect* you only get one shot at and, like a prize-winning fish broken off from your

line, when it's gone it disappears. Connor sat in the bathroom and cried and listened to his father smashing bottles against the asphalt outside. He'd looked long into the mirror, calculating the time it would take for his eyes to become clear and white again.

He spent the rest of Super Bowl Sunday alone in the cellar. He ignored calls from Sully. His family, thankfully, ignored him. Connor drank and crushed can after can of Budweiser. He'd have to convince Sully's brother to buy him more and replace his father's stash, but that was a problem for tomorrow. Connor chucked cans at the light switch, occasionally flicking the overhead lights on and off, but usually just enjoying the crash of thin metal against the cement walls.

As he lay on the cold, rigid floor, Connor began to cry again, but this time for himself. He did not sob or give his family any reason to check on him, but salty tears rolled like waves down the hot sand of his cheeks. He thought he might never stop.

He called Abby.

"Hello," she said into the receiver.

"Abs," Connor started.

"Connor, it's two in the morning," Abby said, her voice tired and hoarse.

"I have a problem."

"Devastating, fucked up game, I know."

"Not the game."

“What do you mean? How can you be thinking about anything else?”

“I need to talk to you, Abby.”

“About what? Let’s just talk tomorrow.”

“No. Tonight.” Connor’s voice hopped through the sentences, trying not to reveal his tears over the phone. “I need to.”

Abby paused before responding. Connor held his phone upside down so he could still hear Abby breathing but the receiver couldn’t detect any noise from him.

“Tell me what’s wrong,” Abby said.

After a moment’s sharp breath, Connor replied, “No, I need to see you.”

“I can’t take the car,” Abby said. “My dad would wake up and kill me.”

“I’ll drive over to you.”

“Connor, no, I know you’re wasted. You’re not driving.”

“Please.”

Silence, again, took over. Connor’s voice conveyed a deep sadness, which he knew Abby had never before heard from him.

“I’ll bike to your house. Give me twenty minutes, okay?”

“Thank you. I’m in the basement.”

Connor hung up the phone. He looked at a dim version of himself in the mirror across the room. He closed his small, red eyes and shook his head. He tried not to think. Instead, he drank another beer as he waited for Abby's footsteps on the pavement outside.

He started to cry again at the sight of her thin legs moving down the stairs.

"Connor," she said with a gasp, "what is going on?"

"Eli Manning is a pussy," was all he could think to say.

Abby laughed uncomfortably. In ten years he'd never let her see him cry; she had seen him break his collarbone wakeboarding, and she held his arm at his grandfather's funeral, but never had she seen a tear. Her eyes watered at the sight of him and she blinked quickly to disguise it.

"Is that really why you're," she looked at his wet eyes and sat next to him, "why you're upset?" she finished.

"It's not helping," Connor said. He buried his head in Abby's shoulder and tried to dry his eyes on the fleece of her sweatshirt. They sat soundlessly on the cold, concrete floor. Abby looked around at the mess of metal cans collected in the corners of the room. She looked down at the soft brown of Connor's hair. Connor kept his eyes closed and hidden. He drew slow breaths to steady his speech. He had to speak, he thought.

"What's wrong?" Abby said. "It's okay, you can tell me. You can tell me anything."

Connor's breath quickened. He wanted to say it, needed to, but hadn't ever planned the words. He hadn't ever said the words aloud, not even in his long showers. He thought often of telling someone. He feared his father or Sully would think he liked it, and they hardly carried conversations that didn't center on pass completions or batting averages. His mother would sob. He would never burden Maggie with that knowledge. Only Abby made sense; she was the only person who would understand, he decided.

"It's going to be okay," Abby said.

He peeled himself away from her, sat back, and took another sip of his beer. They made eye contact briefly and Connor looked down at the can in his hand. Abby waited.

"Do you remember when Sully and I played Pop Warner?" Connor asked.

"Yeah, in Middle School."

"I used to stay late after practices," Connor looked up at her. A line of tears shone in traces down his face like the meandering path of a slug. "Coach Cain, our coach, he would keep me after practice."

"Okay," Abby said with a frown.

Connor swallowed and tried to breathe through his stuffed up nose. He set down his can and spun it around on its edges until the contents spilt across the concrete.

“Are you a virgin?” Connor asked.

“What?” Abby exclaimed. “Why would you ask me that?”

“I don’t think I’m a virgin.”

“What do you mean, ‘you don’t think?’”

Beer spread across the floor. Once out of the can, it could never go back in.

The room around them grew colder; night pressed through the walls.

“I’m sorry I asked that,” Connor said.

“Connor, what is going on?”

“Coach Cain used to do things to me.” Connor couldn’t look up.

Silence enveloped the room like pepper spray. Abby choked and didn’t say a word. Connor had always been the quiet one; he’d wait her out.

“What do you mean?” she finally asked.

“He would touch me,” Connor said, “and he would make me touch him. I didn’t really know it was bad for a while. I hated it though.”

“Connor,” Abby started, “I’m so sorry.” She reached out a hand to put it on his shoulder but he pulled away violently. Abby started crying.

Connor put a hand to his mouth. The winter chapped his lips.

“Does Sully know?” Abby asked through her tears.

“No.”

“Have you ever told anyone?”

“No.”

“You need to,” Abby said. “He can’t get away with this.”

“Don’t tell anyone.”

“I won’t, but Connor, you need to.”

“I’m not going to tell anyone. I don’t even know why I told you. I shouldn’t have told you.”

“Yes, you should have.” Abby walked on her knees over to him and slowly put her hand to his. He accepted it and looked into her wet eyes. His heart pounded against his chest as he pressed it to hers and they embraced. They hugged all night, neither sleeping nor speaking.

Early the next morning Connor’s head pounded with the residue of beer and remembrance of his confession. He decided to drive to the lake.

13.

Snow came down hard and slick. Abby sat silent in the passenger seat. She looked out the window at the trees running past, listening to the tires of Connor’s truck kick up snow and chunks of ice and spit them back onto the road. The flip and fall, and

the engine's hum were the only discernable sounds. Connor did not even click on the turn signal as he changed lanes and turned onto the gravel road, towards the marina.

Only one boat remained in the water, a sailboat built for a child that appeared to be skating across the frozen-over surface of the lake. He had trouble remembering water once existed there; mid-February buried the lake in a thick, trapping cold.

No one attended the Gilford fuel station or fish shop. No ducks traced their way past one another. No bugs hissed through the air. Just Connor and Abby and the once-was lake.

Connor drove the front tires of his black Nissan onto the edge of the ice, like a child sticking his toes in the water, just to test it out.

“Do you know the ice will hold?” Abby asked, shattering the silence.

Connor inched farther, until half of the truck rested over land and half on the ice.

“My dad did it once. I suppose I don't know.”

Connor grasped the gearshift, as if to put it in reverse, then decided against it and pressed his foot on the gas. They shot out across the ice. Connor had little hope, or plans, of stopping, but he could steer. Gliding across the lake felt like a controlled free-fall. He had cut through these waters a hundred times in his father's boat; he felt it was easier to maneuver a boat across the surface than a truck.

“The ice is thick, right?” asked Abby. “You know that the ice is thick.”

Connor hadn't wanted her to come. He wanted to be alone, but her willing eyes persuaded him when she asked to come along, and she made the truck smell like apple cider and warm sweat.

Sunrays peered around the thick clouds, throwing beams of yellow light onto the ice, like a spotlight or an exit aisle. They guided the way to Welch Island.

Snow fell lightly. Flakes landed on the windshield and slowly melted. As a child, Connor imagined a deer venturing to another island during the winter then getting stuck there, separated from his family, as the ice melted. No tracks, apart from lines left by his tires, marked the snow. They glided farther across the ice. Connor found himself only half in control, slipping and moving with the grooves carved out in the ice.

Connor turned hard and slid atop the frozen boat slip at Welch Island. He parked, and as they stepped out of the truck, their feet sank into the snow.

Piles of white weighed down the bare and evergreen branches. Wind brushed snow off branches and swirled it into the sky, making it impossible to tell what fell from the clouds and what from the trees. The fluttering flakes in the air captured all sound, and Connor savored the silence.

He led Abby to his thinking rock, his favorite place in the world. They sat with their backs against the snow and moss-covered rock. Their feet rested on the ice. Connor's heart started to rise and pound in his chest. Snowflakes caught and hung in

strands of Abby's blond hair. Connor brought his hands to his face and breathed slowly into them.

He looked over to Abby. She stared out across the frozen plain, her cheeks red with the burn of cold, her eyes calm. She was steady and beautiful, Connor thought.

He peered down at her gloved hand and took it with his bare one. She looked at him and offered a close-lipped smile. Connor shifted in his seat to face her. He took hold of her shoulders and began to pull her towards him, towards his yearning lips.

"What are you doing, Connor?" she whispered.

He clasped his arms around her and pressed his body against hers. She put her hands on his chest and tried to push away but she could not move him. He kissed her. Their warm tongues met and Connor felt their fire burn through the rest of his body.

Abby twisted her head back away from him.

"I don't know if this is a good idea, Con," she said.

Keeping one arm wrapped around her shoulders, he directed her head back in front of his. He kissed her again. He opened his eyes and saw that hers were closed. With their lips still together, Connor got out of his seat and kneeled on the ice in front of her. He pushed her back against the rock. His hands discovered her body like they had never felt one before. He pressed his chest into hers, firmly against the

rock. She squirmed a little under the pressure. His hands moved down her sides, tracing the curve of her body, until he arrived at the corner where hip met thigh. He reached his cold hands between her legs. She grabbed at his wrists. When she found them unmoving, she pulled away her head.

“Connor, this is too fast for me.”

He pulled her legs apart and moved himself closer in to her. She tried to stand but he held on to her and put his lips to hers again. She thrust her body backwards but had no space to move.

“Connor, stop it.”

In the distance a tree branch cracked and fell to the earth.

Connor tore down the zipper of Abby’s jeans. She started to cry. He tugged them down her legs and ripped her underwear. He forced two fingers inside her. She yelled into the air.

“Please, Connor!”

He stopped and stood. He moved away from her, across the frozen lake, kicking ice chips up into the air. A touch of blood warmed the tips of his fingers. He watched snow fall through the sunlight and outstretched branches, and touch down onto the roof of the cabin. Behind him, he could hear Abby’s light sobs and uneven breath. He looked down into the ice and saw himself, white and peaceful, trapped underneath it, in the boat slip.

“Just leave,” he said without turning around. “Take the truck and leave me here.”

And she did, without a word.

Artist's Statement

This story is about a lake, with a calm surface and a storm below. It's about loss and how people deal with it, particularly with silence. The story deals the huge, hidden problems of a seemingly average world. It's about the power of sports to bring people together and the power of people to tear each other apart. Mostly, it's about a boy who in trouble, but no one knows until it's too late.

The story follows Connor Nolan from the end of summer to the middle of winter during his senior year of high school. Connor stands out as wide receiver on his high school football team. He has complicated relationships with his two best friends. His football teammate, Sully, embodies misplaced aggression and force, while Abby is kind, inquisitive, and adventurous. Both boys are romantically interested in Abby, though neither explicitly addresses it and she does not display any interest beyond friendship in either of them.

Connor also grapples with challenging relationships in his family. His father is stern and distant, except when it comes to sports, especially the New England Patriots who are in the midst of a run at a perfect season. Connor and his father connect through sports and little else. Connor's mother is loving but oblivious. Finally, Connor feels both protective and jealous of the innocence of his younger sister, Maggie.

The root cause of Connor's issues with connection and communication come from sexual abuse he experienced at the hands of his pee-wee football coach, Max Cain. For most of the story Connor remains silent and self-destructive. He eventually

reveals his past, but ends up hurting the person who has cared for him the most, Abby.

I play with a great deal of metaphor, synecdoche, and alliteration through out the story. These devices maintain a feeling of relative calm, while also allow for me to, like Connor, try to say what I mean without explicitly saying it.

I repeat several motifs. Connor has a thinking rock at his family lake house. Often, when Connor grapples with things he cannot voice, he will be kicking or throwing rocks. The final, serious moments of the story take place at the thinking rock. Summer, fire, and warmth are associated with positive emotions and serve as an antithesis to winter, ice, and the cold. Each set are mentioned in specific scenes. The story progresses through the seasons and becomes increasingly dark as the reader realizes what Connor has been through.

Most importantly, the ideas of silence and noise are repeated and explored in many facets. Connor's silence about his own troubles leads to him eventually snapping.

This story has been very difficult for me to write, but I believe in it, and believe it is something that needs to be written.