The Landing

The sky was darkening, and the alcohol was making her footsteps shaky and out of order. She moved as though underwater, slowly and weighted down. She couldn’t see much, the street lights were off or flickering, and her vision had small white spots in the corners. The street slowly tilted down, towards an even darker spot than its surroundings. She walked towards this spot, oblivious to the sloping street and the construction barriers in the way. It gaped at her and she passed the barriers, the pavement around the edges ragged and sharp, and slowed, but still didn’t see the darkness. If someone had been watching from the street, they would have just seen her disappear. The darkness would have swallowed her and she would be gone. They would move on with their night, and forget that they had seen a woman walking down a street and disappear. For her though, she brought one foot down on the jagged edge and stepped forward into the darkness. And then she fell.

Sweet tea. Grass stains. Birthday hats and confetti. She was happy here. Her tights had golden stars on them and there were dirt stains on her knees. The sun was twinkling and children shrieked and ran around, ribbons trailing from their hair. Stella stood by the picnic table, watching as bees hovered around the lemonade. They buzzed and hummed around the rim, occasionally dipping down to skim the surface of the drink. Stella didn’t like the way that children screamed all the time; she felt that it was unnecessary. Nevertheless, she tried to enjoy herself at this party, knowing that there would at least be cake. She hadn’t been paying attention to the lemonade or the bees at that moment though, she was preoccupied with visions of chocolate cake and whipped frosting. A cry came from the girl next to her at the table, and Stella
saw a glass of lemonade in her hand. The girl’s lip was very red and had begun to swell. She looked at Stella with a look full of hurt and betrayal, but Stella wasn’t sure why. The girl was surrounded by adults quickly and Stella could no longer see her or the hurt on her face.

*The hole’s walls quickly swallowed her up, wind rushing into her nose, burning her throat, and whipping her hair around. She screamed, then choked on the air that filled her mouth. The walls of the hole were jagged and rocky, like pavement that had been churned in a cement mixer. She was bewildered and scared and she didn’t know what to do or when she would stop falling.*

The phone almost never rang. It made Stella feel a bit lonely sometimes, the fact that no one called her on this phone. It was an old phone, one that was still attached to the wall with a cord that looped down towards the floor. When it did ring, the call was harsh and static. It would ring so loudly that the phone would vibrate on the wall, threatening to come unhooked and fall towards the floor, which it always did. The phone would never hit the floor, but each time it jumped from its perch on the wall, the cord stretched a little bit more towards the hard wood of the kitchen and it would bounce a little uneasily before slowly swinging to a stop. Stella was a little worried about the phone, she knew how much her grandma liked it, so she had taken to leaving a small pillow underneath the spot where the phone might bang against the floor one day. It was a little inconvenient but it gave her peace of mind when she left for school. One day, the phone rang, and as always, the phone jumped from its hook. It swung, still ringing and Stella came running to the kitchen to see who it was. No one was on the other end of the line, and as
Stella returned it to the hook, she felt a part of her close up like a phone line being cut. But she continued about her day and tried not to think about it.

She felt light headed now, the air moving around her felt thinner and colder. She began to feel like she was being sucked down, and she had lost track of how long she had fallen. It could have been ten seconds, twenty seconds, even forty seconds, and yet she still was nowhere near the bottom. The wind whistled and she felt dizzy. It began to grow very dark.

Stella reached out, holding her hand out to her mother, clasping onto her wrist in the crowd. She was overwhelmed and the people were tall and hot and loud. She clutched her mother, only walking when she walked, only stopping when she stopped. Waves of people pushed against her, moving like fish in a river, darting together, in and out of currents and calm places. The crowd parted slightly in front of Stella, the jumble of legs in front of her slowing, separating, and thinning out. She could see ahead now, to the edge of the platform, watching as a train pulled up. Its doors hissed open and the tunnel between people, her peephole, disappeared. Her mother guided her towards the open doors and helped her sit. Stella watched her mother sway, holding onto the loops hanging from the ceiling, and felt the train move around her.

The darkness of the hole seemed to swallow her. She had sparks in her vision and memories danced before her eyes. The pavement walls were glistening now, a build up of condensation that made them sparkle, like there were little gems that had been churned with the cement. She couldn’t breathe very well, her lungs felt like they were collapsing and she continued shooting down this hole. Her thoughts were fuzzy and she had no sense of time or
where she was in space. She thought of a childhood myth, that you could dig a hole all the way through the earth and reach China. She wondered if that was where she might end up.

Stella’s father brought her to the playground. It was the neighborhood playground, and the range of ages there was so vast that Stella couldn’t put a number on it. She stopped as her father talked to a few of the neighborhood guys, also fathers, here to take their respective sons and daughters to the playground. Stella ran off to play with those children, getting bored with the adult talk of her father. Eventually, Stella and her father made it to the swings. They pumped their legs in unison, swinging higher and higher, until her father jumped. He was an expert, moving through the air with precision and skill. He landed as though he was a feather, or a butterfly, or something else that didn’t know the pains of gravity. Stella kept swinging, scared to let go, as her father encouraged her to jump. She could do it, he said. He was right there, he said. Stella flew from the playground swings. Her father had taught her how to float, how to tilt her body into the wind, how to release the swing at the highest point in the air. She released the swing and soared and the wind rustled beneath her and the earth fell away.

The air was very cold here, and the light had practically disappeared. She had been falling faster and faster, her breaths coming in quicker and quicker as the air thinned. She tried to twist her body to see above her, to see the opening of the hole, so far above her now. She flipped and her hair whipped in her face and she couldn’t find the top or bottom of the hole anymore. She was simply floating now, wind whistling and shooting by her, but she couldn’t tell which way was up, and to her, that made it feel like floating. Floating, but knowing there was an
ending coming, and coming soon. She screamed again, and this time it echoed back at her. It was approaching quickly now the landing. She braced for impact.

Stella flew up and over the girls she had played with earlier and towards the grass beyond them. Her father had taught her everything about jumping off a swing, the release, the aim, the soaring. He had failed to mention the landing part however, and Stella knew this was going to hurt. She braced for impact.