The Art of Falling

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Abstract

Humans are born to run. From their bipedalism to their musculature to their advanced internal systems, humans are perfectly adapted for endurance running. *The Art of Falling* is a written representation of this fact which explores the idea that, just as one is in a perpetual state of falling as they run, so too are they falling through life. This collection of creative prose pieces, informational and philosophical asides, and resources such as quotes or anatomical diagrams tells the tale of the life of a runner, a writer, a student, a brother, a son, a friend. Its collage format is meant to mimic the expansive nature of long-distance running, which, in its own way, also mimics the series of events and choices strung together to create the self. *The Art of Falling* explores, not only the hardship of endurance running, but also the trials of love, family, and life in general through a series of flash nonfiction pieces and asides, which, when experienced as a whole, demonstrates the expansive, chaotic nature of running and, indeed, of life itself.
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Artist's Statement

Humans were born to run. Indeed, even before our modern connotations of institutions like language, art, and society were formed, humans had already been perfectly sculpted by nature for endurance running. This truth is the very basis for my honors thesis. In fact, I did not choose to write The Art of Falling because I am a Creative Writing major or because I wanted to understand the psychology of running. While these are certainly undertones to the overall piece, the backbone of this thesis was inspired by my desire to create a representation of the experience of running. Such a representation could have been achieved via a number of means: song, visual art, scholarship, research, etc. However, it seemed only natural that I engage my training as a creative writer as the medium for my project.

I received the initial inspiration for the thesis while I was running. More specifically, I received the inspiration while I was falling. Despite having been a moderate runner for many years before, it was in my fifth semester at Ball State that I was asked to confront my thoughts on, not only why I run, but how I run. The first question is relatively easier to answer than the next. We (humans) run because we are adapted to run. However, to address how we run is also to address decades of societal sedentism and scientific speculation. As humans began to choose an active lifestyle instead of living one out of necessity, a great demand for active wear and equipment boomed and, with it, the arm's
race for ever-more sophisticated and advanced technologies. Arguably, the most intense period for this phenomenon is occurring right now and began only a few decades ago as major companies began vying for dominance in the late 70s and early 80s. Eventually, this chaotic race to the top convinced a large populace that sturdier, more cushioned shoes were the ticket to a healthier, more efficient active lifestyle. Indeed, I, too, had been sold to this logic and wore what are now referred to as “traditional” running shoes for the first several years of my running life. It wasn’t until my fifth semester at Ball State, when I took an honors colloquium on barefoot running, that I ever even considered challenging the propaganda surrounding running culture.

The central idea behind barefoot and minimalistic running is that, because humans are so perfectly adapted for endurance and long distance running, we should be utilizing our perfectly adapted natural equipment instead of buying products fueled by capitalistic ventures of consumerism. However, to make the transition from shod running to barefoot running involves more than simply taking one’s shoes off. There are entire schools of thought in which theories have been developed to discuss how to most accurately and safely transition to running barefoot from shod. To run barefoot (arguably the most “proper” form of running) is literally to fall. Where running shod demands the legs to push, pull, and propel the runner, running barefoot suggests that the legs should only be used to keep the runner upright as they lean into their run. By leaning, the force of gravity will pull the runner forward and as this happens, the legs move forward to keep the runner from actually falling over. In essence, running is an intricate balance act between falling down and staying upright. After I learned this and began to practice it on my own, I also began pondering how such a theory applied so beautifully as a metaphor for many persons’ lives in general. People live their lives unceasingly. They fall headlong into events and situations and other per-
sons whom they are affected by and, in turn, affect all the while “balancing” to remain upright, as it were. Moreover, the act of long-distance running, itself, is a representation of life. It is a relatively lengthy activity from which only a few poignant moments are taken away and during which the mind is filled with memory, insight, and general thought. Like life, the act of running is punctuated with instances of pain, relief, excitement, motivation, hardship, and meaning-making.

As I continued to reflect upon the relationship between running and my own life, the more I became excited about the many threads I could weave through the two as I constructed my creative collection. Perhaps one of the most exciting aspects of writing my relationship with running for my honors thesis was that I had already decided to train for and run a marathon. The timing was such that I would complete my thesis and run my marathon in the same timeframe. To make explicit my attempt to create a representation of long-distance running, and more specifically my marathon, I anticipated writing 262 flash nonfiction pieces of 262 words or less. This number is relevant to a marathon because its distance totals 26.2 miles. I focused the depth of my collection on writing about my life as a runner alongside my life since I became a runner. This includes discussing my family, my hardships, my success, and my transitions through life. The idea was to mimic the nature of running during which only the most potent thoughts and feelings alter the outcome of the run or are remembered after the fact. In addition to simply writing out memories from my life, I also decided that it would be pertinent to include other material in my collection. These “asides,” as I took to calling them, were designated as, not only transitory materials, but also commentaries on those aspects of life which affect us or push us in certain directions but aren’t necessarily tangible persons, events, or memories. For instance, I can speculate on how the actual event of my moving to a different state
for college may have affected me. I am less equipped to address how something like ideas, concepts, society, culture, etc. influence life or how they have made meaning for me. I wanted these asides to include anything from philosophy to quotes to poetry. In fact, I even hoped to include a running journal of my training process to exemplify the notion that many events or experiences (like a marathon) are built upon the shoulders of past events or experiences (like training). I anticipated the final collection to be a vast, expansive experience like running or living. The collage of flash pieces and asides would build upon themselves to become a singular experience which comments and depends on each segment. Like in running, a marathon is not completed by any single stride or another, but rather by the collection of strides together.

As I delved into the writing of my past, of running, and of the art of falling, I became rather discouraged. I found that trying to fill 262 flashes hyper-extended my commentary. More than this, however, I found that any writing I did simply to fill in the incomplete space would be insincere and unnecessary to the overall collection. Because of this, I decided relatively early in the process that I would need to scale back my anticipation for 262 individual pieces. Perhaps more disturbing than this realization, though, was having to come to terms with my waning interest in the project. As my training for the marathon continued, so too did my ambivalence toward writing what would become The Art of Falling. The synthesis of my process was quickly demonstrating itself to be a project unlike the one I had envisioned. To my mind, the thesis was shaping up to be a journal of sorts, which was far from my intention. However, after I stepped away from the project for a while, received heaping amounts of encouragement from my advisor, and reevaluated the direction of the thesis, I determined that I could reconfigure the manuscript into a final product which existed in the wake of my original design.
In many ways, my honors thesis is much more than just a single collection of nonfiction, but rather it was an exercise in writing. It's difficult to face the romanticism of writing and of literature when other factors such as disappointment, disinterest, or lack of motivation loom in the shadows. While it is not made explicit in the pages of my manuscript, The Art of Falling will be just as much a testament to my relationship with writing as it is to my relationship with running.

The draft of The Art of Falling which is my honors thesis is about 160 pieces long, not 262. I thought that this, perhaps, would detract from the "long-distance" feeling I had initially intended. However, after I completed the project, I found that it actually mimics the experience of running much more closely than I could have hoped. The collection, despite its many pages, is by no means a heavy burden. Rather, it exemplifies the nature of running in that it is hugely expansive and filled with potent memories which represent the soaring highs and sagging lows that accompany endurance running. The collection takes off immediately and waits to settle into a more moderate pace. From there, the collection picks up pace as it rounds the corner into its home stretch: a speedy and climactic retelling of my marathon which is told over a number of flashes. The Art of Falling explores the vast openness of running, of life, and of how we relate to our surroundings. It represents the balancing act we go through as we attempt to create a systematic approach to falling through what is otherwise chaos. It asks to confront our thoughts on, not only why we run, literally and metaphorically, but also how we run.
Dedicated to Cory, Sis, my mother, and my father for whom falling is always worth getting back up.
The Art of Falling
“Running! If there's any activity happier, more exhilarating, more nourishing to the imagination, I can't think of what it might be. In running the mind flees with the body, the mysterious efflorescence of language seems to pulse in the brain, in rhythm with our feet and the swinging of our arms.”

- Joyce Carol Oates
- Prologue -
Free will; or, the lack thereof. At what point do we realize that each effect is not the product of cause, but of a series of effects before it? At what point do we realize that any instance in time is the specific amalgamation determined by the effects preceding it? At what point do we realize that we are all colliding; all affecting? When do we understand the sensation of falling?
It seems to me that at a single point in each of our lives we realize that events happen to us and that we react to them. We realize that the act of choosing is much less a gift of a perceived (and ultimately nonexistent) free will than it is a necessary mechanism. In the end, choice is the reaction to a never-ending series of events set into motion long before we could possibly realize.
When this realization came upon me, my reaction was to run.
In April 2006, I remember feeling the floor fall out from beneath my feet. The memory of my mother leaving Texas to live in Indiana is vague and abstracted by questions: the only solid foothold which leaves me stranded in what is otherwise fog. What day was it? Did she drive? Where did I see her before she left? Did I cry? I don’t remember crying.

What was it like when she was here?
When our mother was gone, Sis would ask me why I wouldn’t cry. *I can’t not cry*, she told me. *I think you need to cry*, she told me. I felt ashamed by my inability and confused about why this was so important.
I wouldn't, couldn't, cry for the situation. I wouldn't cry then or for many years until I felt the distance bloom between me and Cory as I drove headlong into a radiating emptiness. I cried for days straight.
I cried without choice and I felt the effects of the separation push behind my eyes until they bled tears down my face. Until even my father made notice. Until even my father asked, *how can I help?* Until even my father climbed the stairs to my room and staked himself into the distance I felt expanding between myself and the effects of the world pushing into the back of my neck.
It wouldn't be until many years later that a single event, accumulated out of the gathering reactions surrounding me, that I would choose to run for them amalgamated into a single unit, in a single space in time, for a single accomplishment.
Each instance is the precise and direct result of every unknowable effect pushing against it.
- First Steps -
Now Playing: "Wake Up" – *Funeral*, Arcade Fire
"People sometimes sneer at those who run every day, claiming they'll go to any length to live longer. But don't think that's the reason most people run. Most runners run not because they want to live longer, but because they want to live life to the fullest. If you're going to while away the years, it's far better to live them with clear goals and fully alive than in a fog, and I believe running helps you to do that. Exerting yourself to the fullest within your individual limits: that's the essence of running, and a metaphor for life — and for me, for writing as whole. I believe many runners would agree."

- Haruki Murakami, What I Talk About When I Talk About Running
Early mornings make me sick. Physically. On the first day I ever ran a considerable distance, I choked down the uneasy feeling behind what my cross country coach would later call my “baby fat.” I stood among the other runners and waited to be signaled by the whistle. I stared off into the distance and each of my muscles trembled as the wet of the earth filed into columns of fog around our feet. The whistle. Underneath the silent creaking of stretching trees I ran and immediately struggled to keep pace. Sprinting through a hazy dark in the early morning makes me sick(er). I felt the uneasiness rise and fall into queasiness rise and fall into sickness rise. And rise. As immediate and piercing as the whistle before it, the pain of vomit doubled me over, and as the running shoes streaked by me and kicked up dust around my head I heard the coach tell me, *get it out, get up, and get going.*
“Pain is inevitable. Suffering is optional.”

- Haruki Murakami, What I Talk About When I Talk About Running
My cross country coach was a slender, short woman with hair like rusted iron. When we ran by her she forever reminded us that, even at six in the morning before a day of school, she had already been awake for hours and run distances we could only dream of.
Looking back, my cross country coach set into motion a series of events, a strict rubric of determination, that would push upon themselves for years and help me stride through one of my greatest accomplishments.
I could still feel the acid of my vomit pricking at the inside of my throat. As they passed, the other runners hit me on the back and mumbled at me. Jokes or encouragement, I couldn't tell. I watched as the others bent and twisted into complex stretches post-run. When I tried to mirror them, I could feel each fiber threading through my muscles pull and tingle beneath my skin. Because the others had begun training in the summer and I for the first time this morning, my desire to ever run again seemed to be squeezed out of my legs as I stretched them. Should it hurt this much? I wondered if my muscles would transition, if they would relax, if one day the movements wouldn't be as painful.
As the weeks of running into the sunrise wore on and the heat of our breath began to collect on the impending winter, I became accustomed to the echoes of the cross country coaches and fastest runners as we made our final round to the end of the course. Finish it they yelled to us. They called after us to give every last particle of energy that remained to the course. They called for us to ignore the burn jolting through every footfall. They called from the distance to remind us that all things begun come to an end and that the pain exists regardless. Finish it. Finish it.
Now Playing: “Born to Run” – *Born to Run*, Bruce Springsteen
The Tarahumara are a Native American people of northwestern Mexico who are renowned for their long-distance running ability. The word for themselves, Rarámuri, means “runners on foot” or “those who run fast” in their native tongue. These people developed a tradition of long-distance running up to 200 miles (320 km) in one session, over a period of two days through their homeland of rough canyon country.
“Every morning in Africa, a gazelle wakes up, it knows it must outrun the fastest lion or it will be killed. Every morning in Africa, a lion wakes up. It knows it must run faster than the slowest gazelle, or it will starve. It doesn’t matter whether you’re the lion or a gazelle — when the sun comes up, you’d better be running.”

- Christopher McDougall, Born to Run: A Hidden Tribe, Superathletes, and the Greatest Race the World Has Never Seen
The Monday following my first cross country season, I woke up at 4:30. I felt the adrenaline dilute into my bloodstream as I realized I had nowhere to be. No more back roads to run. No more hills to conquer. No more sunrises to run into. For the first time in several weeks my legs had absolutely no obligation to finish anything. That morning I lay awake and watched as the sun poured through my window.
"That was the real secret of the Tarahumara: they'd never forgotten what it felt like to love running. They remembered that running was mankind's first fine art, our original act of inspired creation. Way before we were scratching pictures on caves or beating rhythms on hollow trees, we were perfecting the art of combining our breath and mind and muscles into fluid self-propulsion over wild terrain. And when our ancestors finally did make their first cave paintings, what were the first designs? A downward slash, lightning bolts through the bottom and middle—behold, the Running Man.

Distance running was revered because it was indispensable; it was the way we survived and thrived and spread across the planet. You ran to eat and to avoid being eaten; you ran to find a mate and impress her, and with her you ran off to start a new life together. You had to love running, or you wouldn't live to love anything else. And like everything else we love—everything we sentimentally call our 'passions' and 'desires'—it's really an encoded ancestral necessity. We were born to run; we were born because we run. We're all Running People, as the Tarahumara have always known."

- Christopher McDougall, Born to Run: A Hidden Tribe, Superathletes, and the Greatest Race the World Has Never Seen
I told my neighbor that you get used to waking up early and that he should feel free to run with me. Essentially, I was begging him to wake up early and run with me. At five the next morning I saw him in his yard. We crossed our properties and met at the bushes to say good morning. The frosted grass crunched beneath our shoes. Mine were flimsy and sprinkled with tattered holes from the thousands of steps pushing inside of them. His were made for basketball, I think.
The next morning I peered across my yard into his and only the darkness met me at the bushes. I tread across the yards snapping under me and waited for him to arrive. As the moments gathered around me, I felt them pressing on my patience like the cold pulsating in the back of my head. Without stretching, without regard I took off into the cold darkness and listened to each of my footfalls vibrate in the frozen silence around me. I ran toward a buzzing street lamp which illuminated a corner familiar to me after many years. As I passed beneath it, I watched my shadow twist and pivot into an array of shapes and lengths until, after only a moment, it was swallowed again by the night. I kept running as the glow of the lamp was far behind me and I had only the black windows of the sleeping houses next to me.
The third morning I did not wait for him, but rather took off into frosted morning. Already the route was familiar. Running now was unlike any cross country practice. It felt eerie and I felt out of place and awkward running in giant loops around a road which always led directly back to my house. No matter how far I ran, I continued to careen into the dense blood red of the rising sun over my house where my father and sister still slept waiting to wake again.
As cross country season withers into memory, it pushes ceaselessly into the track season.
Track practice is in the evening. Many of my cross country teammates funneled into the distance team for track and I followed them to practice on the first day. This made me a track runner also. Without being asked about or trained in other areas of track like sprinting or field events, the coach, this one male and bloated with fried foods, told us to run on the inside of the track to build endurance. But keep off the track; the sprinters will be practicing. It felt odd to be trotting next to some of state’s best long-distance runners without a single nod of acknowledgement. Did we even stretch that day? Our cross country coach would have offered encouragement, motivation, criticism, anything after the first hour of caged running. This man ate chips and smiled at high jumpers. When eventually the sun ceased to gleam off the stadium bleachers and had fallen out of sight, that coach patted his last jumper away and turned to us, you all could have left about an hour ago. Go home.
- High School -
In Texas, the heat inflates into the triple digits before lunch. The high school band directors told us that this is the reason for the schedule: in the morning we marched, in the afternoon we rehearsed inside, in the evening we marched. This was apparently the regimen for a marching band which, in its heyday was regarded as the state’s finest. I only saw 300 thirsty teens walk into the bristling waves of heat dancing off the black of the parking lot where we practiced. On my first day of band practice the summer leading into my freshman year, I can’t recall bristling waves of heat or the moans of bone-dry throats parched of limited water. I remember him. He held a saxophone like me and was quiet beneath the sun. I let the water slip from my hands to the ground.
His name was Cory.
With my face pressed into the window, I watched the painted signs fly by us in the truck. GO TIGERS! LADY TIGER XC - STATE. YOU CAN DO IT! STATE BOUND! The diesel of the truck erupted into powerful roars as it hauled us onto the interstate and still we hadn't spoken. My father poked at the power control until his window cracked. The change in pressure pushed into my eardrums and I could hear the subtle pulse of the wind. He lit a cigarette and breathed deep. I couldn't see my sister in front of me. When we arrived in Round Rock, I noticed crowds of people moving en masse back to their vehicles. I stared through the windshield, it's over? My sister said, well this was fun. My father lit a cigarette.
The feeling was unusual. The 3200 meter is the very first event of any track meet. As I and my distance teammates would stagger up to the starting line, other members of the track team would take their time staggering off the bus or stagger in their own line at the concession stand. We would hold our breath as we waited for the gun, and as nobody watched, my team and I would take to the track, and at least we'd run together. But on the final meet of the regular season, the air was especially empty. I posted into the starting line. Instead of a crowd of hungry runners vying for a premium spot, I shared the line with only a handful of other freshman runners from other teams. On that day, the track team was scattered across three different meets and I ended up running the longest track event without a team. The sound of the gun reverberated off of the croaks of locusts in the dusty distance and I ran. I took to the front of the pack and imagined running alone through the dead of darkness in my neighborhood. When I looked out into the bleachers I saw only the darkness of their eyes not paying attention. I would run in several loops always running back to the beginning. Somewhere I would run past my father and sister waiting.
Before the first bell rang, all 2,200 students lined the halls or staked out in designated pockets throughout the high school. It was the same every morning and we wouldn't deviate from our domains. When I entered the band hall, the leg work was automatic. I could almost feel my eyes cast a line over Cory and reel me to where he stood with a group of others. But mid-stride, the bell echoed throughout the linoleum halls and in an instance, without a nod of recognition, each student scattered and the line between us snapped and all I could do was stop. Stop walking, stop wanting. I watched him leave and all of a sudden I understood the widening distance between us.
One of the last memories I have of living in Belton is also one of the first I have of being with Cory outside school. We slid the sofa in my living room across the floor so that it was parallel with the television. We sat alone and close in the dark watching a movie. The screen projected dancing shadows of our bodies dancing with one another into the back wall. When the movie stopped, our shadows wilted back into us and I could hear the buzz of gravity moving between us.
I remember the echo. When I shuffled restless in my mattress on the floor centered in the empty room, I could hear the waves of sound collide with the barren walls. This was the last night I would spend in Belton before my father would drive us soundless into the emptiness. I could see the wall that was our new lives and the resistance was shattering.
The next day, my father moved us one town south to merge with his new wife. Even at such a short distance away, the change radiated throughout my thoughts and warped them into uncomfortable shapes.
Memory is the act of forgetting. Like the half life of an element, experiences decay and the memories radiate, powerful at first, into the boundlessness of our conscience.
There came a night when I would finally sleep in Cory’s house. His silhouette disappeared as quick as darkness as the light behind him went off. Cory’s parents had just gone to bed and it seemed we were also on our way. He said goodnight in the hallway. I felt suddenly surrounded as I searched into the dense black looking for his shape. Should I get some blankets? I said to no one it seemed. Cory told me to sleep in a guest room and I felt his phantom touch turn me around by the shoulder. He said goodnight again and I felt the pressure in my eardrums pulse with my heart until the solid click of his door shut behind me.
There is room for a car to spread its legs in Texas. And I love to spread my legs. Because such a small town like Belton cannot contain or sustain many establishments outside the necessary grocery store or gas station, driving the long flat roads like the dessert cracked becomes enjoyable. We fill the time with distance.
Now Playing: "Road to Joy" – *I'm Wide Awake, It's Morning*, Bright Eyes
As Cory put the sinking sun behind us driving back to his house, he said *I want to show you something.* He pulled off the gravel into the long shadow of an abandoned barn squatting next to a small church. White. When he spoke to me I noticed the sunken effect the fading sun had on his eyes. He said, *come with me,* and held out his hand. Around the church, a pocket-sized cemetery rose above the hill bordered by a chain-link fence. Cory climbed up and over the fence and wove his way through the gravestones toward an island pavilion in the center. I watched him from the outside. He turned back to me and once again held out his hand, *come here.* He sat down prostrate as the stones surrounding him and I climbed to straddle the fence between him and the moon rising above us.
The road looked infinite and cut a line between me and my father driving. He rolled the window down so he could throw his cigarette out. He took one more breath in and then out. I think this is to wring the smoke out of his lungs. When the window was back up, the silence was deafening.

How much farther? I pointed into the far distance where Cory's house sat alone exposed beneath the sun. I grinned watching the house grow up out of the horizon and fingered the gift in the back seat behind me. Thanks again for taking me out here. He cracks the window and puts the flame to another cigarette in his mouth.
The gift is a large poster of Warhol's *Guns*. On top of a bold, undisturbed red, there are two guns like shadows of each other. They exist on the same plane so that they melt into a single image; each woven into the other as an endless expression.
During lunch at school, I sat with my friends, with Cory. When I stood in line for food, my movements were methodical and I grabbed in similar directions for similar items under the similar sound of buzzing fluorescents. When I sat down, I noticed how my sandwich blurred into the color of the table beneath it and the buzzing of 500 students made my ears itch. I strained to listen to Cory across the table, and to myself, beneath the mass of voices surrounding me, I said, \textit{I don't think I want to eat meat anymore.}
They say that long distance running is mind over matter. We do things that our bodies resist. We do things that we've grown to understand as unusual. We do things because we can. To me, mind over matter is an invitation. Many of my decisions are made simply because I can.
I ordered a salad. That doesn't come with meat right? Sis sipped at her drink across the table from me and I remember looking her up and down like I couldn't figure out who she was. I asked her, how is everything?, and she said, actually I have some news. We both stopped drinking. Ok, I said. She told me that she planned on leaving Texas to finish her Bachelor's degree. She'd be moving in with Mom. I furrowed my brow and said, oh. That's great. I could hear the slamming and scraping of metal from the kitchen settle into the silence between us. She continued to sip at her drink.
In the summer, the Texas moon slips into the sky late at night and pushes a delicate chill into the backs of our necks where we shiver. Beneath the pavilion in the cemetery, I picked at blades of grass half dead from the summer heat. Cory lay stiff on the concrete and stared into the night at the moon shining above us. I thought this was the last night we'd share. He spoke to the sky, *I want to tell you something.* I looked over my shoulder at him lying prostrate. *Yeah?* He paused and I watched his chest rise and fall. I could feel his anxiety charge the sporadic, jerking movements of his eyes. Eventually, he looked in my direction and told me, *I'm gay.* And in the same breath before I could speak he added, *and I'm so scared you won't want to be around me anymore.* I looked back over my shoulder and looked at his eyes. I lay down with my head close to his and told him, *that's impossible.*
After we drove back from the cemetery, wordless, Cory ran his fingers over the boxes that lined the hall. *How do you feel?* I asked. *About Baylor? Oh, not much. I just want us to be OK.* I smiled at him and said, never been better. He took a deep breath in and looked into the night. I could see the reflection of his face in the window like a phantom seeing through me. *I'm sorry about all the boxes in the guest room.* He thought I wouldn't want to sleep in his bed after what he told me in the cemetery. I smiled at his reflection and thought, *I'm not.*
In the night, I lay next to Cory and listened to the locusts call for each other through the sprawling darkness. They sounded like heat. I faced away from Cory, afraid to move, afraid to cross the line I imagined between us. Behind me, I felt his chest move deep and low with sleeping breaths. When only a few locusts braved the heavy darkness of the progressing night and called out alone, Cory took a single long and last breath before he pushed his back into mine. I lay still and waited for him to move again. The silence overtook us and his body remained wedged solidly against mine. I took short, shallow breaths so as not to disturb him. And into the night I lay awake feeling his body pressed into mine.
The next morning came quickly and the house was roused soon after the sun. I could hear Cory's father speaking low and boisterous. I could smell the grease of his mother's breakfast saturate the air. And I felt the phantom presence of Cory's back across my own. I lay still and waited for the alarm on my phone. I got dressed and listened to the family make their final arrangements before they drove Cory to Waco. When I walked into the living area, I watched them scramble and scurry, and inside a long sigh I said, *I guess I'm leaving.* Cory heard me and perked up. He stood where he was and looked at my face with a small smile. *Come here,* he told me. I walked over to him and my eyes burned. When I neared him, he placed his hand on the back of my neck and pulled it into his own. We stood pressed together for a long moment before he said, *come see me soon.* I said, *of course.*
As I sped along the highway away from him, the heat boiled over as tears and I cried for Cory.
I visited Cory nearly every weekend that autumn. He pointed to buildings on his campus and told me their names. I felt his energy buzz next to me. In the beginning, it radiated small and tickled at me. But as October rounded into view, the buzzing was loud and pricked like electricity at my neck where I felt the hairs stand.
His dorm room echoed like living inside of a cinder block. I stared up at him from his bottom bunk so that he was upside down at his desk. The buzzing was so loud I thought I was going deaf. Was it buzzing? I really hear a noise and think of the blood whirling through the veins in my head as I anticipated speaking to him. Cory, I said, I've got something to tell you. The blood heated my cheeks and I could feel the pores in my body open. The words stuck in my throat: I'm gay. I could feel his stare pressing into the top of my head. The next time I opened my mouth, I felt the words spill out and linger in the air. It echoed in the room and the blood drained from my head. Pale. He stood and I followed suit like we weren't speaking about the words bouncing in our heads. As soon as I stood up he grabbed the back of my neck and pulled me to him.
My footfalls sent vibrations throughout the second story as I paced to the time of the ringing of the phone to my ear. When my sister answered, I stopped. Like telling Cory, I could already feel my words clustering together into a tight, dense ball in my gut. We talked, but only briefly before I said, Sis, I've got something to tell you. When I said the words, I'm gay, I began pacing again and waited for her response. She said, OK.
My room was dark. I felt for familiar furniture around the perimeter and relied on my memory to peel back the blankets and sit on the edge of the bed. I rubbed the wet from the back of my neck and fell into my pillow. I lay awake searching in the darkness for a reprieve of light, but I could not see direction. My eyes searched frantically and found only darkness, like I could see nothing at all, like I could see through everything at once. And in the open emptiness rose the ticking seconds bounding toward me in all directions. They measured my thoughts, they measured my heartbeats, they measured the waves of heat rising from my body, and they measured his breathing. At my elbow I felt the radiation of his heat licking at my skin. It pulsed and penetrated and crept up my body. And again, instantly, the time was gone, and I was sinking into the void of the space in between. And next to me as the emptiness closed its mouth around me, I felt his measured presence, seeking me out of the dark. *Tyler*, he said. *Yes*, I said. And in the reverberations of my word, I felt his mouth move to mine.
I could hear his voice echo in my phone. The smell of him was on the pillow next to me on the bed. A small bit of his voice broken off and far away. He said, *I love you.* And in that moment I could feel my tongue move like I’d never spoken before. I said without thinking, *I love you, too.*
Since I quit cross country, running was a quiet business. I could hear my breath tangle into the sounds of my footfalls crunching on the loose gravel of the country Salado roads. One day, my father suggested he ride his bike along with me. I looked at him and wrinkled my brow. I told him he could if he wanted. When we began, he asked me how far I ran, and I pointed into an imagined distance and said, to the highway. When we came to a hill, I could feel my dad struggle at my side to keep a running pace without rolling back down the hill. He sped ahead. When I emerged at the top, I looked down the stretch of road and there I could see my father riding away. The space between us kept widening.
Now Playing: “Born This Way” – Born This Way, Lady Gaga
Propaganda like, “born this way,” is a double edged sword. On one edge, the rhetoric surrenders minority or queered communities to the rhetoric of the oppressive group that there is somehow something inherently “wrong” or essentially different. Perceptions of “wrong” are not inherited, they are learned. On the other edge, the “born this way” rhetoric ignores the transactions and meaning-making processes of society and further builds walls by which others can continue to oppress upon because of their “inherent” or “essential” difference.
Even when I pulled into the driveway with Cory I knew something was wrong. I listened to the car crunch and crawl of my car over the gravel drive as we slid past my father’s truck looming over us. Why was he home? When we entered the house, I could smell the smoke of my father’s cigarettes he had quit months ago waft heavy through the current of the house. He sat cross-legged in the backyard. The Salado house was filled with windows and he saw us instantly. *I think Cory should go home,* he told me. I listened to Cory’s car start and drive away into silence before I turned to my father lighting a cigarette beneath a tree bowing with age. I stood as he explained that he had caught the tail end of a school rumor that I had come out. I only remember standing silent as my father disapproved and revealed that I simply was not old enough to come to such a conclusion about myself. Myself. *My self,* I thought. *What does that even mean?*
"It is plain, that in the course of our thinking, and in the constant revolution of our ideas, our imagination runs easily from one idea to any other that resembles it, and that this quality alone is to the fancy a sufficient bond and association. It is likewise evident that as the senses, in changing their objects, are necessitated to change them regularly, and take them as they lie contiguous to each other, the imagination must by long custom acquire the same method of thinking, and run along the parts of space and time in conceiving its objects."

- David Hume
Not even weeks later when I pulled into the driveway alone, I knew something was wrong. I listened to the crunch and crawl of my car over the gravel as I slid past my father looming in my window. We need to leave, he told me. Do you need anything from inside? I've got your toothbrush and some clothes. I told him I didn't and as I drove away from the Salado house behind him I watched the house shrink in my rearview mirror.
I had no idea I would never see the inside of that house again.
The first night I slept in a hotel, I called Cory and explained to him the little information I knew. My father was having trouble with his new wife. This was essentially the extent. I listened to the crackling of the phone to my ear as Cory said nothing. My shadow was splayed into four from the humming, yellow street lamp above me.
The memory seems fake. In school, after I drove from a nearby hotel, my English teacher paced the floor in front of us discussing the themes of homelessness. Imagine, she breathed, *not having a home to return to after this class has ended.* All I remember feeling is the stiffness in my legs as they slowly ceased from not running. *Imagine not having a home to run from.*
It seems that home isn't necessarily where the heart is. Home is the place you return to after you've left.
After school one day, I met my father at his work like he asked. I breathed deep to smell him light a cigarette when I got into his truck. I slid back in my seat and watched the countless rows of new housing. It stretched from barren fields to freshly paved roads to the skeletons of houses to whole neighborhoods erected within weeks. My father's boss owned it all. We drove for only a moment or two before we stopped in one of these new suburbs. What do you think about these? The houses looked drab, and I examined the pattern formed by the row of cloned homes. What about them, I asked. Without an answer, he got out of the truck and began walking to a house after he stamped out his cigarette into the road. I followed. The house smelled of paint and dust. I think this is where we'll be living for a little while. His face drooped and I could only see the blacks of his eyes half closed and unseeing.
In Texas there is room to stretch your legs. I sprawled out in the heat and felt a gentle sting spread down my legs from the heat radiating off the driveway as I spread them wide before my run. After not having run in days, I was happy at the pull in the backs of my legs. My dad told me there were plenty of back roads behind the new housing developments.

I was sure to find someplace to run there. As I stepped off and made my way to the edge of the neighborhood, I looked into the distance of a stretch of road leading into a darkness shadowed by a dense canopy of trees. My smile and stride spread wide that day.
For the first few days living at the Honeysuckle house, each run was new. I ran farther into the twisting, narrow roads paved in a time when the city sat nestled in isolation. I ran new routes every day until eventually I discovered a hill which led to a vast stretch of highway far behind my house. I stopped and peered through the sweat on my brow down the massive road. Out of the waves of heat rising off the asphalt I saw a river and bridge. This was the road leading to Cory. I had no idea I was so near the only link to Cory across the lake. I stared into the distance and told myself I would run to him one day. If marathoners run 26 miles, surely I can make it there.
“Struggling and suffering are the essence of a life worth living. If you’re not pushing yourself beyond the comfort zone, if you’re not demanding more from yourself — expanding and learning as you go — you’re choosing a numb existence. You’re denying yourself an extraordinary trip.”

- Dean Karnazes, Ultramarathon Man: Confessions of an All-Night Runner