

Colby



Colby College
Digital Commons @ Colby

Honors Theses

Student Research

2012

Island Voices

Sarah Hirsch
Colby College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/honorsthesis>



Part of the [Poetry Commons](#)

Colby College theses are protected by copyright. They may be viewed or downloaded from this site for the purposes of research and scholarship. Reproduction or distribution for commercial purposes is prohibited without written permission of the author.

Recommended Citation

Hirsch, Sarah, "Island Voices" (2012). *Honors Theses*. Paper 635.
<https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/honorsthesis/635>

This Honors Thesis (Open Access) is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Research at Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Colby.

ISLAND VOICES

Sarah Hirsch

**Honors Thesis
May 2012**

**Adrian Blevins
Cedric Bryant**

dedication

To Adrian: you taught me how to talk about the beautiful sadness of strange things, and the strangeness of beautiful sad things, and even the sad strangeness of things that are beautiful—and sometimes, about things that aren't any of the above. When I most needed some way of making sense of seemingly all of the everything life can throw, you offered me the crazy, discombobulated, expressive world of words. Thank you, for that, and for all of your teaching, guidance, mentoring, and friendship since—

Many thanks also to Prof CGB, my second reader and an endless source of inspiration, wisdom, and purple ink over my years here. I can't say whether it was your challenging and illuminating classes or your advice, kindness and support outside of them that helped me most – probably because with this, as with most things, the situation is not either/or, but a both/and. Thank you for helping me see, and for all the great books.

Dear Sandhya, Hannah, Lauren, and Jena, ... what can I say? Who even are you people? Roommates doesn't quite cut it at this point, because somewhere in between (oh, those interstitial spaces) the bathroom singing and hand holding and crying like it's never going to stop and laughing because it always did and the wall of feelings and growing up, I guess, and learning – somewhere in all that, you've always gotten me. Each of you, beautiful wonderful women, I love you. Thank you for everything.

Dear Jordan, Molly, and Stephen, thank you for understanding about waves and why water is so damn important anyway, thank you for always being there for me, thank you for your commas and feedback, thank you for being the best editors and friends a gal could ask for. Thank you for the years, and love. Thank you for always being you.

Last but not least, dear mom and dad, in memory and from a distance, thank you for this life. For giving me books and weird scarves and telling me to go at it, for always letting me ask why, for encouraging me to go to school, for loving me. Love you.

A story that's actually a series of poems, told somewhat by the people themselves but mostly as it is seen by the ocean, which narrates lovingly, scathingly, honestly, feelingly.

THE PEOPLE:

- Elaine** A teenage girl who lives with her grandfather, Herbert.
Herbert An old man who tries to take care of his granddaughter, Elaine.
Anne A young woman, married to John, and expecting—
John A still young man, married to Anne, and not expecting much.
Jake A boy mostly-living with his father, Tom.
Tom An angry man, Jake's father, who wishes his wife would come back.
Theresa A young woman who teaches Jake's second grade class.

PART ONE: MORNING

Pebble beach, mostly empty

I stretch out cool gray, an
antithetical response to summer.

Bright towels like so many freckles
dot the curve intermittently, red and

orange, purple against the lap of steel
water, hammered dents white-capped

with dead mermaid foam. Exhaled soft
warm land breath, sweet with the rosehips,

brushes across the dunes, shivering and
shaking the bedsheet surface silk of the waves

to chase all the wrinkles out, and
smooth them to the corners, rolling, endless.

ELAINE

pours orange juice into a glass for her grandfather, ties her sneakers without looking at her fingers, and ponders the ultimate grace of decay.

I look at him, his eyes hiding under wrinkled shelves,
the layers of flesh like rock folded over onto themselves,
pushed there by tectonic forces beyond reckoning with,
now frozen. Immobile.

Hairs like trees grow desperately out of a ledge, each one
wizened and twisting as though a fierce wind blew them
to bend-almost-break — whipped them cruelly until
they stayed bent, even when the sun came out.

He blinks, and all the grotesque, the tumbling, the delicate
comes falling down, rippling visceral through me in a shaking—
my skin, shining and taut against young bones, skin scented to
attract, pliable to be pulled — and I shudder as he breathes.

One shaking breath. Blink. Exhale. Blink.

HERBERT

is too old for time itself to have kept any reasonable record – but actually is 76 this next July 13th, which is a Thursday – and as he sits ragdoll in his chair he plays with the porridge in front of him, slopping the spoon up and down like a depressive egret fishing for minnows.

My name is has been
called but mostly now

just inked and sewn, riding
on the back of my neck

and lower, rippling on the
elastic of my waistlines

like a secret shameful flag,
a darkness, a whisper, a plea—

ANNE

sits with one foot tucked under her and the other tracing circles on the kitchen floor, pondering breakfast and progeny.

The way his nose cuts a sharp angle in the yellow-white light against the kitchen window:

yes. I feel it in the soothing gravel of his before-coffee proto-human grunt good morning that reaffirms:

yes. And yes, and maybe not, but mostly yes, the possibilities of a blue room or a pink one, or maybe yellow, to give

options— to give the future a chance, yes, to define itself as it — that swelling heaviness, low weight — grows—

JOHN

scrambles the eggs for Anne and himself in the big cast-iron pan and with each little toss, tries very hard not to lose his shit.

She keeps looking up and smiling, that one sleepy grin that pulls up only one corner of her mouth, like a question is sitting on the other side, waiting, weighing it down.

And as she sits at the table, her fingers long around her mug, feeling the warmth, the whole time she's humming that damn song, the one that goes something like, *hush-a-bye now, don't say a word*, because

she doesn't need to, just yet. And maybe it is selfish, but the way she brushes my hand, traces the veins branching thin blue under my skin but thinks about its veins under *her* skin, *her* flesh, pressed together in a

mess of red heat that I'm no part of, I can't help thinking about how the water on the stove is boiling, white steam hammering the lid, rattling tin protests into the kitchen, ready to blow, to dissipate, to scream.

JAKE

remembers, and not for the first time, that his father has great weight, his mother had less, and that caring can be complicated.

Slam, I feel it like the sky feels an explosion,
the colors flashing loud and harsh
across eyes ears skin. *He loves me.*

I can see each knuckle, white bones against skin,
and for this one, time slows down,
as that hand comes in, closer, *Slam.*

Tom, stop it. He doesn't understand. Her
voice, jagged, and lights popping like the
Fourth of July, orange against deepest,

darkest blue, smoke, the crowds screaming
for the bombs, for the sound.
Tom. Stop it. Stop it now.

I am placed down then, gently almost,
and sand grains on the floor stick to my skin,
tickling my face as the grip of that hand

loosens from my stomach and I roll
softly on my side. *Slam*, and she
is thrown, tossed by some wind,

by the sound of that hand on skin,
the smack like clapping for the school show,
costumes red and purple and footsteps loud

and hollow on the stage, like crying seeping
under the crack of the closed door late in the night
Tom, no. Not again.

TOM

gets cold too these days, but mostly he has been left solely in charge of his son: Jake's physical, mental, and emotional well-being, not to mention getting him places on time and keeping him fairly clean, and knocking some good old fashioned respect into that dense head, but only when nothing else is working, goddamn it.

Something in the turn of
his head reminds me of her—
the softness behind those ears
and the melancholy waiting

in the corner of the mouth
perhaps to be lifted or maybe
hoping to be hidden, buried
deep in sand dunes shifting

as gray eyes laugh. But the
motion — that joy — never reaches
his dimples. And then he looks
at me, not quite saying, *Your fault.*

THERESA

who could be Jake's teacher—in a world where lives collided and colluded to conveniently form mutually beneficial relations, and maybe that is this world, after all— writes on the board at 9 o'clock Tuesday morning and worries if she left the parking break on and if the future has a chance.

Stares feel like fingertips, outlining every curve, every bump, both appreciative and condemning, even from this miniature jury in stripes and superhero prints, sparkly barrettes and light-up sneakers with the laces knotted

three times around, in a big bump, just to make sure they don't come undone. I can feel every iota of eye-force poking my back, tracing down my spine and pattering like rainfall in a cacophony on my ass as it jiggles with each line I write.

Chalk, though, feels more like the way that free laughter sounds, loud scraping in a quiet gray, and the alphabet pours forth, apples bananas cats in haphazard company looking more similar than nature dictated, marshmallow nest octopus piled

on top of each other and running xylophone yellow zebra off the edge of the board with one final punctuated screech that makes its stripes fall, dripping down into the margins in little rivers and running gooey in the gutter next to the old erasers.

I curl my wrist back, let the chalk tuck into the safer cavern of my palm and there goes my voice again, always autonomous, monotonous the letters clacking hard behind my teeth and tumbling out messily along dotted lines stretching and marching before

my mouth as I turn on one well-shined dowager pump, turn to face the uplifted, the snotty-nosed, those who might be judges or worse, could be vacant, absent, uncaring. As I watch, I can almost see them painting over me with scenes of majestic wings, beasts in flight.

PART TWO: NOON

Ruggles Point, past the fence

Where the waves crash misty
and the washing-in-out pulse

of the water sings to the rocks,
rounding corners, soothing hurts,

seducing. And cascading rivers find
small paths back down, again, down

through the darkest places, cracks
where green slime takes its chance

away from the sun glare and the
violence the incredible bursting the

delicacy of the waves crashing, again,
smooth into spray, pulverizing broken

prisms that catch the light as those
drops seem to just hang there for

a moment, shining, suspended.

JOHN

has known Tom since they spent every day of the summer after fourth grade together, gathering mussels and throwing rocks into the shallow tide pools just to watch the hermit crabs scatter – and he stares at his friend’s sharp profile and gravity-dipped paunch and wonders if, with exposure to pastel surroundings, beer collects faster in that spot just above the belt buckle, and if balding isn’t perhaps causally linked to diaper changing, and about death, too, since there’s only so much room for the living so something’s gotta give to make room for the new, and whether he should order something daring like calamari or, probably, just stick with a classic reuben with extra pastrami.

Do you miss the hollow
sound of rubber on asphalt,
the thunk rattle of ball-
in-hoop talking shit,

chasing the cloth, dark
with sweat spots, up and
back, arms out and waving
like a tightrope dancer,

the lazy yellow damp
of summer circa B.C.?
And what does it even
mean to be a man if

the length of my legs was
notched off and measured
on an old white wall,
pencil dashes after dinner,

charted for progress
against Joe and Bill?
But we all shared the same
genes anyway, and what if

my own children—may their
unborn heads always be
golden and blessed—are
giants, strong, fearless, and

tall? What then?

THERESA

always has her after school coffee exactly here on this soft chair on the left side of the café, because of the way, back when it was still cold enough outside and gray and the wet air drifted up from the quays carrying salt and steamed up the plate glass, that foggy window caught the glow of the headlights, like so many dancing orbs.

There is a woman who lives there, I see, who keeps big pots of cadmium red geraniums on the stoop, and every day she stands and watches from her window as the children pour out of the bus, are vomited forth from

harsh marigold color. Now the engine sputters a halting rhythm that the kids tumble down to, a bubbling over of sneakers and backpacks, zippers and so many fingers, and this woman, she sighs and her face crumples some

and then she tips it to the left, the way small birds do, since they can't see straight on with their eyes stuck on the side of their heads, good for seeing worms but this woman, she needs more and she rests one hand,

heavy with leaded fingertips on her raised belly, rounded with that question that so silently lifts her eyebrow and curves her neck and lies spooning in that lightest fall of her hair, composition in browns against the window frame.

She does not see me, not ever, and like so much loud laughing confetti—bright, disruptive—the children are claimed one by one and in pairs, and the corner empties with the reliability of a wave drawing out, turning over

bruised pebbles with their bellies left wet side up to the darkening sky, and the woman, she lets her curtain drop then, now, every day, and I finish my cup, letting the soft heat anchor me, pulling deep on some sad thing.

JAKE

has been absent a week from school and is having difficulty maintaining focus on the regimens of addition, subtraction, socialization, and deception, and, sinkingly, he knows that despite today's pbj sandwich cut on a diagonal just right, everything is very wrong.

She pulls me aside, and boy do I hate that. Her nails pierce a little through my sleeve as she, big teeth clacking, softly, says strong quiet things, secret questions that, of course, everyone leans in to hear, falling out of their chairs to know. Now she stares at me, hard, the big dark eyes circled by her glasses, like puddles of water with oil floating on them, shifting.

I do not want to go with her out of the room, out of the desk with my name there, taped to the upper right side and covered with dynamic dino stickers, for good work, but also with a scribbled boogey from Mike, who hates me for no good reason, but now she has shifted her hand on my arm higher, she has hit the spot by accident and I do not mean it, I do not want to be loud, to be heard

but I scream and her mouth moves, her hair tosses, she picks me up and now we are going out, through the door and I can feel everyone, all those eyes, mean, scared too probably but worst of all, hers, so thick now with oil rainbowing in metallic swirls across her pupils that she almost misses the handle and has to swing at it twice with her free hand, pushing us out into the hall, her heels tapping the beat.

ELAINE

pissed off and potent, awake and caring since fucking 5:45 a fucking m, does not have any care left for balancing algebraic equations, hates the stench of this asshole to her right who hasn't figured out basic hygiene yet, and mostly just wants to get the fuck out, off this fucking island, like it's the promised land somewhere else, like a bridge and a set of wheels is going to make all the difference but it just better because it very well might be all the hope that the world can offer a 15 year girl.

You don't know me, bitch,
watch me as I go, balance
this—it's funny cuz it's

true, isn't that right, you dirtbag
yeah I saw you, go on, get!
look at the board not my ladies

and god this place is full of
fucking hypocrites I mean, like
really, talk about a future you

work in this fucking linoleum
crematorium factory of monotony
man, screw the system, fuck da

po-lice, and the endless marching
lines of blue soulless blue lockers
stretching straight and sterile,

dingy into the distance, blue
that's been kicked and bruised,
dirty, hurting blue, not at all

the rolling greens that hide
in the cusp of waves about to
break, waiting for the sun

to pierce through and set
them in motion, crashing into
foam, into a bright glow.

HERBERT

opens the mail: bill, bill, political mag, glossy sex and degradation, pizza coupon, puppies, and sighs over Elaine's report card.

She thinks she's the only one,
the only damn girl in the world

to ever feel this anger, to be stuck,
her feet sucked deep in the clinging

mud that gasps and won't let go
that wraps clammy around

ankles, damping that fire,
hissing when it touches flame.

Your mother, I want to tell her.
She was beautiful, too.

TOM

puts on a suit, straightens his tie, and prepares to grin and bear it for the next few hours.

Guardian, please stand up
and tell us of your sins.
Tell declare do, preach
the error of your ways:

Do you, guardian, take this boy
as your child?
Do you, parent, feel his pain?
Do you feel? Do you, guardian?
Daddy hits me, he says, hitting

me right in the gut, a sucker punch
and I'm gone. I can't even hate him
because that face doesn't know to be
righteous or even angry. Just worried,

wrinkled. Just.
But we love each other, damn it,
and we're all we've got now. Cry,
father, can't you? While this boy, my
son, stands guard over the courtroom,

gazing down at my shaking mess
with the solemnity and aching,
with the slightest purpling of my
fingers tracing up above his collar:

Guardian, Never. Do you understand,
do you, sir, you relinquish all claim
over this boy, your child? Do you.

ANNE

calls John from the parking lot with a carton of fresh eggs buckled into the passenger seat beside her, ready for bumps.

There was this girl, skinny little thing, maybe 15, 16 years old, in front of me in the check out line at the grocery pharmacist. Both of us stood there, stuck between high gloss breasts and workout do's and

fashion don'ts, backed up by an old man buying only prune juice and tuna, and surrounded by row upon row of breath mints. We had plenty of time. We stared at each other, each pretending not to,

her eying my bulging practically about-to-leap-out-and-get-you baby momma stomach and then looking down, following the line of stripes across my sweater back and around again, row after curving row, and me,

I kept tracking her fidgeting hand out of the corner of my eye, watching as it tucked and re-tucked her hair that hung lank and dyed, dark except for a shout of magenta. Hooking her fingers, she would slip a few strands behind her ear,

then tip her head and watch it fall back in her face, where it would sway for a minute, caught in the motion as that hand flew from ear to collar bone, the briefest touch, like a feather duster of a prayer, then tapped three times

on the cardboard box of morning-after pills clutched in her other, still hand, rapping the perky sun cartoon on the side once, twice, three times before shaking her hair impatiently and reaching up again to yank it aside.

PART THREE: NIGHT

Johnston's wharf around midnight, out past the lobster boats, where the chiming of the mooring bells is the most piercing and clear

Ripples form concentric circles around
the soggy green of the wooden pilings

as the dock rises and falls in the tide and the
water rises and falls in ridges, in circles, linking

and breaking on each other, and in each ring
an amber glow lies caught, fractured from the

fall down from a nearby streetlight and it
mixes yellow gold with electric blue, a frantic

flashing promise to the jellyfish now swarming
wobbly against the dark surface, drawn by the hope

of barnacles, of flotsam, and by the convection
of warm water rushing upward to fill a void,

later to plunge down cold, in circles, faint bubble
stars in the deepest green, just barely brushing air.

ELAINE

waits with a textbook of moldering words in her lap and watches as Herbert repeatedly nods off to sleep, his head spasmodically jerking up when he remembers, and loosening down again as he forgets.

It's a paradox, isn't it, how we can be
so old and yet always, every year,
the book said, every cell in your body

replaces itself, and you're a new you
every year, entirely. Some parts have
much faster cycles. It's only a month
for skin to totally replenish, if you're young.

But the infant drool of an old man
leaks around missing teeth that
once again cannot manage to chew

the toughness of meat, and his eyes
have clouds in them and I'm always
holding my hand over his, not even
because he needs it but just to feel

the raised cartography, contour line
decisions of a life because there just
doesn't seem to be any kind of sense

that after re-growing all that skin,
the hardest thing is still just pumping
blood around, getting it to go from
one end of the body to the other.

TOM

misses his wife something fierce these empty days, and his hands grab around aimlessly, remembering, reaching for nothing at all.

The way the blues filter deeper as they reach up
darkening into that night when we sat hushed
by the sleeping sea gulls, their wings folded soft
over the rocks and shells, keeping warm.

You leaned into my shoulder, and the pulse of heat
that radiated between us told me some sort of secret—
a telegram code tapped against summer skin,
paler in the narrowing world as the sky rushes shut.

Wind shush shushing in the dune grass with the click
clicks of insects that knew better than we did, already.
An adolescent impulse wrapped my arm around you,
not sure where to drape, and I could feel the quaking.

HERBERT

sits, as usual, at the table on the glassed-in sun porch, looking out over the reservoir as he writes his final Will and Testament.

Days stretch long
with a simplicity,
this fatality

echoing in the after
of each rubbing,
turning joint

curling slow,
skeletal, the bones
in my neck and

there's an answer there,
hidden but only just,
in that low sound.

JOHN

falls asleep and experiences a rare moment of truth, sadly to be lost when he wakes up in seven hours, groggy and late for work.

In this landscape, clouds are
like trees, with roots reaching down
and scrabbling around for nutrients,
which is us, the people, I think, only

we don't want to get slurped up like
that, so undignified an end (dragged
screaming through xylem and phloem
pipes to make leaves greener that we'll

never even see) so we run around like
mad, all of us, and hide under roofs and
rocks and anything else we can find, and
I've managed to get a corner of a crumbly

old warehouse and I'm holding on to the
flaking paint for dear, dear life when this
little kid blows by me like a tumbleweed,
bouncing brittle against the cement and it

must have hurt, I think, and so without
thinking, I stick out my leg and he grabs
it, fingers pressing hard, tugging at my
hair through my pants, and we just stay

that way, me gripping the building and
him clinging to me, as the thirsty clouds
thunder and billow all around us.

ANNE

knows more than she lets on, and it would be easy enough to pass this off as a rainy day funk, or hormones, or age-old insecurities more to do with junior high than marriage, but she feels it, really feels it in her gut.

I have nothing to say. How
do I tell him, you're free?
Fly if you want to need to— but my
hand won't let go, desperate,
ugly around his wrist, *For the child*,
it whispers. Red and splotchy,
You've always been an ugly crier,
my mother's voice rasps in my brain,
sneering. So instead there's this grin,
iron like a cage across my jaw,
holding my cheeks up, poised
over the waiting the fall to get this
aching wetness worry out, the fear
of ten years from now how much
you'll hate me, hate us, and how
you'll hate you, hate yourself for
hating, and us for all of it, and we'll
none of us have anything to say.

THERESA

takes her shoes off, slowly, first one, then the other, and waits a moment holding them and holding her breath before she throws them hard against the wall, first one, then the other, and then she laughs and laughs.

I feel lighter,
some of my bones
gone, broken out of me—

one rib maybe, two, and
that squelching secret place
just below the lungs

that's been scooped
raw, like the goop
out of a pumpkin,

and the spaces
they've made fill up now,
fill with light with every breath.

JAKE

spends his first night in the Home counting the freckles on his arm, the steps around his new room, the crinkles at the corner of his father's eyes—but it's hard to remember, exactly—and he hums his mother's favorite song, he thinks, maybe.

Skin scrubbed so clean
it feels like it might not

hold me in anymore, like
one more wash and little holes

would open up, worn
through

at my neck and at my chest,
and I'd just leak right out.

THE END: THAT NOT-QUITE MORNING TIME

Sachuest Point, stained deepest blue

Rocks scattered
like the drops flung from a paintbrush

curve lazy out—
spots of stubborn brightness

like platforms in the murk,
spots and stars in this

darkness,
flat and calm and moving.

The exhale of water
slowly, coming in to kiss the shore

an explosion of spray
and falling and falling away.