Summer 2017

The Dead Dad Diaries

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THE DEAD DAD DIARIES:
A MEMOIR

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of English
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

By
Erin Slaughter

August 2017
THE DEAD DAD DIARIES:
A MEMOIR

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Diaries; The Yeah Write Review
The Kübler-Ross Model of Grief describes the emotional grieving process, commonly experienced after the death of a loved one, in five stages:

I: Denial
II: Anger
III: Bargaining
IV: Depression
V: Acceptance

First delineated by psychiatrist Elizabeth Kübler-Ross in her 1969 book *On Death and Dying*, the “Five Stages” have become, as NPR’s Krista Tippet notes, our “cultural vocabulary for grief.”

Later, Kübler-Ross expressed her regret that the general public had so widely misunderstood the model; these five stages, she explained, should not be assumed as a linear or absolute progression of the grieving process. These stages are not necessarily experienced in order, and do not necessarily lead to “closure.”

Some people may experience only one or two of these stages. Some may experience them simultaneously, or a several stages in random order, as a “roller-coaster” effect.

Some people do not experience the grieving process in terms of these stages at all.
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This is a book-length work of memoir/creative non-fiction focused around my father’s sudden death and the resulting effects, direct and indirect, on my family and myself. To borrow the disclaimer Maggie Nelson makes at the beginning of her book, *The Red Parts*:

“This book is a memoir, which is to say that it relies on my memory and consists primarily of my personal interpretations of events and, where indicated, my imaginative recreation of them. Conversations and other events have been recreated to evoke the substance of what was said or what occurred, but are not intended to be perfect representations.”
I live with dead things inside of me. Some of them are stories.

I have, for as long as I can remember, recognized in myself the innate compulsion to record my experiences through writing. The impulse is half drive for creative expression, half existential panic of being forgotten—or worse, forgetting. It’s what I’ve come to accept as the core of my life’s purpose, as closely as I am currently able to define it. To be a “recorder of the universe.” It is also an inherently flawed and futile task: our memories are limited, one-sided and unreliable.

I’ve written elsewhere (and I expect, not for the last time) about how my impulse to record—specifically, to write memoir—can feel at times like a self-imposed burden, as problematic as it is vital; that including, omitting, and arranging pieces of memory create a narrative that can never be entirely comprehensive, or accurate to reality (although it is presented as such); that the compulsion to write about life lends itself to the writer narrating the moment while in it, distancing the writer from being able to fully connect and submit to the events and experiences of their life; that ascribing artistic significance to one’s own life prevents a clear and honest understanding of it.
Yet, there is much evidence that for those grieving or recovering from a traumatic experience, writing about their lives can help them integrate, process, and understand those experiences more clearly:

“One key step to recovery involves telling the story in depth, transforming difficult memories so they can be integrated into the survivor’s life. The construction of a narrative that draws on the past, as well as brings it into the present and future, enables the survivor to not only understand what happened but also to more fully process his or her reactions and feelings around it.” (Gray-Rosendale, 202)

If creating a narrative of your life, even a flawed one, can help you live better, does it matter if the story you tell is an accurate one?

Writing about your life affects the lens you see life through, the meaning you eventually come to about what it means to be a body in the world. (“But,” Lidia Yuknavitch writes, “when we bring language to the body, isn’t it already an act of fiction?”)

Lidia, who survived childhood abuse at the hands of her father, with her mother’s silent complicity—and who blazing-wild burned up and car-smashed and fucked reckless self-hating destruction all through her youth as a result—would say that the relationship between memory, writing, and living is a fractured one:

“The more a person recalls a memory, the more they change it. Each time they put it into language, it shifts. The more you describe a memory, the
more likely it is that you are making a story that fits your life, resolves the past, creates a fiction you can live with.” (Yuknavitch, 282)

(VII) Because a mind can repress, shatter, and dissociate emotions and memories after a stressful event, the relationship of trauma victims to memory and truth can be even more complicated:

“Since our memories are made up of many jagged missing pieces, the truths we convey cannot rest on some false sense of memory’s infallibility...Our stories are necessarily always about slippages, about what we know as much as what we don’t know.” (Gray-Rosendale, 218)

(VIII) I don’t know that I will ever feel comfortable identifying myself as a victim of trauma. A large aspect of my process, both in my personal life and writing The Dead Dad Diaries, is trying to sort out why I don’t consider myself a victim of my father’s murder, why I don’t classify that as a traumatic event, even though it is, by all justifiable standards, the most jarring and significant thing to happen to me; significant enough, as only a few events through the course of a life are, to cleave my understanding of self and universe into “before” and “after.” To write this book, I’ve had to interrogate my unusual response to his death—my own ambivalence and distance from actualized grief. I’ve had to literally put myself on trial.
In the Interlude piece, “Trial of a Story in Acts of Love & Violence,” I attempted to interrogate my own morality, as a person and a writer. First, I faced a question of personal morality: Is it true that because I didn’t react “normally” to my father’s death, not grieving publicly, or even really behind closed doors, that—as I have been accused of by friends and family members—I simply didn’t care for him enough to care that he had been murdered?

One sociologist, writing about culturally-approved grieving roles and the “morality of loss,” offers an explanation I admittedly find somewhat validating:

“[The] sturdiest of cultural ideals may be far removed from describing the reality of where intimacy actually lies or the range of intimate ties that exist in the lives of many, if not most of us. Ours is the kind of society that provides both opportunities and needs for intimacy that frequently extend far beyond what is available from our families of origin…the loss of a familial relationship may not constitute a loss of intimacy, with the result that normative pressures to grieve ‘appropriately’ may prove very burdensome. It is not the category of relationship loss that occasions grief but, rather, the loss of significant attachment.” (Fowlkes, 638)

My excuse, at least in the years immediately following his death, was that my dad and I simply weren’t that close. He and I had a tumultuous relationship, defined by addiction, family drama, and personality clash, and I resented his role in that. As I concurrently continued to write about him and continued to grow into
adulthood, my context for understanding him changed. I experienced my own addictions, made my own mistakes.

When I look back at my writing during that span of time, nonfiction and otherwise, the word “forgiveness” shows up repetitively. The word “forgiveness” was a prayer of sorts, an ambiguous god I softly suffered in alienation from, a spiritual ache in my bones. It grew companions, and rarely showed up unaccompanied by the vague sense of generalized guilt that pervaded every aspect of my life for a long time. I’m not sure who the craving for forgiveness was directed towards—my father, or myself. Yet I continued to write, aimless and aflame.

(XI) “Maybe forgiveness is just that. The ability to admit someone else’s story. To give it to them” (Yuknavitch, 310).

(XII) Secondly, I put myself on trial for an ethics of craft: What right did I have to tell this story? And were my motives for writing about his death selfish ones, not for catharsis or to process grief, but rather to create a public record that something exceptionally shocking and interesting had happened in my life? This is, perhaps, a harder question to answer honestly, and a more crucial one to make sure I get right.

(XIII) An example: My first “real” publication was in a tiny, online literary journal called The Yeah Write Review (now defunct) when I was nineteen, and the piece
published was the one that started all that this book has become, the first piece I wrote about my dad’s death, two-and-a-half years after the fact: “A Letter to Dad.”

The second piece I wrote about him was an expansion on that short piece, what eventually became the essay “Retracing Their Steps.” It was shortly after published in my university’s campus literary journal, the North Texas Review, and at the end of the semester, the journal held a reading for the contributors—in Willis Library (the library that, in the essay, my mother warns me never to go to, because when she was in college she used to have nightmares about getting shot in front of it). My mother was with me, as was my stepdad, at that reading. So many ghosts of place and time and memory intersecting. Writing and life intersecting in all its forms.

(XIV) But they almost didn’t come; we had gotten into a huge argument about one line, in which I described my mom “sitting in a broken chair in a carpeted garage, smoking cigarettes and watching preachers on television.” I thought it was innocent enough—I’d meant it to be descriptive rather than any kind of judgement—and it was the truth. That was how she spent her nights, often. But my parents were offended that I would expose the “dirty secrets” of their lives to “gain recognition” for myself, and argued that I was only portraying the worst of them, only writing about the “bad, depressing things,” and not all the “good things” they were and had done. I had no agenda to portray them as good or bad; my only purpose was to portray them vividly and honestly, through the details of
my memories. This was the first of many clashes, interpersonal and/or internal, I would come up against in the process of writing memoir.

(XV) What are our obligations to the people we write about, the tertiary stories we tell? Do we “own our stories,” and should that absolve us from those who are offended at how we portray them, even if those portrayals are honest? Additionally, is it necessary to acknowledge a person’s changes and development, i.e. is it necessary when telling a “bad” thing they did, to include a caveat that something they’ve done or become since is “good/better”? What can we rationalize sacrificing in our personal lives for the sake of the story, and what of our stories can we be expected to sacrifice for the people in our lives? What if the act of writing, telling the story in full, feels as morally pertinent as deciding to live or die, as the purpose of life itself? Is there a different obligation owed when the person you’re writing about is dead, and can’t defend themselves, or counter your account with their own reasons or recollections? Especially considering a single memory is fallible and lacks context outside its own experience, as Laura Gray-Rosendale writes: “…there is ‘multiple ownership of the same past.’ Since each individual’s truth is unique, each person’s telling of a given story will necessarily be different” (218).

(XVI) A close friend, a fiction writer, once gave me advice that I have come to find empowering: “Be a writer first, and a person second.”

What he meant was to prioritize the story, my artistic impulse, over insecurity about how that art’s existence might affect my personal life. It’s what I
usually remind myself of when this cavalcade of questions begins to stifle me from writing the story I know needs to be written, the blood-letting way it demands to be written—or from writing anything at all. The phrase is an arguable one, but it gets the story written, anyway.

(XVII) I don’t have answers to these questions, and I don’t believe any writer has come up with definitive ones, even if they are able to settle on an ethical code that generally works for them. I am asking these questions because they are still questions that matter, and confuse me, and frighten me. I am asking them because the writing will happen regardless, (without my consent, it sometimes feels, like crying or vomiting or dreaming in one’s natural tongue) and so, the only real dilemma for me is what to do about it afterwards. I am and have always been a writer, burdened with the obligations and considerations of being expected, also, to behave like a person.

(XVIII) If this sounds like a convenient way of letting myself off the hook, it’s not intended to be; if writing a memoir—essentially, filling two-hundred-and-seventy-something pages of a book with a lifetime of collected secrets—has taught me anything, it’s that the quickest way to freedom is to figure out what kind of creature you are. Name that creature if you can, and run out into the streets naked and frighteningly alive, howling in its voice. If what you are reveals itself to be monstrous, at least it’ll be a monster you recognize.
The Dead Dad Diaries is a book about stories and recording, the use or uselessness of knowing and remembering. The title refers to it being a kind of “diary” of my life in relation to my dad’s death and its effects, but it also refers to the “diaries” he wrote while in rehab soon before his death, records of his inner life that I was unable to gain access to until almost seven years later (chronicled within the last section of the book). Though reading them did provide me with a form of understanding, resolution, or closure, my seeking the diaries is also representative of my process throughout this book to explore my father’s life in retrospect, to know him, and to understand the part of myself that carries his genetic makeup, a trace of his mark on life, what remains of his death-fractured, daughter-told story.

“The challenge that faces autobiographers is to invent themselves despite the weight of their family history, and autobiographical singularity emerges in negotiation with this legacy…We may have to learn their life narratives before we can truly begin to be ourselves.” (Miller, 543)

Now that this book is finished, its events recorded in full, do I belong to myself? Will my story be mine, or will its photographs always contain an eerie, orb-like lens-flare, the shadow of loss? Can the ghost of a story that lives inside someone else’s body ever truly be laid to rest while that person still moves through the world, carrying it in their DNA?
In exploring my dad’s life through the narrative of his death, I wanted to know him, so that I could make sense of what of myself I inherited from him, particularly the insidious things—tendency toward mental illness, isolation, addiction, and in the end, a destructive relationship that ended his life in gunfire.

“But ‘knowing the truth’ does not come with redemption as a guarantee, nor does a feeling of redemption guarantee an end to a cycle of wrongdoing,” Maggie Nelson writes (32). In her book *The Art of Cruelty*, she also reminds me: “…one of trauma’s most troubling cruelties lies in its tendency to replicate itself” (251).

These are the questions that digging through my father’s life have unearthed, questions about who I am and why, where to go from here. More questions that I don’t have simple or clear answers for, and likely never will.

And the most daunting question: Why write the story at all? Why should anyone care to read about the experiences of someone they don’t know? Well, I’m tempted to counter with: “Why live a life? Why do anything?” But I think Maggie Nelson has the better answer:

“Some things might be worth telling simply because they happened.”

Today is June 23, 2017. I am 23 years old. It has been seven years since my father was murdered, and exactly two months from today, it will be eight years.
The number 23 is significant to me, and to the story of The Dead Dad Diaries. It represents a profound, tragic, and life-altering event, but I don’t think of it as at all malevolent; I imagine it as a signpost for fate, a reminder that when I see it, I am where I’m supposed to be. That interpretation is in itself a story, one I “tell myself in order to live,” as Didion might say, but even more so, one I tell myself about what living amounts to.

It’s the fact that during the year I was 23, my life cracked open painfully gorgeous; I fell in love, briefly, with a person, and more permanently with a place and a group of people; I stumbled into a home and a makeshift family I’ve been aching, scraping for my entire life; I flooded with grief and let it wrack me until I became myself.

It has been five years since the first sentence I wrote about him, to him: There are some things you never knew about me. It took me that long to realize I was talking as much to myself as to him, to whatever space we occupy together inside the story. When we talk to the dead, we are talking to the part of ourselves that believes these stories can one day allow us to touch each other and need nothing.

Let the record show that the year I was 23, I told the story I was meant to tell.

Some things might be worth telling simply because they happened. Let the record show that stories and words led me here, to a room in Bowling Green, Kentucky, on June 23, 2017, ravenous with gratitude.
Hello I am calling from Washington D.C. wondering if you’ve ever seen this city & how sad that I can’t tell your footprints from my own anymore in a coffee shop outside the metro your funeral song played & I wondered if your hair would be graying or gone, whether you were somehow trying to answer a question I don’t know how to ask yet.

Hello I am calling from Seattle & sometimes I see a car glimmering charcoal smell new leather think of you sometimes I think of you not for days or weeks or months at all until Grandma calls & says are you thinking of him? & I lie sweetly tell myself the fact that I am writing this book makes me not guilty of not loving makes me not unlovable myself tell myself I have just moved on I am living my own life whatever that means.

Hello I am calling from Kentucky where I live now yes Kentucky I swear the people here have teeth I was surprised too but here is the place I unfurled into impossible painful lightness here is the place I exorcised myself from myself I heard on a podcast trauma makes you tourniquet your soul from your body & it’s true that I once thought of my legs as dead tree limbs but I have never thought of this as trauma, only a necessary becoming. & maybe that’s part of the problem. Were podcasts around when you were? You would be so excited about Google glasses Apple watches & all those dumb weird beautiful tunnels of data that make our lives so cloudlike now I think of you sometimes.

Sometimes you seem a detail of my past no longer relevant, reduced to a song in a coffee shop a good sharp ache to loosen up convenient tears & other times for weeks I am preoccupied with fantasies of you posthumously scrolling through my Facebook selfies finding that I bloomed beautiful & sighing finally with rest. I am calling from my kitchen
my office my sweet realm of delusion where you are in hiding with the CIA or flying roundtrip the circumference of the Earth just for good old abandonment’s sake, where you are capable of using the internet ordering room service or knowing that two months ago a woman who bled her waterlogged world with fire words said that I owe you this & I was crying ugly. & later on a drunken park bench in a foreign city I sat with someone I saw then as pure luminescence & he swaddled my stories of you in sweet-smelling forgiveness blankets, wrapped my wrists in understanding & I will not marry him but probably I will marry someone & you won’t know what they look like, won’t shuffle through the awkwardness of begrudging your blessing on some beautiful vagabond who wants to tie our lives together until our bones break.

Hello I am calling from slightly-embarrassed penance where yes I remember the way I violently resented branding death onto my life beyond an inappropriately giggly explanation of the murder & your subsequent vacancy said I wouldn’t carry your picture at graduation wouldn’t build you like a canopy over my one-day-distant wedding ceremony wouldn’t ballroom dance with a ghost yet here you are inhabiting my writing a space more true than life & that means something, right? the emptiness or lack of. Hello are you listening am I also dissolved to radio static hello I miss you without knowing what to miss meaning somewhere something feels missing & I have spent years clawing out of myself to avoid finding it in my own blood hello I am writing from the groping dark of the future believing that when this book is finished I will belong to myself again, though these words you made in me have made me. These pages used to gouge you have sewn you into the hem of me, or rather, exposed the oozing seams I was born with.
This story my inheritance has forged me & become me: record of days the dead leave behind fragments half-truths little aches & wonders. So it turns out I am the story, or the body your story passes through a still-breathing narrative of doorways this unreliable fragile sack of flesh & directionless need I am the body that carries the burden of your whole purposeful living, leafing through a semi-stranger’s moments finding them redacted in places heat-sharp in others. Searching through your failings to build myself into something better I owe you at least this every ghost is owed a story whether or not it’s the shape of anything they recognize as theirs.

So now I understand: you had a life full of many things interrupted by the bright messy shock of my birth & suddenly you find this creature clawing wailing bleating out its hungers—encoded with the worst of you. & gloriously ignorant to its own nature. How do you look something like that in the eye without breaking open spilling out on the floor? How do you survive long enough to escape the things that claim to love you & I realize now it was Love that slaughtered you, either loving my mother so endless you walked into the mouth of someone else hoping to be swallowed, or worse—actually brimming with pure ridiculous light for the same eyes & smile & hands that held a gun to your head & said destroy. In which case I would like to say forgiveness, to tell you that I too have glimpsed an unbearable shining from the corner of my eye & been full-ready to sign my body away.

Hello I am calling from Nashville where I dared to ask a psychic where your phantom lingers during that collection of months I unraveled in love & became briefly fearless. I paid her way too much it was all a hoax except I wanted to believe so I did, she recorded the session but at the moment I said your human name the tape died I’ve heard
it just at the instant & she told me you were disappointed with these words. She said bumm 
said you were a little bummed by what I’d written exactly the word you would use, even now your minty stubble comes crawling fierce after it & I have to trust that words mean something because elsewise there is truly nothing left. Sometimes I forget I am a living grave marked daughter sometimes I wait for your ghost to split the wall.

Sometimes meeting a stranger I make up stories tell them my dad is alive & working in Fresno or Boston or sometimes Alabama costume myself in an undamaging that grazes my skin like freedom. Sometimes my friend tells a story & there’s a hazel sparkling in his eyes that looks like you & glitters more like safety than I have ever known any man to be. & this is no one’s fault, sometimes I forget if you were resurrected you wouldn’t love me maybe, hello did you know I sleep with girls did you know I eat myself into ruin I vandalize my body with strangers & with ink both of which feel far too permanent sometimes did you know I am a slave to useless language & all things incapable of wanting me back? Hello do you realize dead is only different than dad by one measly scribble, that dad is just dead without the e. But here I can trap you in your own story make you all mine though I refused your ashes because why would I want to drag around some morsel of you some herb-pinch of your corpse, unpacking & repacking you into cardboard boxes every year another dirty secret that guilts me from the junk closet like your watches your pictures CDs baseball cap, the T-shirt I sometimes wear to yoga.

There are hundreds of ways to tell this story. One is: how to take this grief and transform it into love? What is the alchemy of suffering, how to unearth the archeology
of sorrow? I never took your ashes I took your story though I didn’t ask for it & now I am constructing the gravestone I don’t have, shaping it from granite & moonlight.
Seeing
“What kind of beast would turn its life into words? What atonement is this all about? And yet, writing words like these, I’m also living.”

—Adrienne Rich, The Dream of a Common Language

“I had the kind of youth I’ll need the rest of life to figure out. Forgive me if I don’t tell you the truth.”

—Allison Joseph, My Father’s Kites
There is a photo. My father and I in the ocean, 1999. I was seven. He is wearing swim shorts, a striped wool sweater, and sunglasses that look like the nineties. I’m wearing an oversized Chicago Bears sweatshirt, his. His hand on my back, helping me wade through. A wave beginning to swell behind us, asymmetrical landscape. The water so clear and green-blue.

The little girl in the picture wears her hair in a ponytail. She doesn’t know anything yet and I love her. Her face looks easy—not “easy” like capable of being used, but calm, free. I am her and I am not her. Over the course of seven years the human body regenerates all its cells so that technically nothing of a person is the same as they were seven years before. I am her and I am an entirely new person twice over; I know things now and I understand my heart, or God, or whatever you want to call it, as ocean water: bleeding, eternal, polluted, rhythmic, alive. Constantly in motion. It has been seven years since my father died and I know things now and there are things I still don’t know, like how taxes work. Or what were the last words he said? Even scientists still don’t know how big the universe is, or how to remove stretch marks. It has been seven years since the man in the picture was murdered and the girl walked upstairs alone and closed her bedroom door and did not cry. I am her and I am not her. The ghost of every cell still lives here.
I’m alone in my lime-green bedroom when JJ finally calls me back. He calls my regular cell phone, the one my parents pay for; not the burner phone he bought me, the one I keep under my pillow for when he wants to reach me after my ten o’clock phone curfew. It’s still early, even for a school night—around 8:30 PM, probably. He fell asleep and missed my call, he explains. His voice is sleepy. He’s mumbling a little, his words sticky sweet with the baby-talk I’ve grown to cherish, an indication that he’s in a good mood, that he loves me, that everything is alright, at least for now. At least until it isn’t.

When JJ didn’t answer the first time, I had called Kevin. I don’t know why I chose him, of everyone I could have called. Kevin has OCD, and spent a summer in rehab. He’s known for wearing ten to twenty T-shirts at a time, a manifestation of his mental illness. We’ve been in theatre class together for two years, and once, I let him finger me on the bus ride back from a One Act Play competition. Freshman year, in biology class, he’d often tried (and failed) to convince me to let him finger me under the desk while our teacher screened a nature documentary. Kevin is wild, wily, an un-serious, flirtatious mess. He is the first person I told that my father is dead.

I’m sixteen. Tomorrow, I begin my senior year of high school. I’m graduating early, anxious to leave the tiny north Texas town I grew up in, to move away and become an actress, or a writer, or any variation of Somebody. And tonight, just an hour before I hang up the phone with Kevin and JJ calls me back, my mom received a phone call from my aunt, telling her my father has been murdered.

I’m sixteen. Tomorrow, I begin my senior year of high school.

I tell JJ the news, and his voice loses some of its sleepy edge. “I’m so sorry, baby,” he says. “When did it happen?”
“My aunt said around four o’clock this afternoon. She just called and told us. They’re donating his eyes,” I say, though I’m not sure how I know that detail, how it slipped in among the chaos of the plain facts. “Someone else is going to have his eyes now.”

“I’m so sorry, baby,” he repeats. “That’s horrible.”

“Yeah, but I mean, what’s going to happen now? School starts tomorrow. But the funeral is in Alabama.”

“What do you mean?”

“Like, I have drill team practice. The first football game is next week. I won’t even know the dance, I won’t be able to perform—and theatre, and all my classes...what’s going to happen?”

The line goes quiet, and when JJ speaks again, his voice is hard, “I can’t believe that’s what you’re worried about. Are you serious?”

“Look, I just—I don’t know how to handle this. Any of this. I can’t just be gone the whole first week of school,” I stammer.

“I can’t believe you’re serious!” he says. “Wow, Erin. Wow.”

“What?”

“You’re not even crying!” he says. “Your dad died, and you’re not even crying. You’re worried about drill team.”

“Well, I’m worried about everything,” I say. “I don’t know.”

“I just...I don’t think I can be with you anymore,” he says.

“Wait, what do you mean?”

“I don’t think I can be with someone who is so incredibly selfish.”
“No, wait,” I begin to panic, “I didn’t mean…it’s not like I don’t care. I’m just trying to be practical. I’m freaking out here, okay?”

“I’m sorry,” he says, that familiar dramatic edge of resignation in his voice. “I love you, but I can’t be with someone who’s so selfish they don’t even care that their own dad died. That’s not the kind of person I want to date.”

“JJ,” I say, maybe begging, maybe even beginning to cry for the first time that night. “Please, I’m sorry. Don’t break up with me tonight. Not with everything else. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it to come off how it did.” But I meant what I had said. And when I had expressed the same worries to Kevin earlier, he had been understanding. He had laughed and made jokes with me, allowed me to be confused, strange, stoic. But Kevin isn’t my boyfriend.

“Goodbye, Erin,” JJ says. He sounds like he’s reciting lines from a movie. “I’m sorry about your dad.” I hear the receiver click, and I am alone in my bedroom. I am sixteen. I am a dead-dad daughter, now and forever.

***

There is a photo. Me in the high school parking lot, wearing my first-day outfit. Raspberry lace over a black tank top, and blue jeans. Smudged eyeliner, dark hair curled in ringlets. I am smiling, posing with my hand on my hip.

The next morning my mom and stepdad drove us to school to unenroll us, starting first at the middle school, with my sister. When it came my turn, Stephanie stayed in the car. She was thirteen, and had been closer to our dad than I had been. They had similar temperaments, a similar interest in sports, and similarly, seemed to forget the upsetting things he did and said while drunk. Before he died, she had been trying to convince him
to let her move to Alabama to live with him. Now, of course, that would never happen—
though it was unlikely to happen in the first place; our mother loved us too fiercely to let
us slip away, and our father was a quiet man who liked his space, who had never really
gotten into the messy guts of raising children, even when they were married, when we all
lived together. It had been a long time since then: eight years since their divorce and our
move to Texas. Half my age, at that point, and even longer since the bones of their
marriage had begun to creak through the walls of our house, grind down to marrow,
fracture. I had witnessed a lot more of that breaking than Stephanie had.

My mom met my stepdad, Mark, while she was gardening in the front yard about
five years before, wearing her trademark “Daisy Duke” jean shorts, a cut-off “Loverboy”
T-shirt, and floral gardening gloves. Mark was living across the street with a friend, but
within a month, he shuttled a suitcase of his belongings into our house and began to live
with us. They married a year or two after, and gave birth to my half-sister, Trinity. I don’t
know where Trin was that morning, barely more than a toddler then. Maybe at a
neighbor’s house? Details dissolve beneath the concrete images I remember from that
day:

Mark, a burly, bearded, usually-boisterous man, was solemn and kind-eyed as he
took my mother’s arm, maybe even tearing up himself as she cried in the principal’s
office, explaining the situation. I loitered in the hallway, and spotted two of my friends,
twins whose house I had spent all my summers since eighth grade practically living at.
They each swallowed me in the hardest hug their petite bodies could manage. Somehow,
they had already heard. We talked briefly, but soon, they joined the sea of students
traveling down the one long hallway that was Anna High School, off to their first classes of the semester.

Mine was supposed to be Pre-Calculus, which I felt lucky to have with one of my closest friends, Dylan. He and I had grown more distant, though, in the year I had been dating JJ. JJ disapproved of me having any male friends, seemed to find an obscure reason why each of them were unacceptable for me to spend time with. In Dylan’s case, it had been that I was riding alone with him in the car somewhere one night and hadn’t answered JJ’s phone call. More explosive fights had been set off from less, and when we arrived at my house, I had to reluctantly leave Dylan downstairs while I went up to my bedroom and did damage control on the phone with JJ. There had been an uncomfortable distance between us since then. I missed Dylan, and ached to think that I wouldn’t be able to see him that morning, wouldn’t even get to tell him in person what had happened. He was the main person I wanted to talk to, the person I knew would understand, would respond equally dark-humored and sensitive, would accept whatever I was in the wake of my new strange world. Whatever I was, I had no words for yet, nothing but the story that had already begun to sound practiced on my lips, on my parents’ as they floated red-faced and eerie down the hall towards me.

The next stop would be the DMV, and from there, my grandmother’s house in Alabama. Our bags were already packed and waiting in the trunk. In what felt like a small victory, I would still be getting my driver’s license that day, as planned, but only so that I was able to help my mom drive the twelve hour stretch. I was officially unenrolled from school, untethered and headed towards the hub of grief: a funeral, my father’s dead body, my grandmother and aunt, and the uncertainty of what would become of us after.
I got back in the car with my parents and sister, leaning over to check my makeup in the rearview mirror. The gold glitter on my eyelids was still in place, and I thought, gladly, that at least it wasn’t all a waste, that at least if I didn’t get to go to school I’d still look nice for my very first driver’s license photo. My stomach churned a river of anxiety that in the moment I classified as excitement. Somewhere there’s a picture where I am that girl, but it’s been lost for a long time now.

***

The week in Alabama is a blur of jutting, beige-tinted impressions; it began with seeing my father’s gray Toyota Camry parked in my grandmother’s driveway. If it was a shock to see his car there, if we flashed for a second or two with nauseous relief that everything had just been a misunderstanding, no one mentioned it. Inside the house, my sister and I greeted semi-familiar faces: my aunt Deb, who I didn’t remember having seen since I was four or five—some vague edge of a snowy memory scraping a car windshield in Illinois—and her grown son, our cousin, Mike. Uncertain hugs all around, the soft round fleshiness of kin-bodies. And my grandma, Irma, equally soft-bodied and teary—or maybe not teary, but with a stony face that displayed new lines, saltwater grooves carved irreversible from before we arrived.

My sister and I put our suitcases in the back bedroom, the room we usually stayed in when we came to visit our dad, matching twin beds and gold lamps on the nightstands. My mom slept on a cot in the spare room with the treadmill and stacks of VHS home videos. The adults spent a lot of time moving between the scratchy couch and the dining table, sighing. I spent a lot of time sneaking away to the bedroom to talk on the phone with JJ for hours at a time. It didn’t feel much different than when we were dating, except
that he had already begun dating another girl he worked with, whose name I recognized from stories he had told in the past, bits of conversation. He told me about their first time having sex and their first fight. I told him I was considering getting a tattoo, a little blue heart on my ankle, and he said that if I did, we would really never be getting back together. So I didn’t.

***

In the days between our arrival and the funeral, my sister and I occupied ourselves with small adventures into town. I asked my mom to let me drive her car now that I had my license, and she agreed without a struggle. My sister and I drove to the mall and stole hemp bracelets from Earthbound, bumper stickers from gas stations, and snuck un-tagged halter tops into her purse. We shoplifted and drove around and ate McDonald’s in the car. One day, I recklessly sped down a particularly large hill and nearly hit a small boy playing in the street, and for the rest of our trip I was paranoid that the parents of the boy had seen our license plate and would track us down. Which is what I thought had happened when we returned one afternoon and saw a police cruiser parked in my grandma’s driveway.

Inside, a man sat with my mother at my grandmother’s kitchen table. He introduced himself as Detective Eric King, the detective in charge of my father’s case.

We took turns at the table with him and his tape recorder, while he asked us about my father’s relationship with his wife, our stepmother of three months, Pam. My mother went first, and from the other room we could hear pieces of her: “He called me the day before he went over there…he told me ‘If I meet my demise, this is where I’ll be’…he
laughed…I told him if he was really scared, he shouldn’t go, or he should take someone with…he said it, just like that…‘my demise’…he laughed…”

My sister and I had spent two weeks with them in the summer, at Pam’s house, so when it was our turn, we mostly talked about that. The detective asked about a fight they’d had while we were in town, when Pam lost her hearing aid and we watched through the living room window as my dad crawled around the deck outside looking for it.

He said he had listened to the voicemails my mom left on my dad’s phone that night, after she heard the news. He said they broke his heart, and he was so sorry. He gave me his business card.

Later that day, a neighbor brought over a rotisserie chicken, and my sister and I stood at the counter and devoured the entire bird with our hands.

***

The morning of the funeral, I went into the kitchen and found my grandma had woken early, as she always did when we visited. She was in her night gown and curlers, drinking a glass of Bailey’s at the breakfast bar.

“Can I have a little?” I asked, testing my luck. She consented. I threw a couple of ice cubes in the small glass she poured, watering down the creamy drink. I took it into the guest bathroom to drink while I got ready, feeling dangerous, adult, delighted.

Our grandmother took charge of approving our outfits. We hadn’t had time to shop for funeral dresses, so we made do piecing together what black clothing we already owned. I planned to wear a black, high-collared lace shirt with dark jeans and combat boots, but Grandma vetoed: “Too goth.” I replaced the jeans with a gray skirt, the boots with black ballet flats.
The viewing room was all dark wood and floral chairs. Dim yellow light shone on his coffin. When we got there, we saw that his hair was styled in a way he never wore it. My grandmother took a fine-toothed black comb from her purse, spit on it, and combed back the black strands.

My mother held his cold hand and kissed his face and cried. She told us we should touch him, too, that it was our last opportunity; he was going to be cremated. She said, *It’s still your father. The last time you’ll see him.*

My sister and I stood back, not wanting to come too close to the dead body. We asked everyone to leave the room, so we could be alone with him. It’s the kind of high-maintenance request that we never would have gotten away with if we hadn’t been, on that day, Princesses of Grief, the young bereaved daughters of the beloved. Family and strangers alike left the room and closed the heavy oak doors behind them, closing us in with him.

My sister and I looked at each other, smiling the way children smile when they know it’s inappropriate. We dared each other to step towards the casket, into the yellow light. Tried to shove each other and then jumped back, until together we walked forward.

What was lying there didn’t seem like our dad, but a wax mold of him, a shell. Though the grotesque inanimateness startled us, so did the sense that he could begin moving at any second, zombie-like. His body looked like it could just as easily have been shucked-off empty as rise up out of the coffin and begin to scold us.

My sister tentatively poked his hand and giggled, squeamish.

*Cold,* she said.

I said, *He’s wearing eyeliner.*
We looked at the place where his head rested on the white silk pillow.

*I wonder if they stitched it up,* one of us said or didn’t say.

I peeked behind the pillow, where the bullet made contact, and I saw red.
PLAYLIST FOR A FUNERAL

Track List:

1. Somewhere Over the Rainbow - Barry Manilow (Chosen by His Mother)
2. Forever Young – Rod Stewart (Chosen by His Sister)
3. Faithfully – Journey (Chosen by His Ex-Wife)
4. I Will Follow You Into the Dark – Death Cab for Cutie (Chosen by His Oldest Daughter)

Directions:

Play on a loop. Sit in the chapel pews. Look straight ahead. *Wake up where the clouds are far behind me...* Do not think about the cousins that hate you because you drove to go shopping and get pizza last night. Do not look at the strangers sitting behind you, who will later want to touch your hand and repeat the same phrases: “better place” “can’t believe” “remember talking to him” “he always talked about” “so proud of” “everyone is so.” *Forever young, forever young...* Do not look at your sister’s flushed face or your mother’s trembling hands. Let her hold yours, squeeze them even, if only to keep hers still. Allow her this, even though it makes your skin itch. Look straight ahead. *Sleep alone tonight...* Try not to roll your eyes when his coworker, the hairy, kind woman, tells you his soul was saved. Try not to make a gagging gesture like some bratty teenager when she touches your sister’s shoulder and says he accepted Jesus into his heart, she was there, she knows. This is supposed to be solace. Look straight ahead. Do not cry, jesusfuckingchrist, do not cry. Do not think about why you won’t cry. Maybe let your voice break a little when you stand up to say your speech at the podium. Maybe just a little, so they know. That you are not
empty. That you’re not going to burn down the building. *Fear is the heart of love.* Do not look beside you. Do not look up. Do not look back. Look ahead. Keep looking ahead.
After the funeral, we returned to Grandma Irma’s house. My mom, sister and I changed clothes and went to get lunch while she and Aunt Deb stayed. When we came back, they were sitting at the kitchen table, furious.

My grandma said, “Don’t think I didn’t see you two laughing before the service. Mary and Dianne came to me about how you girls have been running around town, not seeming sad at all about what’s going on. They think you’re spoiled brats, and I’m starting to think they’re right.”

Mary and Dianne were the thin, elegant, snobby, sixty-something daughters from her second husband’s first marriage. They had been staying at the house before the funeral, and had conveniently left afterwards.

“We were laughing because of a joke Dianne made! She said she was trying to lighten the mood!” I protested.

“You know,” my grandma scowled, “I’ve seen Stephanie cry, but I don’t think you miss your dad at all. Now you can have your stepdad walk you down the aisle at your wedding; isn’t that what you’ve always wanted anyway?”

I began to cry a little then, not out of sadness, but fear; although in her eighties, she’s a large presence, vibrant. And terrifying when angry.

My mom tried to defend us, but it didn’t do much good, “Some people grieve differently, but that doesn’t mean they aren’t grieving.”

My grandma said, “It’s been a difficult day. Emotions are high.”

My aunt said, “He loved you girls so much. Everyone he worked with said he told them how proud he was of you.”
“Well,” I said, “He didn’t tell me.”

***

My grandmother was witness to the two ruined Christmases. During the first, he was convulsing on the kitchen floor when she arrived to take us out to dinner. He whispered for Stephanie to come closer so he could tell her he loved her. Last words, like he truly believed he was dying. My sister began to cry. I stood back and watched, annoyed.

My grandma called the ambulance that took him to the emergency room, where the doctors found four times the legal limit of alcohol in his blood. They declared it an alcoholic seizure. He called us a week after we left to tell us he was sorry, and he was going to quit drinking.

He spent the second Christmas complaining about a woman he had just broken up with. He said she was crazy, irrational, obsessed with him. He showed my sister pieces of the emails she had written him; I never saw them, so I don’t know what they said.

On New Year’s Eve, we were getting ready to go see a play when the woman showed up at his door unexpectedly, holding a bottle of wine under her coat. He didn’t want to turn her away, so he invited her to come with us. When we met up with my grandma in the parking garage and she saw the woman, her eyes went wide.

During the play, the two of them got drunk and talked over the actors. They dropped the empty bottle of wine and it echoed as it rolled through rows of seats. An hour in, my grandma asked, “Are you ready to leave?” and I nodded, so we left, and they followed us out.
At my dad’s house, my sister and I drank sparkling apple juice while the adults had champagne. After the ball dropped on TV, I went into my room to call my mom and Mark, and when I came out, the woman was sitting on my dad’s lap, sloppily kissing on the couch.

Six months later they were married, and three months after that she killed him with a bullet to the back of the head. I have always wondered what that bullet felt like, if an unfastened skull parts like the Red Sea or opens like French doors to the pale glow of sunlight. If it feels like an entrance wound or an exit.

***

There was more; each time my sister and I visited, another piece of furniture was missing. Of inquiries about the glass coffee table: “It broke,” (but the stitches he had to get on the top of his head were from a light fixture that spontaneously fell loose from the ceiling). Of the casts and surgeries to replace the shattered bones in his arm with steel pins: “I slipped in the shower.”

There was the time at a hotel when my dad told me my mother had cheated on him with the dad of a boy on my soccer team, gotten pregnant, and miscarried. I stole his phone and ran into the hallway to call her (she denied it). There were multiple drunken voicemails left on our home phone, cursing and calling my mom a whore. When my sister and I visited, he stifled our joy; he couldn’t handle us being playful, loud, or energetic, especially not in public. He loved us, but he showed his love with mp3 players and new school clothes that our mom couldn’t afford. I’m not sure he was cut out for kids, or if he had ever wanted them. We were a shock to the system of silence he lived alone in for forty weeks of the year.
On the few occasions my dad left those drunken, offensive voicemails on our phone, Mark had been the one to call him up and defend my mother, his wife. Mark and my dad, mostly, remained civil when it came to co-parenting, but they were far too different to ever become buddies; my dad was a moderate, white-collar man, while Mark’s personality was loud and reckless, telling off-color jokes, his cultural identity as a “redneck” a source of pride.

Still, as a teenager when I begged not to visit my dad, it was Mark who insisted, “No matter what he’s done, he’s your dad. You need to see him.” Mark lost custody of his own two children after legal troubles in his twenties, a mistake that gutted him even years later, one he was still trying hard to correct. Although he was sympathetic to my complaints, he said he couldn’t allow another man to experience the loss that he had.

After each drunken transgression, my dad called and apologized, said he was getting help for his addiction. He promised things were going to be different. He said the same thing when he called to tell me he was entering rehab, which is why I didn’t believe him. Less than a month later, he died sober.

***

The day after the funeral, my mom, sister and I loaded up the car to go home, toting more than we arrived with: my dad’s vacuum and microwave (“For your dorm room next year,” Grandma insisted), a couple of chosen items of his clothing (me: a Harvard T-shirt; Stephanie: a hoodie; my mom: his socks), a box of framed school portraits of us and knick-knacks from his office. My grandma had gouged his CDs from his car and handed them to me, taped and wrapped boxy in manila paper.
On the drive back, I sat in the front seat, cradling my cell phone against the window, edged with anxiety while JJ complained about the background noise in the car, and my mom proceeded to turn up the radio. There was no real contemplation of what our lives would be now that we were expected to live them. I figured Stephanie and I would go back to school, and I would catch up on the work I had missed. I would learn the dance for drill team in a rush to perform at the upcoming football game, and things would begin to feel somewhat normal again. I couldn’t have known then, my hand cupping the receiver as I desperately tried to quiet the world for JJ’s sake, his angry whine rising in volume every time my mom or sister spoke or we hit a bump in the road, what kind of year I was falling face-first into with every mile: that my teachers weren’t told why I had missed a week, as the principal said they would be, and were overall annoyed with my sudden, oblivious presence; that I wouldn’t perform at the next three football games, even as I teared up on the sweaty field at practice, struggling to remember the steps; that I would begin telling anyone who asked and so many people who didn’t that my dad was dead, and exactly how, tacking on a manic giggle, an attempt to make the listener more comfortable with my story. The manic giggle I would never shake, even once I realized it had the opposite effect; Stephanie with scars slashing up her wrists, and stealing, and getting dragged out of the woods thrice by police; and the letter my mom would write me from her own stint in rehab for alcoholism; and my first job at a movie theatre, where I would make exciting new friends, and I would finally become brave enough to scrape JJ off of my life, like a piece of gum stuck to the bottom of a shoe that never quite un-sticks.
On Senior Night, under the glittering Friday night floodlamps, I would walk across the football field with my mom and Mark, Mark holding a framed picture of my dead father. Mark’s idea, “So that your dad can be here, too,” take part in the occasion meant for graduating seniors and their parents. And me in my sequin-sparkly purple dance uniform, death-sick with embarrassment about the picture Mark held at his side. Eyes focused, shining straight ahead.
ON SEEING

Superstition runs in the blood. Even now I fear showering during a thunderstorm—one of many lingering traces of growing up around my father’s anxiety. When my sister and I were children he didn’t allow us to bathe if it was raining, regardless of the actual presence of lightning, warning that the stray electricity from a strike would climb the metal faucet and fry us in the tub.

I didn’t realize the shower rule was anything but common fact until I mentioned it to friends later in life. These things passed down to us stick, shape reality until pointed out by an impartial party as error or familial quirk—like “uncle” pronounced “onkle” and “neither” pronounced “nee-ther” the way I do; the way my mother does.

I’m fairly certain no one has been struck by lightning in the shower in the last fifty years, since water pipes have been grounded against shock—or so it has been explained to me—but the worry sticks. A myth conjured out of fear is stubborn that way, stained bright red by fear until the fear dies, or a new myth is created to take its place.

***

Fear: another thing I more than likely inherited from my father, biologically or secondhand. My mother has always been cautious, too, but as I’ve witnessed it, her fear is rooted in motherhood; a fear of loss, occasionally irrational, but almost always directed at the safety of her children.

One night I left a friend’s apartment around 8 PM to find my phone flooded with text messages and tearful voicemails from her, saying that something felt wrong, that she’d had an intuitive feeling and was worried something bad had happened to me. My mother often reminds me we have a kind of telepathic connection, things like calling the
other right as the other is thinking of calling. For whatever reason, that time her “feeling” was off completely. I arrived home safely, a little annoyed.

My father carried a blind anxiety, wild and directionless. He shook with it. His hands carried tremors that sometimes grew so strong as to render them temporarily useless—from the fear and from the alcoholism, though I’m not sure which came first. From him I inherited a healthy fear of heights and a predisposition to wasting a bottle of Jack Daniels over a weekend.

It manifests on airplanes: what else but ultimate helplessness is allowing yourself to be suspended inside a metal vessel above the clouds, and what worse way to die than a freefall so sharp and endless? Still, I fly fairly often, and when general statistics fail to comfort, I remind myself of this: my father, over the course of his life, travelled by plane over 3,000 times, and he died on solid ground.

***

There’s superstition, and then there’s precognition. Superstitions are eclectic sets of beliefs that influence behavior, usually in order to avoid something unfortunate: *Step on a crack, break your mother’s back*. *A broken mirror brings seven years of bad luck*. *Pick up a penny only if it’s face-up*.

Precognition is the first cousin of superstition, the estranged spouse of religion, and one step beyond déjà vu: a glimpse of the future. A second sight. A friend in college, an adamant atheist, once told me with certainty that if a person dreams about their teeth falling out, it means someone close to them will die. It happened to him, he said—he woke up the next morning and his aunt had been hit by a car. Studies of both superstition and precognition have been branded pseudoscience, “old wives tales,” but they permeate
our cultural consciousness, forming a small place in the lives of even the most scientifically-minded.

Both involve a conscious or unconscious belief in mystical forces. Both rely on the premise that there are no such things as random events. There are no accidents; the universe is watching, noticing.

***

I almost died before I was born. The doctors told my mother that I didn’t have a heartbeat, said they lost it, as if it had gotten stuck in someone’s jeans pocket and had gone through the wash. Now they would have to remove my body from hers, they said. There was nothing else they could do, and all the tests confirmed their stance.

But my mother argued with them. She refused their carefully practiced words and pseudo-sympathetic expressions; she told them they must have gotten something wrong, to double-check the tests. Somehow she felt that the tiny light inside of her womb was still glowing, breathing, beating.

That tiny light she fought for was me.

So it goes, on one of the hottest days in mid-August, in a west-American desert city, I was born. It was Friday the 13th, a notably unlucky day, though there’s no single agreed-upon origin for the cross-cultural fear the date inspires. It’s been said that it was the day the Knights Templar were arrested and executed in the fourteenth century, or that it marks the last day of King Herold II’s reign over England. It’s been traced to the Christian belief that Judas was the thirteenth person at the Last Supper, but Hindus branded gatherings of thirteen people unlucky before Christ’s time. Norse Vikings attributed thirteen to a myth about the arrival of Loki, the god of mischief, and for
Egyptians the number signified death and bittersweet passage to the afterlife. Regardless of the truth of any of these stories, Friday the 13th signifies one common thing for those who maintain it has power: disruption.

Upon my maternal grandfather’s first time seeing me, he declared that our Irish blood was strong within my tiny veins, and that my favorite color would undoubtedly be green. He had been born on a Friday the 13th as well, in the springtime some seventy years before. When my mother told the story, she whispered it like a prayer. As we celebrated each year at ice-skating rinks, zoos, and amusement parks, her blue eyes followed me.

My favorite color has always been green. I like to think it was my own preference that determined this, and not just a product of being told and retold about my grandfather’s prophecy. But then again, it’s hard to know for sure if we create myths to make sense of ourselves, or if our myths create us. We are all a product of something.

***

An article in Psychology Today reports that about 50% of the general population claims to have had a precognitive dream. An investment group of people who have experienced precognition made more than 2 million in profit by banking on their dreams about the stock market. In 1998, Dr. M.S. Stowell interviewed 51 people who claimed to have precognitive dreams, 37 of which came true throughout the course of the study. One report was from a woman who dreamt of a plane crashing on a highway as she was driving under the overpass. Weeks later, a plane crashed on that same highway.

***
It's a family legend that our Irish ancestors, the O’Learys (from which my grandfather was gifted his middle name), were responsible for starting the Great Chicago Fire. I’ve told this story at so many parties and on first days of class when reaching for a “fun fact” to share about myself. Whether it has any truth to it is debatable—factually, our family descends from Irish O’Learys, and it has been written that the O’Leary family cow knocked over Catherine O’Leary’s lantern one fall night in 1871 and began the blaze. Even this was cast with doubt after the fortieth anniversary of the event, when a former *Chicago Republican* newspaper reporter claimed he and two colleagues had completely fabricated the story. Others have speculated drunkards in the barn; spontaneous combustion; meteor strikes. Still, the original story *feels* true, has always felt true: my lineage carries with it a history of small and large arsons.

***

I was fourteen, a single weekend separating me from my freshman year of high school, when I first encountered the number. It came in the form of a movie at a sleepover, five or six girls huddled in blankets around the television on my friend’s living room floor.

*The Number 23* starred Jim Carey in a dramatic role, as a man who picks up a random book in a book store, written under the pen name “Topsy Kretts,” and upon reading the book realizes that it seems to be about him, all the events in his life connected by the number 23. He begins to have flashbacks about murdering a woman, but doesn’t know if it’s hallucination or memory. He becomes obsessed with the number 23, sees it everywhere, holes up in a hotel room and goes insane. It failed miserably at the box office, and it deserved to. It was a ridiculous movie. I was fourteen.
That night after the movie, we all lay in our sleeping bags in the darkness and giggled as we watched the red glow of the digital clock, added up the numbers, waiting for 23 to appear. Wanting to feel that current of electricity at the back of our necks when it showed up.

It began to show up everywhere for me, and looking for it became a kind of obsessive compulsion. When I entered a room, I would count the objects on the wall to see if they added to some multiple of the number. I would count the tiles on the floor of my classrooms. I would count the letters in my name, in my friends’, and add/subtract/divide the numbers in their birthdates. I would look at the clock, always seeming to catch it right at 2:30, or 3:20, or 1:23. Always right on time.

***

Superstition runs in the blood. The Irish are known for being a superstitious people, and their folk tales say that character traits run in families, that “goodness” and “badness” are inherent in DNA, inescapable. To the ancient Celts, poetry was understood as pulse, the fe’ith na fili’ochta (“vein of poetry”) residing only in poets’ bodies, snaking up the back of the head. And some believed that poetry, a hereditary gift, would flee the bloodline for seven generations if it appeared in a daughter rather than a son.

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*Apophenia*, a term coined by German psychiatrist Klaus Conrad, refers to the human tendency to interpret random occurrences as meaningful patterns. This is where belief in superstition comes from: say you opened an umbrella inside twice, and on both of those days, you slipped and fell in the rain. Say you picked up a penny off the
sidewalk, and in the next moment, got a phone call that you had been accepted to medical school.

Because only so many numbers exist, repetitions are inevitable. People remember seeing the number they give meaning to, and forget seeing other numbers. So much can be attributed to coincidence: if 3 billion people fly every year, and 500 million of those have a dream about a plane crashing, it is likely that over the course of the year, at least one of those people will end up on a plane that crashes (according to The Guardian, there are around 80 plane accidents per year, while 3.4 million flights land safely). Those who dreamed about plane crashes and landed safely will likely never think of it again; for those who crashed and anyone who knew them, the fact of their incidental dream will always linger.

***

The 23 enigma theorizes that all events are connected to and by the number 23, including life itself: The ovule and sperm contributed from each parent at conception consist of 23 chromosomes each.

As I write this, the city bus next to the coffee shop I’m sitting in services route 23.

The physical Biorhythm, devised by Wilhelm Fleiss, a student of Sigmund Freud in the late 19th century, consists of a cycle of 23 days. Though Biorhythmic is largely considered pseudoscience now, the first book of academic research on the subject was published in Germany in 1923.

William Shakespeare was born on April 23, 1564, and died April 23, 1616. His first folio of work appeared in the year 1623. When he was age 46 (23 doubled) the first
King James Bible was published. In Psalm 46, the 46th word from the beginning of the poem is “shake” and the 46th word back from the end is “spear.”

***

In an interview with TIME Magazine, former Harvard professor Diane Hennacy Powell said, “One of the things we know is that [precognition] runs in families. If you talk to psychics, they’ll tell you there’s a family history of it. Though we haven’t found it, there’s likely a gene for it…Of course, that’s not true of all dreams. Some dreams actually are tapping into some other time and place, and there’s real information in them. Others are just imagination.”

***

When my parents were first married and living in Massachusetts, my mother had a troubling dream:

She was in the front seat of a car driven by a faceless driver. The car pulled down a long dirt road and drove up to a farm. When they stopped, my mother got out, and the driver opened the back passenger’s side door to help an old woman out of the car. The woman wore a burly fur coat, her salt and pepper hair pinned up beside her ears. As the faceless drivers, now multiplied into many, carried the woman across the farm to bury her, my mother screamed and beat them, trying to rescue the woman from burial, as she was still very much alive.

She woke the next morning and told my father her dream, and he immediately called his sister, my aunt; apparently, the old woman in the dream was an exact description of his grandmother, who died before my parents met, who refused to sit
anywhere in a car but the back passenger’s side seat, and whose greatest fear was being buried alive.

***

The 23rd letter of the alphabet, W, has 2 points facing down and 3 facing upwards. There are exactly 2,300 stones composing the Great Pyramid in Cairo. The Earth is tilted on its axis at 23.5 degrees. (2+3 =5.) In Islam, the Qur’an was revealed to Mohammad in 23 days. The most famous Christian Psalm is Psalm 23: Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...

***

When I traveled to Ireland at seventeen, I had just decided I was going to be a writer, though I had been one all my life; pursuing it as a career path was a choice, but the act of writing was not. For as long as I can remember, writing has been embedded in who I am as a person, compulsory, as if words bleed from my body.

I visited Blarney Castle on a tour and stood in line to lean backwards, over the edge, and kiss the Blarney Stone, as is tradition. There was a man to hold travelers’ legs and make sure no one slipped and fell to their deaths. It wasn’t easy; there are iron bars to grasp, a bend of spine along a rocky slope, and an outstretch of neck over the airy void to make the kiss happen. When it was my turn, I laid back and froze. The man was grasping my legs, the line was waiting, and I couldn’t do what I had come to do, but I couldn’t let myself get up without touching it somehow, either. I compromised, carefully stretching out my right hand and placing it flush with the stone.
Later, I joked with the Australian women I had met on my trip that it actually seemed fitting; the legend was that those who kissed the stone would gain oral eloquence, and since I was a writer, and had touched it with my writing hand, maybe that gift of language would come out on the page instead.

***

A series of terrorist attacks destroyed the World Trade Center in New York City and killed over 3,000 people on September 11, 2001. (9+11+2+0+0+1=23)
The Titanic sank the morning of April 15th, 1912. (4 + 1 + 5 + 1 + 9 + 1 + 2 = 23)
The Mayans believed the world would end on December 23, 2012. (20+1+2= 23)
The first telegraph message sent was a Bible verse from Numbers 23:23: What hath God wrought?

The number 23 represents the goddess Eris, Greek goddess of discord and chaos—her name only one letter off from mine.

My initials, ES, if flipped backwards, or written down and held in front of a mirror, resemble a 2 and 3.

My father was murdered on August 23, 2009.

***

It’s called confirmation bias: when we start looking for something we tend to find it. I don’t remember the times something even mildly significant happened and the number 23 wasn’t in sight, even after counting all the objects in the room or adding and dividing the numbers that make up the time and date three different ways. I don’t remember the dreams that never came true, dreams about tornados and teeth falling out that never resulted in real-life chaos. But I remember the ones that did, and they take root,
shaping the story like embankments constructed to keep rivers from running wild—from washing whole towns, whole lives away.

***

On a cold October morning in 1966, a landslide tore through the small village of Aberfan, Wales. Within minutes, a schoolhouse was buried in a flurry of black sludge, the avalanche of rock and soil crushing and killing 116 children and 28 adults.

In the aftermath of the disaster, psychiatrist John Barker, who lived outside of Aberfan, received almost a hundred letters from people claiming they had precognitive dreams predicting the tragic landslide. A man from north England saw the word ABERFAN spelled out over and over behind his eyes; a woman in Brighton dreamt of a child walking towards her with a black mass looming behind him; another woman’s dream featured coal hurtling down a mountain towards a schoolhouse, and a little boy being pulled from the wreckage—a boy she would later recognize on television as a local station aired coverage of the rescue efforts. But the most famous and troubling premonition of the Aberfan disaster came in a letter written by the parents of a ten-year-old girl.

The letter claimed their daughter, Eryl Mai, woke one morning, came downstairs and said, “Mummy, I’m not afraid to die.”

When her mother asked why she was being so morbid, the girl relayed a dream she had the night before: her schoolhouse had been flattened by “something black.” She told her mom she was not afraid to die because she would be with her friends, Peter and June.
The next day, Eryl Mai went to school, where she was killed in the landslide. The girl was buried along with the other victims in a communal grave, laid between her schoolmates, Peter and June.

***

My youngest sister, Trinity, was so named because she is the third child of both my mother and my stepfather (and though they deny it, an inspiration for the name could be the heroine of *The Matrix* trilogy, which they watched nightly during my mom’s pregnancy). Her birth acted as a hinge between two families. With two half-siblings on each side and her own name meaning “three” between them, my sister’s life has an ironic symmetry with the number 23. Though my stepbrother and stepsister were raised by their grandparents, our full family consists of 5 siblings—2 in one home, 3 in another. It’s a reach, I know. We find these things because we are looking for them. And still a reach, maybe, when in an unrelated conversation my mother pointed out that Trinity will graduate from high school in the year 2023.

***

What I’m getting at is this: the summer she turned four, Trinity had a dream she doesn’t remember now. If events had unfolded differently—if no one had been in the room when she woke from her nap, if he had died the following year instead of just a handful of weeks later, had died in some other way—if we were a skeptical people instead of a family willfully embedded in a paradigm of superstition, with a history of inexplicable dreams and the eagerness to make meaning of them afterwards—I wouldn’t be telling this story.
My mom was using the computer at the desk next to the bed, and I was on the
couch feet away, on the other side of an open door. Trinity stirred and sat up in bed, and
began talking about the dream she had.

“Wait, slow down. What happened?” my mom said.

“Mr. Steve sat down in the middle of the circle,” she said, matter-of-factly, “and
then, behind him, a little bitty—” her fingers made tiny pinches of the air to demonstrate,
“and BOOM! Now he’s dead.”

“That’s creepy,” my mom said. “It was just a bad dream, though.”

“No, for real!” she insisted “BOOM! Mr. Steve’s dead.”

“Look, I’ll call him, you can talk to him yourself and he’ll tell you he’s fine,” she
began to dial the phone.

“I don’t want to talk to a ghost!” she squealed. Everything seems silly when a
toddler says it with conviction.

He answered the phone, and my mom told him the story. He laughed over the
speaker.

“Tell Trin I’m just fine,” he said.

“See?” my mom said.

Trinity didn’t seem sure. A few minutes passed and she lost interest. She left the
bed for the kitchen, to climb atop the counter and reach for the bucket of candy on top of
the refrigerator, as she was prone to do.

And no one thought of it again, until weeks later, when my dad sat down on a
couch in the center of a room circularly-arranged. And boom.

***
The next day, we drove, because my father had died. There would be a funeral, and we would attend it. Somewhere in the twelve hours from Texas to Alabama, my sister Stephanie asleep in the back, I told my mom, “See, I told you, there is something to this 23 thing.”

She knew about my casual obsession, sparked a couple of years before by that shitty Jim Carey movie. She laughed and shrugged it off, “Yeah, whatever.”

At that exact moment, an eighteen wheeler merged in front of us. Painted on the back of the trailer: a huge, red, number 23.

***

Remember: I’m not telling you the truth. I’m telling you what I saw.

***

Humans take coincidences and make stories of them, shape them, create myths that inform how we understand our place in this vast and unsettling world. Even on the days I am most rational, there is a space in the back of my mind where I cradle these supernatural explanations, tentatively trust them even as I label them nonsense.

A 1978 Gallup poll found that 37% of Americans surveyed believed in precognition. In 2007, a similar poll found that women were more prone to superstitious beliefs than men. A 2013 study discovered that people who felt in less control of their lives were far more likely to believe in precognition and superstition, possibly as a psychological coping mechanism. Even without my father’s death, and my mother’s superstitious sensibilities, I fall into all of these categories. I am American, a woman, and very, very afraid.
Characters:
SHE, 16 years old.
SISTER, 13 years old.
BABY SISTER, 4 years old.
MARK, The older girls’ stepfather.
MOM, Their mother.
IT, An event. A wound unraveling.

Time/Setting:
August 23, 2009.
A two-story gray brick house in a rural North Texas suburb. The sky inked navy blue, out of frame. The night before the start of the school year. The faint hum of fear rushing through the pipes in the walls and the distant realization that IT was meant to happen, that IT has happened before, that IT is happening all the time, over and over, existing outside of time and story.

Note:
It is important that the characters do not know what is about to follow. That they don’t see their lives blooming into an open grave. The audience should remain unseen, immaterial, silent.

(This is where we tell ourselves the lights fade in. Cheap, yellow-tinted ceiling lamp. Lime green bedroom walls coated in teenage artifacts. SHE and SISTER spent the day with MOM shopping for school clothes, which is what they were doing when IT happened, though they don’t know it yet. They didn’t feel anything when IT happened, not like in the movies where something bad happens and someone elsewhere just knows. Nothing. They had been shopping, so maybe there were plastic bags on SHE’s bedroom floor. Maybe SHE had a first-day-of-school outfit hanging on her closet door, raspberry lace over pale satin and new blue jeans. The next day, SHE would begin her senior year of high school.

SHE just finished a shower, and SHE is blow-drying her wet hair, looking into a sequined lime green mirror mounted on the wall next to the bedroom door.)
(On the other side of the door, something less like a knock and more like a collapse of fists.)

(SHE turns off the blow-dryer and opens the door. SHE is still holding a hairbrush.)

SHE. What?

(SISTER is crying, stumbling around in emotional chaos. BABY SISTER stands next to her, worried but slightly amused. A large dog thunders up and then back down the carpeted stairs.)

SISTER. I think
I think Dad killed himself.
Mom’s on the phone
with Aunt Deb and
she’s crying
I think
he might have killed
himself.

SHE. I’m sure
it’s fine. I don’t think he would
do that. Calm down.
It’s probably
something else.

BABY SISTER. (Sort of smiles, in the way someone does when they know it’s not appropriate.)
Everybody
is freaking out! Mom is in
the garage
freaking out.

SHE. (Sort of smiles in the same way. Sort of maybe laughs.)
It’s fine. Go
downstairs. I’ll come down
soon.

(SHE closes the door and resumes blow-drying her hair. SHE thinks SISTER is
overreacting, doesn’t believe anything extreme actually happened. But as SHE is looking
at herself in the mirror, there is a flicker of a moment where SHE can project an image of
her life in a world where her father is dead, was dying, has died. Looking in the mirror, a
strange, violet deja-vu washes over her, and she suddenly feels as if IT was always meant
to happen this way. As if SHE’s existence up to this point was a joke and IT was the
lurking punchline SHE had forgotten was coming. SHE still does not truly think anything
is wrong. SHE finishes blow-drying her hair, leaves her bedroom, and goes downstairs.)

(The living room is warmly lit by two lamps on either side of the brown couch. The
attached kitchen is dark. MARK is standing in the kitchen, by the door to the garage.)

SHE. What
is going on?

MARK. (rubs his face with one hand, like he is trying to wipe away years.)
I think
your mother
should tell you. I think she
should talk to you.

SHE. (insistent)
I want
you to tell me.

(The door to the garage opens, spilling gray light. MOM steps inside the house. She is
holding a cell phone, or maybe it’s in her pocket. Maybe she left it in the garage. Her
face is red and oily with rivers of mascara. Tears stream over freckled skin and pool in
her crow’s feet.)

MOM. (raw-voiced)
That was
your Aunt Deb on the phone. She said your father she said Pam shot your father today around four-o-clock. She killed him. Your dad died. I’m sorry, I’m so so sorry.

(SISTER howls and collapses on the stairs. MOM begins to cry and rushes towards her, covering her daughter’s body in a tight embrace. They sob together on the stairwell.)

(SHE sits between MARK and BABY SISTER on the couch.)

MARK. Jesus, I’m so sorry this happened to you girls. Can’t even believe something like this. I don’t know what to say.

BABY SISTER. That’s sad. Mr. Steve died. Your dad.

SHE. Yeah.

BABY SISTER. You’re
not sad though,
like Mom and Sister.
Not sad
like them.

SHE. I don’t
know.

(SHE stands up, blank faced, and steps over MOM and SISTER on the stairs. SHE walks upstairs, and the sound of a terrible wind rises from nowhere as SHE turns the corner and enters her room. SHE shuts the door. Lights out. End of play.)
Retracing
“It’s not that nobody ever gets away. It’s that you carry it with you…You replay them to keep their memory alive. It feels worthwhile because it is.”

–John Darnielle, *Universal Harvester*

“The whole tragic history of our family comes down to this: none of us knew how to save ourselves.”

–Heather Young, *The Lost Girls*
When I was a child teased  
for my name, my mother  
said to tell them Slaughter

was a river running Cherokee, the irony  
of a family tree whose roots couldn’t be  
more Anglican, the name a word meaning  
run, a warning against pale faces

like mine, who would snuff them out  
with smallpox, then claim stock in their blood.  
My family was forged by these kinds

of delicate arsons. When my mother  
was a teen her boyfriend drove drunk  
and shattered the girl in the passenger’s seat.

And that was the first time I heard the word  
manslaughter. And did not think this man  
was my almost-father, did not think of my father,  
slaughtered onto a living room carpet. And I wonder

which of these stories are mine to tell.
A LETTER TO DAD

There are some things you never knew about me. I got my first kiss in seventh grade, on the basketball court next to the church. His name was Logan, and it was innocent, his lips landing just to the left, barely grazing mine.

When you met my friends my freshman year of high school, and they called you “Steve the Father,” you thought it was funny. At the time, to me, it represented my resentment of how straight-laced you were, how robotic with your suits and carefully tucked polo shirts. “Steve the Father.” I still have you under that name in my phone, though it hasn’t flashed across the screen in years. I’m sorry.

I didn’t cry at your funeral. I was afraid of your lifeless body, the way they combed your hair all wrong and Grandma had to fix it. Everything smelled like rotting flowers. I was worried about missing the first week of my senior year, and not getting my driver’s license when I had planned to. I’m sorry. A few weeks later when I was back home, I cried in my closet clutching a watch, a baseball cap, and a few CDs: all that was left of you. Mom wore your old socks for weeks, and wouldn’t take them off. She said they reminded her of when you were married, all those times she had washed and folded them.

I visited Grandma in Chicago last month, and she told me stories about when you were a baby, how you had sandy blond hair and you loved your first dog, which was a pug named Pogo. How you would sit on the floor to uncurl his springy tail, and how you cried when Grandma gave him away, because Aunt Deb was allergic. I missed you then. Grandma has a new house now, and she had to invite the neighbor over to help her hang her paintings. She misses you too.
I’m in college now, and I’ve traveled some. I think you’d be proud of me for that. I have tattoos and I want to become a writer. I don’t think you’d like that, but I hope you’d be proud of the person I’m becoming. I worry that you wouldn’t. I think you would still try.

I am beginning to forget the details: how you threw your head back when you laughed with your thick Chicago accent, the old green couches in your living room, the way your hands shook late at night as you removed your glasses and placed them next to the computer. I don’t think of you as a ghost, just as someone who existed once and is now unreachable. I still have dreams where you’ve been on a secret mission for the CIA, only pretending to be dead all this time. I felt you with me for a short while, that week afterwards, in my car, but mostly it just seems like you’re gone. I have a new boyfriend and he laughs like you. I will try harder not to forget the little things.

When I moved away, as I was packing up my room, I found a picture of us at the beach. I must have been only four or five, and it must have been cold, because I was wearing your oversized sweater, which blended into the waves as we walked shore-bound, your hand on my back to keep me from falling under the tide. Since then I have moved seven times, reducing my entire life to a series of cardboard boxes, and I can’t find the picture. If you know where it is, please help me find it, because I don’t know where it’s gone, and I miss it more every day.
RETRACING THEIR STEPS

My dad has been dead for four years, and now I find myself living in the same city where my parents met and fell in love. Everywhere I go is like stepping on a grave. Here are the apartments you lived in, just two streets over from mine. Here is the library you liked to study in, your hands moving over the dark wooden surfaces for hours. My mother told me the summer before I came here that when she was in college, she used to have a reoccurring nightmare about being shot in front of the library building. I was in my kitchen cleaning paint off the countertop, the phone laying in the crook of my neck as I spoke to her two hundred miles away.

You were my age when you lived here and now your life is over, and my mother has a new husband now. At night she sits and smokes cigarettes in a broken chair in the garage and watches preachers on television.

She is worried about me and she tells me never to go to the library.

“Just be careful,” she says. “It didn’t come true for me while I was there, so it might come true for you. Maybe it was a warning.”

“You can’t be serious,” I laugh into the receiver. My mother is very superstitious. I am not superstitious, but now I avoid the library anyway. Just in case.

***

The University of North Texas was the last place I ever wanted to end up. Three generations of my family’s footsteps silently line the walkways of this campus: My great grandmother, who married at fourteen and had two children before she even learned how to boil water on the stove; my grandmother, who rented a room in a boarding house on Fry Street after the second World War; my mother, who majored in Real Estate back in
the 80’s when the economy was still growing and hopeful, who met my father at a party in Clark Hall, who was maybe the reason I had avoided UNT like the plague.

I wanted to create my own history, be more adventurous (a word that in my youth was synonymous with “better”). I wanted an escape from the life I felt closing in, one identical to that of my mother which consisted of being married at twenty one, and returning fifteen years later, divorced and empty-handed in a Honda Odyssey stuffed with suitcases, two children in tow.

The smothering simplicity of the small town I grew up in only increased my restlessness. But, after two failed attempts at finding some sense of belonging at two separate universities, I turned to what seemed like the last viable option. Standing on the campus I had so ardently avoided, I couldn’t help feeling lost to the stories of time spent here previous to me, wondering what I was supposed to make of the time still ahead.

***

A boy in my Statistics class asks me on a date. He is tall and has brown hair that falls in his eyes when he leans down to write his number across the top of my lecture notes. We meet two nights later, at a coffee shop I vaguely remember going to in high school, after I drove to Denton with a friend who wanted to sneak into a bar, and we failed miserably. The walls are lined with wooden knickknacks and local art, and we sit at a booth table where the cushion foam spills out from lining of my seat. Over the speakers, a pop-punk song I loved years ago plays, and he knows all the words. He can name the next song three seconds into the intro. We talk about music with a hint of nostalgia in our voices, and he tells me that his first concert was to see the same band I had a poster of above my bed when I was fourteen.
We talk about Statistics, but not in the way I want to. I want to ask, *What is the probability that you will marry me, divorce me and die before the age of fifty?* and *Can we ever really know if we’re headed for exponential growth or for decay?* Instead, I don’t talk much at all. I sit in the warmth of the broken booth seat and let him tell me about the trees where he grew up, about his mother and father who backpacked across Scotland for their honeymoon and ended up staying until he was born a year later. He tells me about his sister, four years younger, who found a dying rabbit underneath their porch, how she nursed it back to life and named it Roger. I let him talk because I like the passionate waning and waxing of his voice, like the rise and fall of waves pulling sand from the shore. I don’t want to speak the thought that’s been looming over me since the start of the semester: that any boy I meet here will end up like my father, as dust in a jar on someone else’s cabinet shelf.

***

“How did you know?” I asked my mother over the phone. It was that same night she told me to avoid the library, that same long summer characterized by indecision and the eternal scrubbing of paint from surfaces.

“How did I know your dad was right for me? I just knew. It was a feeling, the song that played when he asked me to dance: Journey’s ‘Faithfully.’ It was the start of the semester. I had just turned eighteen, and your dad was a senior. He asked me to dance, and everything felt perfect in that moment—”

Stephanie picks up a phone somewhere else in the house and comes on the line, “Mom and Dad slept together on the first night they met!”

“Eewww…” I say, obligatorily.
“I know, right?” My sister laughs.

“Come on,” said my mom, “You weren’t there. You don’t know what it was like, the air between us. It was electric.”

***

When I finally tell him The Story we are sitting in his apartment. His roommate has just finished cooking, and the apartment smells of cinnamon. I tell him:

“When I was sixteen, the night before my senior year of high school // I went downstairs and my sister was crying and my mom told me // my dad’s new wife of two months had killed him because he asked her for a divorce. // He sat down on the couch to write her a check as severance // and she shot him in the back of the head with a revolver.”

As it falls out of my mouth I wonder if he can tell that it’s been rehearsed, that the timing of each word made a place for itself in the thousand times I’ve had to tell this story in the four years since it happened. I wonder if he could possibly know that when you tell it over and over, it starts to sound like lines from a play, like something that happened to someone else a very long time ago. That it becomes an explanation rather than an event.

I don’t tell him about the greasy rivers of mascara that ran down my mother’s face as she and my sister sobbed together on the stairs, and I stepped over them to walk quietly to my room. I don’t tell him that the first thought that came to my mind was a selfish one: But I was supposed to get my driver’s license tomorrow, or that grief smells like rotting flowers, or that the funeral home combed his hair wrong and my grandmother had to fix it. I don’t tell him that later, when we went through his belongings, my mother
put on an old pair of his socks and didn’t take them off for weeks (she said they reminded
her of when they were married, all the times she had washed and folded them).

My father was cremated, and the night before we left town I woke up and saw my
mother in the next room, sleeping on the floor next to the urn that held his ashes.

The night that I tell him, after he falls asleep, I run my fingers across his body and
wonder which parts I’ll miss the most in twenty years. Which ones I’d cross the country
to sleep next to.

***

I once asked my mother, “Did you ever date anyone besides Dad when you were
in college?”

“Oh yes,” she said. “In my senior year your father and I broke up, and he moved
to Boston for a job. I came back to find all my stuff in garbage bags on the front step. It
was really upsetting. A few months later, I dated this man in his forties. I was probably
twenty-one at the time. He took me to nice restaurants, and he never tried to get me to
meet his kids, which I was glad about. But he always wanted me to wear hats. We would
be at the mall or window shopping somewhere, and he would pick up a hat and say, ‘Try
it on!’ and have me model it for him. I tried to tell him I don’t look good in hats, but he
would always say, ‘Oh no, you look beautiful. I’m going to buy it for you.’ I’ve never
been a hat person.

Then, on my last day of college, your dad showed up at my door out of nowhere. I
hadn’t spoken to him in months, and he said, ‘Will you go somewhere with me, please?’
and that day he proposed to me.”
“I can’t believe you said yes!” I said. “You broke up and all the sudden he randomly showed up and asked you to marry him? That sounds crazy.”

“Well,” she said, “he had been away for a long time, but I never felt anything for anyone else like I did for your father. Also, he never asked me to wear a hat.”

***

On a Tuesday afternoon my roommate and I skip class and take a road trip two hours north, to a park in Oklahoma called Turner Falls.

“You’re going to love it,” she says, “plus, no one even goes this time of year.” It’s November, which in Texas still feels like summer dimming and fading into fall. We make a point of stopping at the Welcome to Oklahoma sign to take pictures, even though we live only an hour from the state line. Back on the road, I snap pictures of everything through my sunglasses, pretending that this is more than just a day trip, that we’re charting our escape across the country.

As we approach Turner Falls, the car follows a winding road into the mountains, where red paintbrush flowers grow off to the sides. After we pay admission at the gate, we walk to where, around a corner, the stone remains of a castle are perched on a hill. We climb the stone steps, lamenting our unfortunate choice of footwear, and walk through the abandoned castle. A sign further down the hill lets us know the castle was built in the early 1900’s, as a summer home for a doctor and his family. I wander from room to room, running my fingers over the names carved in the wooden doors and painted in graffiti over the fireplace.

After we explore the castle, we climb back down the trail of steps and walk further into the park, to a spot near the woods where a waterfall fills into a swimming
pond. We’ve been in the park all day and haven’t seen any other visitors, so we decide to do something risky—we strip off our clothes and leave them on the white sandy shore as, giggling and apprehensive, we glide our bodies into the water. It’s a sunny day, but the water is clear and cold, and even as my skin reacts in chills it’s a total freedom I’ve never felt before; being naked and swimming underneath a waterfall in public in the middle of the day.

On the drive home my mom calls, and I tell her about our adventure.

“Can you believe it?” I say, ecstatic. “It was awesome. And we didn’t even get caught!”

“You’re lucky you didn’t get arrested,” my mother says, but I can hear her smiling through the receiver. “Where was this at?”

“It’s this place in Oklahoma called Turner Falls. They have these amazing castle ruins, and caves out in the woods…”

“I know where Turner Falls is,” she says. “Didn’t I ever tell you? That’s where your dad proposed to me. I think it was beside a waterfall….”

***

It took years after my father’s death to realize that I barely knew him. Sure, I saw him consistently for at least the first decade of my life, ran to hug him at night when he came home from work. But I never knew who he was as a person. I’m learning that now, more than ever, living in the city he lived in at my age, walking around and seeing the ghost of his youth in everything.

Here is the bar you spent weekends in, sitting at the pine table in the corner with my mother and a group of friends. Here is Earl’s Liquor, where you worked all through
college. It remained the same for all these years, until one day I drove past and saw that it had become a 7-11.

After he came home from work, my father liked to spread out a bath towel and sit on the floor, while he cracked peanuts between his teeth and watched the racecars on TV wind themselves around the asphalt track. This is what he was doing when the news announced that Princess Diana died, which is something I clearly remember, however irrelevant. Sometimes he would let me sit in his lap, and as we watched the cars drive on an endless loop, he’d say, “If you were a racecar, you’d be the number one, because you were my first born and you’ll always be my number one.”

These days, I sit on the floor in my living room, peeling sunflower seeds and watching reruns of The Office. If I’m anything like my dad, this small detail has given me more insight into who he was than I’ve gotten from going to the same university he did. Different rituals, meaning the same thing: I am an island.
SILENT NIGHT

My littlest sister says, “Read the one I like.”

“Which one?” I say.

“You know: ‘I carry your heart, I carry it in my heart.’” She recites it fast, like a chant.

“Okay,” I begin, “I carry your heart, I carry it in my heart. I am never without it…”

My littlest sister closes her eyes and listens. We are laying in our parents’ big bed, and the center of it sags with age. There are a few gritty grains of sand in the sheets, dragged in from the backyard on the paws of our dogs.

My sister is seven, and she smells like shampoo, her long blond hair wet against the tanned skin of her cheek. A perpetual summer baby. I’ve tried to read her children’s poems, carefully pulled from Alice in Wonderland or Where the Sidewalk Ends, but she still likes e. e. cummings best.

When I’m done reading, she opens her eyes. “Are you going to get married and have a baby?”

“Maybe, when I’m a lot older.”

“I don’t think I ever want to have a baby,” she says.

“That’s okay,” I tell her. “You don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

I add, “Did you know that if I ever have kids, you’ll be their aunt? They’ll call you ‘Aunt Trinity’.”
Her brown eyes go wide. “An ant?! If I’ve got to be somebody, I’m going to be a
turkey! They can call me ‘Turkey Trinity,’ or ‘Turkey Trin’,” she says, with more than a
small dose of silliness.

I almost fall off the bed laughing.

“Annnnddd…” she smiles mischievously, “if I play a trick on them, then they can
call me ‘Tricky Trin’.”

When I was young, every night my mother climbed into bed with me, rubbed my
back and sang me to sleep with “Silent Night.” I always thought she was singing, sleep in
heavenly peas, and I imagined a sky full of round, green peas, bouncing gracefully from
one to the next.

After the divorce, my mom started smoking and teaching at a daycare, from
which she would come home hoarse after spending eleven-hour shifts trying to corral
toddlers. Now when she tries to carry a tune, it comes out sounding strangled. Trinity has
never known our mom to sing. I ask her about “Silent Night,” but she does not know the
words.
A THING THAT SHOULD BE BEAUTIFUL

“There is a temptation to eulogize that which I do not understand and to think of a sister as a thing that should be beautiful. A thing that does not bleed at night. Whose horrors are lesser than or equal to my own. As if I could know my own.”
—Sister, Alicia Jo Rabins

1. I was named for roots and nostalgia, a country whose tongue is knife and earth. My sister’s name is bread broken and given, first my father’s and then my mother’s. Body and blood.

2. Our mother taught us songs to spell our names. They sounded suspiciously like jingles from cereal commercials.

3. You called me Sissy. I called you Bissy. We caught frogs in Grandma’s back yard and named them after each other.

4. You were small and loud and bright, like a city filtered through a keyhole.

5. On the afternoon of my sister’s wedding, we are drinking mimosas from paper cups in a stranger’s kitchen. In an hour, she will get married in a stranger’s living room. The doors and shutters are closed, and bodies are rustling outside. She is wearing white. My dress is black lace.

6. When she went to rehab, we found her toy box filled with cans of Budweiser and Four Loco, her backpack stuffed with aluminum and glass. Behind her dresser: eyeshadows stolen from Sephora, and a $1200 camera stolen from my mother.

7. I was sitting in my car in the Wendy’s parking lot when she called and told me she was pregnant. She was freshly eighteen and dating her boyfriend for three months. I said: Holy shit, Jesus Christ. She said: I’m going to keep it. We hung up the phone and I cried.
8. When she came back from rehab, her hair was short and in her face was a gnarled swamp, the kind I’ve only seen in the eyes of evangelicals. She painted her walls blue and my mom bought her brand new furniture. I locked my bedroom door at night.

9. At our father’s funeral we made everyone leave the room. We dared each other to inch closer to the casket, into the yellow light.

10. Remember when we played house? When you were “Ma’am” and I was “Sir” and dolls were children? When the rooster crowed we’d sit up from the carpet, wipe the fake sleep from the corners of our eyelids? And the rooster sounded like a villain in the basement of a haunted mansion?

11. Items at my sister’s wedding: Three Christmas trees. Two strings of pearls my mother wore at her wedding. A picture of my dead father on the fireplace mantle.

12. You were always the beautiful one.

13. In a dirty Dollar General, my sister tells me the baby’s name will be Gracelyn, and for days afterwards, my heart echoes: *Gracie*.

14. When we were young I promised you that once older and able, I would buy you a kitten. Now I have a cat, and you have two bloodhounds. You have a daughter, and I have only these stories.

15. When she was pregnant, I met her for lunch to convince her that she shouldn’t disown our mother. She said our mom was weak, she didn’t trust her with her child, didn’t care. In the restaurant bathroom, she lifted her shirt and said: Feel, the baby’s kicking.

16. My father called her the son he always wanted.
17. When my niece was born, my mom only saw her granddaughter through the pictures on my phone. The neighbor’s wife had a baby girl and my mother cried every day.

18. The story goes: when you were a toddler you bit me so hard and often you caused welts, drew blood. Mom took us to the doctor, and the doctor said you would only learn to stop if I bit you back. I began to cry and said: But I could never hurt my little sister.

19. The story goes: I told you that you would fly if you jumped from the top of the swing-set, but you fell and broke your arm. When I saw the cast, glorious purple and waterproof, I practiced jumping from the fence every day.

20. You were always the beautiful one and you knew it.

21. Stephanie is a shame that lives in my blood, like my father; the shame of family members awful and loved and not loved well enough. The difference is in breath, in pulse. The difference is that she’s alive, and there is no eulogy for the living.

22. My sister is an item on a to-do list, a trip to the post office, a story still moving, dancing, shifting like smoke.

23. I call you to ask if you remember what we called the sticks we used to beat our father with when he screamed at our mother, and you were too young, you don’t remember, but I know it’s not your fault.
My first car was a 1981 Chevy pickup truck. Mark came to my room and shook me awake, and as I shrugged off blankets and rubbed the sleep from my eyes, he dragged me downstairs, through the carpeted garage, into the front yard. Hazy and truly half-asleep, I didn’t realize what I was doing when I felt the prickle of warm night air on my skin and the sandpaper burn of concrete on the soles of my feet. Standing in the driveway in my pajamas, I barely registered what was in front of me: the truck, its metallic blue shell glistening under the streetlights, next to my parents’ wide conspiring smiles. It was May, four months before my sixteenth birthday.

We took it for a test drive around the neighborhood. I sat in the passenger’s seat, barefoot, childishy amazed at every blaring vrrroom and groan of the engine. The truck’s asthmatic breath stuttered through my body as Mark explained:

“There are some things on it that need fixin’ up. I’ve got a buddy who knows about cars and he said he’d help us do it. Are you gonna help?”

I nodded, yes. Of course.

“I figured it would be something we could do together this summer,” he said. “Do you like the truck?”

I didn’t know how to possibly voice the extent of the “YES” that rang out inside of me, so I just said, “It’s perfect.” And it was.

When we got back to the house, I didn’t slam the heavy door hard enough while getting out. He said, “Here, I’ll show you how to do it. You’ve got to bump it closed, like this—” and rammed the side of his hip against the passenger’s side door. There was a
subtle popping noise, like the sheets of aluminum they use backstage during plays to create sounds of thunder, and my mother gasped in horror at the large dent his body had made. I laughed. “It gives it character!” I said, and Mark agreed. I named the truck “Dartanian.”

That first summer we propped Dartanian’s metal hood open, took the whole engine apart and rebuilt it, inside out. Mark’s friend, Brad, helped us. Brad was fair-skinned and fair-haired, in the late stages of balding, and wore a slate-colored mechanic’s uniform with his name sewn in cursive over the breast, just like in the movies. We parked the truck in the side yard of his double-wide white-paneled trailer, alongside a picnic table, a rusted yellow tractor, and some portion of what seemed to be a go-cart. Plastic toys were strewn out in the grass like buoys, though if he had any children, I never saw them.

We painted and sawed down rusted parts I still don’t know the name of, replacing crumbling black fixtures with shiny new chrome. In our down time, we rode in Brad’s air conditioned Tahoe the three miles to the nearest Auto-Zone to pick up valves and sprockets, clean belts and filters that would replace Dartanian’s decaying innards and bring renewed life to the thirty-year-old truck. Brad rarely spoke except to ask if we’d like sweet tea, or to correct my stepdad’s amateur mechanical knowledge, and when he did speak it was always softly. He never seemed to mind that there was a teenage girl and an ocean of bad spark plugs littering his yard for two months straight. When our work was finished, grease stains splattering our calloused hands and sunburnt faces, I revved
the engine and it roared back, the rumble of victory reverberating off the trees, the grass, the gravel underfoot.

3

Dartanian was my liberation, my salvation, my time machine. A metal ship with the name of an explorer, he and I traveled the seas of that small Texas town, the rubber petal pressed against the floorboard with a blazing restlessness. All the world belonged to me, as long as it had a paved road running through it. Those were the days when, after school let out, we sped past glossy suburban streets, out into the winding back roads, the windows cranked down by hand, the autumn wind a cyclone through my hair as I drove my best friend Rachel home, taking the long way. The engine bellowed, cranking out generous speed with labored breath. We turned the radio up over the blaring pound of the wheels, thunderous joyful music echoing around us in the metal cab like a swirling baptism of sound, and lo, for the first time in our short and frustrating lives we were well and truly free.

4

By the second summer, it seemed something was always breaking. Numerous times I had stopped at the gas station for a soda, only to find that the engine wouldn’t start again, or been driving Rachel home and both of us ending up with no choice but to push Dartanian up the street, and wait inside until Mark or a tow-truck came to our rescue. It had no air conditioning, and I couldn’t drive it for long distances without getting a sunburn across the top of my thighs.
One month the water pump broke and the engine overheated, leaving me in the middle of the street at 2 a.m. with smoke billowing up from under the hood. The next month it was the starter, the one after that the fly belt. (An old man with overalls and a Santa beard fixed that one for me, with a crowbar he just happened to have handy.) Once, the fuel line got jammed, and I was cursing and pressing sharply on the pedal the whole drive, feeling out every subtle vibration of the engine like an art, praying and finagling and beating the hell out of the dashboard, hoping it wouldn’t leave me stranded on the highway.

My friends began to refer to it as “the money pit,” or say that I should sell it. My mom, exasperated by the constant mechanical problems, offered, “You know, they’re still doing that ‘Cash for Clonkers’ thing for another week. Maybe it’s time to just trade it in and get what you can for it?”

“It’s the only thing I’ve never given up on,” I told everyone. “I’ve been through so much with it already, to sell it would be a waste.”

Those were my excuses. Mark had his own excuses for each time something broke:

“Well, I guess that’s the one thing we didn’t get around to replacing, and now you’ll never have to bother with it again. Every part on that truck should be new now.”

And the next month it was, “Every part on that truck should be new now.”

The third summer trickled by slowly as the Texas sun continued on its conquest to beat the life out of every passing day. Finally it was somehow August, and in the span of
a week I became a legal adult and loaded up everything I owned into the back of Dartanian. My parents agreed to drive down to Waco with me to help me settle into my dorm room. Mark took the Ford Escape, and my mom rode next to me on the truck’s bench seat as I drove.

For deep summer, it wasn’t unbearably hot that day, which was good news considering the lack of air conditioning and the three hours of highway stretched out before us. We rolled the squeaky windows down, turned up the radio (the one thing in that truck that always worked), put our sunglasses on, and sang out loud to the music. I caught my mom snapping pictures of me as I sang along.

“You’re my baby and you’re going to be away at college, and who knows where next,” she said. “This is what I want to remember you by.”

In my dorm room, I had a poster on my wall that read: *There’s still time to change the road you’re on*... and I remember staring at it, longing for the courage to make it true. I knew I ached for something, something more than the life I was in and headed towards, but I wasn’t sure what, or how.

One night during my visit for Christmas break, I went with Mark to the grocery store fifteen minutes out of town. He let me drive, wanting to see how the truck was holding up.

He said, “So, you’re going to be a psychologist, huh?”

“Yeah, that’s the plan.”

“So you like it?”
“Yeah, I guess. I’m learning a lot.”

A pause.

“Is that what you’re passionate about?”

“No,” I answered honestly. “But it’s safe. I’ll get a good job.”

“What are you passionate about?” He asked.

“I don’t know.”

“What if you could do anything?”

“I would move to England and be a writer,” I said, meaning it. “If I wasn’t afraid of being homeless.”

7

I called in the morning, two days before they were expecting me home for spring break. My mom picked up the phone.

“Hey,” I said. “I just wanted to let you know I’m going to drive home today instead of Friday. Maybe surprise Mark and Trin, since Mark was giving me a hard time about not coming up there until the weekend.”

“I should tell you, something happened…” she sighed. “Mark’s in jail.”

The static on the line fell still. “Are you still there?”

“Yeah, I need to call you back,” I said, my voice sounding strange and heavy.

I hung up the phone. I cried in the shower. I debated whether or not to even go back and see my family. My impulse was to drive four hours in the opposite direction, to end at the gulf and spend the week sleeping in my car and not answering anyone’s calls.

I drove home.
The story was different according to each person I talked to, but the general summary of what happened seemed to be this: While Stephanie was getting ready for school upstairs, she shouted down something snarky and malicious at Mark as he came in from the garage. He lunged up the stairs and confronted her—he said he “got in her face”; my mom said “attacked”; Stephanie said “strangled.” Either way, the police were called. I suppose it must have been my mom who called them. When they arrived, they handcuffed Mark on the front lawn, in only his socks and underwear. Trinity hid in her bedroom closet.

I drove Trinity to visit Mark, because she and I were the only ones legally unaffected by the month-long restraining order. He was staying at his friend’s house in the town thirty minutes over, where he and my mom both worked.

The air was stained with grief and guilt as soon as I pulled into the gravel drive. Trin hopped out of the truck, and although he smiled as if everything was normal, Mark hugged her for far too long. I hugged him, too. His face was drooping and dark circles rimmed his eyes. Everything about his presence seemed to be sliding downward. He began to cry. I stared at the seam of his shirtsleeve, feeling as though this was not something I should be allowed to witness.

I drove us to lunch in Dartanian, the whole ride Mark talking to Trin in a voice that curved upwards at the end, trying to convey enthusiasm. In the spaces, when he thought she wasn’t paying attention, he kept saying to me, “I just can’t believe this. This is such a mess.”
We went to Outback Steakhouse, and the waiter sat us at a small table with tall chairs. He told Trin she could order anything on the menu; overcompensating the way divorced parents do, the way my dad used to when Stephanie and I visited him.

Over the Awesome Blossom he asked, “No matter what happens, you’ll still consider me your dad, right? You’ll still keep in touch, and come see me?”

“Oh, of course,” I assured him.

Mark didn’t begin to cry again until Trin got back in the truck and I hugged him goodbye. I guess it takes a lot out of a person, being a person.

As I drove down his street, Trinity tucked herself underneath my arm and began to cry for the first time that day. “I really, really don’t want Daddy to live somewhere else,” she said.

“It’ll be okay,” I kissed the top of her head, her sweaty hair, wishing I could do more.

“How about we get some ice cream. Would ice cream make you feel better?”

She sniffled and wiped her eyes.

“Yes,” she said, sounding unsure.

When I got back to college, I made the decision to transfer. I wanted to run and run far—not just from my family, but from my quiet desperation, from the school I could never quite make a place for myself in. I wanted to blow up my life, destroy it irreparably and reconstruct it into something I could live with. I decided to move to England. I changed my major. I got the wrist tattoo I had always wanted. I didn’t care anymore,
because I was no longer afraid. In the angst and recklessness of those weeks, I found a nihilistic freedom.

When I started sending off applications to universities in the U.K., I began to have reoccurring nightmares about being forced to sell Dartanian. In my sleep, people took him away, trashed him, set him on fire. Each night I was at a car dealership, or trying to drive him across an ocean.

It became apparent that above all else, I have a tendency towards loving broken things. I loved that Dartanian was stubborn; he was falling apart piece by piece but for so long he had fought being completely obliterated, and I was stubbornly fighting to keep him “alive.” And as much as I wanted escape, I wondered if I could embark on a new life, if it meant parting with something that had become an extension of my own existence.

10

There were talks that summer. Talks with my mom about whether she would ask for a divorce. Whether it was practical, or even what she wanted. Talks with Stephanie, brief and uncomfortable, about how she resented my mom for even considering taking him back, for putting her in that position.

Once the restraining order ran out, my mom began to visit him at his house on her lunch breaks. It was close to her work, and easier than driving the thirty minutes home, she said. Stephanie lashed out, feeling that my mom had chosen him over her. I avoided talking to Stephanie when I could, at least about important things. Maybe I shouldn’t have. But her anger was so blinding and venom-drenched that it was repellent to me. I
wished I could have been there for Trinity, to protect her or listen to her or something—but I was far away, and (though I felt a twinge of guilt) busy planning ways to be farther.

11

At the end of that summer, I met my parents at the house where Mark lived. The sun filtered through the white kitchen. There were two brown glass bottles on the table, and Mark held my mom’s hand. She was wearing her navy blue work shirt and khakis, her hair pinned back in the familiar gold clip.

She pulled out a manila envelope full of x-rays. “I have breast cancer,” she said. It was her 46th birthday.

After that, the applications to England stopped, and so did the nightmares.

12

I finally sold Dartanian a year later, after I moved to closer to home and transferred to UNT, when it got broken into in a parking lot for its lack of working locks.

The truck was mine for four years; it was my first car, and so many memories were encapsulated in that blue corduroy cab seat, the cracked windshield. I left the matter of selling up to my parents. My mom told me Mark finally sold it to a high school boy from out west, who was excited about fixing up his first car.

A year or two later, I reminisced with Rachel over everything we had done together because of Dartanian, how the freedom of our youth lived and died in that cab, when grass and gravel were the only gravity we knew.
“What I remember most about riding in your truck was always feeling like I was going to die,” she said, sitting on my apartment floor with a glass of whiskey and coke in her hand. “But, like, in a good way.”

13

It’s sometimes hard to understand the difference between giving up and moving on. It’s hard to know which one you’re really doing, or if it’s the right decision. When I’m sitting in my air-conditioned Kia, driving silently down the highway, I’m aware that I’ve sold out a piece of myself. I don’t know if I made the right decision. I know my life is certainly more comfortable now, but I don’t know if an interesting and meaningful life can be made out of comfortable experiences.

What I do know is this: Sometimes as I’m driving I’ll see a truly wrecked antique car, pumping out fumes and stuttering with every exhausted revolution of the tires, and I’ll feel a sudden, warm longing as it passes me and disappears around the corner.

Someday, that car I catch in the corner of my eye will hurdle itself down the road in a blazing fury, its engine roaring deep into the pavement, roaring in triumph of its very existence, and it will glisten blue as an ultraviolet flame vanishing into the summer wind. I will know that, somewhere, Dartanian lives on.
EVENTUALLY THE BIRDS MUST LAND

They hung from a string, one after the other like rugs of a ladder, each separated by two faded green beads. Wrapped in red, black, and yellow cloth, different patterns adorning each, sequins sewn into the sides—something you might see hanging from a flea market stand, something that might remind you of India, or a bohemian loft in Brooklyn with a brightly-beaded chandelier and a mattress on the floor.

It might be hard to tell that they’re birds from far away. They just as easily could have been croissants, or little boats. At the bottom of the string was a small metal cowbell, painted rustic gold. When the birds swayed, the bell rattled softly, like a wind chime.

They were simple birds and I liked them. I must have liked them, to have picked them out from the bags of my father’s things on my grandmother’s dining room floor the week of his funeral. I don’t remember thinking about it. I’d be moving into an apartment soon, I probably figured, and liked them for their aesthetic value. It’s not impossible that I was considering the décor of my future apartment, even at that moment, with the black garbage bags emptied out over our laps and the carpet. My grandmother offered me the microwave and his vacuum cleaner, practical things, which I didn’t take. My mother took his socks and some of his shirts. My sister took his Harvard sweatshirt and a gold watch. I took some other things, and the birds. I didn’t think about them again for a long time.

My father hated the birds. When the package arrived, my sister and I were at his house for winter break, so I was there to witness the confusion and slight revulsion that contorted his face as he walked into the living room holding the box.
“Look at this,” he said, pulling them up out of the box to show us. “What kind of present is this supposed to be?” The package was from his father, my grandpa Chuck who lived in a double-wide trailer outside of Las Vegas. There was no card, just a folded slip of paper that read: *Happy Birthday!* My dad’s birthday had been three months ago.

“I think my dad is losing it,” he said, holding the string of birds like they were a dirty washrag.

“What is that?” my sister asked.

“Some hippie crap,” he said. “It says you’re supposed to hang them by your front door and the bell will ring to warn you of bad spirits coming into your house.”

“That’s kind of cool, I guess,” I said.

“I mean, what kind of gift is that?” he said. “I really think your Grandpa is losing it. Jesus.”

That night he closed the box and stored it away in the coat closet, but the next summer when we came to visit, the birds were hanging by the front door.

I don’t know much about my dad’s relationship with his own father, in part because I didn’t know my grandfather very well. When I was seven or eight we traveled to Las Vegas on vacation, and I have a memory of Grandpa Chuck on a dock, newly wheelchair-bound from the diabetes that took his foot, holding me over the water by the ankles while I attempted to catch a catfish with my bare hands. That night, we went to a barbeque restaurant and ate ribs. His roommate of fifteen years, Ray, (who everyone on my dad’s side of the family insists, even now, was *only* a roommate) joined us.
I didn’t see Grandpa Chuck again, and when I was thirteen, he died. I didn’t go to the funeral. It was as if a stranger had died; I was entirely unaffected. I didn’t know, until then, that I was capable of that kind of inappropriate apathy.

This is what I know about Grandpa Chuck: he grew up very poor in Chicago, and often walked through the snow to school without shoes—or so the stories go. When they were newlyweds, my grandma worked to pay his way through college, although she didn’t get to finish her own degree. They had two children: my dad, and his older sister, Deborah. When my dad was in his twenties, my grandparents amicably divorced.

This is what I know about Ray: A few years after my grandpa died, he found out he was HIV positive, and shot himself inside of that trailer in the desert. By the time his body was discovered, it had been sweltering in the heat for days. Because the trailer was registered in my grandpa’s name, my dad went to Nevada to empty it and sell it. They found VHS tapes of child pornography in Ray’s closet.

My dad said he cried out there in the desert, not for his father who he resented for willing his life and everything in it over to Ray, not for Ray whom he loathed, but because the world smelled of death and waste and he wanted so badly to go home and forget.

Though I don’t know how my dad felt about his own father, I can guess it may have been complicated, especially in those last years—the bird-giving, forgotten birthday years. Still, the birds inexplicably hung by the front door, and they remained there until
he sold his house and moved in with Pam, where their home was already furnished with her things.

When I hung the birds in the first place I lived on my own, a bedroom in a shared house with a gun-enthusiast and his pottery-making girlfriend, it was because I liked how they looked. I wasn’t hanging them for my dad. I already had a box of his things in the closet that I wasn’t sure how to feel about; my Awkward Daddy Shrine consisting of his baseball hat, watch, the CDs that were in his car when he died, and a framed picture of him smiling from a helicopter.

It was not even a year after his death then, and putting conscious effort into trying to memorialize him made me nauseous. The incident of his murder still tinged my daily life in every conversation I had with my mother and sister, in the survivor’s social security check I paid my rent with each month. I was still telling people upon first meeting them, still mentioning it casually on first dates, with a laugh meant to convey that I was comfortable talking about it, a laugh that I can only imagine sounded desperate and manic. “It’s not like we were that close, anyway.” I told them, “we never got along very well.”

I like the birds, despite their origin, despite the guilt and fear and confusion that came with inheriting them.

The birds have been in every place I’ve lived; that first house that smelled of raspberries, a dorm room, multiple apartments, the last place I lived in Texas, a cramped bedroom in a beautiful seaside town, and here.

Even now, they’re still here.
Because Pam plead guilty to my father’s murder, there wasn’t a trial, but two years later there was a sentencing. I flew in from my Texas college to Alabama, stayed at my Grandma’s house. It was too much like repeating the week of the funeral to be at all comfortable. On a Monday morning, my mother, grandmother, sister, and aunt rose for the judge, and Stephanie and I saw Pam for the first time since that week at her house over the summer, when they were married, when he was alive. She was dressed in jail stripes, wiry hair and no makeup to hide the puddle of her face as she took the stand and said her piece. About how she wasn’t a bad person. How she felt her soul drain out of her like a bucket of cold water when she reached for the gun.

After Pam spoke, we were required to read an “Impact Statement.” The one printed here is the original one I read in court that day, with bracketed edits added in January 2016, five years after the sentencing:

I was 16 years old on August 23, 2009. [I thought I was so miserably old, and then] It was the night before the start of my senior year in high school, when a phone call caused my entire life and the lives each person in my family to be decimated beyond recognition in the course of a few minutes. [Who even uses the word ‘decimated’? It was more like a mouth full of sores than a wrecking ball.] Nothing you could ever see on TV or read in the newspaper prepares you for the shock and profound sense of surrealism at having something like that happen to you, in your life. [Mark said this almost every day for a year afterwards, watching crime shows on TV in the garage.] On a night when my sister and I should have been picking out our outfits for the first day of school, instead I
was witnessing my sister collapse in tears on the stairs with my mother as she told us what had happened; that my dad had been senselessly murdered by his wife Pamela, someone he had loved and trusted. [I didn’t know if he had really loved her, trusted her. How could anyone, even him, truly know?]

Consequently the first week of my senior year was spent in Alabama attending my father’s funeral and dealing with the details of his death. [I spent most of that week talking on the phone to JJ, who was already dating another girl, and being accused by my grandmother of Not Caring because I didn’t cry in public like the rest of the family.]

It was like a sick, twisted dream, to have to see your dad, the man who made up half of you, who you spent your childhood memories with, who talked to you and hugged you and supported you, now an empty shell in a casket who would never be able to do any of those things again. [We saw him in the casket and we laughed because there was nothing else to do. He looked like he could rise up and scold us at any moment.]

When I returned home and went back to school, I received little to no support from my teachers in catching up on what I had missed, and for a while I was struggling. [The principal was supposed to have informed them, and I only found out at the end of the year that he never did.] My mother couldn’t speak a few sentences without bursting into tears, and it was impossible to be at home without being constantly reminded that everything we knew was in shambles. [I got my driver’s license the morning after he died; small victories for normalcy.] My sister, Stephanie, who was 13 at the time, began to make some bad decisions that I felt I had to cover up from my mom, as neither one of them could handle it. [Her toy box filled with cans of Budweiser and Four Loco, her backpack stuffed with aluminum and glass.] I was preparing to graduate high school at 16
years old, working a part time job, involved in extracurriculars and trying to figure out my future, all while simultaneously feeling as if I was the one responsible for holding my family together, since no one else was able. [You do what you have to and you keep moving. No one else was able.]

In January, my sister went into rehabilitation for drug and alcohol use after being brought home by the police twice. [What I found most troubling was that I never would have gotten away with the things she did, but my parents were too tired to fight with her.] In June, my mother went into rehabilitation herself, after turning to alcohol to cope with the sudden loss of my dad who was her best friend and partner in raising us children. [He called my mother to tell her he was going to break things off with Pam and joked that he should give her the address so we would know where to find his body.] Neither of these major events, occurring within six months of each other, would have happened without the loss of my dad. [An avalanche lived inside all of us, just waiting for a reason to press through our skin.]

As for me, I didn’t turn to drugs or alcohol, or break down, incapable of continuing daily life. [I told everyone I knew about what had happened. I told strangers.] Instead I was forced to sacrifice the last morsel of my childhood that I had left. [That was the only sentence I teared up while reading. Selfish even then.] During those trying times, I had to be strong for everyone else and I didn’t get an adequate chance to grieve, something I am still dealing with now. [When I passed Stephanie on the witness stand, after she read her statement and I took the stand to read mine, I hugged her and told her I loved her for the first time in four years and the last time since.] I graduated and moved out of my parents’ house two months before my 17th birthday. [He paid for the summer
classes that got me out of high school a year early.] I ended up spending a year at community college, which never would have happened if my dad had been around to look at colleges with me, something he was so excited about doing. [I felt like a failure, but it had nothing to do with him.]

There are some days that I still think, “Hey, I haven’t talked to my dad in a while, I want to call him,” before remembering that I can’t. [In the O’Hare airport, in the aquarium, at my desk at work.] When I want to tell him about my travels and plans for the future, I can’t. [In a hotel room in New Mexico, on a plane to London, on the first day of grad school.] He will never have the chance to meet my future husband, and my husband will never know him. [And please don’t make me carry his picture down the aisle or stitch it into my gown.] On my wedding day, he won’t be there, just as he wasn’t there at my high school graduation and won’t be for my college graduation. [At the time, this seemed like bullet-points in a distant future, but now two of three have passed.] When I see a man who looks like him, I stare and follow them around to try and get a glimpse of my dad. [I still do.] I am severely damaged and that is something that contaminates almost all aspects of my life, no matter how much I try to hide it. [I am severely damaged and I am very good at hiding it.]

The worst part in all of this is knowing that my dad was brutally murdered at the hands of someone he loved and trusted, his own wife, Pamela Terry. [Years later, a friend would remark: ‘Of course you don’t know how to have a healthy relationship!’] Because of her actions she has irreparably inflicted pain upon our family as well as her own. [She said the reason she didn’t kill herself after killing him was because she thought of her kids.] While everyone deserves forgiveness, everyone also deserves justice, and I
hope that for the sake of everyone who has been affected that she is sentenced accordingly for selfishly ripping the life from someone whom she once promised to love and protect. [At the sentencing, underneath her sweater, my aunt wore a shirt that read: Hang the Bitch.]
Ardmore woman gets 30 years in prison for killing husband of two months

ATHENS, Alabama -- A Limestone County woman was sentenced to 30 years in prison today for killing her husband just two months after their 2009 wedding. ¹

Pamela B. Terry, also known as Pamela Terry Slaughter, 50, ² pleaded guilty July 6 to the Aug. 23, 2009 murder of Steven Charles Slaughter, according to a release from Attorney General Luther Strange.

Strange said after Slaughter and Pamela Terry decided to separate after two months of marriage, he was writing her a check to reimburse her for wedding expenses when she shot him in the back of the head at her home in Ardmore. ³

She then called the Limestone County Sheriff’s Office and confessed and waited for deputies to come and arrest her. ⁴

¹ “…she’s at home taking a nap…that’s what five orgasms can do to a woman…” –My dad, overheard talking to my grandma in her kitchen while my sister and I were in the living room. We’d planned to go to the beach, but Dad and Pam had a fight the morning we were supposed to leave. It was about Pam’s twelve-year-old daughter, how she’d started following Stephanie and I on our walks around the neighborhood, asking us questions about sex. I don’t remember what we could have possibly told her. Maybe to ask her mom, maybe something about condoms? We spent our last four days in town at Grandma’s. My dad went to smooth things over with Pam, but we never went back to that house.

² “She was his midlife crisis. He didn’t want to turn 50 alone. He should have waited.” –My grandma, or my mom. Or both.

³ “Execution style.” –An attorney (I’m assuming ours) at the sentencing.

⁴ “She called me and said what she’d done and I told her you have to call the police I kept her on the line until I called them and they were on their way to her house I asked her where she’d done
buckelew Oct 19, 2011
Welcome to Ardmore.  

14Liberty Sep 20, 2011
30 years? Why not LIFE? Oh, yeah, double standards.

And NO, 30 years in her case is NOT the same as life because she'll be out in just a few years. 

Jerome Stcharles Sep 20, 2011
now us taxpayers have to support her for the rest of her life..very pitiful.
she needs to be shot in the back of her head. 

____________________

it she said the living room I said no where like where on his body...” –Pam’s sister in her statement at the sentencing.

5 “It’s still Madison basically, but the address is in Harvest.” –My dad, explaining where he lived now, as he drove us from the airport to Pam’s house. I don’t know how Ardmore is in Harvest, or how Harvest is in Madison, or why everyone who lives anywhere seems to think their town is especially wild. There were no other murders in Ardmore that year. Not even my dad’s, according to the crime rate statistics, which lists the number of murders at 0. The number of rapes is also 0. The number of burglaries and thefts is 13. You could argue it’s all the same, burglarizing bodies, stealing another 30 years or so worth of breath.

6 “You have the Alabama Attorney General’s Information, right? When you move, make sure to call and let them know your new address, so they can notify you when she’s up for parole. So you can go down there and make sure she stays in jail. They say the family’s statements are often very persuasive.” –My grandma, approx. every six months.

7 LOL
This is one strange story.  

killed him..called the police..confessed..waited for them to show up to arrest her..sounds like she watched "slingblade" one too many times.

2 months? geez. 30, 1/3 of the sentence she'll be eligible for parole (10 years), then every 3 years from then on she'll be up for parole hearing. ugh keep her in

“I’ve never seen Slingblade. People say it’s good, or whatever. I don’t know. I’m not really into action movies.” –Me, in conversation with a friend, long before I found this article and read the comments. I’ve still never seen Slingblade. I wonder if Pam had. I wonder if they have movie nights in prison, like they do on Orange is the New Black.

“Who knows where I’ll even live when she’s up for parole? What if I have a job I can’t take time off from to travel to Alabama? What if I have kids and a full life by then? What if I don’t care if she stays in jail or not? What if I just don’t want to deal with it?” –Comments I do not make.
Gee whiz. I hope she waited until he at least signed the check.  

I never heard of a woman who did not take the money first, cash the check, then do whatever.

RIP. Slaughter is her married name. That's ironic.

LOL

Did he sign it, though? I don’t know.

“You’re only afraid of guns because of your dad, though. And because you’re a woman.” –A male acquaintance. Neither of those are the reasons why I don’t want to own a gun, or be near one. It’s because I don’t want to be in the same room with anything whose only purpose is to harm.

“Based on your name, I definitely thought this was going to be some kind of horror story. I was pleasantly surprised.” –A journal editor, after reading an essay I wrote about my father’s murder and its connection to my inability to trust romantic partners.

“Slaughter. You know, like the murdering.” –Me, restating/pronouncing my last name to one of my composition students on the first day of the semester.

It is ironic. It truly is. LOL.
3 CHILDHOOD PROPHECIES I BECAME

1. “That Tattooed Lady,” my grandpa sang about, when he sat me on his knee for the six years I knew him before he stopped breathing in the night.

2. I loved the movie Beauty and the Beast as a child and somehow my life became its realization: a world of books and restlessness, craving adventure. Papa lost in the dark woods and some lover looming with cape and claw.

3. The overweight woman in the car next to us that my father made fun of, when she swallowed a cheeseburger at the stoplight before unwrapping another. Oil dripping from her lips, anointing her swollen neck.
Hunger
“...as if keening on your knees were somehow obscene...as if there were a control so marvelous you could teach it to eat pain.”

–Maggie Nelson, *Jane: A Murder*

“All I wanted was experience. I would have put anything in my mouths.”

–Lidia Yuknavitch, *The Chronology of Water*
AN INTERVIEW WITH EMPTINESS

How did it start?

It started with condensation on the windows, with time rolled out like a velvet carpet.

You didn’t know what to do with it.

No. I slept a lot. Drove. Filled it with cheap sweaters and buttered bread.

Filled.

Yes.

How did it start?

It started with I was starving for nothing and burning burning burning wanted everything wanted anyone couldn’t stop, every single moment of pain longing so eloquent so sharp and gorgeous like raindrops suspended in glass, like astronomy and the mountains and all that light and heat you can’t touch, all that emptiness.

There were places.

There was concrete. There was water. There were bookstores, fingers ghosting over the worlds of the long-dead, the spaces I wasn’t.

What did you do there?

I waited.

Waited for what?

A sign, a sigil, a fucking earthquake.

You wanted someone to see you. To reach out. To mean it.

I wanted what anybody wants.

Why did you not go outside?

I was terrified. The grass. All those foreign bodies.
What about now?

Most days still. But it’s not the same.

What about the snow?

I cried about the snow because it was impossible and delicate. I cried about the snow when I thought it might be the last I ever saw.

Why the last?

Because my body is suspended in a constant state of helpless frightened grief. Smoke rising up from the fields. The lilac sky and the abandoned road. I thought I had died and wandered into some parallel eternity.

Do you believe in God?

I believe we mostly get what we deserve.

You think you deserve this.

I dream about poisoning him with animal crackers. I dream he was alive the whole time but he won’t come in this room and he won’t tell me if he likes the words he’s bald he’s lying on the wooden floor not saying anything he’s on the computer he’s looking at pictures from last year but he won’t talk he won’t tell me.

It wasn’t your fault. You didn’t kill anything.

I killed years. I filled weeks with smoke and haze and lard. I bulldozed my flesh into numbness.

Was it the casket? Or what came after?

It’s never been about that, about him. If anything, it was before. The knives in the walls. Or sleeping on the floor next to the radio.

Tell me about the barn.
A therapist once asked me to envision my hunger. It was the shape of a barn, and it was outlined in blue and yellow. It came from my guts, from the pit of my stomach and it hovered there and filled me up and demanded filling.

_There’s that word again. Fill._

Yes.

_What did you fill it with?_

Everything. Nothing. Seawater, on my best days.

_Tell me about the sea._

I wanted to submerge my entire being, to open up and fill every orifice with dark violent insatiable water, to drown. I wanted to be consumed.

_Was it like prayer?_

It was like burial.

_Why didn’t you let it take you?_

The ceiling fan. The little girl on the beach. The seals and rocks and sunlight.

_You still had more left to say._

That depends on who is listening.

_What about forgiveness?_

 Forgiveness is a charcoal sketch and I prefer painting. I like to give the colors a chance to escape.

_What do you paint?_

Hands in the mouth, hands erupting from the mouth, my body as a series of slashes and spheres.

_Do you ever wish for someone to share them with?_
There is no honest way to answer that.

*It’s why you go to museums and graveyards.*

I go to remember those who no one else remembers.

*What about prayer?*

What about memorizing the veins of leaves. What about closing your eyes as a voice
reads poetry and breath touches your face. What about a car set on fire on the side of the
highway, and driving past, wondering if anyone is inside.

*What about guilt?*

Exactly.

*You thought you had the antidote.*

I thought that I was someone else.

*Someone who could do this alone.*

Is there a choice? There is a reason we go to work and the supermarket. There is a reason
we tell ourselves these stories.

*What are you afraid of?*
THE FAINTING GAME

I

Stephanie was in sixth grade and I was in ninth when she brought home the fainting game. Honey Beavers, who lived three streets over, told Stephanie about it on the bus one day. People play it at sleepovers, she said.

We retreated into Trinity’s disused nursery which had become, mostly, a space where junk collected, marshmallow purple with a Winnie the Pooh border. So you *squat down against, like, the wall or something, and you take deep breaths, really fast, ten of them*, she demonstrated. *Then you stand up fast and hold your breath and someone pushes hard on your chest or the top of your stomach and then you faint.*

*You really faint?* I asked.

*Yeah, for just a second.*

*How do you know it works?*

*I’ve done it.* It was like she had just told me she had done cocaine.

*You do me first,* she said, and squatted down, hyperventilated her breath, stood quickly, and I pinned her against the closet door, my hands pushing into her chest like I was performing CPR. Her eyes rolled and fluttered closed, before her body went slack and floated to the ground. Seconds later, she woke from unconsciousness, as if she’d just woken up from a nap.

*My turn,* I said.

This was perhaps the most innocent, the most like fun, of the ways I performed my adolescent longing for hurt. I had not known much of anything else in the parts of my
short life I could remember, except for occasional, month-long periods of feeling nothing. Most people would probably describe that as feeling normal. I would have described it as gray-tinted complacency.

Luckily, there was plenty of gleaming red drama and bottomless blue emptiness to fill out my life, and if I began to find myself feeling content, I only knew that some deep and impossible pain was on its way. In sixth grade, I manifested my identity as a misunderstood-miserable-damaged-girl by rubbing pen caps across my wrist until they bore pink stripes that burned if I placed a finger over them. I hid them under colored bracelets; a dangerous secret about my body that only I knew. The newfound autonomy delighted me.

Until my parents found the scars, and threatened to send me away. “You’re going to stop this,” my step-father boomed, “or we’ll take you to a mental institution and they’ll sort you out. If we ever find out you’re doing this again.”

“So you want to be wearing these bracelets at your graduation?!” My mother cried, approaching hysterical.

“I don’t know,” I said, and apologized. I threw away the bracelets, treasured my shameful scars, though I wasn’t sure why I had created them in the first place.

II

When I woke from my first real-life faint, I almost didn’t believe it had happened. The last thing I remembered was my sister standing close in front of me, pressing down hard on my heart, backlit by sunbeams, and then I was waking with my face on the scratchy beige carpet, gasping for breath and giggling. It was amazing to know what my
body was capable of, like unlocking some forbidden secret. Like this was a long-held conspiracy we had stumbled upon, the fact that no one had told us we could do this to ourselves, induce a swoon, make a child’s game of our physical state. I liked the sore, heady feeling that came after, the secret blush of rug burns on my legs.

*Don’t tell Mom and Mark*, Stephanie said.

*Duh.*

When I think of being a teenager, I think only of helplessness. The walls of our house were heavy with tension and uncertainty. And yes, there was love there, too; there were bright memories of Mark making breakfast burritos for me and my friends the morning after a sleepover, dancing goofy and snapping our legs with a dish towel to make us squeal. There were our three boxers romping in the backyard, chasing a soccer ball, and my mother pulling weeds with pink floral gloves.

And other times, there was Mark booming in after work, covered in grease, shaking the whole house. My bedroom was next to the staircase, and my sister and I knew immediately who was coming and how afraid we should be based on the cadence of the footsteps. If they were heavy and slow, he was probably just coming up to check if our rooms were clean. If we heard the door to the garage slam, and it was followed by a stampede, there was hell to pay; all we had on our side were the three seconds to anticipate it coming, think of every wrong we could have possibly done, and brace for what came next. A door ripped open. A voice like a bomb gouging you from your bed. Spittle flying from his beard. Confiscating your phone, your makeup, your privacy, your freedom.
In these instances and others, when I fell so deep into the sinkhole of despair that I couldn’t stand to be inside of my own life, I did strange things to cope. I would sleep backwards in my bed, my head where my feet usually went. I’d turn on my stereo and lay with my face close to the speakers—so close that I could hear something as intimate as the tiny inhale of breath the singer took before belting out the next line—and play the same CD on repeat. Or I would pull my blankets off my bed and sleep on the floor, sometimes draw crosses or hearts or song lyrics on pieces of paper and lay them next to me, making an altar for my impenetrable sadness.

When I was fifteen, I wrote in my journal: *I think the problem is that I can get so stressed out and don’t cry that I overload like I used to and have freak attacks... and listed some of these strange behaviors I was prone to, these “freak attacks”:

> **Biting my hands raw when I’m crying really hard, scratching myself, eventually made a pallet of blankets on the floor next to the boom-box, slept next to a piece of paper I made that said “I love Jesus” or “I love God” or something like that. Turned on music, went into my closet, pacing and doing high-knees with my legs, couldn’t stop moving, cut myself on my right hip, rocking back and forth, ended up in the fetal position on the closet floor afraid to come out. Spelling out words over and over obsessively in my hand.*

### III

After school, Dylan came over and we showed him the fainting game. *You do it first,* he said, *then maybe I’ll try it.* Stephanie went down fast and hard, as usual. After my turn, I came to on my back, hallucinating squirrels and birdsong. I saw Stephanie and
Dylan laughing in the doorway. *Had I fallen asleep here? I didn’t remember that, but it almost made sense.* I faintly heard my mom call out from downstairs, *What did I just hear fall up there?* We replied, in unison, *Nothing!* I noticed my head was moving, bobbling up and down involuntarily. *Yeah, that happens sometimes,* my younger sister said, knowingly.

In seventh grade, I made out with a boy and thereafter was disgusted by him, so much so that if he was in the room with me, I could barely sit still. I rubbed my palms raw, rolling the skin from them with hot friction, spelling out the same word over and over in my head to distract myself. The word I chose, for no reason I understand, was: Q-U-A-R-A-N-T-I-N-E.

In seventh grade, I kissed Ryan in the woods behind the undeveloped part of our subdivision—the first time another person’s tongue had had touched my tongue—and a wasp stung me on the soft white flesh of my stomach, and he sunk down on his knees, kneeling in the wet leaves and twigs, and removed the stinger with his teeth.

After, I rode my bike home and said goodbye to him in my driveway, messy Maybelline eyes fluttering with want. My step-father stomped my wobbly new joy when I walked up into the garage, where he sat on the old futon, a cigarette in his mouth, and growled out in his southern drawl with ¾ hate and ¼ amusement, “That boy’s a faggot.” And I told him no but spent the night heavy with dread, and by the end of the week, I was sitting on the metal slide at the neighborhood playground and Ryan was telling me he was gay—the first of many strange and beautiful gay boys I would fall in one-sided love with over the next ten years, boys with kind eyes, artful hands and bright, gushing hearts,
boys who would go to prom with me, or take me to their church, or write me songs, or get high and fuck me on their bedroom floor. Boys that smelled like cinnamon or sea salt or Christmas trees, who filled me wild with panicked longing until they came out, or turned to Jesus, or fell mysteriously out of my life.

When Ryan told me, his red hair flaming against the malnourished Texas grass, I realized my step-dad had been right. I felt sick. It wasn’t just because I knew now that he wanted to kiss boys (and maybe already had), and I had been told that in itself was wrong, unforgivable. I thought of the woods, his tongue magenta in my mouth, how I had held his sweaty hand. No, it wasn’t his attraction to boys that destroyed me—it was that no part of him had ever wanted to do those things with me, and he still had, and until then I hadn’t known it was possible for someone to fake desire when the other person was not faking it, and I felt horribly abused by the universe for waiting until I had already given myself over before it came around to revealing that these were the facts of how the world worked.

IV

And more and more and more: when my eighth grade boyfriend, a funny, snaggle-toothed boy a head shorter than me dumped me, I ran the shower for noise, shoved the back end of a toothbrush down my throat, and vomited up alfredo. I continued the ritual every night after dinner for close to a week, until Stephanie heard my retching and told my mom, who pulled me out of the bathroom, sobbing, scolding me in between tearful questions about how she had failed me as a mother, what she could have done to help. I hated her then, for making my pain about her—as if there was anything a mother
could possibly do about the social ramifications of middle school heartbreak—but I hated her even more for taking my vice away from me, leaving me with no way to purge my body of its smoke-like, swirling anguish.

In high school, after an embarrassing hallway rejection by the guy who I’d used to rid myself of my virginity, I boiled with self-hate and attempted to soothe or transform it by dying my hair from platinum blonde to dark brown at a neighbor’s house. When I came home and Mark saw me, he threw a steak knife at the wall. At least he never made it about him, his faults; with him, I could assume the fault was always my own.

I navigated these impulses under the assumption that if I dressed a certain way, or dyed my hair, or pierced my ears, I was disfiguring an extension of my parents’ lives, embarrassing them. If I hurt myself, I was defacing their property. It was more a matter of how long I could continue before they noticed.

After my father’s death, while my sister blazed angry, stealing, wrecking, screaming, I retreated inward. Destruction sizzled sweet and sharp and needy inside of me, yes, but I destroyed only myself, in secret ways, so as not to inconvenience anyone. So as not to make myself unlovable. So as not to claim any space with my grief.

If my body was something I owned, I was never encouraged to believe it was.

V

So one night, when another attempt at a traditional family dinner ended in argument, and Mark flipping the dining room table, tumbling plates and silverware, and Stephanie ran to her bedroom, and my parents went to the garage, where Mark would howl through the bones of our home and my mother would spend the next three hours
silently crying until she broke, when he would laugh meanly at her futility—I retreated to
the nursery, the purple walls and soft pastel light. I pressed my own body against the
closet door, tackled my own heart in my hands, and felt myself falling to my knees,
hallucinating orange and pink carousel lights, the music of carnivals, and woke on the
floor smiling, nearly smiling, breathless.
You are sixteen, and often have nightmares about being caught at school with no makeup on, or crawling into bed with a boy only to discover in horror that your legs aren’t shaved. In one of the dreams, you sneak away to the bathroom to shave in the sink before he notices, but you keep cutting yourself accidentally, covering the cuts with tape so he doesn’t see the blood. After some time of this you no longer have skin left. You are raw everywhere.

You walk back into the room, and he sees you, and says:

*You’ve never been so beautiful.*

***

Let’s say that, as your mother’s story goes, you were born hungering. Let’s say you came into this world gooey-hot with blood and slick and before the howling inside could make its way up the ladder of your throat, to find grounding in your tongue, you conjured a boulder to block the chasm of your lips. To close out the vulnerable shadow of light until something deathless comes to roll the stone away, voice risen. Let’s say your mother’s myths are truth, that your first act in this life was to shut up and look around: quiet, quizzical-eyed. Let’s say your mother’s milk, as the story goes, was never enough; that you gorged yourself, infant-belly swollen, until you puked a white sea across the wall. A nightly ritual sprung more ancient than words. In those first moments, swallowing sound, looking around at the world, what did you take in? What unasking need took root in you?

***

0
It’s summer, and you have learned many things. You have learned how to put on eyeliner without a mirror, sitting on your wooden bunk in the un-air-conditioned cabin.

You have learned that if you shake your hips as you walk, if you brush your hair away from your face and smile while you lean over the pool table, boys will notice you. You have learned that lying about your age, and smoking menthol cigarettes in the camp bathroom stalls with your friend will help you get away with more than you ever thought possible. More than you feel safe about getting away with. You are often afraid your parents will drive up and take you back to your old life any second, expose you for the fraud you know you are.

This is what you’re thinking about when you sneak off into the woods with the blue-eyed boy, just after a thunderstorm, pressed up against the damp, musty bark of a tree. He’s twenty-one, and you are thirteen, but he thinks you are sixteen, and you like the way it feels to be someone that he wants to kiss. Even years later, you will catch his scent in the air and imagine the crunch of leaves, the taste of his sweat mixed with your sweat mixed with petrichor.

Then, he is gone. It is mostly him you will miss later that summer, while you’re giving your first hand-job to a different boy, eighteen, under a water trampoline in the lake. When you go home to your parents and the frilly pink sheets on your bed, these are secrets you take with you and hide in the swamps of your heart, where no one will ever find them. Over time, the texture of sand under your feet, the smell of men’s cologne and murky lake water will fade, but the heat of that summer still exists somewhere inside of you.

Burning. Wondering.
Let’s say that hunger comes from lack. Let’s say lack and hunger are twins that live inside the mysterious caves of our bodies and whisper to each other in the dark. They hold hands down the bone-jagged hallway of our spine, hoist each other into the hollow wrinkles of our esophagus. And other tunnels the body struggles to fill with anything lasting. Let’s say that lack is a swan and hunger a swallow, lack a taxi driver and hunger a pedestrian always running late for his flight. Let’s pretend that either of them know what the hell they’re up to when the house they live in quakes and shivers with want—pretend we don’t know how it starts, the hunger, the bruise-like, blossoming void. How they are seeds planted in a camera-shutter’s flash-glimpse of abandonment, just seeds sucking greedily at the same dumb damp earth. Fledgling roots that intertwine, despite themselves, and grow dexterous fingers. How quickly a hand becomes a shovel, aching to be useful: to dig, to plant, or destroy.

I

The boy with the birthmark on his lip is your friend, and even that is new to you, because you’re fourteen, and you haven’t realized yet that one day you’re going to die, or that there’s more than one way to love someone, or that leaving is easy.

So you stay in the car while your friends go to the carnival, because at this point, you’re fourteen, and there is someone in the car that you love more than carnivals. You don’t know this yet. You don’t know there’s more than one way you could.
Now all the lights have faded. This is what people say is the time of your life and whiskey is less bitter than you expected it to be. Everyone is laughing with their arms taped to their sides. The person in the corner is not you. You belong here.

By dawn everyone is sleeping. You walk around the house and check under each of their eyelids. You’re not sure what you’re hoping to find.

In your bedroom—the same room where you’ve had sleepovers since you were nine and cried on the floor over unrequited crushes—a phone rings, and you walk over to answer it. It wakes up the boy with the birthmark, passed out on top of the covers.

This is the first time you’ll feel this nervous and unsure, as you walk over to him, and sit on the edge of the mattress. The boy with the birthmark isn’t sleeping, he’s slurring his words. His body is beautiful. He barely kisses you. This is what you wanted. This is good enough. You see virginity as a layer of plastic to slough off, a box to check so that you can be free in the world, your sexual encounters unburdened by meaning.

You’ve never felt so swallowed by your own bed. Enjoy it now, the invisible scratches, the slow creaking of muscles as they stir and clamp around you.

Tomorrow he won’t remember your name.

***

Let’s say that the theory holds true: too many Disney movies turned you into a whore. And what we all know, if we’re being honest with ourselves, is that whore is just the name we give to anyone whose want grows antlers.

***

2
This is the part where you begin to realize that there is more than one way to love someone. This is the part where you don’t realize you can love someone in all those ways at once, until it’s too late.

This is the part where you both promised not to tell. The TV lights the room in flickering shades of blue, and he smiles in a way that makes you want to give him more than you could ever be. It never was about flesh and sweat. It was about waking up in the same bed, and finding a wonderland growing outside the window.

***

This is a story I never tell: after the divorce, my mom dated a man she met down the street from our house. It was a new house, and the deed was in my mother’s name. She was proud of that. She worked hard to keep our tiny world afloat, and she was beautiful, really beautiful. She said it felt like being in high school all over again, like she was head cheerleader.

Mike was visiting five houses over. He stuck around for a week or two, enough for my sister and I to notice him hanging out in the garage during the day, and sleeping over some nights. There was no money then—my mom tried hard not to let us know, but there wasn’t. She taught toddlers wearing uniform polos that came out of her paycheck, and then there were our Goodwill/Wal-Mart school clothes, and the repetitive cans of ranch-style beans. My mom loaned Mike two hundred dollars, no one can remember what for, and he ghosted out of town soon after.

On Mother’s Day almost six months later, he called to let her know he was coming back to town and wanted to see her. She was in her bathrobe, frantically applying mascara and brushing her hair when she sliced her retina on one of the bristles of the
round-brush. A neighbor drove her to the hospital and took us to the mall to buy her a Mother’s Day gift while we were waiting. The money never showed up, and neither did Mike.

***

3

The dark-skinned boy kisses you like he almost means it. He’s charming and feels like sun and sand slipping through your fingers. He is an artist. He could use his hands to mold you, and you know it would make you beautiful because everything he makes is beautiful. Against him you are pale, contrasting skin on skin, and that is beautiful.

Having him on top of you is like being at the beach. You’re bathing in the rays of his smile. His long hair shades you. He knows exactly what to do.

The clock ticks. Against him you look sickly. He molds you into something hollow. You begin to count the numbers on the walls.

He’s still kissing you.

***

Let’s say the tired cliché is more truth than accusation: girls with dads the shape of void wander around looking for other men, cardboard men, songless bird-like men, to fill them.

Let’s pretend not to remember what your own vodka-wobbly, shapeshifting father said out of spite that night as a home movie played, barely-more-than-toddler you large on screen with her child-hand reaching down the front of her purple Aladdin sweatpants: You were always like that, even as a kid, couldn’t get you to stop touching yourself. Let’s disown a memory that should have predated memory itself: being two, maybe, in the
basement den, grinding aimless against a yellow blanket printed with sheep, when he walked down the stairs into frame and arrested you with a traffic-red-light shout. Fear came barreling like a dark horse, hooves the shape of shame-silence, but your body only became a secret outside itself, its pleasure-need untanglable, even then, from your own notion of personhood. Hungers too old for a body that size, too drowning. Must’ve been spellcast into you—the specter of a hunger that lives in you still and beckons more than blood and bellows out fill.

Let’s pretend anyone can walk away from a life like this blameless.

***

4

Here is another dark-skinned boy removing your sweater, but this time he tells you he loves you, and you believe him. He presses his lips against your forehead. He holds your hand. He licks sugar off your wrist and lets it dissolve. He says he wants to share the same air.

He listens to your music, likes some of it, though most of it he doesn’t understand. He teaches you new words, new games to play. He writes you letters signed with love forever. He gives you pet names. He gives you his jacket.

He sleeps next to you, even when you’re hiding him from your parents on the closet floor. He drives two hours, both ways, to see you. He pays for dinner. He takes you on a picnic. He tells you he needs you always.

He cries on the phone. He says things to scare you into staying. He can’t make up his mind, and you’re afraid of what will happen if he does. He swallows a bottle of cough
syrup and lies about it. He doesn’t swallow antifreeze but lies about it. He swallows someone else’s heart and lies about it.

He keeps you up all night, threatening you with nightmares, but as much as you want it to end, you just as much don’t. You begin to disintegrate beneath his touch. He’s suffocating you and you don’t even stop him. You don’t even try.

He wants to own you. He gives you a bottle of pills. He tells you he loves you.
When I was young enough that I had only a vague idea sex involved kissing and maybe a bed, I rationalized that God must have made me fat to keep me from becoming a whore, from overindulging in the bodies of others. Like the biblical Paul with his deformity, I grew to believe mine a necessary barrier, because I knew, if I weren’t self-conscious about my baby-fat boobs and the way my stomach hung over my jeans, if boys could desire some creature like that, I would never want to do anything else but touch them. If I was allowed access to that kind of easy-won, validating intimacy, I knew I’d never stop.

***

The first man I tried to love had full, plush lips and an unshapely nose. He said that most women either found him devastatingly handsome or repulsive. While resting, his face did look a little like it was smelling something sour, but when he smiled he lit up child-like, sparkling full of innocent joy.

I fell into feelings for him before I saw his face, when he was a disembodied voice over the phone. Sweet, sensitive, I fell into him when he was the boyfriend of my friend, Sara. They grew up in the same town before Sara’s family moved two hours north, to my town. In our freshman year of high school and his junior, they were still together.

After we got off the school bus at her house, she’d call him immediately. Sometimes he’d be on speaker phone, just in the background, as we sat on her bed and did homework or gossiped about dance team. Sometimes she’d go do chores or to talk to one of her sisters and hand the phone off to me, to chat with him and keep him company while she was busy. He was usually friendly, sometimes flirty, and once, as I stood in her kitchen while she unloaded dishes from the dishwasher, he told me he loved me, called
me *babe*. This took me by surprise. He was charming—and at fourteen, I craved male attention beyond caring what unfeasible or dangerous direction it came from—but I barely knew anything about him. I felt conflicted, but after we hung up the phone, I told Sara what he’d said.

“Oh yeah, he told me he’s getting a crush on you. He falls in love so easily,” she said nonchalantly.

“He told you that?” I was flattered, amazed even, but wary. We had spoken on the phone maybe four times.

“Yeah, he’s just like that, though,” she said. “He gets crushes all the time, but it doesn’t mean anything. We’re in love, and we’re already planning on being together forever. So it’s fine.”

***

I admit, here, that I’ve already lied: JJ wasn’t the first person I tried to love. He wasn’t even close—I had been trying to love men and boys, individually and collectively as a species, since before I had memory or language for it. Since the second-grade boy who pushed me down the slide in Kindergarten and the fourth-grader who popped my bra strap on the jungle-gym. Since my third-grade boyfriend of ten minutes, who asked me to kiss him behind a picture book during group circle and when I wouldn’t, for fear of being seen by the teacher, he broke up with me. Since I fabricated the ice-cream date I told my mom a boy in my class had asked me on when she picked me up from daycare.

Since too many Disney movies; my first memory of what I recognize now as arousal came at four, replaying in my head the scene in *Beauty and the Beast* when Belle
refuses Gaston and he slams the door to her house open anyway, nearly pinning her against the wall.

In real life, though, I told my mom about the various assaults of those boys on the playground, and each time she called the school to get them in trouble, I’d wanted her to. I smoldered darkly with a secret fondness for the perpetrators even as I rallied for justice, confused about the complexity of it all. Though something in me sparked early at desire-driven violence, it always showed up real, and harsh, and plentiful. The only thing I had wanted enough to make up, when it proved impossible for what felt like a long time, was the promise of holding hands, of being someone’s choice; that wish of an ice-cream date.

***

JJ and I began texting and talking on the phone, separate from Sara. I considered him a friend, and he considered me one, too—but the conversations grew increasingly flirty. Often he called late, in the middle of the night. Sometimes he was crying, usually about a fight he had with Sara, or with his mom. Sometimes he just wanted someone breathing on the other side of the phone so that he could fall asleep and not feel alone.

At the end of our freshman year, I took a trip with Sara’s family to her aunt’s house, in East Texas, where JJ lived. He came to see Sara at her aunt’s house, knowing I’d be there with her, and we’d finally meet.

He wasn’t at all like I’d expected—by then, I’d seen pictures of him, of course, but his presence in real life was startlingly different. He was quieter, reserved, tall and lanky, and appeared a little awkward, at least a first. Even when he laughed, it felt strange to see the voice I knew coming from a stranger’s face. His dark brown eyes seemed
bottomless, and when he looked directly at me, I couldn’t keep his gaze for long, shying away from the intensity.

At some point that first day, Sara went to the bathroom, leaving JJ and I alone in her aunt’s office. I don’t remember if there were any words exchanged, but if there were, they were meaningless. When Sara closed the bathroom door, he pushed me up against the wood-paneled wall and kissed me, his unfamiliar tongue working its way hot and woozy into my mouth. He grabbed my breast under my padded bra, maybe, and squeezed. When Sara returned to the room, he was already back on the other side of it.

I would like, in retrospect, to say that I felt disgusted. That I was wracked with guilt for betraying my friend. I wouldn’t have initiated anything boundary-crossing, physical or otherwise, with JJ by my own choice, and even when presented with this part-thrilling, part-nauseating opportunity, I wasn’t sure I wanted it. But who I was then didn’t say no, especially when it came to boys and their hungers. Who I was then took what I was given, and felt lucky for it.

Later that day or week, JJ, Sara and I sat at a picnic table in her aunt’s yard, the pine trees muggy with spring. Sara lay in his lap, facing away, one of his hands holding hers. His other hand rested sweaty inside my bra.

***

There is a photo. In it, I am fifteen, JJ is eighteen, and it is the night before his high school graduation. His mother took the picture in their kitchen, the flash too bright, making both of us look vaguely greasy. In a T-shirt and ponytail, my bangs stringy and eyes hazy, our heads are pressed together in imitation of two animals trying to merge. There are many pictures of JJ and I—Myspace-era kissing selfies I took, or pictures
before a friend’s quinceanera, where we stare lovingly into each other’s eyes, him wearing a dress shirt the color of the sky and me in a long white dress, my jawline as sharp as I only hoped it would be on my wedding day—but this is the one where we look most human.

The summer after my trip to East Texas with Sara, she and JJ broke up, and he and I began to date. That meant weeks of constant phone conversations, punctuated by a day-or-two-long visit he’d make every couple of months. Perhaps nothing born from deceit can end well, but the middle was all muddy too; all anxious longing and tear-your-hair-out pain with brief periods of rest and glow, of what I came to believe was love. And I must have loved him. Who would go through what I endured for him, if not out of love?

In the picture his mom took, my mom was there, too, somewhere behind the camera. His family invited mine to come downstate and stay with them so I could attend his graduation. Trinity and my mom slept in the trailer in their yard, and I slept on their living room floor. We’d been together a year by then.

JJ had told me he hated his mom. He said she was the reason he didn’t trust white women, (and therefore, could never trust me); when he was a kid, his mom had cheated on his dad, a quiet immigrant from Mexico who JJ idolized. We all have reasons, tangled wires beneath the love and damage we bring into the world. I try to remember that now, even when it comes to JJ. No one can walk away from a life like this blameless.

When I met his mom, she reminded me of my own. She was sweet, a little loud, made lame jokes, scrambled to be hospitable. I don’t know what my own mother thought of his family, or him, or that trip. I don’t think I ever asked. Trinity remembers picking blackberries.
What I remember are flashes: sex on his dad’s office chair before his parents and my mom got back from the store, drinking margarita mix from a plastic mug while sitting on his lap in that same chair. In the bleachers at his graduation, when his mom leaned over to mine and said, “Next year, it’ll be time for us to come up for Erin’s graduation!” Half-awake on the floor one morning, JJ’s mom cooking breakfast in the nearby kitchen, when JJ looked down at me from the couch and said, “Momma, isn’t she so beautiful?”

There is another picture of JJ and I, but he’s not in it. He’s standing just out of frame, and this time, the picture is in my kitchen, taken by my mom. I’m blowing out the candles of my birthday cake. I am sixteen; dressed in a brown top and white shorts, my eyes hollowing into dark circles, barely hidden by self-tanner and too much makeup, my face too bony, limbs too long. The thinnest I have ever been, and I probably look, to someone who doesn’t know me now, like an average-sized person. I had been starving myself for three months, so when JJ saw me again, I would have become someone he wanted to be with.

The previous night, with my mom’s help, I’d lied to Mark about spending the night at a friend’s house and had stayed with JJ in a hotel instead. When we checked into the room and I removed my clothes, he said, approvingly, “Wow. I never imagined you’d do this good of a job. I’m so happy you’re taking this weight loss thing seriously.” In the hotel bed, I tossed and turned all night, glad to be with him, but unaccustomed to sleeping naked, or with another body. I dreamt of shipwreck.

After cake, I kissed JJ in the garage and watched tearfully as he got in his black sedan and pulled out of my driveway. There was a strange weight to the moment, the
troubling sense that it would be the last time I saw him. I knew that wasn’t likely, but as I watched him, I tried hard to take in every detail, tried to see that present version of him as if in loving retrospect, as you might the last tender memory of someone tragically, unexpectedly lost.

Two weeks later, my dad would be dead. I wouldn’t see JJ again for two years.
TRIAL OF A LOVE IN ACTS OF VIOLENCE & STORY

Act I

The Question of Guilt

Let the record show that evidence is not considered memory.
That memory is a lit cigarette stamped out by rain.
Let the record show that the record is only a photograph of a stranger
seen from space by another stranger, blurred at the edges, frictionless as kindling.
Memory is seeking warmth from the second it’s born.
Let this evidence be in itself a truth.
Let the record show that we have gathered here to build a signal fire.

Pornographer: This not a question of guilt, but of corrosion.

Cinematographer: I think we can agree, this is a question of responsibility, not absolution.

Pornographer: What labels we claim disguise lightning as a lighthouse.

Cinematographer: It was written that art and love are both conceived by violence. 18

Pornographer: Violence is not on trial for being an iron switch that strikes. The question of guilt is about warships smuggled into cotton, tornadoes disguised as hospitals.

Cinematographer: I think we can agree we are responsible for the trees we pierce for sweetness. Even if sweetness is so glad to bleed for us.

Pornographer: Even if syrup will be soured by the soil eventually, it’s true the tree is voiceless without the wind.

Cinematographer: We are to be held responsible for the things we put in our mouths.

Pornographer: Let the record show that no one can walk away from a legacy of teeth blameless.

18 Sarah Gorham, A Study in Perfect
Act II
Airing of Grievances

*Let the record show the names of the accusers have been scorched from the record. This is an act of brutality.*

JJ used love as a scalpel. JJ perverted words the shape of promises, promises the shape of affection. JJ demanded the knees of those he called his partners, bewitched his caresses coercive, silenced others with threats. JJ isolated others to his convenience, required they betray friends and family for his sake. JJ demanded fidelity but refused to be faithful. JJ demanded ownership but refused to be owned. JJ was jealous. JJ lied about where he spent time and why. JJ blamed others for his betrayals. JJ was selfish. JJ was manipulative. JJ discovered what others loved and asked them to gouge it from their lives. JJ turned sister against sister. JJ demanded sacrifice: of time, sleep, autonomy, innocence, flesh, mind, personhood. JJ dressed his lovers in the clothes he preferred. JJ required his lovers deprive their bodies to earn his love. JJ required women not to curse, not to speak loudly or intelligently, not to question, not to retract consent, not to inspire the lust of other men, not to lust for other women, not to desire independence, not to require. JJ severed a heart from its body, a body from its voice. He destroyed gleefully, even of himself.

*Let the record show balanced consideration:*

JJ was on and off medication for bipolar disorder. JJ had been molested as a child. JJ was half-drowned and grasping at waves. JJ was eighteen nineteen not yet twenty. JJ might be different. JJ might be regretful. JJ might be deserving of forgiveness.
Cinematographer: Somewhere in Ohio or Connecticut, a man lives in a very nice house.

Pornographer: The house is in a very nice neighborhood, and because that is what his family knows of human living, he has succeeded.

Cinematographer: The curtains hanging from the windows are red embroidered silk, which the man’s wife bought from a market in the city—quite inexpensively, she would add if you asked.

Pornographer: The house is large, but not suspiciously so; upper class, but not extravagantly so.

Cinematographer: He is a nice man, a doctor or a dentist. He keeps assorted snakes in assorted glass jars in the fireplace mantle.

Pornographer: The snakes stumble legless and slide themselves jagged, green scales like lake-drowned emeralds pressing the thin glass. The snakes snarl and slither because that is what they know of reptile embodiment, and this means they are successful.

Cinematographer: For fun or out of boredom, the man drops furry white mice into the jars and watches as the snakes devour them. The mice are themselves until they are food. To the man and his snakes, this means they have succeeded.

Pornographer: The mice are busy being mice until they are busy being food and they do not have time to learn how to be a thing with choices.

Cinematographer: The man’s wife sits in a different room in the same house, but not because it’s what she chooses.

Pornographer: A talent for rot is not a choice. “Feeding time!” the man announces in the evening after dinner, and his four small children shriek with excitement and joy.
Act IV
Objects Entered into Evidence

1. Two handwritten letters, sent through the mail. On each white envelope the address of ES is written, but no return address. At the end of each letter, “love” is written, but no name is signed.

**Translator:** Though he wrote “love” with his own hand, he resisted to attach his name. He was sending letters to more girls than one, but without taking responsibility for the words in them, the letters were evidence of nothing. Blank space providing reasonable denial. If it ever came down to that.

2. Heart-shaped necklace, the gold façade worn away at corners to reveal silver metal.

**Translator:** A marker of ownership over the body who wears it, disguised as a gift.

3. A series of journal entries written by ES, age fifteen and sixteen, referring to the relationship of JJ and ES, and/or its effects, in various degrees of vague and/or explicit detail:

1/12/09

i love him. a lot. <3
my brain hurts.
i love your voice. i want to marry it. it keeps me warm. i want to nestle with you. i want to make a nest with you. hold on. don’t put me on hold. stay here. i want so much.
you give me a quiet mind. and i love you.
too much too much.
fuck my life. im tired of all this bullshit. im sorry, i want to be myself again! too much has changed. fuck. fuck. FUCK. FUCK. FUCK. FUCK. FUCK. FUCK!!!
something about love is worth it. i don’t know what it is though. not yet.
please. don’t. let. me. drown.
1/13/09

Things I Know For Sure:
1. I like having long hair.
2. I want the heart-shaped scar on my ankle tattooed on.
3. I have a freckle on my toe on my left foot and I like it.
4. I love music!!!
5. I tend to make things more dramatic than they need to be.
6. I love my room.
7. I’m always waiting for a “movie-moment” to happen.
8. I spill my heart out everywhere.
9. I think the stars at night are beautiful.
10. I like the cold weather more than the hot.
11. I tend to live in the past.
12. I always want what I can’t have.
13. I want my driver’s license and a car. I want freedom.
14. I don’t like lying when it can be avoided.
15. I like expressing myself through clothes.
16. I don’t like getting hurt.
17. I want someone to love me.
18. I am naturally self-destructive.
19. I feel the need to create something constantly.
20. I really want to live my life.
21. I’m fat, but I have a pretty face.
22. I like being nice to people.
23. I don’t like people telling me what to do.

Translator: A series of notes, intentionally uncomplex in content, which ES wrote in an attempt to hold onto some piece of individual identity, having changed so much of herself to please JJ.

4/22/09

List of things to do:
1. Take Nyquil and morphine til my body is numb and my brain fries.
2. Lay in bed and die.

Translator: Let this evidence be in itself a/truth.
8/9/09

I will not call him back, even though I know he’s with friends so he probably won’t feel compelled to call me back.
I will not apologize, because that’s what I always do, and because I’m not wrong.
I will probably apologize, because that’s what I always do, and because I know he won’t.
I will not leave him, even though I know and everyone who knows us knows that I should.
I will not leave him because I could have his stupid fucking baby in my uterus.
This said, I will not use the child as a weapon to keep him with me, piss him off, ruin his life, or try to take it away from him in the event we break up.
(Assuming I even carry out the pregnancy)
I cannot have a baby.
I will not have a baby.
This is fucking ridiculous.
I hope you I fucking drown.

Our children’s names?
Stella Rochelle
Dylan Zachary (JJ doesn’t like the idea to name a kid after Dylan but maybe I can convince him?)
Rachel Alaina (He doesn’t like this one either because he doesn’t like Rachel)

**Translator:** A typical fight, during which JJ hangs up the phone, and ES meditates on a possible pregnancy scare. Note the shift in tone between hate-fear and listing possible baby names. Note the revealing parenthetical comments. Note the date.

9/1/09

Senior Audition Songs:

**Translator:** ES auditioned for scholarships in hopes of pursuing a college degree in musical theatre. On the night this note was written, ES was unable to prepare because of a time-consuming conversation-turned-fight on the phone with JJ; a week later, the night before her audition, JJ called her at 3AM to solicit phone sex. When she declined, citing her need to rest for the audition early the next morning, he became angry, then tearful,
then demanding—he told ES if she didn’t comply, he would end the relationship. He told
ES it was unfair of her to reject his advances, though just a week earlier he had announced
he was suspending their sexual activity indefinitely, for undefined religious reasons. Or
until she reached the goal weight he had set for her, he said. He said when she turned
eighteen, he would agree to marry her, so that he could monitor her eating and exercise
habits at a closer distance. To demonstrate his commitment, he illegally procured (stole;
from WalMart) diet pills, and mailed them to her. A gesture of ownership, disguised as a
gift.

12/6/09

Every beautiful moment is short-lived. Don’t waste time mourning the loss of the ones
that are gone and miss out on others.

Translator: A moment of relevant insight? Doubtful; instead, a quote from a Myspace
page.

Let the record show that some evidence is unable to be presented:
the (3) panic attacks ES had two years after ending the relationship with JJ
and moving away, when she was driving to the grocery store and saw him
walking on her college campus;

the (2) times daily text messages JJ sent ES in the month after their split,
threatening to show her step-father the nude pictures ES had once sent JJ
(which would cause ES to be punished indefinitely)
in order to blackmail her into talking to him on the phone;
the (1) letter written in Crayola marker on pink construction paper
the mother of ES sent JJ in the mail secretly, after ES
confided in her about the blackmail,
berating his character and demanding he stop contacting ES.

He mostly thereafter did.
He lays a blanket down to cover the rough gravel, and takes off his shirt. You begin to undress, and for a second you both lay there, eyes still reeling and skin slightly dewed with sweat from the high school football game. There is a good reason you left your phone in the car. There is a less good reason why you’re there, hidden naked behind a dusty road, a series of trees, some train tracks. You gaze up at the stars, and the infinite shining pinpricks splayed across that vast, black oblivion make this almost seem wonderful.

This boy, you’ve known him nearly all your life. He doesn’t love you, and you don’t love him, and you don’t want to. What you do want, more than anything, is to be immortalized. To matter for some reason, to someone.

He leans over and places his body clumsily over yours, and you can feel him shaking. He’s never done this before. He wanted it to be you, and you wanted to be remembered. You wanted to be a story, a name he’d never rid himself of.

It lasts a handful of seconds, and afterward, you lay shoulder to shoulder and laugh together. And that ending, that bit where voices rose and echoed through the night: let’s leave it there.

The day we crossed the Texas state line—my mom, sister, two cats, two rabbits, and all our belongings stuffed into a mini-van—we stopped for lunch at Jack-in-the-Box. There, a man was waiting for us: my mom’s high school boyfriend, who she’d been in casual phone contact with over the last couple of months, as the divorce papers were
drawn up and we prepared to move away. The man had the same first name as my father.
He came to our new apartment with us that night, and never left. He stayed downstairs
with my mom as my sister and I lay in sleeping bags on the floor of our new bedroom. A
few weeks later, when the divorce was officially finalized, the four of us would go to the
pool, he and my mom passing a bottle of champagne back and forth in the water.

My mom tried to cushion the divorce and our move to Texas, but what inevitably
followed was a string of boyfriends that she would let move in briefly, fight with, and
wring her hands for too long before finally breaking it off. As with my father, I just
wanted her to make a decision, for the fighting and drama to be over. When she met
Mark, she continued to confide in me about their relationship, even details of their sex
life.

The first time I ever saw a penis I was twelve, when he was gone at work, and I
walked into their bedroom where she began venting angrily about what she’d found on
the computer’s browser history. On screen, the biggest, blackest cock was spurting cum
all over a woman’s face.

When I confronted her in adulthood, said I resented that she had always told me
too much, she retorted, “Well, you were always asking! You wanted to know all the
details.”

***

6

You’re joking, you’re only joking, but he says, Really? Okay.

And you don’t know how to say no, you never have. So you pull over to the side
of the road, which doesn’t matter because it’s so dark and this road leads to nowhere.
While he takes your clothes off, kisses your stomach, bangs your head against the car door, you’re thinking of the coke stains on the carpet. You’re thinking of how murderers could be anywhere, hiding in the grass. How monsters are only grand versions of ourselves, with bigger claws and sharper teeth and some sense of control.

It’s over and you let him drive home, because he asks. You give him money for cigarettes, because he asks. He should have known that you were only joking. You should have never let him drive your car.

You only wanted a friend and now you’re left with an empty tank of gas in place of something you don’t even think should count.

***

When my sister and I were young, my mother made an effort to be open with us. This mostly manifested as her walking around the house naked or nearly so, until my stepdad jokingly hollered out, “Put some clothes on, woman!” and the lot of us laughed like child actors in an off-center sitcom.

She said she didn’t want to be like her own mother, who was prudish and closed-off, never let her children see her as human. My mom wanted us to know we could talk to her about anything—anything translated to us, accurately, as sex, and lead to brief, vague answers on the rare occasion either of us (usually me) got up the courage to ask an awkward question.

When I was eleven, a word in a Jennifer Aniston movie I didn’t recognize: “orgasm.” My mom’s explanation: “It’s a rush of fluids when two people are together.” When I was nine or so, on vacation, and asked for “the talk” on a balcony overlooking Panama City, she described a condom as “a sock the man puts over his thingy.” I don’t
resent her for any of this, of course. When it comes to parents talking to their children about sex, there’s no relatively painless way to accomplish it. Even the most sex-positive of parents could find themselves reactionary and odd when faced with the reality that their own children have sexual curiosities. And my mom, as well-intentioned as she was with her openness, was raised conservatively, and defaulted that way.

Maybe that’s why, when I wanted, at eight, a padded bra to speed-pass me into womanliness, it was my father I asked. Specifically, I asked for a Wonderbra, a bronze-beige one I had seen at Wal-Mart. I even wrote it down for him. He asked why I wanted that bra in particular, and after I fumbled some version of an honest answer, he said, “Okay, maybe. We can talk about it in the morning.” I was wild with excitement. I couldn’t sleep; it felt like Christmas Eve, and I waited up for him all night, so that I could catch him before he left for work. My excitement was half in the prospective bra itself, and half the rare feeling that my dad was on my side, that he was my comrade in something, a secret from even my mom.

I was waiting in the hallway in my night-shirt when he came out around 7am, dressed for work. I tried to engage him on the topic, but he seemed confused, a little annoyed. I quickly realized that this was not at all important to him as it had been to me. The blow was crushing. I climbed back in bed, falling asleep to the sound of the garage door opening, and his car pulling quietly out of the driveway.

***

The boy wore too many shirts, flirted shamelessly, and groped for you behind curtains in the dark. In the back of classrooms, his eyes and hands always reached for
you. In the back of a dark bus, after a school trip, he slipped his fingers under your polka-dotted dress. He wanted you to know what you taste like. *Like peaches,* he said. He snuck you into his bedroom one night, sent you trailing winding streets barefoot and your sandals stayed in his driveway all that summer.

He was chaos, needed everything twice, hid behind layers of the fifteen T-shirts and three pairs of pants his illness compelled him to wear. He let you slide your hand beneath them and touch his stomach, warm, scarred with cigarette marks from before he went to the hospital. There, he said, they didn’t even let you have pencils.

Years of this culminated in an hour spent dodging headlights, blending with the November night. Another virginity you gladly took in the bed of your pickup. Another person whose history you used your body to brand your name into.

For the first time, you realized you didn’t want to save him. You just wanted him.

***

The summer before my junior year of college, I met my parents at their house. The sun filtered through the white kitchen. There were two brown glass bottles on the table, and Mark held my mom’s hand. She was still dressed in her navy blue work shirt and khaki’s, her hair pinned back in the same gold clip she had always worn.

She pulled out a manila envelope full of x-rays. “I have breast cancer,” she said. It was her 46\textsuperscript{th} birthday.

***

8
The first time you kissed, you were hiding from the cops, hiding from yourselves in a dingy hotel parking lot where someone’s sleeve caught fire. You were all laughter, streaks of neon cutting up crooked smiles.

And you wanted him to want you so badly that you pulled the stickers off his Rubik’s cube and stuck them back where you thought they should go.

The next day, you were afraid he wouldn’t remember, or wouldn’t care, but he pulled you behind the wall, put his hands on your face and kissed you like he meant it. Before you knew it, it was spring, and it was snowing. You were in another dimension, another reality, provided by the bong that didn’t belong to either of you. In the back seat of a red car you shivered in his jacket and into him. His hands on your hips, mixed breath on the glass. You felt wanted.

One missed hot air balloon ride later, spring dissolved into summer and he vanished. You had been hiding from yourselves, hiding from each other. He had been hiding nights with his red-haired co-worker who flunked out of school. Then he left for California and you didn’t. You’re not sure what either of you really wanted.

***

My youngest sister is eight now, and when she puts on my mom’s bra and walks around the house, laughing and pretending she has “big boobies,” my stepdad gets angry. He doesn’t approve of her fascination with when or how or why she will grow breasts.

Trinity has learned a lot about breasts in the past year, after watching my mom lose hers to cancer. Through some unspoken congress, my family has decided that of two undesirable conversations, it is more appropriate to talk about breasts than about death. I listen silently as my mother explains the tubes that drain fluid from her sides, and how
the doctor will cut off a section of her earlobe to form a new nipple during reconstruction. Mark is at her bedside, emptying her fluid and pus-filled bags, bringing her water, and sleeping on the couch while she recovers. He is gentler with her than I have ever seen him, except in the weeks after my father was killed.

These are the things she talks about, because these are the questions that we ask. She says the reconstruction is the most painful part, and we don’t ask why she chose to do it at all, when she is in her late forties and has a husband and can no longer have children.

A few days after the diagnosis, I drove her to work.

She said, “You know what’s weird? When I found out, the first thing I thought of was how much I hate all that pink ribbon stuff. I think it’s stupid.”

“You don’t have to start liking it just because you have breast cancer now. You’re allowed to hate it, if you want to. I mean, you’re still the same person,” I said.

She sighed, “Yeah, I know.”

A few months later, our house is covered in pink ribbons and things that say Survivor on them. My mom drinks tap water from a pink mug while she is on bed rest, recovering from her surgery. My mother is alive, and she is alive because she gave up a part of her body. But looking at those pink ribbons, I suddenly feel a profound sense of loss.

***

9

He offers you his bed, as if you don’t know what comes next, and like an afterthought, rolls over and presses his lips against yours. You just want something
interesting to happen and you don’t care what. Soon you don’t know whose clothes are whose, or whose hands are whose, whose worried fingers are sifting through layers of unfamiliar skin. He rams his body into yours and you kiss that crook where his neck meets his shoulder so many times it must be raw.

\[ I \text{ want you to come, } \text{he whispers between jagged breaths.} \]

You buck your hips in a rhythm that matches his, letting a moan escape your lips between thrusts, timing it out so that it sounds real. You fake an orgasm, because that is the currency you carry, the price you pay for intimacy. He doesn’t notice, or if he does, he doesn’t say anything.

In the morning, everyone wakes up with dust in the corners of their eyes and goes outside on the balcony to bathe in the golden sky. You eat breakfast in silence. Someone breaks a glass and spills red wine on the carpet, and somebody else laughs about it.

Finally, he comes back but he wants to be alone. So you leave him alone. You should have known that you’re not safe inside your head, that this is what you do: You take the pieces you like and turn them into something less fragmentary, some imaginary place where he is loved and you are understood and everyone finds everything they were waiting on all along.

You swallow a bottle of rum and fall asleep in a stranger’s bed and the next day, without saying goodbye, you drive the long stretch home with your insides burning.
He offers himself to you like he’s offering you a soda, and somehow your mouth forms sounds that add up to: Yes, I want to.

I want you. I want under your skin. I want to get my claws in you to match the claws you have in me, you should have said, with words or something else.

You didn’t expect him to come out and say it, for it to be so easy. In retrospect, you don’t know how it could have been anything else. He fucked as he was: a little awkward, and much more confident than you might anticipate. My god, those ocean eyes and the three years you spent writing bad poetry about them. About how easily they could drown you.

The ticking seconds spill over two simple bodies writhing on the floor, the claws no longer relevant. He finishes and the gray of the room fleshes back in place. Lay on the ground and put on your clothes, go see a movie. It’s ended, it’s over, it’s a memory. This time, you feel as if you’ve won, though you’re not sure what.

The next time, you will ask him to fuck you again. He will tell you that he’s gay. He will feel so bad that he fucks you anyway.

I am nineteen, walking up the stairs to my apartment, when I hear a voice coming from just outside the next apartment over: “Hey, baby. What you doin’?” I look over, and there are a group of guys outside my neighbor’s front door, beer bottles in hand. I don’t say anything, just look down and fumble with my keys.
The voice starts in again: “I said hi to you, are you going to be rude?” I don’t look up.

Another guy says, “Dude, cut it out. Don’t be a dick.”

The first guy shouts out in my direction: “What are you, a dyke?” and that’s when I finally unlock the door and slip inside quickly. I drop my groceries on the counter, and I feel strange, changed and unsafe.

Once I have time to think about it, I’m angry at myself for not saying anything back. I am shocked that word, dyke, stings as much as it does. I know, logically, that there is nothing bad about someone being gay. Still, the single syllable crosses my embarrassed face like a slap mark.

I sit on the kitchen floor the rest of the night, imagining that if I had met him in a dark alley, I would have stabbed him in the eye with my keys.

***

In our freshman year of high school, Dylan started dating a girl who lived in the town thirty minutes over. Her name was Morgan, her trademark features bright blue eyes, dark hair straightened in choppy layers, and the fact that she was bisexual. No one we went to school with was openly queer, so her readiness to claim attraction to girls as part of her identity seemed mature, exotic. Because Dylan and I spent most days after school together, either at my house in the suburbs or his out in the country, I got to know Morgan through his phone conversations with her, or the occasional visit, when she’d borrow her dad’s car to drive down and hang out with us in Dylan’s backyard, laying on the trampoline, a sliver of porcelain hipbone exposed between her band T-shirt and low-rise jeans.
Dylan often teased, good-naturedly, that I might be bisexual, like Morgan. I had never seriously considered that I might be attracted to girls, other than in the obvious way I’d always been hyper-aware of their bodies, envying flat stomachs and sharp hipbones and gravity-defying breasts I’d never have. Though identifying as queer was akin to a kind of socially-approved edginess in our group of friends, in reality, same-sex dating was understood to be impossible in our small Texas town, deeply forbidden in the cultural Christianity of my family and the families of almost everyone we knew.

Dylan and Morgan’s relationship lasted only a month or two, but they stayed friends, and she and I spoke occasionally, too, through text. More than once, our conversations turned flirty, bordering sexual. I’d participate hesitantly, experimentally, all the while feeling with equal force a dangerous excitement and a squicky uneasiness.

On Dylan’s front porch one afternoon, copying each other’s answers to math equations, I told him about my text conversations with Morgan.

“See, I told you you’re into girls,” he joked.

“Honestly?” I said, “I think I might be.”

“Really?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I mean, I think I might actually be bi. I definitely like guys, like, a lot, but I might want to experiment with girls sometime, maybe.”

“Cool.”

That was the extent of our conversation. We openly discussed sexuality so often, it hardly felt like a thing of importance.

But when Mark came over to pick me up a few hours later, Dylan’s dad motioned for him to come inside, and for Dylan and I to stay in the yard. It was unusual, but so was
Jackie, Dylan’s dad—barely at home, in and out of jail for DUI’s or bar fighting or minor possession charges, or away on long trucking jobs—so we didn’t think much of it, just pulled down the tailgate of Mark’s F150 and sat and talked until they were finished.

When the front door opened, Mark barreled out of it, keys in hand, and snapped, “Get in the truck.” Dylan and I locked eyes, not knowing what had just happened but that Mark was definitely angry, which meant I was definitely in trouble, though I couldn’t pinpoint what I’d done.

We sat in silence until we pulled away from Dylan’s long gravel driveway, back on the main road that ran through Anna, towards the schools and subdivisions of houses built up around them.

“I bet you want to know what Jackie just told me,” he said, stone-faced. “I can’t even believe what the hell I just heard. Can’t believe it was my daughter he was talking about in there.”

“What?” I pleaded, “What did I even do?” I searched my memory for transgressions, past or present, that I might have caused, trying to prepare, to anticipate, coming up empty. We had just been doing our homework. Maybe Jackie found Dylan’s cigarettes? But he never cared if we smoked, as long as it wasn’t in the house…He’d even made me a buttery nipple shot once after school, months before. Maybe it was a test, and I shouldn’t have accepted it?

“He overheard you and Dylan talking on the porch,” Mark paused. “I think you know what I’m talking about.”

“I really don’t,” I said. I really didn’t.
“He heard you tell Dylan you want to date girls now. That you’re bisexual.” He spat the word, and my heart dropped out of my body, crunched under the truck tires, smeared like roadkill on the asphalt under us. I didn’t speak.

“Why the hell would you ever say that shit?” He was screaming now. Red-faced rage I had never experienced, too untethered even for him, exploded and filled the truck cab.

“I didn’t—I don’t,” I stammered. “I just said I was curious, that’s all!”

“That’s not okay!” He shouted. “That’s not fucking okay, it’s not something to joke about, and it’s sure as hell not something I want to hear from fucking Jackie that my own daughter was talking about!” He screamed, and never stopped screaming.

When he parked in front of our house, he locked the car door so I couldn’t leave, couldn’t escape his anger, kept screaming, too much noise rattling the windows, too much night darkening the space outside into a closeness I wanted to run from and never stop running, too much of my face—the embarrassment and self-loathing disgust behind it too visible, too trapped, as he kept screaming about the things women do to each other during sex, the disgusting things they lick and suck and the smells and each other’s bodies, bodies that didn’t belong together, repellent—and is that what I wanted? Is that the kind of disgusting act I wanted to do to another girl?—and women’s bodies, beckoning hellfire and sewage-seeping knife-wound damnation, the unforgivable choice of it all although there was never a choice, couldn’t be a choice, I had already made my choice and it was the absolute wrong one, he screamed and he kept screaming and I wanted to take it back and I tried to take it back but it was too late, my words stung newborn raw in the world, what had I done who was I oh god, crawled down inside
myself and burrowed though even inside my own flesh I was unsafe but what else was there, what safe place except howling regret, until the car door clicked unlocked and my mom was sitting in the garage smoking a cigarette, blissfully unaware and now she would know—I would ruin her too, ruin the daughter she thought she loved and here she was, my beautiful kind mother, she was about to find out what I had done what I had tried to be and even she couldn’t save me now if she ever could, and he was screaming and still screaming never stopping and even all these years later a part of me still hears him screaming. Years later, I am in so many ways healed and free and fully loved but even now I am trying to write down something about helplessness and failing, I am still fourteen and a breathing burning funeral pyre, he is still screaming and never stopping, I am still in that parked car.
DEAR FOOD, MAYBE FOREVER

You are the green beans and salad greens my mother bargained for at seven, after I was bullied at school for being fat. You are the Belgian chocolates my dad brought back from business trips, the spaghetti and parmesan we ate at the table while he took his plate to the bedroom. Food, you are and always have been the leftover pizza lunchable at the cafeteria table in third grade. I offered to take another girl’s trash, and gorged myself on your remnants over the garbage can, so quickly I forgot to breathe. When I sat back down, I choked you out over the same girl’s sweater.

You are the bread dipped in butter and sugar, and the tortillas smothered in ranch that my sister and I concocted in the hours after school, before Mom came home from work. You are the startle and shame of getting caught with my hand sheathed in a bag of chocolate chips, the disappointment in my mother’s voice when she said, “Should you really be eating that?” or “You just ate, no snacking.” You are the refrigerator lock I begged for, fashioned by myself out of bungee cords and a bike latch. I was desperate; for change, for help, control against my own insatiable flesh, but it lasted only half a day. My mother grew bored of handing over the key.

I know now that she was trying her best. That she was never fat herself (despite her size-two dissatisfaction), and didn’t know what to do with a fat daughter. That she loved me and saw how I ached when the other children on the playground laughed and spit.

The summer I uttered “eating disorder” while looking at her face, you were the breastmilk she said I devoured as an infant, sucked myself so full each night that I
projectile vomited across a wall. I don’t know if she said this to be helpful, or to avoid responsibility.

You are my bland ingredient of self-harm in eighth grade, after my parents found the scars on my arm and threatened asylum. You are alfredo coaxed out by the back of a toothbrush while the shower ran. I had something in me rotting, begging to be purged. Then my sister heard my choking, and told, and my mom cried in my bedroom and hugged me too tight. So they took that away, too.

You are the cute boy in my garage who said, “I’d definitely fuck you if you were skinny,” and every single teacherfriendadultstranger who said, “but you have such a pretty face!” You are that hope and that burden, the worth of me hiding under the worthless shell of you fused to my skin. You are the boyfriend who stole me drug store diet pills because, “I love you but I don’t know if I can be with you if you’re going to look like this forever,” and “It’s easier for you to change yourself than for me to change my mind.” You are the pills in that bottle, blue and pretty yellow. I ate you one by one like candy. Nothing happened.

You are pants with elastic waists. You are dresses that won’t zip over my ribcage. You are entire stores that exclude me, stores I can’t go into with my friends, afraid they’ll ask why I won’t try anything on. You are the anxiety of lunch meetings and dinner dates, to-go boxes to be enjoyed only alone, with the doors locked.

Food, you are the freedom represented in those forty pizza rolls I bought with my own money at seventeen, cooked in my own oven. You are the quiet at the kitchen table while I ate them all in love. You are my very own pizza lunchables, not scarfed over a trash can but over a coffee table, cheese sticking in the carpet like blades of grass. You
are the time I killed between work and sleep, between waking and work. You filled hours. You filled days. You filled me.

You are the frozen pasta dinners for two I made while my roommate spent the weekend with her boyfriend. Each time, I treated you like a Christmas present to myself. A preferable substitute for human company. I chased you with a bottle of sugary wine until you became the wine, too.

You are numbness, you are comfort, you are joy, surprise, orgasm, regret, escape, shame.

And you were love until you were fear. Maybe you have always been fear. Maybe I have always been empty, or maybe you carved an emptiness inside of me so that you could fill it. Maybe we need each other. We use each other and grow inside of each other, this flesh a battleground, a casual casualty, both of us hemorrhaging like a cancer.

All I know is that one day I’m searching the aisles of a grocery store, fingernails digging red crescents into my palms. I’m standing in front of a display case for half an hour, unable to move or decide. Frozen. Panicked. Hating. Desperate. One day I have stuffed myself so full, I dread what I might have done, the organs that might burst, the infinite ruin of my body. One day I wake up and food is as much drug as death. One day I’m sitting in my car in the dark and a gulp of ginger ale burns my insides like acid, so painful I scream. One day I come home, get stoned, eat you as full pizzas, eat you as boxes of Swiss rolls, eat you as pans of chicken nuggets shaped like dinosaurs. I fold you inside of me and fold myself inside of rooms. One day I promise that the next day, I will do better, be better, be alive.

One day lasts for five years. Maybe forever.
You decided, resting on his ribcage, that it was too stupidly perfect, the bed and
the candles that welcomed you at the end of a drowsy, beer-soaked night. How you felt
the warm buzz of bubbles and sugary liquor in your muscles, and you pushed him up
against the wall and kissed him until you were dizzy. You wanted this, despite—or
maybe because of—the fact of his girlfriend in another state and the understanding they
had come to. He dragged you above the sheets and did things with his tongue that you
still have trouble believing. Perfect.

Until the fire alarms went off at dawn, and even then he said, *Come back to bed.*
A cold front was coming in, which meant Christmas in September. You remember the
rain.

You let him see you in your pajamas, sweaty and red-faced. You sat with him
wrapped in white sheets with the windows open, holding lit cigarettes and talking about
eternity, pizza, and the nature of having a dead parent. You couldn’t figure out why you
didn’t love him.

You faked sick to keep him out of your apartment. Once a week, you slathered your lungs
in marijuana and let him make you come. It wasn’t bad. It was tedious.

You felt guilty, hated yourself for a while, burdened by the mantra: *he hasn’t
done anything wrong.* You took quizzes online to decipher whether or not you were a
sociopath. You daydreamed of an ocean he couldn’t follow you across, a city you could hide in without his knowing, without telling him it was over.

You weren’t brave enough to realize that his wanting you didn’t mean you owed him your life. Once you got brave, you broke up with him, cut your hair and dyed it blue. You never looked back.

***

In the garage, the night Mark found out I was possibly not-straight, my mom tried, graciously, to defend me.

“She didn’t say she was gay, just curious. Everyone has been curious. Haven’t you ever been curious?”

“Well no, Mary, ‘cause I’m not a fucking queer.”

“I’m just saying. It’s normal to be curious. You only said you were curious, right, Erin? That’s all.”

“Right. That’s all. I didn’t mean it.”

I was so frightened, so spilling over with embarrassment and regret, there was no part of me that wanted to entertain the idea of being attracted, maybe, to girls anymore. And maybe, in the garage that night, I even believed I could decide I wasn’t, and that would be the end of it.

I should have known my parents would react as they did, if they ever had a hint I was possibly not-straight. But I never thought they would have to find out. I never thought, for most of my life, that I was anything but straight. I had always dated boys, and wanted to. I was always, self-professedly, boy-crazy.

***
My and Stephanie’s babysitter lived at the bottom of our street. Her name was Maegan, and though she was a high school freshman when I was in sixth grade, she quickly became more of a friend than a caretaker. She was an odd goose, in her baggy chained goth pants from Hot Topic, her obsession with *The Lord of the Rings*, her short, stringy brown hair parted down the middle, barely covering the unexplained protruding bump at her left temple. Stephanie and I slept over at her house a few times a week during school breaks and summers. I can remember the way her bedroom carpet smelled. Like rubbing alcohol and new pillow feathers.

When her dad and stepmom moved away, my mom and Mark offered to let her live with us, so that she could finish out her senior year of high school. She had become a close family friend by then, and though my parents could see she was a misfit of sorts, they were fond of her. She stayed in the spare bedroom upstairs, the one that was Trinity’s, but that Trinity had never slept in or claimed as her own, preferring my parents’ bed, or the couch. The summer Maegan moved in with us, I went away to summer camp, and when I came back, she and Stephanie were constantly arguing. Having spent half a summer as siblings, they were passive-aggressively at each other’s throats.

Before that summer, before she moved in with us, Maegan had told us she was bisexual. We didn’t know of any boys she had dated—ones she’d had crushes on, maybe—but she told us that she’d once had a fling with one of her female friends who lived an hour away. We’d even met the girl once or twice when she came to visit Maegan: a pretty, bubbly brunette named Sam. Stephanie and I knew this was meant to be a secret, but otherwise, it was a piece of information like any other (if a juicy one).
A week after I got back from summer camp, Stephanie told my parents Maegan’s secret. They, as Stephanie knew they would, flipped their shit—there was a conversation in the living room we weren’t allowed to be around for. They sent us down to the park with Trinity, and when we got back, Maegan was in the upstairs room, on the phone with Sam, sobbing and packing up her things. They had kicked her out.

I asked Stephanie, “Why did you tell them? You knew they’d be mad!”

“I just told them knowing she was that way made me uncomfortable.”

“You’ve never said that before,” I said.

She shrugged, “I was just tired of her. You haven’t been here all summer. There’s no way I could handle another year of that, of her in our house. She was soooo annoying.”

I heard Maegan didn’t go back to her parents, but moved in with friends somewhere south-er and west-er. I heard she met some guy and had a baby. I never heard from her again.

***

My dad, from the few instances I remember, was just as homophobic: I remember him once ranting for hours about a gay couple we saw holding hands at the airport.

“I just don’t understand why they have to be like that in public, shove it in everyone’s faces like that,” I remember him saying, standing in his living room, blocking our view of the TV. “Two men? It’s gross.”

Death forces an end point, a point at which no more human progress can unfurl. As I’ve wondered what my relationship with my dad would be like after he was sober, or once we could relate as adults, I’ve wondered if his social views would change. Though
he grew up Catholic and attended Catholic boys’ school, he wasn’t religious—he hardly attended church with us, even when my mom had an office at the church she spent four days a week in. I don’t know where his prejudice came from, except for maybe the time he was of, an older era where gay romance wasn’t as culturally visible or normalized as it’s become. He’s eternally frozen in 2009, a time before the popularity of *Glee* and *Modern Family* and Pride Parade photos on Facebook, before the US Supreme Court signed marriage equality into national law. Maybe he would have shifted over the years; I never would have expected, in 2009 or 2016, that when I finally came out as bisexual to Mark and my mom, they would not only be accepting, but loving and supportive. People change. Time and love changes them. They come to terms with what’s important, what isn’t worth losing.

I wonder if my dad would choose to accept me as I am now. All the versions of me he didn’t know I was. At the moment of his death, I was only his teenage daughter, and to him, that’s all I’ll ever be. Maybe it’s better that way.

***

She texts me to say that she is waiting for me on a bench downtown. I text her to say that I am on my way there, which is a lie; I’m still standing in my closet, wondering what to wear for the first date I have ever been on with a girl. I have dated boys and known what to do, so I feel like this should be easier, come naturally, but it doesn’t. Instead it feels like waking up underwater and being expected to know how to breathe.

I decide on a dress, a blue one with birds, which compliments the yellow shirt she is wearing when I get there. We begin to talk about school, about the way the park downtown is lit up at night during the winter months, and how the lights remind us both
of snowflakes. We decide to go back to her house, and she drives. I am doing things that must mean I trust her very much for someone I barely know. I am aware that it is probably because she is a woman, and that because she is a woman I am not afraid of her. I am allowing myself to be a passenger in her car, to let her take me somewhere I have never been before.

Her house is small and comfortable, and she pours sparkling water into a glass and hands it to me, while I sit in a wooden chair in the center of her kitchen petting her elderly Australian Shepherd. We laugh and talk all night, and when she drops me back off at my car, she hugs me gently and lets her body linger. It’s on the way home when I realize that this is the best date I have ever been on.

I never call her again.
You drank a bottle of wine on your apartment floor and invited a stranger over. His kiss was a clumsy lake creature, his naked body a sheep waiting to be slaughtered. You laughed in his face. Then you showed him your collection of antique pennies.

“To seek forgiveness is to fill the body.”
– Justin Phillip Reed, *A History of Flamboyance*

The sheets you bought last week now bear the sweat of three people other than yourself, and one of those people is still tangled in them. When you wake with your mouth dry and your head stinging, you roll carefully to face him. He’s still sleeping, snoring a little, so you stare at the back of his head and how clean the lines of his haircut are, how he smells like soap and some secret thing you knew you’d be breathing from the pillow when he left. You admire how handsome the back of his head is, how incredible that this is a person who chose to sleep with you. You lay that way for a while, trying not to wake him, trying to remember.

Once you get up the courage, you slide out of bed, and go clean the inexplicable slices of bread out of your bathtub, where someone else is still sleeping.

“Who would have thought that cannibals could be so tender?”
– Lucia Perillo, *On the Spectrum of Possible Deaths*
You don’t talk about him. Even a year later when your therapist asks, and you try to remember his name but can’t.

“When violence becomes aware of its mediacy and loses its object, it will begin to resemble love.”

—Ben Lerner, Angle of Yaw

You picked him because he had the same name as the lead singer of the band you were currently obsessed with. You shouted it into the pillows while he worked at demolishing your body, marking up your pale flesh. He was looking for the faulty foundation, the support beams to wreck. You focused on the way your mouth opened up around his name. You closed your eyes and pretended that you were someone else, too.
The morning after I slept with Trey I lay on my living room floor in a white T-shirt and blue floral underwear. I stared at the ceiling for about half an hour listening to the cars and bird noises outside, before I began to cry. I didn’t know why I was crying. I was happy. I should have been happy.

When I remember it now, I rarely remember that it was a date I almost didn’t go on. Just like everyone I knew, online dating was an engrained part of my college experience. Four years of reading and rereading profiles, struggling through awkward icebreaker messages about what music you like, where you go to school, what your major is (and those are the good ones, the ones that don’t include the words “sexy” or “baby” or a descriptive essay on the stranger’s particular level of horniness) and every human being on Earth begins to seem some variety of lame. Tidious. Disposable.

Trey had fantastic hair. He typed semi-eloquently and used the forms of “your” and “you’re” correctly. He liked pizza. He met all of my criteria.

Once we began messaging, he told me he wrote poetry, and excitedly, I told him I was a writer too. I offered to send him something of mine if he showed me some of his writing. The piece he sent me could have been either prose-poem or flash-fiction, something with an apocalyptic landscape; it seemed to rely a little heavily on the thesaurus, but was still better than most of the work I had read in my undergraduate creative writing workshops.
He wasn’t, perhaps, ideal on paper; he had an eight-year-old son, but assured me that he and the child’s mother were on good terms, so there was no lurking drama. He was a veteran, an ex-Marine, which might have been a deal-breaker for me, if not for his “complex feelings about the nature of war and government at large.” (Twenty-one year old me swooned.) Still, he was the most promising candidate I had talked to in half a year, maybe more. He asked me out for a drink, and I suggested one of the only two bars I had ever been to.

Trey was older: twenty-eight to my freshly-acquired twenty-one. The only alcohol I had legally bought was a twelve-pack of Lone Star; cheap, Texas-brewed beer that tasted like rusted pennies and watery hops, chosen because a band I liked mentioned it in one of their songs. I had gotten drunk for the first time a month before my fourteenth birthday, and once or twice a year throughout high school, and I regularly plowed through boxed wine with my college roommate, but legal drinking was a different game. I never knew what to order at bars, so I mostly defaulted to Jack & Coke (what Rachel ordered), or cheap cider that tasted like sparkling apple juice. On the night I met Trey at Oak Street Drafthouse, I arrived thirty minutes early, ordered a pint of cider, and drank it in a locked bathroom stall.

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It was a date I almost didn’t go on because I was on an upswing. I’d moved into a new one-bedroom apartment that didn’t stink of two years of chronic depression, dog piss and molding dishes. I lost fifteen pounds over the summer, thanks to the Metformin my gynecologist prescribed for my PCOS, which made me have to pee all the time and too nauseous to eat anything that wasn’t cold and sweet—chocolate-flavored Adkins protein
shakes, frosted flakes with almond milk, slices of Swiss cheese—coupled with Rachel living on my futon for four weeks while she waited to move into her new apartment (which made it nearly impossible to binge) and the strange, immediate empowerment that came with turning twenty-one.

Two nights before my date with Trey, I had the transcendent realization that online dating could be used like food delivery, but for sex: I typed in the height, age, and background that I was craving, found someone who went to my college and looked relatively harmless, and invited him over. His name was Matt. He was a little nerdy, talked about wanting to travel to Japan, and was a sloppy kisser. He didn’t last very long, but we fucked three times and in-between we talked and it wasn’t so bad. I was able to lay naked with him, un-self-conscious, because I didn’t care what he thought—and also I hadn’t eaten since my protein shake that morning. He commented on the rumbling emanating from my stomach. He seemed enamored with me. Afterwards, I kicked him out and ignored his text messages. It was a beautiful experience.

I almost didn’t meet Trey because in online dating, much like in online anything, it only takes a few hours, a few clicks before something you were interested in before becomes irrelevant, forgotten with the promise of newer, more enticing things and people. Trey and I messaged for a week before our date, and it was the equation of waning interest versus time and effort already invested that caused me to consider flaking out, but ultimately decide to go anyway.

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I finished my cider and left the bathroom to order another before he showed up. I sat on the front porch, and looked out over the street, trying to be avoided. He walked up
the path, and as he waved from the steps I immediately felt that I had made the right choice to be there, with him, on that particular night. He was tall and sturdy in a green plaid button-up, sleeves rolled to reveal hints of a forearm tattoo. He had even better hair than in his pictures, gingery-brown and combed to the side in a trendy Hitler Youth cut. He hugged me and I inhaled his cologne: warmth and pheromonic musk.

We opted out of the crowded vintage couches inside the converted twentieth-century farmhouse, and headed for the backyard, populated with wooden picnic tables. We talked about books, the authors he liked, ones I had never read, and I told him about the bands I was embarrassed to admit I liked. He said he had just quit smoking, so that he could be a better role-model for his son. He talked about his time in the military; the guilt he felt for having killed, the PTSD and homelessness that pervaded the lives of many of his friends. He was handsome, funny, and kind. “My Girl” played over the speakers under humid starlight. He finished his drink, and when I asked if he wanted a second, he said he usually limited himself to just one. I went inside and ordered myself another.

***

By the time I met Trey, I had a handful of years’ experience in dating with a Dead Dad Story in my pocket. I used to take the Dead Dad Story out on first dates and wave it around before the other person even had a chance to ask, used to spread it wide over the table and force them to look over each fold, inspect every morbid detail. I saw the looks on their faces and laughed, made light of it, pulled it apart and stuck my tongue out at it so that they would understand how okay I was, how cool and casual, how Not-Broken. Later, I learned to keep it hidden until they asked, and when they did, I’d open my palm slowly, watch their eyes unravel as they glimpsed the corners of it, before shoving the
Dead Dad Story back into my pocket until I could projectile-word-vomit it across the table at them the way I really wanted to.

By the time I met Trey, I knew better than to prod at the Story at all, lest it take over and ruin things. But after he turned himself inside out and confessed to his guilt at having killed another person’s child, even if they were behind enemy lines, I rationalized that it was only fair to empty myself out, too. I told him it was something “I almost never do.” Then I told him the Story.

He seemed surprised, but not frightened, and soon after, we moved on to the topic of TV shows. He insisted that if I loved David Duchovny in X-Files (I did), then I absolutely had to see Californication. I told him that I had a laptop, a couch, and an apartment with internet access. Under fading streetlamps, he walked me to my car in the gravel lot. He asked if he could kiss me.

“Of course,” I said.

He tilted my chin up with one finger, gently wrapped a hand around the back of my head, and he kissed me. Minutes after he left to go to his car and I stumbled into mine, I was still lightheaded.

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A trip to the liquor store punctuated each drive when my sister and I visited my father. A brown bag with an unnamed bottle, a question we wouldn’t learn the answer to until we set our bags in our respective guest rooms and took off our shoes: Vodka. Microwaved dinner. Vodka. A rented DVD. Vodka. Crawling on his hands and knees to the bedroom, shutting the door. By 8:30 my sister and I usually had free reign of the
house. What we did with it was much of nothing; some ice cream, maybe, and another movie, or the occasional forbidden AOL chatroom. We might have tried to walk through the neighborhood in the dark if it had ever crossed our minds, but all the doors and windows were locked; even when he could barely stand, he never forgot to set the alarm.

I don’t know if he always drank vodka, if he even liked it, or if it was the just easiest thing to hide in his morning orange juice before work; something I’d never considered until trying to pour a pint of sangria into a plastic water bottle on the way to my afternoon literature class, two days after meeting Trey. My dad’s tie was always knotted, his hair combed back and suit jacket crisp before his first drink, standing at the kitchen counter. He was never late. Neither was I; if I reached the door more than two minutes after class had started, I just went home.

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In the gold glow of fairy lights strung up in my living room, we kissed more, before moving to the bed. We attempted to watch an episode of the show he recommended, but by David Duchovny’s second nude scene we were making out again, my body hovering as his fingers floated gently over the back of my thigh, the hem of my dress. Everywhere our skin touched, I had chills.

“I have chills,” he whispered.

He took my dress off, and moved to the edge of the bed to remove his shirt, smiling as he pulled it over his head. I fingered the cool metal buckle of his leather belt.

And from there, it all went to shit.

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When I was twelve, I found the divorce papers in a file folder on the office floor while helping my pregnant mom clean out the room that would be Trinity’s nursery. Before we painted it purple and taped up a Winnie the Pooh border, it was the room where we collected things we didn’t want to deal with, and among old electronics and boxes of pictures, I found a folder full of papers detailing the reasons my parents decided they didn’t want to be married to each other. One of the reasons outlined in this document was that in the first years of their marriage, my dad spent his inheritance money from his grandfather on cocaine. (Then again, it was the eighties, and who didn’t?) I don’t know how his addiction(s) progressed before he shifted to the bottles and cups I remember, the shouting, semi-violence.

It would be easy to blame my father’s alcoholism on the divorce, if it hadn’t been such a large cause of the divorce. Still, it’s safe to say that my mother leaving him and moving us from Alabama to Texas didn’t make things better for his addiction. With a house that was empty forty-eight weeks of the year, he needed something to fill the space, the silence.

When you live alone, there is so much silence to fill.

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When Trey didn’t call the next day like he said he would, I met Rachel at the duck pond on her lunch break in an attempt to waste time. Later that night I texted him. Two days later, not having heard anything back, I texted again. I almost couldn’t believe the way it all shifted, that I would probably never hear from or see him again and not know why. When he left my apartment that night and kissed me in the doorway, I was so sure. So sure it all meant something.
I felt like the worst kind of person. I never bothered to worry about coping with my father’s death, but the second a man I’d met once didn’t call me back I was armed to destroy myself, wearing the same sweaty flannel days in a row, suckling at a wine bottle in bed.

Following one abnormally beautiful date, I became bitter, dismal; I became more negligent than I had ever dared to be, going to school and work every day for a week wallowing in some lame attempt at drunkenness. I wanted to implode, to really wreck something—my body being the only thing I owned.

I tried to drown flashes of his fingers interlaced with mine as he slicked his tongue up my inner thigh, how gorgeous he was as he took off his shirt at the foot of the bed and stared down, hungry. The sex itself was strange and awkward, but thinking of the moments in between—his arm draped over my chest afterward, lying next to me and laughing into my ear—was unbearable. Laying drunk on my bedroom floor, I was terrified that no one would ever kiss me like that again. Like gentle lightning.

When I realized he wasn’t interested in responding, I told myself stories about our brief encounter so that I could make sense of it, could cope; that we might have been soulmates in another life, meeting fleetingly again in this one. It was the only way I could understand why the universe would let me feel a spark of happiness, a connection, only to rip away the source.

In retrospect, the encounter didn’t warrant any of these responses, or the reckless depression that came in the wake of it. It was, in reality, only an above-average date with a good kisser, but it cracked my long-practiced numbness. And I have often attempted to conjure soulmates into the bodies of strangers.
In a February 2015 interview with *Pitchfork* titled “True Myth,” musician Sufjan Stevens talks about the inspiration behind his newest album, *Carrie & Lowell*, named for his mother and stepfather, and written after his mother’s death. He reveals that his mother was bipolar, schizophrenic, an alcoholic, and often missing from his life.

The interviewer asks Sufjan how his mother’s physical and emotional distance affected his feelings about her death, and he replies, “They always talk about the science of bereavement, and how there is a measurable pattern and cycle of grief, but my experience was lacking in any kind of natural trajectory. It felt really sporadic and convoluted. I would have a period of rigorous, emotionless work, and then I would be struck by deep sadness triggered by something really mundane, like a dead pigeon on the subway track.” When the interviewer digs deeper, poking at the effect of his mother’s addictions on his grief, Sufjan says something that stung like antiseptic, searing my entire body as I read it: “In lieu of her death, I felt a desire to be with her, so I felt like abusing drugs and alcohol and fucking around a lot and becoming reckless and hazardous was my way of being intimate with her.”

When *Carrie & Lowell* was released on the last day of March in 2015, I was living in Port Townsend, Washington, and I was not thinking about grief. I was long past Trey and the city I left him in six months before. I was thinking about the ocean outside my bedroom window, the privilege of that after growing up landlocked, and the guilt I felt for not touching it every single day. I was hiding in my tiny seaside apartment, irrationally anxious and fearing the sliver of space above the windowpane that the drawn blinds didn’t cover, listening for the muffled rustling knocks of the woman who lived on
the other side of the wall. I was trying to get my eating disorder under control and failing. I tried to seek out new rituals that didn’t involve hiding inside of two portions of Pad Thai and a computer screen, so I began to sit in bed and play Tetris instead, listening to *Carrie & Lowell* through earbuds on repeat until I was too tired to go out and search for food. I still, and forever will, associate the delicate pinging of the first track with moonlit tide and neon Tetris blocks.

Living in Washington was my first foray into an unfamiliar, magical-seeming world. It felt like escape and like finding home at the same time. I wasn’t thinking about my dad’s death, or his life, or what to make of all of it. I didn’t write about him in the six months I lived in Port Townsend, except for this one line: *There is only so much you can say about grief before it becomes something separate, something that lives on its own in the world and has little to do with you.*

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During college I left work by 9:30 most nights and began my ritual of going to the Target across the street and picking up a basket—one of the spritely, hand-held ones, not a metal pushcart, which was too clunky and obvious—and filling it with a liter of Diet Dr. Pepper, a bag of Lindt chocolate truffles, and a frozen pizza. By 10:30 I was in the bathtub, Joanie Mitchell’s *Blue* album playing over laptop speakers, half-drunk on the poisonous sweet lifeblood of ¾ whiskey and ¼ D.D.P., the hot water coaxing condensation to the surface of the plastic Solo cup in my hand. When I got bored of sitting in lukewarm water, I wrapped myself in the only towel that still fit around my body and poured another drink while the pizza cooked, then watched another rerun of
The Office as I ate every bit of food I owned and drank until I didn’t feel bad about it, sitting cross-legged on the carpet and using the edge of my Ikea futon as a table.

I never before had such an honest glimpse into my father’s existence, never felt as close to him as those nights drunk in my apartment alone, crawling to my bedroom and laughing at nothing for no one to hear. For the first time, I understood his resolve to have three screwdrivers for breakfast and go about his day. I understood how much five decades of emptiness made him want to fill.

But in the end, it was not the bottle that killed him.
HOW TO TALK ABOUT DEAD DADS ON DATES

[A Guide]

1. You shouldn’t.

2. You will.

3. Often, readily, inappropriately, and in thorough detail.

4. An hour after you find out your father is dead, don’t let your boyfriend know your feelings are complex, scattered, conflicted. Don’t make it about you. Just suck it up, pretend to cry. Let him console you. Give him that illusion of power over your life’s most defining devastation. When you don’t, when you react on impulse and choose, instead, to be honest, he’ll break up with you. He won’t understand why you can’t just cry. He’ll call you selfish, and you’ll secretly agree. It’s okay. This one is just practice. There will be others.

5. The Dead Dad is yours to keep now, a shadow breathing loudly over your shoulder. The Dead Dad is your phantom bridge to every man you’ll never reach.

6. In Biology class, when the mayor’s son asks if your parents are coming to Senior Night, follow his inquiry with an explanation: “My mom and stepdad. I mean, my dad is dead, so he won’t be there.” When his face goes startled, you’ve gained a tool; a new facet of yourself revealed, a Lego block pressed into your heart with superglue and a satisfying click. Here, your Dead Dad Story grows an extra limb. “No, it’s fine, I’m cool to talk about it. Really.” Smile, to reassure him. When the boy—the poor, pretty young boy asks: “What, did he die, like, a
long time ago?” “Three weeks ago,” is your response. It will seem to you, already, like ancient history.

7. When you meet new people at your brand-new-very-first-part-time-after-school-job, you will tell them, in the same breath as your name, high school, and favorite band, about your Dead Dad. This is how your Dead Dad Story will sprout wings and a jester’s face: the compulsive telling to near-strangers, the “it’s cool, I’m fine, we weren’t that close anyway,” and the manic laugh that follows. You won’t realize how it makes you seem. It wouldn’t matter even if you did. How could anyone know you, know anything you are or are about, if they don’t know this?

8. Start hooking up with your boss at the movie theatre. He’ll probably know about your Dead Dad, even if you don’t tell him. It won’t matter—behind the wall of the box office where the cameras don’t reach, in the backs of dark theatres, in the candy closet—there’s no talking. On the loading dock, his cock in your mouth, there is only sweat and runny mascara. There’s only “thanks” and a wink and a slap on the ass or kiss on the cheek. Your boss will be kind of ugly, and engaged to someone else. Your boss will be twenty-four while you are sixteen, but most importantly, he will wear a suit, and people will call him “Mr.,” and he will be fake-mean to you in public to throw the other managers off. He’ll give you easy tasks, like a whole shift of sitting on the floor and sorting 3D glasses in the back of box office, where he can stop by to make out with you during his rounds. His power will taste like you’d once dreamed cum would. Don’t wonder out loud if
he uses your Dead Dad’s brand of shampoo. There’s no room for talking with his fist in your mouth.

9. Quit your job at the movie theatre. Lie about the affair when the GM corners you in his office. Get a new job at the shoe store in the mall. Tell your new boss your Dead Dad Story on orientation day.

10. You’ll be bright, fractured and holy. You’ll be beautiful and broken, a light bulb patched with electrical tape. Your Dead Dad is the light. He flips switches in morose code. He flickers through the cracks in your smile.

11. Your best friend will tell you that talking about your Dead Dad on dates is a boner-killer. She will tell you the giggle trailing “murdered” makes people uncomfortable. You won’t understand. At least not for a couple more years.

12. When you understand, even start to agree with her, it won’t stop you from telling. How could it? Who would you even be, if not a daughter of the Story? How could they sign up to love you without knowing your dowry drips with blood?

13. You will, inevitably, meet people with Dead Dads and Dead Moms, with Stories of their own. At first, it will seem like the kind of thing soulmates could be made of. Like the ancient magic of your collective grief could transform into a gingerbread house big enough to contain it all. But your Dead Dads won’t get along. You won’t understand why they’re so upset about theirs, why their Story leaves them staring out the window in tears, while yours has its feet propped up on the coffee table.
14. When he tells you, smoking a cigarette after sex, how much he misses his Dead Dad, how he idolized him enough to take the nickname he’d bestowed on him as a kid (even though it sounds like something a fat trucker would be called), you’ll lose respect for him. It’ll make you feel like a monster, but so many things already do, and none of them are because your Dad is Dead.

15. When she tells you, eating pizza at the beach during your first lunch break together, her Dead Dad Story, it will be the first time yours didn’t fall out first. When she tells you she was three when he died of cancer, and she doesn’t remember him that well, that the Story she carries around doesn’t amount to much more than an ambiguous ache, it is the closest you will have come to understanding.

16. The first week of college, you’ll be riding in a boy’s car, the lights from his dashboard staining your faces with purple glow. The Story will emerge from you effortlessly, as it does, and he will reply:

“Wow…that’s awful. I don’t know if I can top that.”

You’ll both laugh and smile because it’s a bigger deal than either of you want to admit.

“It’s okay.”

“Well…I was raped by this girl I knew. That’s pretty bad I guess.”

“Yeahhh, that is about as bad.”

You’ll laugh and smile because you’re both broken.

“It sounds really cheesy, but it’s like as soon as I got on campus, I felt better. Lighter.”
“Yeah, like everything is going to be okay.”

And then the car will come to a stop, because he’s found his way to your apartment. You’ll wish you could continue to be lost.

“We should do this again sometime,” you’ll say, really meaning it.

“Yeah, definitely.”

Walking back to your apartment will feel like coming out of a dark theatre. And you’ll smile because you are glad to know him and feel known. You won’t see him again. You won’t find out why, and it won’t matter.

17. There are more Stories living inside of people than just the Dead kind. You’ll learn to recognize them by the silver bell lodged in their throats.

18. You’ll realize, over a string of casual first dates during a transient summer, that holding your Dead Dad Story hostage is incredibly liberating. That if you’re moving across the country in two months, there’s no reason dates need to know your real name, or age, or where you’re from, or that your Dad is Dead by murder. So you gag your Dead Dad with a sock and stuff him in the closet before you leave the house. You meet strangers for drinks, kiss them or fuck them sometimes, and you could be almost anyone.

19. You could even be two-parented, unblemished by the metallic smell of grief.

You could be anyone, anyone at all, for as long as pretending is practical. Why be known and seen, when you could choose to be free?

20. You will meet someone who cracks your world open bright and tender, like a tiny sun pried out of a clam shell. On the anniversary of the Death, your Dead Dad Story will tumble out in front of him. You will have known him for three
days, and already he will be the light of your world. After this, you will learn how to cry. For a while, everything will flood you. You will tell him all the ugly Stories you own, because you love him beyond logic or caution, because everything that comes out of you is raw and recklessly genuine, because there is no other way for you to be. You will offer him everything, and he will accept enough of it to know you. He will not be capable of loving you back, but he will be kind. It will feel like enough, until it doesn’t.

21. At some point in your life, you will find, by beautiful careless fate, a group of people who shine a flashlight into every slimy crevice, Dead Dad Story included, and choose you anyway. Who grow fond of your morbidly-timed giggling. Whose Stories will begin to feel as comfortable and familiar as your own, like the well-worn pages of a book.

22. At some point in your life, you will stumble into intimate, healthy, healing friendships with men who know you and love you and do not try to fuck you. At least once, each of these men will laugh, and their laughter will be the tender echo-song of your Dead Dad.

23. It will make you love them just a little bit more.
On the last night of your seaside sabbatical you woke at dawn and saw her get out of your bed and take a blanket to the couch. The window was open, and the ocean’s sigh filled the blue room. You had waffles for breakfast, drove her home, and left town for good.

Her hair was soft and long and maybe you thought sleeping with a Jewish girl could make your body holy, but there’s a stone in your gut you can’t dig out with prayer or fear. You spent the next three days of twelve-hour drives chopping at the rung she climbed inside of you, praying desperately to purge yourself of something you didn’t understand.

Months later, landlocked and less guilty, you thought of her. She would be spending summer in the Bay, and you wanted badly to talk to her, but couldn’t bring yourself to call. That’s when you realized what the guilt was for, what you had actually ruined: it was the miso soup she made from scratch for you when you were drunk and singing in her kitchen. It was pizza on the beach, and how she waited while you took your time, standing knee-deep in the waves, in the middle of January. She stood by the shore and watched, never, ever questioning why.

There is only so much light a person has to give. It’s like sleeping pills or ovaries, not like photosynthesis. It doesn’t regenerate. Light is taken and given away. Cross your arms around your stomach, hold it in. You do not want to be an abandoned church, waiting for some small warmth to pass through the cracks in the ceiling.
The familiar Southern heat was cleansing, not smothering as you’d anticipated. During the summer of returning to the last remnants of a place you could call your hometown, you shed pounds of self-loathing and suddenly became braver than you had ever been before. You dragged your friend, the one whose living room floor you were currently and indefinitely sleeping on, to the party.

He was flawlessly dressed, his thick black hair combed back, and after a game of strip truth-or-dare, you followed him outside. He was smoking a cigarette in the driveway, wearing only boxers and a bowtie. You asked him for a drag and let the spice of gray smoke drip from between your lips. That’s when he covered your mouth with his, snaking his tongue against yours, trapping your bottom lip between his teeth and not bothering to be gentle. Still standing in plain sight on the pavement, he wrapped his hand around your throat and swallowed your moan.

Ten minutes later, he was naked in the back seat of your car, hands buried underneath your black dress. He was a tornado, almost too rough, and you tried your best to keep up as he scratched stripes into your thighs, pinched and kneaded your soft flesh. It was a delirium of wet and sweaty heat. He bit bruises into your exposed neck, one hand tangled in your hair and pulling hard. You smiled and told him, You’re the only person who has ever choked me. He looked at you with dark eyes and said, That’s a shame, before clasping his fingers dangerous around your fragile throat again.

After he went back to the party, you walked aimless and barefoot down the sidewalk, feeling dizzy and disoriented, a little ghostly. You passed barely-lit windows of
strangers’ homes and wondered about the people inside, and the people who were really inside those people, those bodies. You considered climbing a tree, sure you’d be able to disappear into the branches and live there forever, become some kind of tree spirit.

You didn’t know how to climb a tree. You went back inside to find him already gone. Your friend drove your car home, and you fell asleep in the front seat.

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This is for the days spent wandering shopping malls and sitting alone on park benches. This is for the moments you could never imagine wanting anything more than you wanted someone, anyone, to reach out and make you feel human. For the days and weeks and years spent feeling impossibly alone. Like every nerve in your body burning up. Like void.

This is for the midnight car rides when you are sitting next to a person you love, knowing that you will never tell them. For the three delicate seconds after you have parked and the interior lights fade. You can barely make out the profile of their face. The world goes soft and silent as they tell you something honest.

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19

Even before your first visit to the city that spring, you might have guessed that Los Angeles was built to break your heart. You find quickly, after stepping off the plane and into the streets downtown, that everything in LA is composed entirely of golden light. Even the darkness is not an absence of light, but light overwhelming, packed dense as a bomb. The flan shared with silver spoons is light. The white saucer of a doorman’s smile is light. The slivers of sky between the outstretched fingers of palm trees is light.
You’ve been told that in Los Angeles, people fuck with the shutters open. Polyamory is synonymous with enlightenment, and everyone has agreed that penetration is irrelevant; truly connected people can make each other come just by sending vibes across a room. So when you meet a stranger at a trendy bar and he tells you what TV show he works on, don’t pretend to have seen it. Let him buy you a second martini because you know he can, and you know it really doesn’t matter to him, anyway.

It’s eighty degrees but he still wears a blazer, which is how you know he’s not lying about who he is and what he does for a living. The diamond pattern on his blue boxers matches the red diamonds on his dress shirt. You get the feeling that he has never made a girl come because he has never been expected to. The sex itself feels like a fever dream, like it barely happened. Imagined almost. Except you know that he was inside you, in some way or another. He closed the shutters. He touched your face.

He is and remains a stranger, so much like years of nameless bodies, faces, limbs and their effects blurring into haze. You didn’t expect to feel anything except, at best, the excitement of fucking a stranger in a far-away city. What you do feel is overwhelming and unexpected: his mouth in proximity to yours is light pouring into an abandoned church, his body wrapped around you like being specifically chosen by melting sunshine. The fact of each finger on his hand massaging the back of your head and tucking your knotted hair behind your ear feels like light so unimaginably bright. The kind you hope for. The kind of light you wait to see when you die.
And for fuck’s sake, he kissed your forehead and recited fucking Shakespeare to you while you lay on his chest hear his lungs contract his non-native vocal fry vibrating ancient words through whatever bones you have left he had at least five sonnets memorized most of them from *Romeo and Juliet* and jesus christ he spoke them all at you, two at the bar and three while you were naked, you recited the only poem you remembered over his body like presenting a newspaper-wrapped gift and even then stumbled the words at the end, and there was so much more he knew, some Frank O’Hara, some Auden, if only you lived in LA, if only you could get it out of him, suck that golden light, bathe in it, be warm for only a gentle little while his eyelashes flecked with candle flame the golden silhouette of his nose everything at your fingertips for once for once everything illuminated it was so gorgeous to touch a city full of marquees under his skin to know for fifty minutes love that grand impossible deadly sparkling mirage—

—and what you’ve come to expect comes, too: when he walks out the door and the elevator shuts, the hotel hallway is gray and smells like ancient cigarettes. When he leaves, the light leaves with him.

Walking barefoot on the Santa Monica Pier under the Ferris wheel lights that reflect off the water will not wear the beach tar from the soles of your feet and between your toes. The streaks of black stick through a scrubbing in the bathtub and smell like gasoline on your fingers. It is the only part of California you take with you when you leave.

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Light slips between your fingers no matter how tightly you try to hold it. You cannot keep it all without strangling it, making it ugly. When it spills, make it count. There is only so much, so build. Construct with your light a sanctuary of tenderness.

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20

On one of the many first days of the rest of your life, you woke at four in the morning to a dark room and a text message asking you to come by his place before you left town. You had spent the summer with him murmuring mischief into your skin, and you found your voice in repeating it back, the forbidden words slipping out so easily, sounding so much like a part of you that had always been there.

You stuffed your suitcase with anything that was left in the room and stripped your blankets from the air mattress on the concrete floor.

Sometimes it takes leaving to make you realize what home is, what it means. Sometimes the most important thing about leaving is coming back.

Now you were leaving again, for good or something like it, everything you owned packed into your car for the fourth time that year. The air around you exhaled sleepy breath as you turned onto the highway, towards something uncertain but important, and the sun rose slowly, spilling red light into the sky as you drove away.
INTERLUDE: TRIAL OF A STORY IN ACTS OF LOVE & VIOLENCE

Act I
The Question of Guilt

Let the record show that memory is not considered evidence.
That memory is a fractured mirror on the far side of a long stone hallway.
Let the record show that the record is only a photocopy of the daughter of another record, charred at the edges, chased by sundials into flame.
Memory is burning up from the second it’s born.
Let these un/truths be in themselves evidence.
Let the record show that we have gathered here to sift through ashes.

Cinematographer: This is not a question of guilt, but the question of what guilt absolves us from.

Pornographer: What the fates of our names beckon from the hillside.

Cinematographer: I think we can agree we are responsible for what we sing to. Even if we are singing downstream, we are wind stealing voice from a flock of starlings.

Pornographer: We are responsible for the harsh songs we smuggle. We are to be held responsible for the things we put in our mouths. I think we can agree.

Cinematographer: See what hardness breeds about her heart. Is there any reason to harbor such a heart?¹⁹

Pornographer: The question of guilt is not culpability, but responsibility.

Cinematographer: Let the record show that no one can walk away from a history of toothmarks blameless.

¹⁹ King Lear, Act III Scene VI
Act II
Airing of Grievances

*Let the record show the names of the accusers have been scorched from the record. This is an act of tenderness.*

ES uses tragedy as a carnival. ES profits from the spectacle of death. ES is insensitive. ES is selfish. ES is guilty of not feeling guilty enough. ES is unfazed by injustice, indifferent to the untimely loss of loved ones. ES is ungrateful. ES is immoral. ES is secretive and deflects with humor. ES tries too hard to distance herself from herself. ES claims responsibility for her damages, instead of giving credit where credit is due. ES is unchanged by events that devastate others. ES is quick to normalize. ES claims hardship as identity when it suits her, but does not suffer accordingly. ES tells secrets that do not belong to her. ES tells stories that are not hers alone to tell. ES offends the memory of the deceased. ES is forgetful of the tragic circumstances she operates under, neglectful of the obligation to live solemnly. Or at least appear to. ES is disrespectful to the importance of appearances. ES is inappropriately composed. ES does not confide in her bloodkin. ES does not cry in public, does not react like others. ES does not care that her father has been murdered. She is not to be trusted, even by herself.

*Let the record show balanced consideration:*

*So many words have been hers. Let this record of others’ grievances stand.*
Act III
Parables of Love and War

**Cinematographer:** A man walks into a bar. He orders whiskey and tells the bartender he is an art collector.

**Pornographer:** He orders soup and tells the waitress he is a huntsman. The roof above the bar shines like the glint of a knife, and the sky above the roof is black and dense as a knife’s hilt. The waitress and the bartender converse, but not about the man; about hands and their borders.

**Cinematographer:** The waitress has drawn a line in the dust and the bartender has drawn a line in the dust and neither are willing to tell the other what that line looks like, if it’s straight or jagged, if it can save anyone from anything at all.

**Pornographer:** The man sits at the table and pretends to eat soup. He chomps and his teeth clatter the spoon. The waitress goes outside and pretends to smoke a cigarette.

**Cinematographer:** Her hair is messy in a beautiful way, as if she were on the set of a movie. There is dirt in her sandal.

**Pornographer:** The bartender doesn’t own sandals because glass has told the bartender a secret. The man stands up and walks through the dusty parking lot to his car, feeling like he’s on a movie set.

**Cinematographer:** He gets into the car and starts the engine. He unzips his skin and is only himself.
Act IV

Objects Entered into Evidence

1. An account written by RW (the closest friend of ES at the time of her father’s death) which reads as follows:

_I don’t remember the exact words she used to say it, but I do remember the way she said it. With nonchalance akin to a housewife reading off a grocery list: Bread, Check. Chicken, Check. My dad’s dead. Carrots, Check._

_Some people wear their hearts on their sleeve; Erin keeps hers in a safety deposit box upstate. I was probably taken aback at the time, but in retrospect, this episode of compartmentalizing seems apt. I remember that she said, maybe even with a misplaced giggle, “You know, Trinity saw it in a dream.” She seemed overwhelmed by her situation and so her attention turned to her younger sister and the supposed premonition of her father’s passing. Unlike myself, Erin has always attached a certain weight to her subconscious and intuition, a trait that made her a captive audience for such an idea. Especially one that distracted from the larger issue._

_There was a pretty abrupt shift in the conversation. She talked about getting her driver’s license, her new car, school. Suddenly life and all its mundanities took precedence over this large, traumatic event she had just experienced. But that’s understandable, for her. That’s Erin._

2. Journal entries and various notes written by ES, age fifteen and sixteen, which were presented as evidence previously, in the “Trial of a Love.”
Translator: Note the dates. Note that the journal contains entries written in the days, weeks, and months surrounding the death of the father of ES. Note that the father, his death, and/or the resulting events are never mentioned, vaguely or explicitly.

3. This book of words and stories.

Translator: Note the subject matter of the book, that it acts both as record and investigation. Note the ugliness in the author’s admissions, the blood-letting attempt at honesty. The author understands that, in this case, many consider evidence of guilt absolving rather than convicting. Consider the words and stories. Aren’t they enough to prove she cares? No one can live a life and remain blameless.
Escape
“We can’t change what our mothers or fathers or step parents were like or what demons or gods ruled them or when they died or how. We can only change who we are in relation to them. We can revise how we narrate those stories of our lives.”

–Cheryl Strayed, *Tiny Beautiful Things*

“I’m working out the vocabulary of my silence, the difference between one human life and another.”

–Simone Muench, *Wolf Centos*
Mountains

It is always almost raining. That’s something they don’t tell you about Seattle; they tell you about the rain, but not about all the days the air holds its breath, bracing itself like someone on a diving board working up the nerve to jump.

Over the phone, Grandma Irma asks if I can see Mount Rainier from my window. It is two weeks’ time since I’ve moved my life in cardboard boxes across the country. To me, the mountains are still intimidating and holy. I haven’t yet learned to live among them as domestic creatures, the way we forget after a while that house-cats are made of lions.

My grandma tells a story: “When we visited Tacoma, Steve was a toddler. While driving, we saw Mount Rainier off in the distance, and he had never seen a mountain before, so I told him, ‘Look, there’s the mountain. That’s a mountain.’ And he turned to me and said, ‘Ma, why’s it floating?’ I explained it was attached to the ground, there was just a cloud in the way. He didn’t believe me.”

It has been long enough that when she says, “Steve” I don’t immediately think, “my father who is dead now,” but can imagine the little boy, blonde and pantalooned, and his conviction in the truth of floating mountains.

I can laugh at this, and do. I have long since domesticated grief and whatever grief turns into. Grief the cat, rarely resembling grief the lion.

When one morning at work, my new boss tells me his twin daughters call him “Papa,” I smile and don’t say, “I called my dad ‘Papa,’ too.” Conjuring memories like these sometimes feels like beating ghosts with a wire hanger to keep them in the attic. There is only so much you can say about grief before it becomes something separate,
something that lives on its own in the world and has little to do with you. Even the word *grief* sounds tedious, like trying to make conversation while walking uphill.

There is only so much distance you can put between yourself and an event before the distance becomes nothing more than a map of everywhere you’re not. There is only so much distance available—behind, between, before. And after us.

Above the streets of Beacon Hill, the sky exhales. I gulp down frozen air and hold my breath.
AN ESCAPE FROM SKIN

From the time I was eight when my parents divorced until the fall of my sixteenth birthday when my father died, I had been in an airport twice a year, every year. As a result, I knew the drill of flying by heart. My father taught me: You get your ticket. You check your bags. You read the flights board, and you go to your gate. As part of my parents’ custody agreement, my younger sister and I flew into Huntsville, Alabama for two weeks every winter and summer, and then back. My father was a computer engineer for the government, and complained about how he lived in the airport for good portions of the year as his shaking fingers struggled through his bags at the security gate. The skin of his hands was red and pudgy, and he had only stubs of fingernails from his nightly ritual of sitting cross-legged on the bedroom floor on a spread out bath towel, watching Nascar with a glass of vodka and biting his nails.

When I began travelling on my own, the ease with which I was able to find my flight number, check my baggage, get my ticket from the kiosk and go through security surprised me. The bustle of hurried bodies, the squeaking roll of suitcases across the tile, and the stale taste of cabin air are as much of a childhood memory as sitting in my dad’s lap, watching the racecars on TV go around and around.

I once read in a magazine that there is a psychological link between early childhood experiences and those who travel; supposedly, kids who have a tumultuous family life, or have the desire to leave their family at an early age, tend to travel farther and more often when they are older. Sitting in the airport, waiting for my flight halfway across the world to board, I looked around and thought of all these people, some in suits and some in sweats, as just sad little kids in big bodies with messed up parents. I thought
about it then, and again after getting into a fight on the phone with my stepdad four months later, sitting in the same airport, and while driving 500 miles through the desert at night on a whim, and to fill the quiet space in the many small, empty hotel rooms in which I found myself in the next few years. It put a cause to an effect for me, and came to define one of the parts of adulthood I like most: newfound, unconstrained freedom. My ability to run away when I want to, and not to have anyone come searching with the intent to take me back.

Looking back, I have spent most of the last handful of years dreaming desperately of escape, without knowing why, or to where, or from what. These are the things I do know: I worked at a call center one summer, and the only thing I remember about those two months of dial-tones and sanitized headsets is the map on the wall of the gray cubicle where I sat. The year I was eighteen, I fantasized extensively about faking my own death, Sherlock Holmes-style. Even now when I walk down the street with a friend, it is always a few strides ahead, as if my body is itching to break away.

I know what it is like to follow isolated winding roads through forsaken-looking small towns with names like Post and Tucumcari, a chorus of hollow historic buildings left in their wake, decayed echoes of a time when the road sang out and the towns vibrated with life. I want to tell you how it felt, driving through the desert at ninety miles an hour, flat endless nothing to all sides; head blazing with the ghost of Jack Kerouac, utterly free and accountable to no one except the yellow divider leading onward, the pink sand from the mesas that dusts the asphalt. The deep sense that if there is a God, he most certainly resides in West Texas, in the fractured winking light of the orange sun.
flickering through the trees as it saunters out of view like a celestial headlight, in the iron orchards of abandoned cars and rusted drive-in signs, in the split-open houses that only nature fights to inhabit.

I want to tell you what it was like to be seventeen and alone in a strange country. Eight months out of high school, I booked a trip alone to Ireland, telling my parents after the fact. The trip was paid for with the social security money I received after my father’s death, and was perhaps a small act of rebellion against my mom and stepdad, who had just forbidden me from moving to California with my boyfriend. At seventeen, I’d been graduated from high school nearly a year, and was enrolled in the community college fifteen minutes from the house I grew up in. I felt as if I had completely failed myself, my ambitions. To compensate, my new ambition became to travel as far and as often as possible. This marked the beginning of my autonomy as a traveler, the transition between being shuttled east by my mother and dragged back west by my father, and actively running towards any direction of my own choosing. Perhaps I felt some small echo of my father there, in my first experience in international travel, in the airport rituals that became my inheritance.

On the flight to Dublin, which was at least nine hours long and my first overnight flight, I sat next to a retired couple from North Carolina. They talked to me like old family friends, asking me questions about my college plans, my sisters, and my grandma’s recent cruise to Alaska.

After a microwave-meal dinner of lukewarm Salisbury steak, the captain extinguished the cabin lights, and in unison the people in my section leaned back in their
seats, put the hospital-quality pillows behind their heads and thin felt blankets over their faces. I couldn’t sleep, imagining they could all be dead under those blankets, if not for their raspy breathing. I wished someone would talk, to break the illusion. I sat hovering over the Atlantic Ocean, in the middle of an airborne morgue, with restless leg syndrome for the next four hours, until a glimpse of sunlight, grass, and ocean came peeking through the oval window.

Ireland.

Before going through customs I stopped in the bathroom, and at the sight of the oddly-shaped European toilets I understood that I was truly in a different place. I took out my cell phone. It had no signal; the whole device was completely useless. It didn’t even show the right time. I had never felt so free.

The airport was color-schemed silver and green, a geometric wonderland. I heard the singsong accent of the young customs officer with sapphire eyes and sweeping brown hair, and it seemed as though anything could happen. I still had to call my parents, however. I slipped the coins in the slot, felt the cold receiver against my face, listened for the dog-whistle dialtone.

“Hello?” My mom, her words slurred together by sleep. It must have been around three in the morning for her.

“Yeah, I’m here. I just got through customs and I’m about to leave the airport.”

“Okay. I was getting worried. I’m glad you made it there safe, honey.”

There was warmth in her voice. I could imagine her in bed, her thin blond hair a mess against the pillow, the pores on her face bare and visible without makeup.
“Yeah, I’m here. I’m fine. I haven’t been kidnapped and killed yet.” I looked around at the bustling dome.

“Okay, you’re going to call me when you get to your hotel? How are you getting there?”

“I’m taking the bus, Mom. It’s in the itinerary I left for you on the fridge.”

“You’re going to call me when you get there, right?”

“I don’t know, it depends on if I can get to a payphone. I’m calling you now.”

“No, you need to try to call me when you get there so I know you’re safe.”

“Okay, I’ll try. I’ve got to go, love you.”

“I love you too, be safe, baby.”

Finding the right bus was easier than I expected it to be. Staring out the window as I passed through Dublin, I could hardly believe I was witnessing one of the greatest cities on earth in action. Giant clocks, masses of pedestrians, painted pub doors, taxis and fancy bridges; everything seemed like a landmark. The towers of carved marble and masses of people were exciting, but it was nothing compared to what I saw when we pulled onto the freeway heading north out of the city. First were patches of grass, and then strips of furry swaying land, trees draped in ivy, until as far as I could see, everything was enveloped in the ten-thousand most brilliant shades of green that ever existed. I felt the breath leave my body all at once like it had been knocked out of me.

The following summer, I took a trip to Montreal with Rachel. Our first night in the city, we were walking back from dinner at a Mexican restaurant (who knows why, after paying eight hundred dollars and traveling six hours by plane from Texas, we
sprung for a mediocre version of what we could easily get at home) when she twisted her ankle on the hostel’s marble steps. The next morning when I got up and dressed for the day, she was still lounging in the bottom bunk of our shared bunk bed. Her laptop was propped on her chest, her ankle wrapped up in an Ace bandage.

“I don’t feel like I’ll be able to walk a lot today,” she said, “You should go do things, though, and when you come back later we’ll get lunch.”

I was excited to have a chance to explore by myself. Unlike my friend, who was afraid to walk down the street unaccompanied in the unfamiliar city, I was itching to set off alone amidst the pedestrian hordes and howling train stations. I walked down to the mall district, past dark stone cathedrals with grassy lawns, paper-mâché string lights in rainbow colors hanging overhead, left over from the recent Pride Parade. Rachel texted me around lunchtime, asking me to bring her food, and I ignored the text for an hour before reluctantly heading back up the concrete hill to our hostel.

Rachel’s mother had organized the trip for us, taking care of each detail, reading reviews of hostels and choosing ones in safe neighborhoods. She even made us flashcards of common French-Canadian phrases, although we never learned any other than “Parlez-vous Anglais?” (‘Do you speak English?’) to which the Quebecois replied with confused looks; despite our exotic imaginings of Canada, everyone spoke perfect English in Montreal.

The fact of her mother’s influence over the trip didn’t feel smothering, as it would have if it were my own parents. In fact, it was a little comforting. It was nice to relinquish control and let myself feel taken care of, for the first time in as long as I could remember.
The next morning, I left while Rachel was still asleep. Early mist hung in the gray air as I took the Metro to Mount Royal Station across town. Mount Royal crowned the city, creating a concrete amphitheater below it. I climbed the paved path up the mountain, passing wildflowers and dogs with their owners, elderly couples in posturepedic shoes. By the time I reached the top, sunlight was burning through the trees, dissolving the fog. The giant electric cross at the peak of the mountain hovered over Montreal at the altitude of my own fascinated gaze.

By the next day Rachel was fully recovered, and we had a whole catalogue of interesting experiences together, but in some small way the two remaining weeks in Montreal were spoiled for me. I began to wake up just past dawn to sneak off to breakfasts alone at the café down the street, to wait for Rachel to settle into her bunk for a nap so that I could steal an hour aimlessly wandering the cobblestone path by the river. I remember walking on the pavement between a row of skyscrapers, just another body moving in rhythm among strangers, and thinking ecstatically, “I could be anyone. I could be no one at all.”

It is perhaps more fun, and more convenient, to have a travelling companion. There is the strict comfort of company, and someone to take pictures of you doing silly, touristy things at the opportune moments. Waiters don’t look at you strangely when you have another person at the table to share dinner with. But for me, travel is less often about comfort, and more often about reckless adventure. There’s an instinct that pushes me further, compels me to seek more; I don’t only want to be adventurous, I want to be anonymous. I want to drown myself in a hurtling sea of strangers, to consume the city
with ravenous eyes while remaining unobserved and un obrigated. This is not something I understand, nor is it something I chose. It just is.

Which brings me back to that magazine quote, the airports, the empty hotel rooms. If childhood has something to do with it, you’d think all children of divorce would have a secret hoard of frequent flyer miles, a folded map in their back pocket at all times. My childhood reeks of embarrassment, longing, and frustration—but so does everyone’s. And although my father died just as I reached the cusp of newly-flowering adulthood, the same basic rules apply.

Memory tends to cloak the dead in ambiguity, grief to relieve them of accountability, so it is hard to be accurate. Yes, I remember the smell of rotting flowers, the open casket, his hair combed all wrong. In the same breath I can also remember him crawling inebriated across his bedroom floor, and the golden leaves on the Harvard yard when he took us to Boston.

This is something else I remember: staying with my parents again for the first time after going away to college. I stood in the bedroom I had grown up in, my former fortress, a room where the air was full to the brim with memories of sleepovers, tears, laughter, friends, fears, and first loves—now entirely vacant. The lime green walls, bare, scarred with more than a decade of staple marks. The unsettling aura of a life condensed neatly into cardboard boxes. It was the realization that home is not a place, but a feeling, the ember of a flame inside you that must be built and nurtured. The house still survives, but home no longer exists, except in faded memories.
Perhaps that’s what I’ve been struggling to escape to, if anything: home. I’ve searched for it in bleached hotel sheets, in foreign countries and foreign bodies, in the pounding of wheels on pavement. I’ve caught a flicker of it from time to time: in a sandwich shop in the bone-cold rain, a galaxy of milk being poured into hot tea, the line in that glorious song when Paul Simon sings, “oooh, losing love is like a window in your heart...”

Escape, however, is rarely about running towards something, and more often about running from it. I would like to believe it’s the sense of adventure, the craving for new experiences alone that keeps me constantly moving, unsatisfied with limitations of place and time. For some, that is enough to keep a bag packed in their trunk, a flight schedule always open on a tab. For me, I’ve come to realize, it isn’t about escaping from a place; it’s an escape from my life, from responsibility, from my very skin.

I’ve spent years wondering, and it’s still hard to tell if this impulse has anything at all to do with a childhood impression. I think in some way, everyone’s families are a concoction of good and bad, scarrers and menders, perpetuators of fears that drive each other away and comforts that call them back home. Families are made of people, after all, and people are that way: Messy. Complicated.

It’s not anybody’s fault how things turn out. Life moves, eroding everything in its path, until a child is grown and sitting in an airport, wondering what made her want to leave so badly in the first place. And someday she will be someone else’s mother, and that child will be wondering, too.
“I don’t think it really matters what happened, it isn’t fair to punish her this way.”

My mom was on the phone. My mom was almost always on the phone in those days, with one of her friends who dealt Mary Kay cosmetics, the PTA, or Vacation Bible School committee.

“Yes, I understand that. No, I don’t think it’s normal for a seven-year-old to have to do that, but that’s what kids do when they’re scared.”

She hung up the cordless receiver and let out an exasperated breath, “I’m sorry, honey, but Miss Jenny says Katie isn’t allowed to spend the night here anymore because of what happened.”

I wasn’t as surprised as I should have been. The rest of my friends’ parents soon followed suit.

My dad had been upset about the manicure kit my mom bought my sister and I on a trip to the mall that day. He called it a pocketknife and said it was dangerous. Then he proved his theory by using it to cut open my mom’s hand and locking her outside on the back patio.

When he stormed out the front door, I stole the cordless phone and my little sister and I, with freshly showered hair and dressed in night-shirts for bed, hid upstairs with our pet rabbits clutched to our chests.

“Um, hi, our parents are fighting and my dad cut my mom with a knife and we’re upstairs with our bunnies and we’re scared. We don’t know where he went.” I was the one to make the call because I, at seven-and-a-half, was the oldest and most composed. My sister was crying, but I wasn’t scared.
When my mom came in and found what we had done, she took the phone from me, but there was no one on the line anymore. The phone line had been cut. The lights followed. We looked out the window expecting to see a blackout, but every other house on our street was still lit. We all crawled into my sister’s room and locked the door.

She tried to make it seem like it was only bedtime, the way she herded us into blankets and hoped we’d forget everything the night encompassed and just fall asleep, like kids do. But I wasn’t that easily soothed. There had been other nights like this one. The police would show up, their booming knock on our front door a beacon of hope and excitement. They would make my dad leave for the night, and though my mom scolded me for calling 911 without her permission she always seemed relieved when he left.

We could hear my dad enter the house through the echoes below. Then there was blank, spaceless noise as he ascended the stairs.

“What? Why is this door locked?!”

I slithered down into my sleeping bag on my sister’s bedroom floor. We are refugees, hiding out. We have be quiet and hold our breath so the monster won’t find us...

“I’m trying to put the girls to bed!” my mom hollered back, “We can talk about this later.”

Her voice sounded unusually collected, I realized, which scared me more. During their fights, she almost never hesitated to match his anger. I understood that this time was different, at least to her, more serious; it wasn’t that she was trying to protect her marriage anymore. She was trying to protect us.

“Open it. Come on, Mary. Open the goddamn door.”
Okay, I was wrong. Forget that story. I’m a caterpillar. I’m a caterpillar in this cocoon and if I hide in here long enough I’ll become something beautiful. If I wrap myself up tightly enough in this big ball of fleece I’ll be able to fly...

“Come on, nothing is going to happen, you’re acting crazy. Open the door! Just open the door.” My dad’s voice turned calm outside the door. It was chilling.

Wormlike, I rolled into the closet. My mom got up slowly from my sister’s bed and opened the door for my dad. They both went downstairs, and their hushed voices slowly rose in volume until they were interrupted by a resounding knock at the door.

If I squeeze my eyes shut really tight, I won’t be in the dark by myself. If I wrap myself up until I can barely breathe, I’ll be able to fly...
I

Sun-warmed symphony of jangling keys and lemonade laughter, we plucked cherry
tomatoes from the garden and ate them with our hands. Her arms and shoulders cartography
of strawberry-freckled deserts, her spirit is of safekeeping. Sapphire country-song eyes
reflecting a chest of skeleton-key drawers, a hall of autumn mirrors. Mascara, gold hoop
earrings, hairspray and heady perfume; her entire being in sparkle. Her smile glows like
angels’ bones. My father called time her worst enemy, because of how she moves inside
of it. Love like the underside of lime bark, willow sap glossing her stars. Her lullabies were
hymn and hosanna, pink salt fingernails skating over the backs of her children. The stubble
on her warm legs itched, and when she planted us in our beds with a ritual of cotton and
cloud, she fell too fast in oblivious love with sleep.

II

There is a photo. My sister and I, droop-faced with sleep in pajamas and hoodies,
messy preteen hair. It’s Christmas, and we are sitting beside the tree, tearing paper off of
boxes with a careless ferocity. My mother spent long nights up late for those gifts—after
her nine-hour days at the daycare, and dinner, and dishes, and scrubbing the counters
with a wet rag, and waiting for us to go to bed so she could lock herself in the lamplight
of her bedroom and make sure the creases of the paper were folded and taped just right,
the matching ribbons majestically scissor-curled.
My mother’s not in this picture, but behind it; like her photojournalist father who was never caught without his black Canon hanging from his neck, she is the taker of so many boxes full of pictures, the diligent recorder of memories. My sister, father and I mostly found her impulse annoying, forcing us to stop the surge of our lives to smile and pose. Now, I find myself annoying my friends with the same habit, the same itching need to create a visual record of the moment. Something that captures, proves, preserves.

My mother tells stories of a different tree, a different time when each year she and my father would bring a real pine home, before they invested in the plastic and wire one I’ve always known. Though it never lived in a forest, nothing about this one feels fake to me; the rainbow assortment of lights cast a glow of warmth and gentle safety that still radiate in me as some abstracted and distilled essence of childhood, of love incarnate. The ornaments are collages of time: my great-grandmother’s glass antiques, my grandmother’s cloth angels—the ones my mom grew up with—the popsicle stick and glitter-glue projects of our childhoods, and Disney characters, and plastic snowmen, and porcelain baby shoes with our names hung high towards the top. On top is our angel, our blonde-ringlet, harp-holding angel, beautiful in gold-embroidered cream silk.

There was once another angel, too, I’m told. Although I remember the day ours arrived, I don’t remember anything about the one it replaced. I remember my father bringing in the box and unwrapping the porcelain angel, reaching to place her over the tree’s point, smooth her dress over the branches. I remember he said that she looked just like my mother, and my mother laughed, flattered. Truthfully, they do resemble each other: the full, blonde hair, the pretty cream face and thick lashes. The angel has pale green eyes while my mother’s are blue, but from a distance, it’s hard to tell either way.
Of course, the angel is flawless in a way no person can be; she remains wrinkleless and serene, always embellished in that cream and gold dress that never stains or creases. My mother is a person, and time slides out of her, as it does us all. I think when my father said she looked like the angel, he meant it, but he meant something beyond complexion and hair color. Their spirits look the same. They share the same awe-inspiring softness. From the photo and from behind it, they reflect back to each other, presiding over the tangled mess of lights and joyfully scattered ribbon-curls.

III

The morning of the surgery to have my gallbladder removed, winter storm Stella was barreling up the east coast. As they wheeled me down the hallway into surgery, my first, I was so frightened that I tried to quickly memorize the light fixtures on the walls. They were angular and green, an eerie art-deco I appreciated, should they turn out to be the last thing I ever saw. I didn’t want to cry in front of anyone, especially my mother, so I focused on the snowstorm on the news as I waited for the anesthesiologist to slip behind the blue curtain and calm me with his steady-handed potions.

After surgery, I woke howling. Uninhibited, throat-raw gasping, sobbing, a blur of half-drowned white fog. At some distance, an infant began to cry. The nurse said, “Wow, calm down…that’s a little much…” and spurted something into my IV.

When I came-to again, I was upstairs in the room with my mom. I watched the news from my hospital bed as I drifted in and out of nauseous consciousness, anesthesia and morphine wearing off in shifts. She sat in a chair beside me and graded her third-grade class’ papers, her project while she slept on my living room futon to care for me.
that week. Outside the hospital window, a speckling of snowflakes fell over the parking lot. Kentucky wasn’t in any real danger of a blizzard, too far south for anything but a sigh of Stella’s breath, the breeze at the backside of a flip of her hair.

My mom tells me a story of who she was at twenty-three, the age I am now. She was someone’s wife, my father’s, and they lived in an old Victorian house in Boston. She says she can remember an upstairs window she stood at once when she was the sickest she’d ever been, vomiting up food poison. She can remember looking down from that window at the front yard, at the grass.

While my dad was at work, she made the house her project. She spent all her free time peeling a century’s worth of paint coats from the walls, pulling up linoleum, restoring the original antique wood doors. They only lived there a year before they moved again for my dad’s job.

She searches the address and pulls a picture of the house up on her phone. It’s blue with a rounded doorway, a flag hanging over the entry, a large yard. It doesn’t look that old, to me. It looks satirically all-American. A section has been added on in the years since, she said, but otherwise it’s the same as when she lived there. Briefly I realize that as we look at the picture, the house in it is being pounded with feet of snow, Boston icing over as we speak. She said she can remember it so clearly, what it was like to walk up the front steps and unlock the door, what it was like to be that person, the twenty-three-year-old person who lived there. Just one of so many of her lives buried under layers of paint and past.
WOMEN IN THE BASEMENT

Two days after Christmas, I woke my mother at 3 a.m., shaking her shoulder and calling her Mama like I hadn’t since I was a child. The tree was still plugged-in, casting its orange glow across the dining room, onto the dark kitchen counter. She packed me a tin of homemade chocolate-covered peanut butter balls, little Trinity sneaking one or two into her mouth with a smirk, her hair still ratty from sleep.

I had spent the day before loading boxes into my used Kia Soul, everything I owned but my twelve-year-old mattress and a couple of bookshelves.

My mom said, “Hold on, I have something I planned to give to you,” before shuffling to her bedroom. When she came back, she was holding a small, blue velvet box.

She placed it in my hands.

***

Anna was a trucking town, built on the constant commerce of drivers passing through and yet never really leaving, their spots at the torn vinyl booths of Driver’s Diner filled hours later with another the same as them; always everyone going but seemingly never going anywhere. The town itself reflected this, steadily building and growing but never really changing.

My bedroom had a view of the highway, stretched out above our subdivision, a valley of gray shingles replicated across angled roofs. I would sit awake and count the cars whose headlights flashed across the sky, the roar of engines faint echoes of lullabies in the distance. As soon as one appeared it was gone, and the bright call of another replaced it. My thoughts followed them to wherever they came from, wherever they would go. I longed to join the spectral fleet of anonymous travelers, who left without
realizing that where they had been was somewhere. That someone briefly had seen their fractals of light and wished to know them, wished to be them.

***

“Grandma Taylor brought this back from one of her travels,” she said. “I must have been eleven, or twelve? Maybe just a little older than Trin. And I kept it all these years. Even my grandmother’s handwriting is still there.”

Inside the box was a delicate silver ring, the thin band worn, like it could have once been gold. Crowning it was a silver flower and a Star of David at its mouth, embellished with one tiny diamond. The note inside read, in blue cursive pen on faded blue paper: Haifa Israel, 1976.

***

Of the myths that run riverlike through my mother’s side of the family—that our ancestors started the Great Chicago Fire, that they were vagabond travelers in Ireland, that they gave away homes to freed slaves in Dallas after the Civil War—the myths about my great-grandmother, Helen, carved the deepest furrow.

A notebook entry from second grade reminds me that I used to pray to her. From the top of our computer desk, a gold-framed picture of her looked down, her wide wired glasses and toothy smile, her liver-speckled skin. But I always imagined her as beautiful. She married when she was fourteen, the myths say. It was only after her husband died, when she was in her sixties, that she traveled the world, and earned her college degree.

And she painted. Though no one ever told me; no one spoke of her as an artist. It was something I discovered before moving away to graduate school, when I was searching through the moth-ridden cosmos of my grandmother’s basement for chairs to
furnish my apartment with. I found stacks of beautiful oil paintings, hundreds of them, some raw canvas and some framed, lying under tarps, behind dressers, stored under the pool table and in the storm closet. I found my great-grandmother’s story, the one no one tells, collecting dust in the basement.

***

“This is so beautiful,” I said, hugging her. “Thank you.”

“Well, I always said Grandma Taylor was my guardian angel, and now you’ll have her keeping you safe on your trip.”

I tried to slide the ring onto my finger, but the band was only wide enough to reach the knuckle. On my pinky, it was loose, in danger of flying off with one eccentric hand gesture. I jammed it down over the meat of the thicker finger.

***

My great-grandmother, Helen: the traveler. My grandmother, Bea: the historian. My mother, Mary, the teacher who followed my dad around the country for fifteen years before divorcing him and driving us back to live in Dallas, her hometown.

Three women before me, and three alongside me, including my sisters and myself—though at twenty-three I barely feel comfortable calling myself a woman. A “woman” has a partner, children or the possibility of them, a certain perfume sparkle to her. A woman has something that passes for a rooted life.

My sister, Stephanie, has a daughter of her own, and my other sister, Trinity, is still young enough to be satisfied with being someone else’s daughter. I am a daughter, but I am many other things a daughter doesn’t have the luxury of being. I am still trying
to work out how to successfully be a woman, a daughter, and—somehow, between the two—free.

***

Three women before me, three among me, and a history of cancer. Helen died of breast cancer. Bea and Mary had double-mastectomies within two years of each other. Between myself and my two sisters, statistics suggest at least one of the three of us will have breast cancer, too.

If I had the choice, I’d choose to take that burden for my sisters. Stephanie has a daughter, a family to live for, and I would never want Trinity to experience the panic and pain that comes with your body turning against you, consuming in its multiplication. Although maybe my theoretical sacrifice has nothing to do with them, with martyrdom, or even a secret death-wish; the women in my family are all small, petite and ever-shrinking with age as their husbands grow—or their husbands’ ghosts grow and swell and flood—while my body has always taken up too much space.

***

In the driveway, I slung my sunflower-printed duffle bag into the passenger’s seat and felt a lump in my throat. Two weeks since my college graduation and just less than a month of planning to move half a continent away hadn’t left much time for last-minute nostalgia or fear. When I came back from Seattle, if I came back, it wouldn’t be the same. Texas wouldn’t be home any longer, just another holding place with some of the people I loved inside it.

My mom trapped me in a smothering, minutes-long hug, and I felt her hot tears on my neck. I playfully laughed at her, said goodbye and got in my car, and then she and my
nine-year-old sister stood in their pajamas in the cold and drizzly-dark driveway as I pulled away.

***

Two years later, I’ve moved across the country a second time, toward the opposite coast. One of my great-grandmother’s paintings hangs in my apartment, above a bookshelf, perfume bottles, a jewelry case, and a jar of sea-glass and shells from my shore-side walks in Seattle. The painting is a seascape in lavender and blue that reminds me of wandering the stony beach, when I was lonely and afraid and alive, the Puget Sound a seething friend at my bedroom window.

My last day on that beach was gray and still, as I parked my car by the sand. It was packed and stacked with the same boxes I had come with, a hoard of new books bulging them just a little larger. I stared in the direction of the lighthouse for a long time, trying to carve its silhouette deeply inside my skull. During the summer, they open it for tours, allow people to climb up inside and look out over the glistening cove. But I wouldn’t be there for summer.

In the glass jar that now sits on my bookshelf, under my great-grandmother’s painting, I collected shells and rocks and driftwood to take with me, souvenirs of a life I’d once belonged to. I remember that gray day clearly, but it seems a very long time ago.
EVIDENCE OF BURNING

In a movie, this would be the place. A slow fade in on the pockmarked road, truck tires tilling thorough bramble. Lavender sprung up like stray hairs among browned-out winter weeds. The moon-carved shutters, half-stolen by vandals, filtering the damp, gray-golden light. My sister climbing the gnarled tree in the front yard, paper flowers in her hair. A nose unlike mine, and deep, crescent-moon dimples; half-sister. Best sister.

This house is log-built and monstrous, and like all things I am attracted to, abandoned. My mother tells me it’s the Jane Wyatt estate, built in the 1930’s by an actress who returned from her life in smoky New York to Crossville, Tennessee, to reclaim the land she was born on. Down yonder are the ruins of her grandfather’s home, the home of her youth. My mother brings us here, my sister and me.

Two stories and fourteen rooms, emptied out glorious. Glass windows blown to shards, and wires sprouting from the weathered mortar between cherrywood planks. A gorgeous grand staircase, the banister ripped from rusted nails. The built-in cabinets are still intact, and my sister makes a game of stuffing her spry bones into them, emerging unexpected, with a laugh. The air here does not feel haunted.

Earlier in the year, the Crossville Chronicle ran a story with the headline: “Crossville’s Lady of Fame.” In the accompanying picture, an old woman stands by a framed painting of the log mansion. She holds a black-and-white picture of a woman with dark hair pinned under a wool hat. Jane Wyatt, young and alive. The old woman: Ruby Wyatt Davis, her half-sister.20

20 Crossville Chronicle online. “More on ‘Our Lady of Fame.’”
It doesn’t take much to become a “Lady of Fame” in a town as small as Crossville, the place my parents and eleven-year-old sister have newly settled after moving from a town in Texas not much bigger. Texas, the place I left quickly, my footprints marking the front yard with ashes on the way out. In places like these, all it takes to be Somebody is to be gone.

The gone-er, the better. Jane went to Nashville, then Kentucky, then New York. I went to Seattle, then Kentucky, then—well, I’ll go somewhere else, probably. Who can say? There’s still time. You get better at being gone the more you do it, and women like Jane and I have a lot of practice.

Jane’s sister remembers Jane’s absent years through fond gifts: letters, one printed with a stamp from Grand Central Station. Silver pieces from her travels to China. A recording of her singing, *Have You Ever Been Lonely?* (What is it about an almost-mournful croon that borders sexy, and a feathered sexiness that borders melancholy?) Anyway, these things are all lost to time now.

I think of my own sister and a drawing she made in second grade that hangs on the wall in my writing room. In crayon, three crude sketches of landscapes with the captions “Texas,” “New York City,” and “England,” and underneath, her explanation: *My dream is to travel the world because my sister travels and she inspires me to do this.* It’s a reminder that there is a reason to keep exploring, keep living wild. That the wandering part of me is something good.

Being gone was never a choice for me. It was an impulse, a deadly lust for disappearing, a flame tangled into my DNA. Some people feel an obligation to their roots. Jane rerouted the same well-water from her grandfather’s house to flow through the
pipes of the log mansion. When my mother assumes their house will be passed on to me when they’re gone, I tell her I would never choose to live in Crossville. The truth—an obvious one based on everything she knows about me—but it upsets her. Maybe I’m not old enough yet. I’ve never lived in New York. I’ve not yet tired of being a ghost, a voice on the telephone, a letter with a stamp from Grand Central Station.

Take three crooked staircases to an attic room with a crouched sliver of roof, the windows pouring open. I trace my hands over a charred plank, evidence of a forgotten arson, some teenager’s sour-apple-Smirnoff-Molotov-cocktail. Evidence here, in the shattered glass and weathered floorboards, of a burning.

When Jane was in Kentucky she married a man. He was an alcoholic, and she divorced him. She must have loved him, but he must have loved drinking, drowning, more; a love unattainable. When I moved to Kentucky, I drove in as the sun was setting orange and pink over rolling hills bordered by rustic wooden fences. I felt my chest swoon bittersweet and mystical as I thought, This would be a beautiful place to fall in love. And I was right. But how to explain that falling in love is about falling in love with everything, the whole of being alive?21

Once we name something, we can never see it the same way again.22 I named you love and you became it. You named me something I wished to be, and I tamed the fire I always was, smoldered only on the inside. I’ve written about this elsewhere, but I’m

21 I didn’t mean for this to be about love. I wonder how long before I am able to write about anything else and feel it is some kind of honest. No—feel it is not some kind of lie.

22 “Once we name something, you said, we can never see it the same way again.” Maggie Nelson, The Argonauts. p. 4
trying to say something different now.\textsuperscript{23} I’m trying to say that I have always wanted what is unattainable. I was a little girl watching through my bedroom window at night as the pinprick shine of cars disappeared down the highway; I was a teenager wanting blazing bleeding craving so thoroughly it made my core shake and my soul run and hide inside of me for years; Here I am now, dousing myself in gasoline and calling it need.\textsuperscript{24}

I’m trying to say, I think, that maybe the women I know write with fire under their skin because there is a fire under their skin. Maybe their words were ignited by some man—father or lover—who made them feel the lightness of grief, or tried to drown them in remembering. Or maybe women are born of fire and spend their lives clawing their way back from burning, creating new things to make up for the way they have of singeing everything they touch.

How telling it is that women describe creation, even childbirth, as a kind of obliteration.\textsuperscript{25} Love, for me, was a pouring out and reconstructing of self; another obliteration. Here, I am writing myself out of the record, and perhaps I have always been. This is just another kind of leaving.\textsuperscript{26}

\textsuperscript{23}“I’ve explained this elsewhere. But I’m trying to say something different now.” Maggie Nelson, \textit{The Argonauts}. p. 4

\textsuperscript{24}If \textit{wanting what we can’t have is the most self-hating thing we can do}, then I don’t know how I can continue to call this love, except that I don’t know how to call it anything else.

\textsuperscript{25}“I had nearly four decades to become myself before experimenting with my obliteration.” Maggie Nelson, \textit{The Argonauts}. p. 37

\textsuperscript{26}Writing is a small, quiet room where you can talk to someone as if they’re there. Lately, my writing feels like the bones of this house; empty, wooden, boxed-in rooms that lay into each other, one leading to another, all of them abandoned and lying in wait for you to search through them. I am letting these details slip from my fingers like flower petals. I am daring you to come find me.
Jane Wyatt died at age 93, in a year before I was born. When I search her name, I find only pictures of an actress more famous than her, twenty years her junior. Now, in a small-town newspaper article, her half-sister remembers her. Ruby Wyatt Davis never left Tennessee. She drives reporters down the pockmarked road to the gutted house. She shows them the way. I can’t say what is better in the end, what is freedom: to leave and be lost to the wind, or to stay and remember. My hope is that my sister gets the choice. Maybe freedom is in the choosing, in believing, even for a second, that nothing is truly unattainable.

And what does it mean if there were no charred wooden boards to trace with my fingers, as I climbed through the ribcage of a grand place wilting in the woods in Tennessee? If I tell you that this house never hosted a fire. That it was just forgotten.
LIFE IN BOOKS:
AN INTELLECTUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY


Here is how it started: a purple cover embedded with a stained-glass rose. It’s nearly terrifying to imagine the possibility that everything I am now, everything I’ve loved and hated and fought to achieve, is owed to a book that appeared in my bedroom when I was two-and-a-half years old. My mom might have bought it, or at least might remember where it came from if I asked her, but that’s beside the point. As a kid, I wore the tape out of the VHS watching Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast*; I was taken to see the show on ice and acquired a Barbie doll Belle I still have somewhere, though her head might be missing. Maybe that’s where the book came from as well.

I loved that story as a child and somehow my life became its realization, a strange, self-fulfilling prophecy. But that’s also beside the point.

The point is: when I was two-and-a-half I memorized this book from my mother’s voice at bedtime. I learned to read by decoding black symbols scattered in the stained glass, deciphering sounds and words, I would recite the book from memory to my parents, their friends, my friends, anyone who would listen, and when I saw amazement spring up into their eyes I knew that this was the first thing that made me special.


Like most people in my generation, the Harry Potter books were the first I became absorbed in. *The Sorcerer’s Stone* was given to me by my second grade teacher, Mrs. Dinkle, a stout woman with black hair and straight, even bangs. I can still remember that
second grade classroom; the sticky smell that accompanies anyplace children spend time
and the blood-red, bean-bag-sized pillows in the reading corner where I sat and consumed
the first book, then the second. The third, *The Prisoner of Azkaban*, was a loan from the
library, and might have been the first book I disliked no matter how much I wanted to
love it (and maybe the first book I finished mostly by skimming). By book four, *The
Goblet of Fire*, I had caught up to J.K Rowling, and I began to wait for the newest book
to come out each year, which I usually received as a birthday present, or for Christmas,
and spent that entire day on my bed reading cover to cover, to the confused delight of my
parents. As an adolescent, when I got grounded—which in our house meant waking up
early to do chores all day, with no friends, no TV, and no books—I hid *The Goblet of
Fire* under a pile of clothes in my closet and read in secret, listening carefully for
footsteps coming up the stairs, cracks in the fantasy of being elsewhere.

**Mitchell, Margaret. *Gone with the Wind*. New York: Macmillan, 1936.**

In sixth grade, I borrowed the paperback from the school library and read all 1035
pages in two weeks. I found a role model, an alter-ego of sorts, in Scarlett O’Hara—she
was everything I secretly felt I was, except that she was better: beautiful, brave, desired.
(Years later, when I saw the movie, I would scoff at the way Vivian Leigh played her as
selfish and pouty, not the empowered and incredibly complex figure I understood her to
be.) I wrote a book report on *Gone with the Wind* for my English class, and my teacher
accused me of plagiarism because, “a girl your age shouldn’t know that many words.”

I bought this book with a Barnes and Noble gift card two years after it came out, having missed out on it until then for some unremembered and unimportant reason. I read it while spending the summer with my dad, late at night in the guest bedroom, in the house of his newlywed wife; the woman who would, at the end of that summer, shoot and kill him in that same house.

When I finished the book, I cried for Dobby and for the end of my childhood.

**Carroll, Lewis. *Alice in Wonderland*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1992.**

I was in love with Mr. Hays, my bearded, combat-boot-wearing high school English teacher. Because I was graduating a year early I was ineligible for dual-credit at the nearby community college, and so I took Mr. Hays’s class: “regular” English senior year, the desks filled with future frat boys and disinterested burnouts. He loved me a little too, I think, if only in the way that I was his smartest student, read for fun and wrote poetry, and was desperate for his approval. I began to research the bands and books from the posters that hung on his classroom walls (even his posters were perceived as enticingly anti-establishment in my largely southern Baptist high school of 400). I learned facts about Talking Heads and Pearl Jam, and bought *In Utero* on vinyl (a solid purchase, since I loved Nirvana before and after Mr. Hays). I played it over the speakers of my mom’s barely functioning, marshmallow green record player from the 70’s while reading *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, a book I didn’t understand then, and to be honest, still don’t.

That year Mr. Hays taught *Alice in Wonderland*, which I fell into even more easily than my unrealistic obsession with him. We talked about narration, metaphor, and
literary absurdity. I wrote a poem with images inspired by the book, and he, a former professor, was the first person who told me I should be an English major, though I didn’t listen. At least, not yet.


My love for books may have started with so many others, but seeing them as a potential path, aglow with potential—a beacon of unexpected hope and a talisman against death and fear and a dreaded but seemingly unavoidable life of quiet desperation—began first with the moment I pulled *Crush* out of the mailbox.

I walked through the courtyard of the private Christian university I had spent eight anxious, disconnected months at, and went upstairs to the apartment I shared with my university-assigned roommate, my only friend there. The carpet in that apartment was dark blue, plush, new, though everything else was left over from the 80’s. My roommate wasn’t home, so I sat on the blue corduroy couch in the living room and looked through the book; a book of poetry, the cover a close-up, black-and-white photo of a man’s stubbled mouth and calloused hand wiping away what was possibly, but not definitively, blood. I had come across a quote attributed to the author on Pinterest, something about a beautiful boy in a car who won’t tell you he loves you, and bought it on Amazon impulsively. I had time before my next class, so I began to read.

When I finished, I was crying. I slid to the floor and read it again. My hands might have been shaking a little when I pulled my laptop open and started a Word document.
What happened next I can only describe as a pouring out of language. I wrote without trying, without thinking, without noticing the sky darken through the blinds or that I had missed my classes and my roommate was home and cooking dinner in our cupboard of a kitchen. For three days, maybe more, I skipped all my classes and wrote. I was a Neuroscience major, but what I had created, the impulse to create in itself, felt far more important than the study of synapses firing in the dark. By the end of the week, I had eighty pages of poetry and the wrist tattoo I had always wanted but had been too afraid to get, which said:

*Write something worth reading or do something worth writing.*

I vowed to do both. I transferred schools, and when I did, it was as a writer.


With the new freedom of finding the missing puzzle piece, the thing I realized I was meant to do, came the fear of not being able to do it well. Soon after I began to take my study of writing seriously, I found *Zen in the Art of Writing* on a bookshelf in a friend’s bedroom, and asked to borrow it, not knowing what I was getting myself into. What I was getting myself into was this: Unbridled, joyous passion for the power of stories and the process of writing them. It reminded me why I loved books and helped me figure out what I wanted to accomplish with my writing: to *Live Forever*, and to make the people who read what I had written feel less alone.

Even now, it only takes cracking my battered copy and reading a few lines before I’m moved to literal tears and flowing over with passion and inspiration and truly
immense gratitude. Whatever the stuff is that makes people want to create, that impulse, that fabric of the universe strung up secret inside all of us, is in this book.

Now, I think that maybe that stuff is genuine love. Bradbury had love for the craft, love for his characters, love for his readers and fellow writers, especially the young ones in whom he saw shadows of himself. I teach this text now to my freshman composition students, and look closely for the spark kindling in the eyes of those rare, creatively-inclined students who “get it.” In the months and years that followed what I consider the beginning of my writing career, Bradbury’s words were my prayers and mantras:

“What does writing teach us? First and foremost, it reminds us that we are alive and that is a gift and a privilege, not a right.”

“The first thing a writer should be—is excited. He should be a thing of fevers and enthusiasms.”

“Let the world burn through you. Throw the prism light, white hot, on paper.”

“You must stay drunk on writing so reality cannot destroy you.”


One of the first pieces I read by Carver, “The Bath,” is a beautifully cut gem of a story. It’s minimal, cold and unapologetic in its pristine calculation, a style reflecting the story’s theme of distance between people, of inevitable, crippling human isolation. A feeling I understood well.

I had sent out my graduate school applications but the future was still uncertain, so the writing workshop I took in my final semester of college could very well have ended up being the last class of my life. Outside, the air was dancing gusts of frozen chill, but the classroom was warm. Cozy.

“A Small, Good Thing” is a revision of “The Bath,” almost ten pages longer than the original and written after Carver remarried and gave up drinking following a lifetime of alcoholism. The new story uses many of the same phrases and plot points as the original, but in many respects, it’s nearly an opposite; the prose, in “The Bath” is short and sharply calculated, while it’s flowing, meandering, almost sloppy in “A Small, Good Thing.” While “The Bath” is essentially about the disconnection between individuals trapped in their own bodies, minds, and lives, “A Small, Good Thing” is about all the glorious and sustaining connections between people, and how hope can be found and loneliness extinguished with simple gestures.

In the end, there is a scene where the parents of a dead boy go to a baker’s shop to scream at him for what they perceive to be the baker’s intrusion, though accidental, during this tragic moment in their lives. Instead, the baker opens up and shares his own sadness with them. He gives them his story, his tenderness, the small bit of kindness he has to offer. He makes them warm cinnamon rolls and they stay and eat and talk into the night.

My professor spoke about the warmth in that ending, the love, and he mentioned that some scholars believe Carver actually wrote the baker to represent himself, offering
his stories and what kindness he could to his readers. Though I’ve never done research on this, I liked the thought of it, and I teared up in that room, on that final day, feeling warmth and transcendent love and the sense that although I didn’t know how things would turn out, it would all turn out okay. It was a good ending.

After class, as we got up from our seats, I saw in a glimpse that none of us would ever be who we were in that moment again; I could see our lives, everyone’s, flowering in different directions like rivers on a map. I walked quickly down the hallway because I wanted to remember that image, that flash of bittersweet insight and everything good to come ahead.

On the way to my car I ran into two guys from class who told me they really liked my writing and that I should submit it somewhere, and wished me a good holiday. It was a rushed, happy moment, and I wondered why I had ever shied away from connection, why I so often felt isolated when there is so much empathy, so much compassion in other people, just waiting to be shared.

A few weeks later, on the way to the Seattle area where I moved after graduation, I stopped in Port Angeles at the Oceanview Cemetery where Raymond Carver is buried. There’s a small stone bench by his gravestone where people leave rocks and wildflowers, polaroids and pennies. I sat with him for a while and said things to him, even though I was only talking to a grave. Although his body was down there somewhere, I knew he’d probably long ago fled it. I suppose the best way to talk privately to your heroes is to wait until they’re dead.

What I said to him doesn’t matter, but one of the things I said was: “Thank you for being the baker.”
Richard Siken’s first book lead me to writing, and writing lead me to an internship at Copper Canyon Press, which lead me back to Richard Siken—something I didn’t expect or plan for until the staff told me I would be helping to manage the campaign for his first new book of poetry in a decade, *War of the Foxes*. At my desk in the drafty WW2-armory-turned-publishing-office, I found Siken’s new book on the computer server and read it in one sitting, and it was everything I hoped it would be. Like the feeling of things that matter growing alongside you and finding you again when you need them most.

I could write volumes about Port Townsend, about the way I was set free by the rise and fall of the ocean outside my bedroom window, about the Victorian houses, the driftwood beach forts, the swell of the shoreline from the ferry deck and the intoxicating smell of the paper mill. I could write about Copper Canyon; the sense of belonging I had never felt as strongly as when someone interrupted the workday to read out a particularly beautiful line they’d come across, and how my boss’s office smelled wild, like dried meat and the forest. I could talk about the way any time someone read poetry, the others closed their eyes, listening as if the words were sacred, as if poetry read aloud in a room was better than or equal to prayer.

And someday, I will write about that, and all the things I haven’t let myself think about since leaving that place because I don’t want to lose a single detail. Because revisiting past lives that were worth living hurts a little too much.
For now, I’m going to write about the day I boarded the ferry to Whidbey Island at five in the morning, drove up to the Samish Bay where, hidden in the trees and flood plains, there was an old wooden barn, now an artist’s studio. The wood stove burned too hot and splinters from the ceiling beams stuck in my sweater sleeves as a fellow intern and I hung hundreds of blank white postcards from invisible strings. The camera crew, two men with curled moustaches, arrived and began to set up; we were filming a video to promote War of the Foxes.

Richard arrived, smoking a cigarette, and began to paint. We watched him.

At the end of the day, the Press’ coordinator interviewed him on film, and I stood at the back of the barn loft, feeling so grateful and trying not to cry but mostly failing. This was something he said that stuck with me:

“As a beginning writer you feel like you’re screaming in the dark. When you publish, you realize not everyone wants to hear what you have to say, so when someone picks up your pages, they’re really listening. It’s a strange, sideways love. You’re not screaming in the dark anymore, you’re whispering, and you don’t know who you’re whispering to, or how many there are, but nonetheless you have to trust them, because they chose you. Or maybe your words chose them.”
PORTRAIT OF MY STEPFATHER AS WOODEN PORCH AND IVY

after “Those Winter Sundays” by Robert Hayden

I

“Sundays too my father got up early
and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,
then with cracked hands that ached
from labor in the weekday weather made
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.”

A copper-wire-manufacturing mechanic (formerly dog-washer, ranch tiller, drug addict) come home with a burst of garage door and Rorschach of oil splattering his work-shirt grays and blues. Oddities of brushes to scrub black tar from palms and fingernails, pill-bottles filled with ostrich oil to balm the metal shards embedded incidentally in his arm. Back-breaking work, he said but continued on, sleeping days and suiting up at night, toiling in the heat under the monstrous carriage of steel machines. A secret poet, writing winding sentences from his youth of sleeping under bridges, only a journal and a sweater to his name, after a brief career parachuting from planes, alarm clock the internal rhyme scheme of his soldier’s heart. On days off he got up early to sizzle bacon with those cracked and blackened palms, tucked fluffy eggs into tortilla blankets, hollered up the stairs or steam-rolled over us in our beds on a playful morning. And sometimes yard work, never half-assed. He said the only thing a person has in the end, when stripped of all but God, is the dignity of their word, the promises they’ve relinquished to another.

II

230
“I’d wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.
When the rooms were warm, he’d call,
and slowly I would rise and dress,
fearing the chronic angers of that house,”

There is a photo. In it, Mark and I are hugging, him smiling proudly, my long, dark hair and face smooshed into his shoulder. I am sixteen and almost look it, and even he looks younger, maybe, than his forty-something years. In my billowing purple robe, I have just graduated high school. Ten months since my dad died.

In those ten months, the disaster of his looming anger softened briefly, wore down like an old cotton T-shirt. My sister in rehab and back. My mother, too, would be going soon. Was he simply tired, or answerless? How to be gentle while watching your wife mourn another man, another love, a different, deified piece of her past? Somehow he managed, between the twelve-hour shifts and clanking of pans and TV noises and pummeling of bodies moving reckless through our home, to find a patient strength.

Our relationship would not feel like a friendship for many years, but in this photo, I am holding onto something almost better. A still-living piece of a father.

III

“Speaking indifferently to him,
who had driven out the cold
and polished my good shoes as well.
What did I know, what did I know
of love’s austere and lonely offices?”
On Christmas Eve the year that I am twenty-three, Mark asks me to come stand with him on the front porch while he smokes a cigarette. This house is not the house I grew up in, but the place my parents and Trin have moved in rural Tennessee. The wooden porch looks over a small, unkempt yard, an antique iron bell hanging from a pole in the center, acres of as-of-yet unexplored forest surrounding the house from all sides. Ivy coils up the side of the wooden railing. I eye the green vines as Mark speaks his concerns.

His concerns are about me, my future. He’d overheard me talking to my mother minutes earlier, telling her my fallback plan when my master’s program ended was to move to Ohio with my friend and office-mate, who had just been accepted to a PhD program in Bowling Green. Sweet and bubbly Lena with lioness blonde hair, the kind of hair that begged for a smattering of wildflowers. Nicknamed “Bop” because of her way of bopping rhythmic while cheerful or dancing, I’d brought her to their house with me for Thanksgiving a month earlier, and they’d enjoyed her.

“I just don’t want to see you settling, following anybody around,” he said. “You’ve never been a follower. You’ve always gone off and had your own adventures.”

“It’s not a for sure thing,” I said, “just something we’ve been talking about. Because I don’t know what I’ll be doing after all this is over. I don’t know about a job, or what I really want to do, or anything. It’s just nice to have an option.”

He sighed, shifting over the wood boards, igniting a faint creak. “But what about if ya’ll break up?”

“Wait, what?”
“Come on, you don’t have to play dumb. Your mom and I knew when you brought her. Why do you think we set ya’ll up out in the camper, so you’d have privacy."

This shocked me only a little. Lena and I joked that we had a “romantic friendship,” though it had never gone farther than that. It never would, probably. But still. What shocked me more was that my parents had been so considerate. That Mark had set up the pop-out camper in the yard and made up the two beds, only one of which he expected to be slept in. The porch ivy tangled itself in the wind.

“Lena and I aren’t dating,” I said, not looking quite at him. My nerves felt metallic, collapsible. My throat opened fire-worn. “But, you know, um, I think you should know. I do date girls. And boys. Both.”

“I mean, I assumed that,” he said. “Your mom and I assumed that, at a certain point.”

Did the world go quiet then? The porch the sky the trees the wind the inanimate misplaced ivy greening behind my eyes?

“Nothing about that could make me love you any less, though,” he said. “I don’t care who you date or who you end up with, as long as they’re good to you.”

“Thank you,” I said, lump-throated. “So you don’t care? That’s just a little surprising, based on things you’ve said in the past.” I didn’t mention the car, the yelling that night when I was fourteen. I doubted he’d even have remembered. It didn’t matter much now.

His dark eyes began to shine and water. “You’re my daughter. The incredible person you are….and the joy you bring to my life…is too important to me to let anything else affect that.”
Later that night, after our ritual peanut-butter balls and Trinity’s letter to Santa, Mark helped me find time to talk to my mom alone in their bedroom, distracting Trin and Grandma Bea with a rerun of the *Rudolph* movie.

When I came out to her, she was equally loving and supportive. Sitting on the bed, she puffed on her cappuccino-scented vape pen. We hugged, and went back to the family, the dim living room. Mark sat in a recliner by the tree, drenched in the warm multicolor light. “Everything okay?” he asked. I nodded. He gave me a thumbs-up across the room, his smile beaming bright.
Grief
“We might expect if the death is sudden to feel shock…We do not expect to be literally crazy, cool customers who believe their husband is about to return and need his shoes.”

–Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*

“I am chasing my father the way the dead chase after days.”

–Ocean Vuong, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*
ON GRIEF

After my father died, I began to follow men around the grocery store. Middle aged men, men with dark hair and bald spots, glasses-wearing men in white sneakers and too-long socks, in tucked polo shirts, in dark suits. Men with their thin hair combed back, a slight tan. Men who looked like him. I began to see my father in strangers, began to watch these strangers for a glimpse of my father. I still do. Now, I watch men who look like him and like he might have looked were he still alive; a more pronounced bald spot, the jowls and papery skin that come with old age. I don’t follow them through stores and streets, but I let my gaze linger. With these strangers, I stage an exhibition of how he lived and breathed and moved through the world. You would be amazed how many random men at airports and in cars at stoplights have made me look twice, look closer.

My father was a computer engineer. He had a security clearance. In the months surrounding my birth in Henderson, Nevada, he drove an hour to work in a government facility in the desert, and boarded on a jet plane with blacked-out windows. Even he didn’t know exactly where he was going or where he ended up, just that he couldn’t talk about it to his wife (my mom)—not to anyone. Later, he worked with iRobot in Boston, planning the software that was eventually used for military patrol robots in the Iraq War, the Mars Exploration Rover, and locating the Boston Marathon Bomber.

These are only pieces I’ve heard, from him when my sister and I visited, from my mom and grandma, but as I was growing up I didn’t know exactly what he did for a job. Aside from his drunken ramblings about aliens and Area 51 at a Ramada Inn when I was twelve, I still don’t. There is no reason to believe that he worked for the CIA in any capacity, or the FBI, or any government agency that would feasibly require someone to
fake their death, leave their life, disappear. But a year after he died, I began to have
dreams.

In the dreams, my father faked his death because he was undercover for the CIA.
He’s back now, alive. He’s glad to see me. He pulls up a chair to a desktop computer and
I catch him up on everything he’s missed: pictures from my high school graduation, trips
to Europe, and grad school. There are variations: In one dream, he didn’t work for the
CIA at all; I go to grab a bottle of wine from my grandparents’ basement on
Thanksgiving, and find him hiding behind the shelves, among the ancient moonshine and
pickled okra.

In one, he’s lying on the hardwood floor of my apartment completely bald,
completely naked except for his glasses. I try to show him the pictures, but he won’t
move. I tell him I’ve been writing about him. I try to push him into my office so he can
see, ask him if it’s okay to write about him, if he’s mad, if he likes the words, what he
thinks, but he won’t talk to me, he won’t tell me, won’t say anything.

I woke up smelling his aftershave, haunted.

I play these games, look for him in crowds, dream about the CIA. But it wasn’t
until I was sitting on the elevated train headed to Sears Tower in Chicago that I realized:
I actually believed he would show up there.

***

My dad began his life in Harvey, a suburb on the south side of Chicago. Now, a
simple Google search auto-fills the space after Harvey, IL with “crime rate,” and reveals
images of derelict buildings burnt and boarded, grotesquely peeling billboards, and black
men standing around taquerias with steel-barred windows.
When my dad, Steve, was three, his family moved to Park Forest, which my grandma, Irma, remembers as “a nice, upcoming suburb for middle class people, with plenty of community parks.” She describes an idyllic American boyhood, where my father competed in the neighborhood Pinewood Derby and played baseball under cool skies, paying no bother to grass stains. My grandma says she would meet my grandpa, Chuck, at the train station after he got off work, and bring him a clean shirt that he’d change into in the car on the way to the baseball field. They brought pop-out chairs and sat in the grass near the bleachers, Irma hauling water for the boys on the team, and a cooler of ice, in case anyone got injured. Chuck didn’t get dinner until after practice was over, but he held off his complaints because he knew Steve appreciated his presence there.

My grandparents moved to Palatine, on the north side, when Steve was ten or eleven; he took his south side accent with him then, and into adulthood. Even after living all over the country, the hard whine of an “a” punctuated his voice, especially when he said “Chicago.” It’s the only word I can still hear him through clearly, the only way I can remember how his voice sounded.

***

He attended St. Theresa’s Catholic boys’ school. I was nearly shocked when Grandma Irma recalled a memory of him playing the lead role in his school’s production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. When he was alive, I’d spent six years in musical theatre, even going to State with my One Act Play cast, and I intended to enter college as a theatre major, of which he mostly disapproved. But further conversation with Grandma revealed that my father was more liberal-artsy in his youth than I ever knew him to be,
winning a city-wide oratory competition for his speech about the importance of safety in children’s toys, and writing imaginative essays.

These are things I was told in adulthood, only because I asked. Because I only thought to ask after he was dead seven years, when I realized I didn’t know him at all. I’m still not sure I do. After discovering these details, more questions sprout from me like twigs or branches than there are answers to flower them.

What I have for sure is this: a black and white polaroid photo, labeled Stevie, April 1962. A small boy stands on the concrete steps of a brick house. He is wearing suspenders and a bow-tie, his head almost too big for his body. He smiles for the camera.

***

When Steve graduated high school, Chuck and Irma divorced. Irma moved to a townhouse in Schaumberg, and though he was supposed to stay with Chuck, Steve thought it would be best for him to stay with his mom. He enrolled in junior college, but apparently didn’t take it seriously, regularly skipping classes to laze around the house. Irma told him she wasn’t going to pay for college if he didn’t apply himself, so he got a job in Evanston, working on computers at an insurance company. The company thought he was smart, and wanted to pay to send him to Northwestern to study computer engineering, the caveat being that he would, in return, come back and work for them for five years. He came home from work one day and told his mom this. She asked what he was going to do.

According to her account, he said, “If I do it, they’ll be in control of my future, and I want to be in charge of my own life. Call dad; I’m ready to go to college now.”
His best friend Gary’s girlfriend went to what was then North Texas State, and Gary mentioned that she was having a lot of fun there. Steve flew down to Texas and found out that their computer program was one of the best in the country, so he decided to stay. This is where he met my mother, where they fell in love and were married, and where I would find myself returned to more than twenty years after their meeting. The rest, as they say, is history—summed up in my DNA, in the fact of these words written down.

***

Before I hang up the phone, Grandma Irma says, “I have a whole box full of those old pictures and essays from when he was in grade school. Would you be interested in seeing any of that?”

I tell her yes, and she promises to go through the box and send them to me, as soon as she gets the chance.

***

Grief: /grēf/ noun.

a. deep sorrow, especially that caused by someone’s death.

b. poignant distress

c. a cause of such suffering

d. an unfortunate outcome

Example: “She was overcome with grief.”

***

I have never felt overcome with grief, but rather, overcoming, like I forget I am constantly climbing a very steep hill. More than suffering, his death merged into my life
has been a kind of smothering. The honesty of the thing seems, most often, not like sadness, but the guilt and regret that follows an unfortunate outcome.

It was not until five years after his death that I actually missed him, craved him the way I occasionally crave spirituality or an imagined lover. But guilt has always been my default emotion; I feel guilty that my first thoughts after learning of his death were selfish ones about the inconvenience of it all. I feel guilty that I never cried in front of my family. I feel guilty that the relationship between my father and I was a strained one, exacerbated by his drinking and my resentment. I was a shitty teenager to him. Most teenagers are shitty to their parents, but most of their parents aren’t suddenly murdered.

My passions were artistic ones, and his were scientific. I wanted to be a writer or an actress, and my younger sister wanted to be a veterinarian, and only one of us could be his favorite child and for that and many other reasons, I was not it.

***

Grief as I know it has been more like a wall, constructed at the time I descended the stairs and saw my mother’s face, heard her voice as she told the Story for the first time; the Story I and my family would tell a million times over until it was learned by heart. Until the lines were practiced, even the intonation of each word memorized. I descended the stairs a teenage girl and walked back up them not a woman, exactly, but some kind of newly-born, unfamiliar creature. I closed my bedroom door behind me and my life officially began.

Of course, there’s no way to know if any of the stories we tell are the truth.
This is the story I tell to others—to myself—about my father’s life and death, about the tiring complexity of how I handled (or didn’t handle, or am still handling) the puzzle of it all.

Once the story solidifies, everything before the moment of impact becomes myth along with it. There is only life as we see it in retrospect. There is only after.

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Here’s another story: I visited Chicago for the first time the summer before I turned thirteen. With my dad and sister, I remember walking on Michigan Avenue, through streets that sprouted into skyscrapers. Beside an ivory bridge and a body of water, a black man in loose jeans and a white tank top walked beside us, and I remember my dad being visibly frightened of the man, placing his arms around my sister and myself as a barrier. I remember trailing behind, embarrassed by his neuroses. The man walked past, and when he was far ahead, my dad whispered something about gangs.

He took us to Sears Tower. The guide on the ground floor told us that the building was built to sway with the wind. As the numbers on the screen rose and we approached the 100th floor, I was terrified the elevator cables would snap. I didn’t look over and see my dad shaking, or wringing his hands, but he must have been. He was too nervous to ride escalators at the mall.

At the top, he looked briefly over the city, pointing out Wrigley Field. For the rest of the time he stayed close to the center of the circular room, near an interactive screen mounted on the wall. I inched toward the glass, woozy with height. I imagined the sensation of a plane toppling the building, or the floor underneath us capsizing. I could
have sworn I saw the bridge where we had walked earlier. I could have sworn I felt the building sway.

***

Joan Didion opens her book, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, with the first words she wrote after her husband’s death: “Life changes fast. Life changes in the instant.”

Didion’s life and her husband’s were, in many ways, defined by their words branded to paper. But here, she writes about the futility of trying to convey the story of his death to others, to herself. She writes, “This is a case in which I need more than words to find the meaning.”

The first words I wrote about my father after his death were: *There are many things you don’t know about me.* Since then, every sentence has been a revelation that there is so much I don’t know about him, may never know. My writing has become a search, not only for the cosmic meaning in life and death and sudden rippings from one to the other, but for what it means to live life with a death in the blood.

Losing a husband is not like losing a father. Except maybe it is. There’s something about the shape a man leaves when he’s gone—work unfinished, days untangle-able. I remember the funeral of my maternal grandfather and how my grandmother shriveled without his elephant largeness, how she became a trembling bird wearing a dress as pale blue as a drowned child’s cheeks. Whether heart attack at the kitchen table or blood spilt on a living room carpet, there is a need to exorcise the story, to relay cause and effect so that we can be done with grief, or at least, tell ourselves we are.
On page 7, as Didion outlines the circumstances of her husband’s death, it is intimately apparent to me that this is “The Story,” the one she has told until, like a word repeated over and over, it loses meaning. This story is necessary, functional. I have been telling mine for seven years, and it wasn’t until very recently that I’ve begun to wonder whether this story is the truth, or if it hinders me from the truth.

So much about the Story seems absurd, even as it feels true. Why was my reaction to my sister to brush it off and shove her out, go back to drying my hair? Why have I never questioned my actions in that moment, even after the mysterious call from Aunt Deb? And I know for a fact it wasn’t until days later that we learned the circumstances of the shooting—that he was writing her a check, that she shot him in the back of the head instead of somewhere else—but I can be almost sure I remember my mom telling us that story, that night.

Memory is fallible. I tell myself stories about my father’s life and death—that after he died I was the only one unemotional enough to move forward and function and so I never had a chance to absorb it, or that’s it’s complicated because he was an alcoholic and our personalities clashed—but maybe I’m uncomfortable stepping out from behind the assumptions that seemed solid for so long.

***

Grief as I know it is not a ravine with dark and raging waters, but a brick wall. The meaning and circumstances of my life had changed irrevocably but I continued to live, pressed up against it. Over time, the wall has eroded, secret fears and misshapen feelings trickling through the cracks. Sometimes I reach through a hole in the wall, grasp air. Sometimes I dig at the mortar and bloody my fingernails, futile. Sometimes I try to
patch the holes with scotch tape and bedsheets, but when wind comes roaring through, when I gaze into the spaces and see a pair of hazel eyes lurking on the other side, it is only then that I am afraid of what’s left when the wall comes tumbling down.

***

We never knew for sure how much money he left for us. My grandma wouldn’t talk about it. She set up a trust fund and invested the rest into stable CDs and stocks.

My mom was bothered by the secrecy. She said that as our guardian, she had the right to know what was in the trust fund. I never asked; my grandmother was sensitive about money, and besides, she sent me a check for my living expenses every month. She used the money to pay my college tuition, which is what she said my dad wanted it to go to. I finished my undergraduate degree with no student debt, and when my first car fell apart, the trust fund bought my second. She made a conscious effort to be a stand-in for my dad, personally and financially, and I have always been incredibly grateful for all of that.

Still, the money made everything between us, which was already a little tense, exponentially so. There was a certain way she expected my sister and I to behave; namely, as if nothing could ever be happy again. On Christmas three years after, I was gifted a vintage typewriter from my mom and stepdad, and when I excitedly posted a picture to Facebook with the caption, “I have the best parents ever,” she and my aunt accused me of offending my dad’s very memory.

My junior year of college, I forgot my grandma’s birthday, and I got a call from her the next day as I was driving back from class.
“You treat me like a meal ticket,” she yelled. “Your dad left that money to me, and if I decide you don’t deserve it, I don’t have to do the things for you girls that I do!”

I felt my core rot with guilt and fear. I was already floating in a consistent state of crippling anxiety, and I couldn’t handle the emotional conflict, or the thought of my support being taken away. I would be homeless. I would have to drop out of college. I really, honestly wanted to die right then. I passed my apartment and kept driving to nowhere, until fifty miles out I was pulled over by a police officer who asked what was wrong. I lied, “Nothing.”

I drove home and spent three hours on the internet searching to find out how much sex work paid and how to do it without getting murdered by strangers, before ultimately getting shitfaced drunk with my roommate and calling my mom, who made me a therapy appointment.

Now, I mark the days I am obligated to call her on two calendars: Mother’s Day, my aunt’s birthday, Father’s Day, the anniversary of his death, his birthday, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year’s. I set a notification on my phone for every day of the week leading up to her birthday. I make sure to call and send her flowers, but she doesn’t make as big a deal of it, now that the trust has been dissolved and I no longer rely on her for money.

***

When I announced I was going to Chicago during my spring break from grad school, my grandmother called me.

“I don’t know what your plans are, but maybe we can meet outside the city for lunch?”
This is a story I never tell: When I was in third grade, my father tried to explain that he tested things at work, using words I couldn’t spell or repeat. I liked experiments, or the idea of them. I asked him what kind of experiment I could help him do, and downstairs at the kitchen table after dinner, he told me about air-sealed rooms in laboratories, and how scientists inject mice to see if what they’re testing is safe to try on monkeys, or humans. He asked what I wanted to test. This was after 9/11, the planes and flames and the word “terror” still echoing on TV a year later, and I didn’t know what anthrax was at age eight but I knew it was a white powder that killed people and it could show up anywhere, in the mail or on teacher’s desks or even at the White House. It was a problem I hypothesized to solve with the things I knew and had handy: a purple gel pen, a shiny silver nickel, and the albuterol capsule from my inhaler. My dad sat at the kitchen table with me and helped me come up with a plan, how I would draw on the nickel with the gel pen and then melt the metal down, stir in the albuterol; how once the vaccine was formulated we could go to a lab and test it on mice. I wrote it out on a piece of paper with the very same gel pen I imagined could save the world.

The next morning before I left for school, on the kitchen table was a typed and stapled document, printed on fax paper with perforated sides. It was my plan, my experiment, typed from my notes after I had gone to bed.

Sometimes I think my father never did anything for me. But he did that.

When I think about him—more specifically, when I think of his murder, which is what he has become—not just my dad but my tragically dead dad—I almost always feel
nauseous, or tired, or both. My thoughts long to shuffle back, retreat not out of anguish, but something akin to annoyance, or exhausted boredom. I read recently in *The Atlantic* that stress can do that, make a person fall flat from an argument into a mid-day nap. It has to do with a chemical called orexin, the sympathetic nervous system’s flood after a fight or flight scenario that chooses neither. In other words, my nerves are sympathetic so that I don’t have to be.

The article’s author calls the phenomenon, “learned helplessness.” He writes: “If, during early development, a living thing comes to understand that it is helpless, it will continue to perceive a lack of control, no matter if the context changes.”

This is true, maybe, but in the context of grief it couldn’t come across as more erroneous. Helplessness is facing fear in every direction, realizing there is nothing else, nowhere to hide, nothing to be done. There is helplessness in the first moments of a death, if you really love someone. The helplessness is sadness until it isn’t. But grief is something else—that same fear cloaked in a brand new coat of paint. If I understood I was helpless I wouldn’t be churning with vague guilt, writing and rewriting these stories with no end in sight. If I had learned helplessness, I would have let go by now.

***

I met her at a fountain outside the mall in Schaumberg, a thirty minute drive from the city. I waved to her as I approached, and she waved back. She gathered me into her arms for a hug, and touched my cheek, her eyes sparkling with genuine delight.

She squealed, “Oh, you look as beautiful as ever!”

“So do you,” I said.

She linked her arm in mine and we walked into the mall.
Fair or not, our parents chose us. I was my mother’s confidant. She didn’t trust her female friends with the details of her marriage, so when I was six I knew the name of the woman she suspected my dad of cheating on her with. The woman worked with him and had the same first name as my sister, Stephanie.

My sister grew closer to my dad and I became more like my mother; calm, sensitive. A tomboy, my sister went jogging with my dad in the mornings and played softball. I sat inside and wrote and drew. She loved our dad unconditionally. I saw him more clearly.

After the divorce, my mom put verbal penalties on my dad’s personality traits. When I wanted to lose weight but was too embarrassed to jog around the neighborhood, where kids in my class could see me, she said, “You’re being a prima-donna, like your father.” In regard to my sister: “She has your father’s temper. It’s scary how much she’s like him when she lies. He could make himself believe anything to get away with it.”

I wonder if my father would condemn these words if he could read them. I wonder if he would see that there is love in my brutal honesty, that even in recalling his offenses I am trying to know the person he was, not the airbrushed icon death reduces the dead to.

I have always been adamant that if nothing else, I would not saint him simply for the fact of having died, the way my aunt and grandmother have. I promised I would remember him realistically. But is that really what I’m doing? Is it even possible? The reality of who he was has changed with each year that he’s been lost and I’ve lived.
On the cusp of my twenties, I developed extreme anxiety and depression. I didn’t do my dishes for six months because I felt physically incapable. Garbage bags piled up to the ceiling. As a full-time college student I kept a full-time job, where I worked hard to get promoted to manager and still did well in school, but every night locked in my apartment I smoked pot and drank whiskey until I was crawling to my bedroom. There was so much space to fill, so much emptiness; I understood what my father’s nights were like, alone in his home. In my addiction, I felt close to him. For the first time, I felt I was like him.

And though he disapproved of my becoming a writer, I use these words to preserve him and everything that came after he was killed. I am a writer, and the last thing he ever did in his life was put pen to paper. At the moment he died, he was writing.

***

As we were walking through the mall, she pointed out a black bench. “That’s where your grandpa used to sit while I tried on clothes in Macy’s. He would just go right there and take a nap when he got tired of shopping, and I always knew where to find him.”

She said, “I came to this mall when I was looking for a mother of the groom dress for your parents’ wedding.”

“Oh yeah?” I asked.

“I found this beautiful royal blue dress, and I just loved how I looked in it. It was one of those mermaid style dresses, with curves—I had the body for it back then—and I asked the clerk, should I buy this? And he was a lovely gay man, he said, oh yes! And I
said, but I’m mother of the groom. He said, oh no! You’ll show up the bride!” My grandma laughed.

“I told Don about it, and he said we should come back for it, but we never did. I always regretted not buying that dress.”

***

The words we have for things shape the way we think about them. There are some words, like the French dépaysement (the feeling of displacement or bewilderment when one is in a foreign country) that can’t be translated to English. Language shapes our cultural consciousness, limits the ideas we can explore.

As a child, I called him only Papa. Papa is the name of running through the kitchen and jumping into his arms when he had been gone on a business trip. Papa is the name of being small enough to sit shirtless in his lap. Soon after the divorce, I began to call him Dad or Daddy, and now that he’s dead, he is My Father.

My father was not a writer but when he was in rehab in the weeks before he died, he kept a diary. My mother says he specifically told her he wanted my sister and I to see it, “so they don’t make the same mistakes I did,” he said. My grandmother has it, but I’ve never been allowed to read it, though I’ve asked multiple times. She said, “There’s stuff in there you don’t need to know about him.” I told her I want to know who he was, that I’m old enough now to handle whatever I learn. She said she didn’t want me to think of my dad “that way.”

There’s another French word, aplaventrisme, which means, “to submit to authority without a fight.”

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This is a story I never tell: When we could hear them fighting downstairs, we gathered our battle weapons and snuck down the stairwell, almost giggling, almost a game. When their voices rose to a crescendo, we attacked, springing on them both like guerilla warriors, matching their volume with cries of, “Stop being mean to my mom! Get away from her!” as we, little girls with long, braided hair, pummeled him with the stalks of plastic wrapped in foam. There was one for each of us, taken from my after-school stint in Taekwondo. We called them “no-no-sticks.” We called this “rescue.”

***

Again today I saw a man at the gym who looks like my father, and I wondered if he would recognize me. I wasn’t wearing makeup, and I am often worried people I know won’t recognize me without makeup. His hair was white and he struggled not very much to keep his pace on the elliptical, firm bones and sinew stretched strong beneath sagging skin. Was he here to spy on my life from a close distance, or had he accidentally ended up in my town, through no intention of his own? If he caught a glimpse of the deep red my face was after sweating, maybe he, like so many instincts of animals, would recognize that as kinship, as his own, as daughter.

After a few minutes, I realized that this man with the white hair was too pale, marble mannequin of a man, all the color washed out of him. He was not my father.

***

Oct. 8, 1959 - Aug. 23, 2009 Steven Charles Slaughter, 49, of Madison passed away Sunday. Survivors include his children, Erin Slaughter and Stephanie Slaughter...

Online, the rest of the obituary has been archived, so there’s no way to read it without paying for a subscription. It wasn’t easy to find hidden under the many news
articles about the murder, most of them badly-written and featuring a weary mugshot of Pam in prison stripes. But here, the murder isn’t mentioned; he passed away, the way leaves pass into autumn.

There was no deathbed, no goodbyes under white sterile lights. He was my dad, and then he was my dead dad, with no space in-between to make sense or amends.

Survivors include his children...

That the word “survivor” is used to describe the family of the deceased strikes me as strange. What have we survived? Not grief, which by the time the obituary is printed in the daily newspaper hasn’t even begun to settle in a person. As if death had come for us, too, and we only nearly stepped back from the blade unscathed. It’s a reminder that everyone still living has survived, at least for now. We are all eventually the victims, leaving behind a trail of our own survivors.

“In the midst of life we are in death.”

***

I have a folder in my desk drawer full of articles and newspaper clippings like those, and I found myself at three in the morning walking around my apartment in the dark, feeling like a ghost. Imagining my body could be a whisper that doesn’t truly move anything.

On a night like that I pulled out the manila folder from the desk drawer. Sometimes I resent that this is a folder I own, that it has a drawer designated to itself.

The folder is full of more like that; legal paperwork, handwritten notes and phone numbers with the words “victim services.” Printed online articles with typos I hate almost
more than the fact that I’m still reading them. Last summer, I added three pictures to the folder: the black and white polaroid of my father as a toddler, a picture of my parents on their wedding day (they looked like they loved each other, which was startling to me in a way I hadn’t expected), and a picture of my grandpa walking my mother down the aisle, the veil draped over her face, her blue eyes doe-like, frightened.

In the folder is a folded newspaper recounting the details of the sentencing, and something stuck out to me, something I don’t remember having heard:

“She testified that one of the last things he said to her was, ‘You and I have lived alone for many years.’”

***

When I think about my father’s death, I often forget that someone was the direct cause of it. This is the story I tell myself: that it was always meant to happen this way, inevitable, sewn into the fabric of the universe. From my father’s ashes, I was born into flames. In the midst of tragedy, my life as I know it began.

But Pam killed him. Perhaps it’s strange that although I know this to be the truth, I don’t feel the burning need for justice or revenge that the rest of my family does, that any normal person in this circumstance would. I have generally felt mostly indifference about the woman who killed my father, my stepmother of only one short summer.

It causes me to reflect, again, on the terms “survivor” and “survived by,” the contextual space between them. It all comes down to the question: who is the recipient of the trauma? The answer isn’t easy to come to, or perhaps even capable of being entirely accurate. It’s not a question I know how to answer. I’m not sure I ever will.

***
After finding that line in the news article, I realized that Pam had answers I didn’t. I mulled over the idea of going to Alabama to visit her in prison, interview her. Everyone I asked thought it was either a bad idea or a great one. I was wary; I didn’t want her to try to explain herself to me, or apologize. I wanted one thing: to know what my father’s last moments were like. What his last words were. What shape the light was as it left his eyes.

After some research on Wetumpka’s visitation process, I discovered that it was going to be nearly impossible for me talk to Pam face-to-face in prison. So instead, on a whim, I wrote her a letter:

December 14, 2015

PAM,

It may seem strange that I’m writing you a letter after all these years, and even now as I begin to write it I’m not sure what I want to say. When I think about my dad’s death, the story of it is always there, like a broken record, but I sometimes forget that you were the person who caused it. And I wonder about you, about your daughter and what happened to her after you went to jail. I wonder about the story you tell yourself about the day my dad died, just like the story I tell myself, or what it’s morphed into, after these years.

I want you to know that I’m not writing this to blame you or tell you I hate you. I don’t feel anything for you, really, including hate or the lack of, because I didn’t know you for very long and I don’t know you now—but our lives are intertwined anyway. You are a part of my story, the catalyst for the most important thing that has ever happened to me.

I remember being excited to have a stepmother. I remember staying at your house and liking it there, feeling glad that my dad was part of a new family. I remember after that trip, when my sister and I recognized you and my dad were fighting (and maybe you had already separated and he was in the rehab center) and you called me and said you hoped you and him could work things out. I don’t remember much about that
conversation but I do remember feeling good about it afterwards. The thing is, I was so young when he died, and because of the divorce and his drinking we didn’t always have the best relationship anyway. I wish I had gotten to know him as an adult, as he’d be now.

There is only one thing I would really like from you: I want to know what my dad was like as a person, what it was like to know him. More than anything, I really want to know what his last moments were like. What were his last words? Do you ever think about him, or dream about him? I know you don’t owe me anything, but I hope you can please just do this one thing for me.

My return address is on the envelope.

***

I dropped the letter into the mail and drove to Texas for New Year’s. I didn’t tell anyone about it, and didn’t plan to. I was staying at Rachel’s apartment when I casually mentioned the letter.

“That was a bad idea,” she said.

“Why?”

“I don’t think it’s genuine,” she said. “I don’t think you actually want to hear from her. I think you just want to be able to write about hearing from her.”

“I said in the letter I didn’t want to hear her apologies. I just wanted her to tell me about my dad’s last moments.”

“Yes, but she’s not going to! She’s only going to try to clear herself. She’s a literal murderer. She’s not going to be rational.”

“Yeah, but—”

“Look, I’m just saying, you’re not going to get what you want from her. It’s going to cause more harm than good.”
“I don’t know,” I said. “Maybe you’re right. Who knows if she’ll even write back, anyway.”

When I came back from Texas, the letter was in my mailbox with a red stamp that read *Return to Sender—Refused*. I put it in my desk drawer, in the folder, where it still sits unopened.

***

Grief is commonly described in five stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.

Joan Didion describes grief in rolling waves that manifest as, “a tightness in the throat, choking, need for sighing.” I have never known grief except as a word that feels like truth, and yet exhausts me. If there is pain, it is the dullest pain, punctuated by unexpected moments of irrational mourning. His death is numb weight I carry through the world. Half of the flesh that made me has died, so it would make sense if the part of me that is made of him has died, too. I once heard someone say that the people who are most depressed are the ones who don’t realize they are, so perhaps my grief is so prevalent, like a misty cloud enveloping me, that I can’t see it. Perhaps I am not a person experiencing grief, but grief embodied, unaware of itself.

***

The summer before beginning grad school, almost a full year before my trip to Chicago, I drove to Alabama. I didn’t tell anyone that I was going. I’m not sure what I was looking for there, and it wasn’t until I was in Madison that I had the idea to go to his house.
Driving through town, I was mostly apathetic, as if journeying into the belly of a toothless shark. I passed the old Blockbuster where my dad took us to rent DVDs each time we visited (now a DIY pottery shop), and the thrift store Stephanie and I stole scented candles from the week of his funeral.

Once I found Wall-Triana, I didn’t even need the GPS; it was like navigating in a dream—I suddenly knew where to go, and then the house was lying ahead of me at the end of the road.

It looked the same as I remembered it, the same gray garage door and tri-color brick, except that the front door seemed a slightly different shade of brown. I planned to knock and ask the people who lived there if I could look around inside, even began to plan what I would say to them, until I noticed the FOR SALE sign stuck in the grass.

I called the number on the sign. A man with a gravel-thick accent answered.

“Hi, um, I saw your sign at the house at 101 Dawn Drive? I’m just in town for the day looking at places, so I was wondering if there was any way I could see it?”

“I can be there in thirty minutes,” he said.

As I sat in my hot car and waited for the man to arrive, I wondered what the actual hell I was doing there. I felt crazy. I felt brave. I couldn’t help but think, this is going to be an incredible story later, and I hated myself for it, for the running typewriter in my head that kept me from staying entirely in this significant moment.

A fly buzzed around the inside of my car as I planned what I would tell the realtor: that I was a freelance writer—no, accountant—and my fiancé was in the tech industry, and we were moving to Madison for his job. We were from Macon, Georgia—
no, I’d just say Texas; I didn’t know anything about Georgia—and this was my last day in town looking for houses on my own, because my fiancé couldn’t take off work. I panicked when I realized that I didn’t have a ring, and decided that if he noticed, I would say it was getting cleaned.

The man pulled up in a white truck, and when I stepped out of my car to meet him, my flip-flop broke. He watched me struggle to fix it and slide it back on my foot as I hobbled towards the driveway.

He shook my hand and unlocked the front door.

It was exactly as I remembered it, but shrunken, smaller. The man told me the number of rooms and bathrooms, and that the last owners had refurbished some things.

“How many owners has the house had?” I asked, walking through kitchen, now painted pink, orb-like lights hanging over the bar.

“Just two,” he said. “The current owners bought it in 2009.”

“2009?” Through the hallway was the room I slept in, where I watched my dad remove his glasses and set them next to the computer each night. “What about the first owner?” I asked.

“I don’t know much about them, it’d be back in the records I suppose.”

I was surprised to realize I had forgotten the existence of whole rooms: the laundry room that leads to the garage, and the bathroom by my old bedroom. The linoleum on the kitchen floor, where he laid that winter as he seized and called out for my sister, kept the same blue-bordered squares. The crown molding had been painted black in the dining room, which we called “the dancing room,” because our dad kept it empty of furniture so we could slide our socks over the wood floors and twirl like ice skaters.
The man said, “Through here is the master bed and bath.”

His room was much smaller than I remembered, the ceiling more sharply angled over where his bed used to be. In the bathroom, the new owners had hung a cloud-shaped light fixture over the jacuzzi, but I could still remember the mint smell that lingered there as I watched him take a wet comb to his hair. I looked into the mirror, and it felt a bit eerie, like a private joke between my Dad and I that the realtor wasn’t in on. *Dad, I’m here again. Look who I am now.*

I wished the realtor would stop talking about the amenities and price points, or that I could have more time to explore the house alone, but I knew I was fortunate to have been inside at all.

As he locked the front door, he asked, “When did you say your fiancé starts his job?”

“August?”

“Ya’ll don’t have much time!” he laughed. “You’ll want to get into something as soon as possible, with the closing period ahead of you.”

I blurted out some excuse and thanked him, and he gave me his business card.

I intended to go to the house where my dad was killed. I always assumed I would want to see the room he died in. But after seeing the place where he lived—the house he bought after the divorce and lived alone, where we visited him and knew him—I decided not to. I was surprised that in the end, remembering the place he lived felt more important than investigating the place he died.

***
We got a table for two at the PF Chang’s inside the mall. My grandmother ordered a water with lemon and unfolded the cloth napkin into her lap.

She asked how my studies had been going, and we talked about her health and her hip surgery. It was pleasant, and I was enjoying spending time with her. I didn’t plan to bring up the diary, but it happened anyway.

“I wanted to talk to you again…to ask you about the diary Dad wrote when he was in rehab?”

“Yes?”

“Well…so, I know we’ve talked about it before, and you said there are things in there you don’t feel like I should know about him…”

“Which one?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, there are two diaries,” she said. “One he kept during the time he and Mary were getting divorced, and the other is some stuff he wrote while he was in Bradford.”

“I didn’t know there were two,” I said. “I mean, I can understand why there would be things in the one from the divorce that you wouldn’t want me to see. There’s probably stuff in there I don’t want to see…”

“When we found it while we were going through his belongings, I said, I’m not going to read it. But then Deb said, you have to read it, what’s there to lose now? So Deb and I read it and we were stunned. We had no idea how bad it really was between them. No clue.”

“Did he talk about me and Stephanie?” I asked.
“Yes…just things about how he didn’t think it was fair, how your mom buddied up with you. And you girls didn’t get a chance to be kids, because of all of it. He didn’t think that was fair.”

“I can understand why you wouldn’t want me to read that—I mean, maybe when I’m older, hopefully, but—I’m interested in the one from Bradford.”

“There’s nothing in there that would be useful to you. It’s just things from his childhood that he felt like contributed to his addiction. Things they had him write there as part of the program.”

“I already know about the priest thing,” I said.

She looked surprised, “I didn’t even know about the priest. What do you know about the priest?”

“Nothing, not a lot, just that there was an incident with a priest when he was a kid. I don’t know what actually happened.”

“He never…there was no molestation, or anything. When he was an altar boy, and the boys all got changed in a back room, a priest motioned that he wanted Steve to touch him, you know, inappropriately, but he didn’t. After that, he came home and said he didn’t want to be an altar boy anymore and I didn’t know why, but I figured it was one of those things, that he just didn’t think it was cool anymore. I wish he would have told me why.”

“Is that in the diary?” I asked.

“I don’t know. I would have to look again. He must have told me when he was alive because I remember asking him about it, and he said he thought if he told me he would get into trouble.”
“I just…I’m trying to figure out who he is. Who he was. Now that I’m an adult, I realize I was never able to know him as a person, there were things I didn’t understand, like the drinking. Things I resented him for. And now—okay, I haven’t really told anyone this, my mom or anybody—but last year, I had some troubles with alcohol. Just for a short while, but in going through that I think I finally understood a lot of what he was going through. He was lonely.”

“He never got over your mother, after the divorce,” she said.

“I get that now,” I said. “It was hard for me to understand then, because I was a kid, and all the things he did…but, you know, I’m writing about him now, and I’ve just been thinking about how valuable it would be to have something he wrote. In his own handwriting. To look at it and be able to think about the place he was when he wrote it, and what he was feeling…and if he wrote that diary in Bradford, it must have been only two or three weeks before he died. That would be so important to have. For my writing, but also just for my life.”

She said, “I’ll have to look at it again. I don’t know what all is in there. I’ll have to take a look, but I’ll think about it.”

“Yeah, don’t worry about answering me right now, just think about it.”

“I’ll think about it.”

***

In the opening sequence of one episode of the NPR-produced podcast, *On Being*, writer/journalist Krista Tippett recites T.S. Eliot: “What we do not know about a missing loved one,” Eliot wrote, “becomes all that we know.”
Through conversation with her guest, Dr. Pauline Boss, they discuss grief and what Boss calls “the myth of closure,” the erroneous cultural notion that grief follows a straight line, progresses through stages, until it is finally “complete” and the person is no longer grieving. Boss and Tippett use some other terms I find interesting, phrases like “ambiguous loss” and “complicated grief” that don’t exactly mean, as I listen further, what on first impression I want them to mean; all the same, stripped of their psychotherapeutic contexts, they clearly appear to describe my own feelings of grief in relation to my dad. Ambiguous, often. Complicated, certainly.

What I find most compelling in this podcast episode, though, is another term: epigenetics. The study of, “how trauma transmits itself [to] future generations…not so much as an exact memory, but as a response conditioned by the trauma that actually happened to previous generations.” This is the definition Tippett gives, but Boss elaborates:

“Even when the stories aren’t told, however, there’s a transmission of the trauma by, let’s say, having a parent who is not expressive, a parent who doesn’t speak much, a parent who can’t show love or emotion, or a parent who may have been brutalized who then passes on the violence.”

What she’s describing here might as well be my own complicated, ambiguous, unexpressed fear—one I’d assumed was unfounded. That sadness can be passed on genetically, that taking on the role of parent after having a dead one might stain my child’s life with the ghost of an untended grief. A wildflower grief. A grief growing weeds that flesh out the garden of a troubled family past like delicious cancer. And who
would that child see themselves to be, one-fourth phantom of lover’s violence, gouged hole named “missing grandpa”?

There are worse problems, I suppose, harder and more pressing ones to sort. There always have been, and those clusters of human sorrow ripple out. When Boss speaks of the Holocaust and Civil War, Salem Witch Trials and slavery, she states that, “we are a nation founded on unresolved grief.” I am inclined, somberly, to agree.

***

After lunch with my grandmother that day, I drove back into the city. Over Wicker Park, the sky was unraveling into deep blue. I bundled up in a scarf for the chilly night.

I was walking to the train station when I was distracted by a sign on the sidewalk advertising a psychic: $10 special. I rang the doorbell, and a teenage boy invited me in.

He said, “She’ll be with you in a moment.”

I sat on the white linen couch, embellished with Mediterranean beaded pillows and a white fur blanket tossed over the side. Through a crack in the double doors behind me, I glimpsed a kitchen with an open laptop resting on the table.

The woman descended the stairs slowly, clunking down one step at a time. I stood up. She had teased black hair and a New Jersey accent, and after I handed her my ten-dollar bill she led me to a rounded wall with a door in the center. The outside of the wall was adorned with opalesque turquoise mosaic tiles, and when she opened the door, we stepped into a dimly-lit circular room draped in candlelight and burgundy velvet. She sat on one side of a round table, and I sat on the other.
“This is how it works,” she said. “You have three questions you can ask. First, to get a sense of your energy alignment, I need to know your star sign.”

“Leo.”

“What time of day were you born, and where?”

“8:49 pm, in Nevada.”

“And your name?”

“Erin.”

“Good,” she smiled. “What is your first question?”

“I want to know how old I will be when I meet the person I will marry.”

“I see it happening twelve to eighteen months from now,” she said. “You will meet your soulmate and the person who will be the greatest love of your life.”

“Really? That’s so soon,” I laughed.

“Yes, and when you meet them, it will be sudden, and it will move fast, but just let it happen. Don’t hold back, because it will be very good for both of you. Based on your current aura and the energy I’m feeling from you now, that’s what I see happening.”

“Okay,” I said, the top of my head beginning to tingle. “Thanks.”

“What is your second question?”

“What publisher should I publish my first book with?”

“Well, I don’t know about things like that—I don’t know the names of those things. But I see it happening in around three to five years, and it will be very successful. I can see people from all over coming to see you.”
“That’s good to know,” I said. I was feeling like maybe I had made a mistake coming there, that it was probably all bullshit, and I should’ve spent my ten dollars on pizza instead.

“What is your last question?” she asked.

“Oh…I don’t know, sorry. I only thought of two.”

“It’s okay. You can take a moment.”

I thought of asking something ridiculous. Just to see what would happen. A test to prove her real or fake, at least so that I would know for myself.

I hesitated before saying, “Is my dad is still alive?”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“I mean, like, I just haven’t seen him in a really long time, a bunch of years,” I fumbled, “and people in my family say he’s dead. That he died. But sometimes, I suspect otherwise. And I wanted to know…if he’s really dead.”

“Well,” she said, “based on what I see right now, he will be gone for a very long time. You will be unable to reach him. But you will see him again.”

“When?” I asked.

“It will be quite a while from now, but he will reveal himself to you. When he does, it will be because of your writing.”

***

I didn’t want to go to the Tower, but I had already purchased the ticket the day before. It felt like an obligation to the memory I had there with my dad, to the person I was then. A person who didn’t know what I know now.
And then, sometime between boarding the train at Division station and getting off at Quincy, I realized that some subconscious part of me believed my dad was alive, and that if I went to the top floor of Sears Tower, he would be there. As soon as I thought it, I knew how irrational it was. Somehow years of pretending he was following me, looking for him in passing cars and airports, turned into an underlying presumption that if I were to just look hard enough, go to the right place at the right time, he would come out of hiding.

I have always understood that my father is dead, but dead is different than gone. Dead is a state, a veil that separates you and keeps you from communicating, but gone is deeper. Gone is ruin, a deletion that can never be undone. And the thought I’ve never truly confronted—that he won’t be in my life again, that there will be no reconciliation, no closure—feels like falling through air. Dead is easy to grasp, but gone is like the bottom dropping out from underneath.

***

Now, older, I understand why my mother wasn’t squeamish at the funeral, why she touched and kissed my father’s cold, graying hands. I never knew him well enough to want to touch his cold hands. And how terribly sad that is. That’s not to say I didn’t love him; but it was the kind of love so deeply rooted it can only beget damage.

The love of a child for their parents is godlike in its power and in its stakes. And it is the crucible of the parents that with their entire soul they love their child, as much as a person could love (or in some cases, resent) a split-off piece of their very being—but the child can only, in the end, look around and find sources of destruction. Regardless of how
their parents tried or what they might have done right, they will look at them one day and feel the slow flood of betrayal—because of the sheer, inevitable fact of their humanness.

***

Sears Tower changed its name to Willis Tower in 2009, the year my father died. Like many, I hold onto the past by using its former name.

It was full-blown night when I stood in the elevator and climbed past the fiftieth floor, then the ninetieth. I didn’t want to be there, chasing him up into the sky. I was terrified the elevator cables would snap.

The Skydeck was cold, gray carpet underfoot as tourists of all ages and nationalities walked the circumference of the floor, taking pictures inside glass boxes that suspended them over the city. A group of Mennonite women in long dresses and bonnets passed through the gift shop. I didn’t remember there being a gift shop. Did we buy something there? I remember my dad standing near the wall with the interactive screen, but there wasn’t a screen to be found. I have a memory of seeing the place where we walked by the water, but that was impossible from every angle. What did we do in Chicago all those years ago? What did I think coming back here would solve?

I pressed my nose to the window and stared past the glare of the ceiling lights into the blackness, where buildings like conglomerations of stacked boxes were lit up in orange. I wanted to cry, but couldn’t force the tears to come. I wanted this to be a defining moment in the story of my grief, but what if there is no story, no narrative to make sense of?

There is an Inuit word, *iktsuarpok*, which roughly translates to “the anticipation and frustration of waiting for someone to show up,” and there is a Korean word, *won*,

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which means, “the reluctance to let go of an illusion.” But what came to me in those moments were Joan Didion’s words:

“Why did I remain so unable to accept the fact that he had died? Was it because I was failing to understand it as something that happened to him? Was it because I was still understanding it as something that happened to me?”

***

This is a story I never tell: We stayed in a hotel with my mom the night before we left Alabama for good. We went out to one final dinner as a family, and afterwards my dad took us to the toy store, where he told us we could buy whatever we wanted. I picked a Barbie doll made to look like Hermione from the Harry Potter movies. When we came back to the hotel, my dad sunk down onto his knees to hug us. He was crying. He told us he loved us, wanted us to know this was an important moment, not to forget. My sister cried and clung to him. I held my doll and smoothed down her wild hair, the corners of her plaid skirt. I wanted him to leave. I wanted this to be over.
I come home after writing workshop on a Wednesday night to see a package propped against my door. I bring it inside and set it on the couch.

I change clothes, make a small and tasteless dinner. I answer emails. I surf Instagram. I watch a few random Youtube videos, and one freezes mid-play, won’t load or move past the minute-mark even when I refresh the browser. I look at the white box on the couch next to me. I sit on the floor. I wonder what I’m waiting for, but I already know.

I cut it open with the sharpest key on my keychain and pull out a block of bubble-wrap, yellow envelopes, and crate paper. With stuck and stapled notes, my grandmother’s pristine handwriting guides me through. On a black cardboard folder, she writes, *Student at North Texas State—Mom’s request for Christmas present.* Opening it reveals a picture of my dad in the mid-eighties, almost comical with feathered hair, a chunky Casio watch, and a wispy moustache worthy of the decade’s most ridiculous porn stars. In a larger black folder, she has written 1973 in pen, directly on the bottom left corner of the photograph, etching it into the grass where a boy kneels in a baseball uniform, wearing nothing of my father I recognize except for his eyes.

A small brown mailer with a DVD inside of it reads, *Steve at Don’s retirement party.* I put it aside and reach for a mass of bubble wrap with a taped note: *Steve’s supervisor said ‘What a loss—we will never know what this enormous talent would have done in the future.’* I peel the tape off carefully and unfold from the bubble wrap a wood-framed shadowbox. In the shadowbox, six medals are embedded in navy velvet and
engraved with SAIC, iRobot, Boeing, and some variation of an American flag and “Supporting the Armed Forces.” Three of them have come unglued, broken out of their sockets and are wading around the bottom of the frame. I look to see if there’s a latch, a way to open it up and fix it, but there’s no way in or out from behind the glass. I shake the frame and try to shimmy the medals back into place, like pinball. One sticks. I wrap it back up, but can’t get the bubble wrap to fold the same way.

On crate paper, Grandma Irma’s handwriting says, One of my favorites. I brush back the packaging and find a gold-framed portrait of our family—my original family. The one that feels so aged and vague in me now it’s almost forgotten. Dated 1999, it’s a picture I remember taking. We are color-coordinated in gold and black; my mom has short hair and a leaf broach pinned over her heart, my sister is soft-faced, and my father stands in the back wearing a red tie, the width of his shoulders spanning our bodies like a mountain range.

I stare at myself, garnished with an enormous gold bow, a small golden cross hanging from my neck. I try to catch my reflection in the glass and make it match up with the younger girl’s but nothing about our faces seem the same. Even the shape of my mouth when it smiles has changed.

Underneath the packaging, I spot an envelope labeled Bradford. I drop the picture and reach for it.
I carefully pull out a thin stack of papers, my fingertips in tremor. On top of the stack is a sheet of yellow lined paper, the kind from the legal pads my grandmother keeps all over her house, covered in her cursive. An introduction. Her own story:

*Bradford family sessions were 3x wk for 2 wks. Pam refused to go—too busy! The enclosed sheets are his worksheets he brought home with him...*

*The one session he had with Pam towards the end of his therapy was a disaster. She kept yelling at him that he lied to her about the drinking. The next day he was released and I went to pick him up. His roommates told me after the session with Pam he returned to their room crying and they were glad I was there to take him home and not her. That night he told me after the session with the therapist, he knew he would not go back to her house or he’d end up drinking again...*

*I enclosed a copy of the letter sent to me from Pam. I know you have seen it before—but thought you would like to have as proof of her “crazy” behavior. I guess the difficult weeks she mentioned were the Bradford weeks...*

*I hope this doesn’t make you sad. It doesn’t cheer me up any!*
A photocopy of faded, round handwriting on white computer paper. She was right, I had seen this before. It came to my grandmother’s house in the mail the week of the funeral.

Dear Irma,

Words cannot adequately express the sorrow and regret I feel. I loved Steve. I still do. And I miss him so much!

I’m sorry I took your son—no mother should suffer such a gut-wrenching loss. I’m sorry I took the girls’ father. Poor Steve will never see his grandchildren...

You were my friend and confidant during those difficult weeks. I’ve wanted to come to your home, fall on my knees and beg your forgiveness. I would expect you to scream at me, even strike me. That would be alright, completely understandable. And I would cry with you...

I wish I could do more to ease your pain, Irma.

Sincerely, Pam
When I spot my father’s handwriting, I immediately begin to sob. His block letters are scribbled in blue pen on a simple piece of creased notebook paper, words marked out and underlined, and suddenly I am transported; the veil is lifted and I am there with him in a space before the story that has defined my life was ever told or imagined. He is sitting at a desk in a beige room somewhere, his skin warm, his heart beating, organizing his pain into bullet points; and I am somewhere miles away, sixteen again, at drill team practice or theatre rehearsal or lounging in a lime green bedroom with my friends’ names drawn in bubble letters and posters of punk bands stapled to the walls.

Before, all I had of his handwriting was the last birthday card he sent me, two weeks before he died, where he had written Sweet Sixteen! on the pink envelope and signed, Love, Dad.

Now, I can see the spaces where the pen ran out of ink and dragged his E’s into N’s. I can touch that window to the past, that moment.

It’s a pros and cons list. In the header, he wrote and underlined OF USING. He printed his full name in the top right corner, like a school assignment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRO</th>
<th>CON</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-AN ESCAPE MECHANISM</td>
<td>-HABIT FORMING</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-CAN TURN OFF/SHUT DOWN</td>
<td>-SHUTS OUT FAMILY MEMBERS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHENEVER I WANTED</td>
<td>-SOMETIMES GOT EVEN ANGERIER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ANGER MANAGEMENT</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-MAKE LIFE’S PROBLEMS GO AWAY</td>
<td>-MUST DEAL WITH EVERYDAY</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

PROBLEMS
-DEAL WITH DISAPPOINTMENT -MAKE IT WORK
-FIXES BOREDOM -FIND SOMETHING TO DO

After reading it I cry ugly and choke out “I’m sorry,” into the air because these are things I didn’t understand then, things I have now struggled with myself. How to slip out of your skin so that you can forget. How to fill the empty spaces.
***

Underneath is a packet of what must be the worksheets. A square note is stapled to the top: *1st meeting with him since he entered Bradford*. I attended “family therapy for the victim” since Pam said she couldn’t attend. *On his release day he told me how thankful he was for my love and support.* –Grandma

The worksheet is typed in Comic Sans; when I notice, I can’t help but laugh at the choice to use such a ridiculously comical typeface—an aesthetic plague, really—to prompt deep questions about addiction. My grandmother’s letters are tight and faint, floating in white space. My father filled the boxes with the same blue-penned block letters.

**Bradford Family Services—Communication Exercise**

Please complete the following sentences as if you were speaking directly to the person you are with in the Family Program. You will share this exercise during group session on Wednesday.

**Name:** Irma Heimberger (Slaughter)

**Right now I feel**...*Very proud that you personally accepted your need for professional help to control your addiction.*

**Something I regret having done is**...*Allowing you to drive with my grandchildren in your car.*

**I was most angry when you**...*Spoiled two of our Christmas celebrations with your daughters and letting your girls see their father at his worst.*

**Some important things we’ve lost because of drinking/drugging are**...*Mutual respect and trust we always had for each other.*

**What I really need from you now is**...*To continue at Bradford until you finish their program; to go to AA meetings and stay clean.*
Bradford Family Services—Communication Exercise

Please complete the following sentences as if you were speaking directly to the person you are with in the Family Program. You will share this exercise during group session on Wednesday.

Name: STEVEN SLAUGHTER

Right now I feel... CALM, COMPLACENT, CONFIDENT THAT I HAVE “TURNED THE CORNER,” SUPPORTED, LOVED

Something I regret having done is...CAUSING ANXIETY DUE TO MY DISEASE TO YOU AND OUR FAMILY

I was most angry with you when you...HELD ME UNDER THE PROVERBIAL “MICROSCOPE” GROWING UP, AND CONTINUE TO DO SO AT TIMES

Some of the important things we’ve lost because of drinking/drugging are...QUALITY TIME TOGETHER, ESPECIALLY WHEN MY GIRLS ARE IN TOWN...

What I really need from you now is...UNDERSTANDING—THE “OLD STEVE” IS GONE, AND IT’S ALL ABOUT MOVING FORWARD NOW—FORGET WHAT THE “OLD STEVE” DID AND SAID—HE’S DEAD NOW
He’s dead now.

He’s dead now.

He’s dead now.

A plea surfacing from beyond the grave, shot straight into my nervous system:

Forget what the “Old Steve” did and said—absent Steve, brown-bagged vodka in the trunk Steve, seizing on the floor Steve, my red-faced Daddy who was gone, or mean.

Forget. He’s dead now.

It’s all about moving forward.
The back of the worksheet prompts a list of the ways they planned to celebrate together for each month of my father’s sobriety. In the blank next to “1 month,” my father wrote in _HAVE DINNER AT IRMA’S_. At “3 months”: _DINNER AT ‘FANCY PLACE.’_

Below, each of their signatures, and the date: 8/5/09. They would never get to have that first dinner. A month later, he would already be dead thirteen days.
I notice that he always used blue pen. I wonder if this was by choice, or if they only allowed him one pen, if there were only blue pens in Bradford. Maybe it’s calming for addicts in withdrawal because when the pen bursts from nervous chewing, blue ink splatters the tongue as a Rorschach of waves collapsing onto shore like a spent lover, not the void-black tentacles of fever dreams.

I notice he always wrote his name in the top right corner, but would sometimes abbreviate it—STEVEN SLA instead of STEVEN SLAUGHTER.

Another worksheet, dated 8/3/09, features black and white drawings of stressed-out people saying phrases like, “I know I can’t use cocaine anymore, but maybe a few drinks on my birthday?”

List settings or activities in which you frequently used drugs or alcohol:
LISTENING TO MUSIC AT HOME, PAYING BILLS

Times/places I never use: WORK

Times/places I almost never use: MOVIES

Times/places I almost always use: PRIOR TO SEX

Times/places I always use: WEEKEND

What particular triggers might be a problem in the near future? PARTICULAR SONGS, DRIVING PAST A LIQUOR STORE

I used when I felt: ANGRY, GUILTY, EMBARRASSED, LONELY, WORTHLESS
***

I had steadied my breathing, but when I get to the final piece of paper I choke out
sobs again, lungs wheezing, and I sit in a ball clutching the page with my body in silent
wreckage before I can even begin to read it. Once I get through the first line, a manic
laugh slips out, remembering how nerdy and melodramatic he could be. I reread it five
times, tracing the slant of his pen, breaking down over one line again and again.

The page is filled up by his blue words. The header says: GOODBYE.

DEAR ALCOHOL (AKA DISEASE),

SO, HERE WE ARE AGAIN, YOU RAVENOUS BASTARD.

YOU HAVE BEEN ALIVE INSIDE ME SINCE MY CREATION, MANIFESTING
YOURSELF IN MY TEEN EFFORTS IN STEALING LIQUOR FROM NEIGHBOR’S
GARAGES...AND THAT DUI BACK IN ’91, HUH? YOUR FINEST HOUR. HOWEVER,
I WON SINCE I DID NOT LOSE MY SECURITY CLEARANCE...

YOU AWAKEN AND DESTROY MY FIRST MARRIAGE...

NOW I HAVE TO CONTINUALLY WORRY THAT YOU MIGHT HAVE SEWN
YOUR EVIL SEED WITHIN MY DAUGHTERS...

IN THE PRESENT DAY, YOU THREATEN TO DESTROY MY MARRIAGE TO
THE MOST WONDERFUL WOMAN I HAVE EVER MET...

ENOUGH! BY THE GRACE OF GOD, I HAVE DISCOVERED THE ONLY WAY
TO DRIVE YOU OUT.
I’m not sure what I believe happens when we die. Most often I assume there must be some “after” to consciousness, a place where my dad is and where I’ll see him again when I am also dead, but I have never felt his ghost in this world. In the days after his murder, my aunt claimed to see him rounding the corner of my grandmother’s house, and my mom claimed to hear his voice, but I have never felt him there. Not at his funeral, or at my sister’s wedding, or my graduations; not at Sears Tower, and not now that I am calling out for him with everything in me. And I think, if the air is empty of him in this moment more than any of the others, he must be nowhere. He must actually be gone.
When I am finished with tears and wild noises, there is still another yellow envelope, labeled *photos*.

In square polaroids, I watch my father grow from black and white baby portraits to his fourth birthday, to his eleventh, to bell bottoms and blackheads on his nose, to the marshmallow-pink suit of his senior prom. Finally, he stands left of frame, a blurry wisp in red cap and gown.

I shuffle through, watching how his body morphs and builds around his brown eyes. My chest expands. I feel my limbs burn and see the sad freckles on my arms and know I cannot come away from this unchanged, knowing if I ever have a son all I will do is think of these pictures, that in every small and large boy I see out in the world I will be reminded of what they lose as they sprout thin like sunflowers and their Halloween costumes fade into suits. How the space around them will billow in their absence. The sudden emptiness that will be left when they are lost.

Seeing him grow up through the polaroids, I understand why my grandmother grieves so deeply, why she clings to the fact of his death so tightly, why she texted me just weeks ago after reading a piece of my writing: *u know my grief is still the lion*.

Imagine the sweetest thing you have ever given yourself to. Imagine a closet full of polaroids and the remainder of a life spent grasping at what you split your own bones to give breath to and loved with more than words and can never touch again.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

The citations listed below are comprehensive and encompass any sources that were referenced or quoted in the work (both contextual essay and creative thesis), as well as select sources that the author found to be significantly influential on the style, form, theme, and/or content of the work.


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