

The sharpness of what lies behind

by

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For the Major Program

In memory of my grandmother, Alice,
and for my mother, Karen

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Cultivation	7
My Grandmother's Orchid	25
Long Slow Distance	46
In the Absence of Faith	62
Broadcasting into the Blind	72
The Ache of Travel	85
Resisting Joy	94
What I Hear	113
Seeds of Something Native	130

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*Perhaps, I am telling this story in an attempt to heal myself, to confront what I do not know,
to create a path for myself with the idea that “memory is the only way home.”*

— Terry Tempest Williams, *Refuge*

*Who is that girl, the rod still quivering in her hands, rapturously balanced between
two worlds? I sometimes think that if I could go back, follow the driveway down,
past the woodshed and out into the meadow, I might find her—I might find
what I have lost. Like my brother wandering in the wilderness,
I might find home.*

— Kim Barnes, *In the Wilderness*

*There’s no need to go looking for home, of course, unless you’re lost.
I have been lost, in ways no map could remedy.*

— Scott Russell Sanders, *Staying Put*

Introduction

When I was a very little girl, my father used to read to my older brother and me at bedtime. He would perch in a child-sized chair at the foot of our bunk beds, while my brother and I sat at the edge of the bottom bunk in our pajamas and craned our necks to see the pictures and incomprehensible words of the book in his lap. He had a wonderful storytelling voice, deep and capable of great excitement, and he could make those books come to life like no other. My favorite book, one that I still keep with me now, its cover creased and torn a little at the bottom, was *Teaser and the Firecat*, a Cat Stevens tale written in English, French, and Spanish. That I should have liked this book as much as I did—my mother tells me I begged them to read it, over and over again, in spite of the fact that I knew the story by heart and could “read” the pictures on my own—seems sadly and ironically appropriate to me now, all these years later, both because of the story the book tells, and the fact that it was my father who read it to me.

The story of Teaser, that prematurely old, white-haired little boy, and his fat, fiery-orange cat, seems to have become, in some ways, almost a metaphor for my relationship with my father, who is easily the most complicated person I have ever loved. In *Teaser*, the trouble begins when the moon inexplicably falls from the sky and becomes stuck in the roof of an old barn. Teaser, in his purple vest and starred pants, decides it is up to him and his companion, Firecat, to set things right. They embark on a brief adventure, in which Firecat is almost lost, and finally land, moon and all, in a prickle-red-tree. For all Teaser’s efforts, though, it is the five red owls living in the tree who manage to set things right again: they pick up the moon with their beaks and fling it back into the sky.

What is it about the way memory works, I wonder, that causes me to read this story now, not only as a child's tale, but as a vivid illustration of the way I have spent my life struggling to right my relationship with my father; or, at the very least, to understand its failures? Is it a process of youth, as Patricia Hampl suggests in *A Romantic Education*, to analyze our families in order to place ourselves in history? Or could it be also, as I feel, simply the way some of us attempt to reconcile and articulate the profound sense of mute loss we feel when one of our most important and longest-lasting relationships, that which we share with our parents, is somehow not right?

Though much of what I write concerns itself, in one way or another, with those broad, abstract themes of family, memory, and loss, it seems it is to my difficult relationship with my father that I return, as though I am trying to write my way to understanding or acceptance. And yet, I still have not reached the point where I feel comfortable sharing these essays with him. Why? For all his faults, I know my father loves me, and I know it gives him pleasure to be involved in my life, even if that simply means changing the oil on my car, moving me from apartment to apartment, or reading my work. But one thing I have been forced to realize, again and again in our long relationship, is that we do not understand each other, and that he, especially, does not seem able to understand the perspective a grown child might have of her father, or how it is possible (and it is!) for her to both be angry with him for the unkind lessons he has taught her, and to love him for the good things he has been. So I have kept these essays from him all this time, because I know he will not understand; he will see all of the meanness of the light I have shown him in, none of the love that motivated my searching words.

Then, a few months ago, without my knowledge, my mother showed my father an early draft of my essay, “Long Slow Distance,” in which I write about my relationship with him through the lens of my experiences with running. He read it, she says, and he was not pleased. “This is not how it was at all,” he said. And the scene where he voices his hope to have a “real runner in the family,” since I have so obviously disappointed him in that respect? “I never said that,” he told her.

My mother tells me all this on the phone one night, just as I am in the midst of puzzling, once again, over those nagging questions which seem so central to and inseparable from works of memoir: how do we write about friends and family without losing them, and should we?

“But Mom,” I said, “you were there. Do you remember him saying that?”

My mother laughed a little. “Of course I do! He did say it! He just doesn’t want to admit that there’s any truth to what you write, because if he did, he’d have to take a good, hard, long look at himself.”

So my mother will corroborate my memory. Does it matter? It seems more than a little ironic to me that I would have these most important, searching conversations—and they are conversations, with me asking many of the questions and the answers coming from somewhere within—about my relationship with my father *on the page*, and not with him. Some of these subjects, I know, I have never been able to talk to him about. Is this right? Is it fair for me to write down these stories, both his and mine, if it makes him unhappy? And what about my grandmother’s story? My mother’s? My grandmother is no longer alive (though my grandfather is) and my mother says she doesn’t mind, but what if my grandmother *were* alive and my mother *did* mind? What then?

Patricia Hampl confronts this problem in her essay, "Other People's Secrets," in which she explores the difficulty, and sometimes betrayal, involved in writing memoir. Her first act of betrayal, she says, was toward her mother, when she chose to write and publish a poem that revealed her mother's most fiercely guarded secret: epilepsy. Her mother was, she says, "outraged by my betrayal," while she herself believed she had done a good thing—broken the bonds of her mother's shame and "freed her from silence, from secrecy, from the benighted attitudes which had caused her such anguish." It took many years before Hampl was able to comprehend her mother's sense of violation, years during which she continued to believe the story she had told herself about "how I had spoken for my mother who could not speak for herself." When she finally asks her mother what her own take on the incident had been, the response stuns both reader and writer:

Remember that poem in my first book, I said, the one that has the seizure in it and you and me?

Oh yes.

Remember how I told you I wouldn't publish it if you didn't want me to, and you said I could go ahead?

Yes.

Well, I was just wondering. Is that something you're glad about? I mean, do you feel the poem sort of got things out in the open and sort of relieved your mind, or...did you just do it because you loved me?

Without pausing a beat: Because I loved you.

Then the pause: I always hated it.

Is it wrong, then, for me to tell my own family's secrets? Because my relationship with my father is, in some respects, a family secret: the clients who come into his veterinary clinic, most of the people in my hometown community with whom he interacts, even most family friends, don't really know the way my father is with his family. The different face he has always worn for "outsiders" has maintained this secret. Is it my right to give it away?

Mimi Schwartz asks a similar question in her article, “Writing About Family”: “What about those stories that intentionally tell family secrets, embarrassments, betrayals—or tread in dangerous emotional waters we are still in? Should we not write about them because of hurt feelings and privacy issues, or should we go ahead because, after all, they are *our* stories, too, and demand to be told?” The decision for most writers, she says, lies in their answer to two questions, “motive—*why am I telling this story?*—and craft—*how well can I tell it?*” In the case of my own work, I will have to leave it to my readers to be the judge of the latter, but I can answer the question of motive: I write memoir not out of a sense of pride or any kind of desire for revenge, but because I need to understand and make sense of these difficulties and losses that shape my life, and because these small stories are a way for me to think more fully about larger questions of relationship to family, place, and self—questions too unwieldy to think about in anything less than the concrete and specific details of an individual life.

I write out of a sense of hope, too: hope that, if I remember well enough, I might learn from the past—my mother’s as well as my grandmother’s, my father’s as well as my own. And that, perhaps somewhere along the way, my stories might help someone else find clarity in her struggle, just as Patricia Hampl, Terry Tempest Williams, Pattiann Rogers, Scott Russell Sanders, and so many other excellent writers have helped me.

To the question, then, do I have the right to tell these stories? I’m not sure there can be any one true answer; it surely must depend on the story, its urgency and purpose, and who it might hurt or anger. I keep returning to a comment Sue William Silverman made at the Associated Writing Programs conference in New Orleans in 2002: “We only own those secrets that haunt us,” she said. This seems right. I could never presume to write about my

parents' marriage, for instance, except in the sense that it affects me—otherwise, it is not my story to tell. I can write about my grandmother's two early marriages, however, because the essay really is not about those two marriages, but about my struggle to know who my grandmother was. I have been haunted not only by her death, but by the life I never really knew, and the tenuousness of memory which connects me to her still. In this sense, memoir seems to grapple with something altogether larger than the specific details of any one person's life. "We reenter old lives," Schwartz writes, "to discover what they meant to us: to pay homage, to bear witness, to commemorate, to learn something new, and to pass that on." This is what I hope I have begun to do in my writing here.

The essays in this collection are not wholly concerned with family relationships, but they all treat, on some level, ideas of loss and difficulty, whether in the destruction and recreation of native prairie, the struggle to understand the spiritual in the absence of faith, or the small, persistent sense of disorientation that comes with hearing loss. They are about what it means to live in a place, fully, whether that place is geographical, spiritual, or remembered, and to ground ourselves in the smallest mysteries.

In his essay, "Settling Down," Scott Russell Sanders writes, "I cannot have a spiritual center without having a geographical one; I cannot live a grounded life without being grounded in a *place*." To this I would add: how well I understand a place is inextricably linked to how well I understand myself and where I come from. Family, geography, spirit, the body: all these things inform and shape the self, and to write the self is to create my own home. It is to this purpose, this exploration of memory and loss, this grasping for the truth or, as Hampl writes, "a version of its swirling, changing wholeness," that these essays are gathered here.

Cultivation

November

We have kept them inside almost too long: the tulip and crocus bulbs in the one open box have already started producing shoots, smooth green fingers reaching out from a rough brown heart. They are fooled by a false warmth; whatever sense it is they have that tells them, *Grow*, has mistaken the heat of a furnace for the sun's pure energy. Still, my mother thinks they will be okay, so we put on coats, hats, gloves, and bundle the boxes of bulbs out to the meadow in front of the house.

Outside, she bends over one box, her left hand pressed against the top for support while she drags a knife blade across the taped opening. I stand with my gloved hands shoved in my coat pockets, my back to her and the cold wind. I can see my father, bulky in his down winter coat, carrying wood for the stove from his pickup truck to the basement door. I can see a warm light through the living room windows, glowing like the heated coils on a stove.

In spring there will be fragrant lilac and chocolate mint growing by the steps of the front porch. My mother will pinch a leaf of mint gently between her thumb and index finger, rubbing them together to release the plant's heady scent; she will call me over to crouch down beside her and inhale deeply and with deliberateness, eyes closed, like a connoisseur breathing a fine wine. She will smile, as if to say, *Isn't that delicious?*, and I will know exactly what she means.

Now, though, in late fall, the mint is buried beneath a blanket of leaves, and the lilac bushes look dead, their thin branches bare and brown. The windmill by the old limestone barn, a hundred yards north of the house, creaks in the cold, stiff breeze. Beyond the

meadow to the east, the occasional car sweeps past on Pike Road, and the Quail Ridge golf course across the road lies half-hidden in the chill fog. Our house—simple, pale yellow, built on the foundations of an old farmhouse—crouches in the southwest corner of these six acres. The road is the eastern boundary; a creek, trickling and nameless, where my brothers and I used to explore among the cattails, marks the northern edge. When we first moved here in 1979, only Sherrard's house across the road shared our space, and my parents entertained the possibility of buying what was left of the land around us. But they were still young and poor; now developers have named our space Whispering Meadows, and replaced the quiet with homes and two-car garages.

I hear the pop of tape as my mother breaks open the seal on the last of the boxes. I know the digging won't be easy: last night's frost has frozen the top layer of earth into a solid sheet, and a morning's weak grey light can do little to soften Kansas soil in November. We kneel beneath the plum tree I planted five years ago, its leaves still that rich violet-red like the skin of a plum, the stain of plum juice on my lips in August, and I point the tip of my trowel into the ground.

"Where do you want these to go, Mom?"

My mother holds the bulbs like eggs in her gloved hand, and she half closes her eyes as she flings her arm outward, scattering bulbs in the brittle grass. Then she smiles at me, brown eyes tearing from the cold beneath eyebrows which haven't yet grown back.

"Wherever they fall," she says.

~

The cold burns my ears, the tips of my fingers, even creeps into my boots to settle in my toes. I struggle with the trowel, working it back and forth into the hard earth, wedging it

slowly to a depth of three inches before I try to lever the block of dirt up and out of the way. I press the bulbs one by one into their cold, damp beds, silently wishing them luck. We never know how many will survive the winter.

My mother works quietly beneath the maple tree, ten feet away. In air so bitterly cold it crackles like the snapping of twigs beneath trees, I can hear the effort in her breathing. It has been three months since her last chemotherapy treatment, and she still tires quickly. There is something, though, about planting for spring, thinking ahead to the warmer weather and the blooms it will bring from some of these bulbs, that cheers her; to act as though it were a given, these next four months of mending and gathering strength, even though we both know now that it isn't.

Cancer steals certainty from our hearts, just as surely as it stole my mother's breast from her body. We can never know that there aren't still dangerous cells circulating through her blood like malicious stowaways. My mother's oncologist says that there is no such thing as a "cure": someone only "survives" cancer when they die from something else. But my mother needs to feel more hopeful than that—and I need her to *be* more hopeful—so we plant and plan for the tulips and the mint, the wildflower seeds we will broadcast in the meadow, the warm days and their bounty of strength.

I press the trowel again into the earth; my arms and hands ache from the effort, and the blade bends. I yank it from the ground in frustration, trying to straighten it, but its strength has gone, and it bends again as soon as I put pressure on it.

"Damnit," I grumble. I look over at my mother, her shoulders squared and pushing down into the soil. "Mom!" She stops pushing, and I wave my useless trowel in the air. "I bent my thing. Now it doesn't work."

She stares at me for a moment, and then she grins, her breath rising in a cloud as she exhales. She laughs. “Well, I’ve bent my ‘thing,’ too. Why don’t I get the shovel?”

We finish planting the bulbs this way: my mother jumps on the shovel, wobbling wildly from side to side as she burrows deeper into the earth, and then she holds the slice of ground up while I slip two or three bulbs like secret treasure into the cold, dark space beneath. Less romantic than a woman wearing a straw hat working in the garden, but it works. The sun is failing when the last bulbs are finally covered, and with it, the temperature. My mother and I stand and stretch our bent backs, brushing dirt and wet grass from our knees. We leave the bulbs to their winter bed and go inside to warm ourselves.

~

April

On Easter Sunday, my mother sends my little brother and sister downstairs to wake me. They burst through the door and Kairee hops onto my bed, giggling and pulling back the blanket I’ve gathered around my head. Jay dances impatiently around the room like a small spinning dervish.

“Jenny, Jenny, wake up! The Eeee-ster Bunny was here!”

I can feel Kairee’s soft breath on my cheek, her voice loud in my defenseless ear. I grumble and pull the blanket over my head; I don’t remember being this excited about a giant mythical rabbit when I was seven years old. But the twins are persistent, and I slowly, reluctantly give up the notion of falling back to sleep. I force myself up from the warmth of my bed to follow their laughter and pounding footsteps through the house.

Upstairs, my mother stands at the kitchen counter, filling the pink and purple Easter baskets with colored plastic eggs. The eggs rattle with their secret contents, coins and candy for Kairee and Jay, whose excited shouts I can hear out on the front porch. We're a small family today: my brothers, Jeff and Justin, are away at school, and my father is working again, cleaning kennels and doing treatments at the clinic where he spends the better part of every day. My mother looks tired, but cheerful; she drinks coffee while she works, humming softly. Her hair has grown back soft and dark around her brown eyes. I think how easy she makes it to forget, sometimes, her sickness: all that she has endured in the last year; the numbness she still feels in her right hand from the loss of lymph nodes and damaged nerve endings; the nagging fear I know is there whenever she has a cough or a cold, when I see in her eyes the worry that it might be something more. I give her a quick hug, she smiles and says good-morning, and together we carefully lay the dyed hard-boiled eggs on top of the plastic ones.

When we've piled them as high as we dare, I carry the two baskets outside and sit on the steps while she shoos the twins into the house. The sun has burned the dew off the grass, and the tulip bulbs we planted last fall are beginning to poke their green fingers up into the cool air. Purple, white, and yellow crocuses crouch close to the ground, waiting for the day to warm before they unfold their thin, veined petals. The red bud tree's tiny pink blooms are still hard crimson knots on bare branches, as though the tree were unsure if this spring was, in fact, a certainty.

My mother steps out onto the porch beside me and scoops up one of the baskets. I follow her into the yard, carefully nestling eggs into new blades of grass, in the gentle crooks of trees, in the flower bed of snapdragons and violets; all the same places we've used as

hiding spaces for years, so familiar the eggs are more seen than hidden. I empty my basket first, and sit back down on the porch steps to watch my mother, her body short and strong, crouch by the Scotch pine to leave the last of her eggs in the tree's fallen needles.

~

I realize now that my mother's long relationship with Kansas is deeply rooted, her natural history shaped in barely perceptible ways by this landscape of limestone bluffs and gusty winds, of cottonwoods which both conceal and reveal the banks of trickling streams and muddy brown rivers. She was born in Nebraska, in a military hospital at Offutt Air Force Base in Omaha, a few weeks before Christmas in 1950. But my mother remembers nothing of her life there: my grandfather, a second Lieutenant with the United States Air Force, took his wife, son, and newborn daughter to Kansas in 1951 when he was stationed at McConnell Air Force Base in Wichita. My mother has never left. She told me once it was because she wanted to stay close to my grandparents as they grew older, but I sometimes wonder if she didn't feel just as bound to the place: the hills and long, lonely horizons, the sunsets made brilliant by dust suspended in the atmosphere, that certain kind of familiarity with the landscape which takes a lifetime to cultivate, and which one can never quite leave behind.

~

June

We wait until a thundershower has dampened the hard, hot ground before planting the trees. I pull the scarred red wagon, its wheels rusted and stiff from the seasons, while my mother lifts the potted maples into the wagon bed and follows me, dragging the shovel through thick grass. I stop just south of the house, where there is a break in the long line of

trees—an absence created by the wilt, a fungal disease which is slowly, one by one, killing the Austrian pines edging our property. My mother points, a little breathless, to the empty space beside me.

“Here, Jenny. I just want to fill in where the pines have died.” She wipes the perspiration from her forehead with the back of her hand, the ends of her short dark hair curling from the humidity.

My father whirs past us on the red riding mower, his broad, bare back hunched forward over the steering wheel. I can see his lips pursed in a whistle, though he’s the only one who can hear his music. It will take him the most of the day to mow all six acres, including the ditches, but he insists that it be done. He likes the grass short and sexless, never let alone long enough to come to seed. I shake my head and wait for the noise of the motor to recede. “Okay, but you dig first.” I nudge the ground with the toe of my shoe, like a reluctant child: I have always been a clumsy, ineffective digger.

Before she can protest, I grab the brown plastic pitcher and walk to the shallow fish pond by the back porch. I kneel down on the limestone slabs rimming the pond and lean out over the ragged-edged lilies, scooping water, green with algae, into the pitcher. A lazy, dark catfish moves like a shadow beneath my dripping hands. I can hear the rhythmic whine of cicadas in the trees. I pull the filled pitcher from the pond, slopping smelly washes onto the ground as I haul it back to the wagon.

My mother wipes her palms on the front of her white tank top. The bubbly pink scar from her chemo catheter peeks up from the neckline of her shirt; it looks raw in the bright sunlight, even though I know it’s almost a year old now. She grips the shovel handle firmly,

swaying from side to side in her old flip-flops, edging the blade slowly into the ground. I wait, my face lifted to the sky, as though there were a breeze to be felt in this dead heat.

When she's broken the earth into thick, movable clumps, I lift them out and pile them like rocks on the ground. My mother kneels before the hole she's created, filling it with fish water as though she were somehow consecrating the earth. I pull the young maple from its pot and lower it into the dark water, holding it upright as she pushes broken slabs of soil into the spaces around the tree. The dry earth absorbs the water and grows soft. My mother stands and presses on the mud with the toe of her thong; like a floating garden, it gives. The little tree is buoyed in a sea of algae water and mud.

We plant six more maples and a red bud that morning, hoping that between the intense summer thunderstorms and the water we carry from the fish pond, the trees will weather the heat. In August, after nearly a month of no rainfall and an endless string of one hundred degree days (according to the Weather Service, the most since 1934), all but two of the tender trees are scorched. We cannot carry enough water. Their tiny dead trunks linger like the remains of a forest fire, years after the last flames have been extinguished.

~

July

One stifling night in July, my father and I run our familiar route down the dirt road bordering the Quail Ridge golf course. He moves heavy beside me, shuffling, the soles of his shoes scraping loose gravel. Once in a while, he kicks a rock clear and sends it skittering in front of us. The last streaks of sunlight behind us wash a muted glow on the crowns of cottonwoods down by the creek, and on the limestone bluff to the south. The bugs are

already thick, and about every five steps I swipe an arm through the air in front of me, trying to clear a path for my nose and eyes and mouth.

My father and I don't talk much. He hates waiting this late to run—hates waiting for me to get ready even more—but these are dog days in south-central Kansas, and only the truly crazy people venture out for exercise before dusk. So I deliberately took my time tonight, double knotting my running shoes and pulling my hair back into a ponytail, hoping the delay would give some of the earth's heat an opportunity to escape back into the atmosphere—somewhere above the six feet of space my father and I would be passing through. When I feel a tiny breeze from the creek bed while we're running—more like the displacement of stillness than an actual air current—I can almost imagine that those few extra moments made a difference.

My father coughs beside me, a wrenching, chest-clearing hack. He spits. He coughs again.

“Shit, I hate this weather. It's like a goddamn oven.”

I don't know what to say. I think I hear a trace of, what? Pain? Or just discomfort? But he buries the trace beneath an almost angry sullenness, and I don't understand his anger. So I pretend we're just making conversation.

“It actually feels pretty decent tonight, Dad. Not so hot.”

I pucker my lips, spitting out the bug that's just found its way into my mouth. I wave my arm through the air again, swatting in vain at the growing darkness. My father kicks another rock into the dead stillness.

“Well, I'll tell you what, I hate this godforsaken place. The minute I retire, I'm leaving. I'm not going to stay in Kansas one day longer than I have to.”

He coughs again, so forcefully I wonder if he will vomit. I think there must be something wrong for him to always be coughing like this when we run, but he insists that it's just "sports-induced asthma." I'm not even sure what that is, but I wonder if it's something a person just develops, because I know he hasn't always coughed like this.

"Your mother, she thinks we're going to stay here. Well, she's crazy. It's too goddamn hot. I'm not staying. The minute I retire."

"Right, Dad." I sigh.

Except for the whine of the crickets and my father's grating cough, we finish the last two miles in silence.

~

On a one-foot wide piece of wall in the kitchen, my mother keeps a record of our growth with a black Sharpie marker. With my fingers, I can trace down through years, through diminishing height: seasons of cross country practice in high school; Saturday mornings in the attic of my friend Julia's, playing with dolls; summers with my grade school friend Jessie, sauntering across harvested milo and wheat fields on the backs of her ponies, Sunshine and Firefly. All the way down to June 16, 1981, to where my name first appears on the wall: Jenny, six years old, three feet, ten and a half inches. My brothers are here, too, on the same day. Jeff, with his dark hair, eyes, and skin, is eight; blond, exuberant Justin is two. The twins, Kairee and Jay, don't come until eleven years later.

I remember the summer ritual of being measured against that wall. It almost always happened in June, near my birthday; I think I sometimes liked to believe it was the realization that *I* was another year older that inspired my mother to track our growth, but now

I'm sure it had more to do with coincidence or convenience than any sort of favoritism on her part.

It was a sort of game to see how far we could stretch the truth of our height. One by one, our backs to the wall while my mother placed her yardstick flat on our heads, we would edge our heels up just the tiniest bit against the baseboard.

"He's cheating!" I would accuse from my spectator's spot at the kitchen table. My older brother Jeff would glare at me from under my mother's upraised arm. She would glance down at his feet.

"Jeff, honey, feet flat on the floor. I want to know how tall you *really* are."

Every summer for the past nineteen years, my mother has marked the record of our heads inching skyward like trees, and now there is a bit of living history on our yellow kitchen wall; our names and heights written in her careful hand above dates spanning our lives in that house. My mother jokes sometimes that when she and my father finally move, she's going to cut out that piece of wall and take it with her. I wonder if I'm the only one who knows that she will probably do it.

~

The day I watched my father hurl a kitchen chair into the wall, leaving a hole in the sheet rock the size of a golf ball, I understood how much he truly hated his life. He only admitted to hating his job—being a veterinarian, being woken in the middle of the night by someone whose dog had been sick for days, dealing with clients who became more and more unreasonable every year—but I thought I understood what he wasn't saying. That he felt trapped. To escape would mean not just leaving his profession, but leaving our home in Winfield, leaving Kansas, leaving the Midwest altogether. My father wanted mountains, not

plains. He wanted cold winters, cool summers, heavy snows, air he could breathe without feeling suffocated, and a career more challenging than that of a small-town animal doctor. I think he simply wanted a life other than the one he'd chosen. And as much as my mother, my brothers, and I wanted to be supportive of him, to not be selfish in holding on to home, this was one life change we just didn't know how to embrace.

~

I thought I saw my father happy once, on a trail in the mountains of northern Colorado. We'd left my mother and the twins behind at the campground that day, my brothers at home in Kansas, and together he and I climbed up from the trail head along a ridge into the thick pines. Fifteen minutes into our hike, the afternoon sky darkened and a heavy drizzle dripped through pine needles, soaking our heads and washing down our ponchos. I asked my father if he wanted to go on. He slowed and looked up for a moment, his breathing heavy and hollow sounding in the thin air. He leaned oddly forward, his arms dangling like a puppet, as if a pole wedged against his chest were propping him up. Then he looked at me and nodded.

"Why don't we keep going for another ten minutes. If it doesn't let up, we can turn back."

I shrugged and turned again up the trail, my head bowed against the rain. My father lagged behind, his shoes scuffing the trail with each step. Two minutes later, lightning flashed over the ridge and the rain became hail. I cried out as the frozen bits stung my face. I spun around and trotted back down towards my father.

"Forget this!" I had to yell over the rain. He nodded.

I ran with my head down, watching the wet rocks in the trail beneath me as I leapt from one flat surface to the next. Hail pelted my head and hands, and water dripped from my eyelashes, blurring the world in front of me. I could hear my father's footsteps faint behind me. Lightning flashed across the valley to my left, striking a tree, and smoke sizzled up from the tree's crown. The thunder boomed almost instantly. I knew we had to get off the trail and find shelter.

Just ahead of me, a large boulder had eroded on one side, creating a overhanging crevice the size of three squatting women. I crawled over mud and slick rock to reach the crevice, and waved for my father to follow.

He was clumsy in the small space, scooting backwards on his butt and bracing himself with his feet to get out of the rain. I shivered in the sudden cold and glanced over at him. His black hair dripped water into his beard and I could see the mud halfway up his back, but he was smiling; a slow, unconscious stretch, his green eyes wrinkling slightly, the space between his two front teeth wide open. I'd almost forgotten what his smile looked like. I sat in silence beside him, staring out at the trees and the hail accumulating on the trail, wondering for perhaps the thousandth time who he was.

~

Like my mother, my father has always lived with the prairie landscape of the Midwest; but unlike my mother, the years on the plains have brought him dissatisfaction, rather than contentment. I sometimes wonder if he didn't inherit his sense of restlessness from his own parents, who were never happy staying in one place. Except for a year in Texas, my grandparents never left Kansas, but they moved frequently, for reasons unknown

to the rest of the family. The last time, when they were both in their late 60s, they built a new home only a mile away from their old one.

My parents, too, moved several times when I was too young to remember; we'd lived in three different towns by the time I was three years old. But the moves ended with Winfield, and my father's discontent has been growing for the last twenty years. My brothers and I have been listening to him talk of leaving since we were kids, but after so many years, it seemed that was all it would ever be: just talk. He'd curse the blazing dry summers, the petty small-town gossip, the after hours emergency calls, and sometimes he would slam doors or phones, or even throw a chair into the wall, but we never really expected him to do anything.

~

August

The American elms are dying. They stand in a stoic, graceful row in my parents' backyard, their bark peeling back in brittle patches, like dead blistered skin on sunburnt shoulders. Small leaves crinkle brown and fold to the ground, though autumn is still months away, and the pruned limbs look strangely sparse surrounded by the thick green of early summer. I watch from the window as my mother follows a few steps behind Gary Beeman, a tree specialist from the Heartland Tree Service. I can't hear what they're saying through closed glass, but I see Gary pause by one of the 40-year-old elms and rub his fingers over his beard as he squints up into barely filtered sunlight. He looks at my mother, his lips moving now, and raises his right hand to touch the open wounds of the tree's trunk.

I stare at his hand on the familiar surface, and remember a hot summer night when I was nine, sitting at the base of that tree, my head tilted back and cradled in the trunk's inward

groove. I remember watching the quick streaking spark of meteorites flashing through spaces between the leaves above me, and the feel of the rough, knotted bark against my back, the thick roots pressing against my legs where they stretched out from the trunk and into the earth like tendons, holding us both to the surface. I remember the tree, in my mind, as constant as the stars. As permanent as anything could be. At least, more permanent than me.

Gary pulls his hand back from the elm, places both hands on his hips, still talking. I can see heat in the stillness, the smooth reflection of light off the small pond's surface. A lazy shadow drifts across the yard, darkening brick and buffalo grass, the young maple by the porch. My mother listens, nods slowly, then she and Gary turn and walk around the south corner of the house, along the long row of wilted Austrian pines, out of sight.

~

Trees are resilient creatures. They must be. In times of drought on the plains, as in other arid and semi-arid climates, they will extend their roots deep into the earth's surface, reaching instinctively for the withdrawing source of moisture, a diminishing water table. Simply picking up and leaving a barren environment, as did many inhabitants of Kansas during the Dust Bowl years, is for obvious reasons not an option for a tree: It must dig deep to survive, or die.

Still, like all organisms, trees have their weaknesses. For the elm, it is a fungus which invades the tree's cells and spreads, like my mother's cancer, to the limbs, wilting the leaves and eventually killing the tree. Dutch elm disease, as it's commonly known, is destroying the elm population of North America. It has been estimated that within the next 25 years, most of the deciduous trees in Kansas will be gone, devastated both by disease and pollution.

I cannot imagine the farm and prairie landscape of Kansas without trees. What will be left but barrenness?

~

After our morning's work of watering and weeding, my mother, my younger brother, and I sit at the pine picnic table beneath a sheltering maple in the backyard. Justin is home for the weekend from Lawrence, where he lives with my older brother, and where they both go to school. He smokes while my mother talks, his cigarette trembling in his fingers, his brown eyes hardened almost black.

"So there's a possibility your father and I may be selling the practice and the house within the next couple of years," my mother says. "I wanted to know how you would feel about that."

Justin flicks the dangling ashes from his cigarette and presses the heel of his hand against his blond head, scowling. He glances at me quickly, but I stare hard at the patio bricks beneath my feet.

"I think it sucks," he says, then sighs. "You know, I was practically born in this house, Mom. It'd be really strange to not be able to come home anymore. I don't know why Dad can't find a different job without leaving."

My mother nods. "I know. To be honest, I don't want to leave either. But your dad's miserable, and if leaving is what will make him happy, that may be what we need to do."

I lean back against the maple, silent, and stare up through the branches. I think about all the hours Justin spent last summer, laying bricks for the patio by hand in the blazing heat. I think about the scraggly flower garden my mother and I have coaxed to bloom each spring

for years. I think about the pet cemetery behind the shed, where my brothers and I buried all of our childhood pets, covering the graves with heavy stones to protect their remains from scavengers. I think about all that we will not be able to take with us when we leave this place. Everything seems rooted in these six acres, in the yellow house behind me, in the years of careful cultivation. Sometimes I think even memory belongs here.

I remember a time, just out of high school, when I felt I understood somewhat my father's restlessness; at least that sense of needing desperately to escape the smallness of Winfield and the people who lived there. When I moved to Munich in southern Germany to study for a year, I left with the smug notion that the lives of the people who stayed behind would go on predictably, narrowly; while mine would literally swell and split with experience, expanding to accommodate all that I saw and learned. I equated escape with a kind of living that was somehow truer than anything that could take place on the plains, and that to stay in Kansas would be to resign myself to something less than life itself: a form of dying. I wonder if perhaps this is how my father views his life here now. I don't know. I only know that I go home because I need what I find there; what my mother has found there all her life. Family. A sense of place. Memory itself.

There is a kind of memory, I think, which nests in place. A memory which is rooted, like trees, in the very soil. I feel it sometimes when I go home. I walk through the grass in bare feet, touch the curling bark of the elms, run my fingers through old dirt in my mother's garden, and the sensations of this place, its smell, texture, color, return memories to me like forgotten childhood treasures. I can see the fallen tree where my brothers and I used to climb, scrambling after wayward kittens; I can taste the sweet drop of honeysuckle in my

mouth, its soft purple blossom between my lips; I can hear my mother's young voice, her laughter, in the smell of the lilac bushes.

And maybe the memories were already mine, buried beneath the busy refuse of more recent years, with home only a means of unearthing them again. Maybe, but even so, I've been away from home now long enough to know this little bit of truth: those memories are buried so deep, I can't reach them anymore on my own. I need this place to help me find them again: its geography is sometimes the only recollection I have of who I have been, and what has been lost.

~

In first grade, I came home from school with a black walnut tree starter, its roots wrapped in an orange plastic bag filled with earth and water. My mother helped me plant the tree in an open space south of a decrepit wood garage. Although the old garage has been gone years now, the tree has flourished, its growth much more impressive than mine: branches now reaching up twenty feet in the air, a trunk a solid foot in diameter. In spring, pale yellow jonquils bloom beneath its limbs. I wonder sometimes, when I hear my father talk of leaving, how my mother will take my black walnut with her if they go; if she imagines how she might just cut it out of the earth, like the kitchen wall, and pack it along.

My Grandmother's Orchid

When Grandma felt my small hand on her arm, she quietly laid down her book and looked at me, her head tilted forward so she could peer through the top half of her bifocals. "Jenny," she said, smiling. "What can I do for you?" The smoke from her burning cigarette curled up from a violet glass ashtray. The pink tropical flowers of her turquoise caftan unfurled over her low breasts, her stomach, her knees. I shrugged my shoulders, staring at the book in her lap. It looked, to my young eyes, just like all the other books she read. On its cover, a beautiful woman with long brown hair stood with her eyes closed, her head back, her lips open. A man with no shirt held her around the waist, looking as though he might want to kiss her.

"Grandma," I said. "Why do you always read these books?" On the last book, I remembered, the woman had red hair, and there was a black horse behind her and the man, far away, running. The horse had been the only detail that interested me. I wondered if Grandma's books were always about a woman with long hair and a man with no shirt.

Grandma laughed. "I read them because they're about love. Why do you always ask such nosey questions?" I sank to the floor by her feet, cross-legged, and shrugged again. She took my hand in hers and squeezed it. I felt the cool press of her emerald rings against my skin. She looked at me for a moment, quiet, and I stared back. Grandma's skin, her pale, white skin, looked so soft I wanted to run my fingers across her face. In the lamplight I could see tiny, blond hairs curling on her cheek. Like a baby, I thought.

Grandma sighed, then, and looked past me, as though there were someone standing behind me, and I turned to see if it was one of my brothers, about to interrupt. There was no

one. When I turned back, she looked at me again and smiled, her hazel eyes almost gold in the afternoon light. She bent forward a little, touched her fingers to my cheek, her hand trembling, then she reached for her cigarette and her book.

~

It has been a hard Christmas. For the first time in more than ten years, since the year I was twelve and a sudden ice storm kept my grandparents from making their annual half-hour trek to our house in Winfield, we are celebrating the holiday at my grandparents' home. The gifts have been unloaded from the van, the dinner—carried from our house to theirs in stacks of Tupperware—is being reheated in the kitchen. But there is no tree, no lights, no decorations, and, worst of all, a kind of strained cheerfulness. An absence of real joy.

I sit on the floor by my grandmother's rocking chair, watching her, with my knees pulled to my chest, arms wrapped tight around my legs. She was 25 in 1950, when she had her only baby girl, my mother. My mother was 25 in 1975, when she had her first baby girl, me. Twenty-five years separating each of us, each born neatly on the turn of a quarter century. I used to marvel at the magic of these numbers: a mathematical proof, if such a thing could exist, that we three women belonged together. The mother who cares for the daughter, and the grandmother who cares for them both.

Now I am 23, my grandmother is 73, and I find myself struggling to remember when this strange transition took place: my grandmother used to take care of me, weekends I would spend with her and my grandfather; today it is my mother or me who cuts her food for her, who holds her arm to steady her as she hobbles to the bathroom. She tries to feed herself, steadying her weak right hand with her left, spooning aching slow bites of turkey and mashed potatoes to her mouth. Her hand shakes badly, and the potatoes touch the corner of her

mouth, leaving a trace of soft whiteness on her pale lips. She hunches over the tray on her lap, over the child-sized bites of turkey my mother has cut for her. She hunches over, her body bent as though afraid someone will snatch the food away from her.

I know it isn't fear that bends her, though; she fell in July, just one month before I returned from a year in Munich, and the pain of a broken back twists her down, down in a way that seems to break her spirit as much as her body. I reach out, touch the soft skin of her pale arm, smile at her when she looks up from her plate. "How does it taste, Grandma?" She squints, her lips trembling in a sort of pained smile, her eyes—that same odd blend of green, gold, and brown as my own—crinkled at the corners and red from lack of sleep.

"Good," she says, her voice rough, deeper than I remember. She grasps my wrist with trembling fingers and squeezes.

My grandmother is heartbroken that she never got to see how my mother "did up" her house for the holidays this year—the mismatched collection of ornaments, the porcelain angels in their velvet gowns on the piano, the village of folksy Santas inhabiting the buffet—and in spite of the fact that my mother "does up" the house the same way, with the same decorations, every year, I almost understood her tears when my mother told her we would bring Christmas to her and Grandpa. She doesn't cry for the holiday ornaments. I think she knows, somehow; she senses herself slipping.

My mother hovers in the living room doorway across from my grandmother, frowning slightly. "Mom," she says, then hesitates. "You need to try to keep your feet up, Mom." Grandma looks at her for a moment, silent, and my mother seems to catch her breath. I can hear the television from the kitchen, where my father and older brother are watching football while they eat. Through the sliding glass door I can see my uncle and his wife,

sitting opposite each other and smoking. A closed bedroom door down the hall muffles the laughter of my younger brother and sister and cousin. Here in this room, though, there is only my mother, my grandmother, me, and this strange, silent moment between us.

I kneel over my grandmother's swollen feet. "Let me help you, Grandma," I say, lifting first her left leg, then her right, onto the ottoman.

"Thank you, Jenny," she says, and touches my cheek with the dry tips of her fingers.

Later, as we're leaving, I bend over my grandmother to hug her. She catches my hands and, for just a moment, clings to me, her smile tremulous and her eyes full of some wild sadness. I stare at her, see myself reflected in the paleness of her skin, those gold-flecked eyes, and then I feel a kind of desperate fear, caught up in my throat, my chest, my eyes. "I love you, Grandma," I say, and somehow it feels as though I am saying it for the first time, the forceful truth of it thick on my tongue.

"I love you, too," she says, her voice soft and sure.

Later, in the car, I ask my mother what made her catch her breath in that strange moment. "I saw something in your grandma's face," she says with a kind of wonder. "I saw death there."

~

In my 26th summer, in the cool, familiar dankness of the basement, my grandfather slides open the top drawer of a battered brown file cabinet. It has been more than two years since my grandmother's death, and above us, an early summer thunderstorm rages, the unholy rumble of thunder muted by unpainted concrete walls and the enclosure of earth. I can hear the footsteps of Uncle Wayne as he moves down the dark hallway and through the living room, probably on his way to the screen porch, the only place my grandfather will

tolerate smoking, and where he can watch the boil of clouds and lightning in comfort. From my perch next to the bookshelves, I can just barely see the top layer of a pile of papers resting inside the file cabinet. My grandfather gently lifts out a section with steady hands and tilts it toward the light, reading the faded handwriting.

Beneath the bare bulb, his dark hair reveals traces of thinness, a glimpse of pale skin. His peppered beard, still new to me, quiets his gruff face. I remember several weeks before, brushing my fingers against its surprising softness, thinking how it felt like my cat's downy fur. I remember my mother and me teasing him: she said he looked like an Amish farmer, I thought perhaps one of the Seven Dwarfs. I remember thinking I saw him smile then, a crinkle of pleasure in his dark, almost coal-black eyes.

My grandfather shifts beneath the dim light and sighs. "I don't know if this is what you're looking for," he says, handing me the stack of papers.

~

My grandfather's house, in the middle of the block on Edgewood Street, next to the old sycamores, has a distinct smell—a kind of soothing, sweet mustiness, a true blend of old perfume, cigarette smoke, and mothballs. Dried flowers. Cedar. Furniture polish. My grandmother smoked for so many years, most of her life, sometimes I think the essence of her cigarettes has been rubbed like oil into the wood, into the stained brocade wallpaper, into the old air of their house.

I have come to my grandfather's small house on this quiet, shady street in Mulvane, Kansas to recover my grandmother. Here, in this house where they lived since 1960, and where he has lived without her for the past two and a half years, on this street where the old sycamores lean over parked cars and children chase each other on bikes, in this neighborhood

where families come to stay, I have come looking for the stories of her life. I feel as though I am losing her, in the way we lose what we never knew.

Like many children, I think I unconsciously armed myself with the belief that my family, and my grandparents, especially, existed purely in their role as *family*. That my grandparents fulfilled all their own needs by waiting for visits from me and my brothers, sending us savings bonds for each birthday and Christmas, and bestowing on us the awkward sort of attention that can come only from older people who are no longer accustomed to the frenzied energy of children. Even the stories my grandmother told me, as I sat on the floor at her feet, rubbing my fingers across the brown-flowered velour of her rocking chair, seemed terribly unreal. It was as though the stories were somehow disconnected from this woman whom I knew as my grandmother, this woman in her tropical print caftan and emerald rings on nearly every soft, swollen finger.

Not until her death did I recognize, in the most concrete way, my grandmother's separate reality. Not until then did I realize how little I knew her; and, in fact, how little I knew anyone beyond my most immediate family, beyond my own stories.

Now, sometimes, I dream about her, and in my dreams the smell of her, of her house, drifts, as present and invisible as dust caught in the perfect afternoon light, through the sliding glass doors, through the suncatchers hanging there in the form of ruby-red cardinals; as indescribable as the exact color of that translucent glass ashtray—now violet, now burgundy, now some smoky shade of blue—sitting empty by her chair. Real, but also impossibly beyond my grasp.

Last week, I dreamt she played the piano, her body small but upright, her pale fingers drifting over the keys. She played "Rhapsody on a Theme from Paganini" while I lay,

listening, in bed, and even in my dream this confused me, because it is my mother who plays the piano, my mother who plays “Rhapsody” late at night, when her children are in bed, not quite asleep. I have never seen my grandmother play the piano, but when the music ended, we carried her, in my dream, to her bed. She lay there, my hand held softly in hers, and she called me Sister. The smell of her drifted through my dream.

~

I glance up at my grandfather just in time to see him reach for a small flat box tucked into the back corner of the cabinet.

“What’s this,” he mutters. He slips the lid off the box. Inside, in a neat pile, are several quaint, obviously old wedding cards. He touches one, gently, as though he is surprised to find it still there. “Mama’s and my wedding,” he says. I move quietly to stand next to him.

My grandfather still aches for her, a kind of grief too present not to sense, yet still too uncomfortable, too tremulous to talk about. He rarely speaks of her, and when he does, he says very little. Once, I remember, he showed me a photograph of my grandmother, her lips parted with the beginnings of laughter, at 21—the year of their marriage—and said in a rough voice, “She was a beautiful woman.” Before I had a chance to say anything, to ask him to tell me more, he changed the subject.

My mother sometimes worries that he isn’t “taking it well,” and yet, I’m not sure how anyone, after 52 years together, could handle such loss well. I imagine it must be a little like waking in the morning and trying to breathe with only one lung: though not impossible, you can’t help but feel the terrible strain of it. I remember Christmas Day, five months ago, when my grandfather disappeared quietly from the kitchen where the family had gathered. I found

him sitting on the couch in the living room, staring at our fake, tinsel tree, his eyes red and tears following the wrinkles of his face. I sat down next to him, then, with no words for a kind of pain beyond my experience, and wrapped my arms around his neck.

Now I touch my grandfather's shoulder and point to the folded tissue, pinned at its edges, lying beneath the cards. "What do you think that is," I ask. He carefully lifts the yellowed tissue, pinching the edges together so that he can peek inside. I hear the soft catch of his breath.

"It's Mama's orchid, from our wedding," he says. He gives me the tissue, and I hold the brittle paper gently by its edges. Inside are the darkened remains of a dried orchid, just beginning to powder at its tips. A Showy Orchid that in bloom would have been white but for the delicate, lavender hood extending over its lip.

"I can't believe it's kept all this time," I say. The fragile flower reminds me of my grandparents' wedding photograph, hanging on the wall in my apartment. They married in June 1946, my grandfather in his khaki Air Force uniform, just a hint of a smile in his full lips, and my grandmother, pale in her dark wedding suit, a starched white ruffle in her hair, her hazel eyes almost translucent in the camera's light.

I remember my grandmother telling me how much she disliked that photograph of herself, but not why. I used to believe she had told me she was suffering from morning sickness at the time, and perhaps I believed this because the face in the photograph seems so strained, so pale, but my mother says this isn't possible—my uncle, her firstborn, wasn't born until 1947, more than a year after their marriage. My grandfather says she was just plain sick. Now I don't know if I just imagined the story to begin with, or if my grandmother confused her memories, or if she was, in fact, pregnant when my grandfather married her,

and perhaps lost the baby. That I don't know the truth doesn't matter, really, but that I don't know whether to trust the story or memory or the possibility of secrets in my family unsettles me.

Patricia Hampl, more than any other writer I know, speaks most eloquently to this struggle. In her essay "Memory and Imagination," she suggests that it is perhaps this nagging discomfort with the *not knowing* which motivates one's search for, and through, the past. "Locating touchstones," she writes, "is satisfying. Who knows why? Perhaps we all sense that we can't grasp the whole truth and nothing but the truth of our experience." I know I sense this about my grandmother: that she is, in death as in life, just out of reach of my understanding. And yet, I cannot, for some reason, be content with this conclusion, this summary of sensations, emotions, memories associated with a face in photographs, a name. This woman, for better or worse, is in my blood; she is in both my mother and me, and to accept the impossibility of understanding her feels akin to letting slip away some rich and vital vein of knowledge about myself.

I lay my grandmother's orchid in its shroud of tissue gently back in the box. I want to take a closer look at the yellowed wedding cards, but I hesitate to ask and my grandfather doesn't offer them. Instead, he sighs gruffly, as though the contents had opened some uncomfortable memories. He slips the lid on the box and tucks it back into the dark corner of the cabinet.

"What else do you want to see," he asks. I watch the contents of the drawer disappear as he slides it firmly shut. "Mama's yearbooks are over there on that shelf." He waves his hand toward the bookshelves behind me, and I pull one of the frayed red annuals from the shelf. I sit down in my grandfather's tweed office chair, feeling the old creak of the cushion

as I sink into it. I touch the soft cover, the black letters: *The El Doradoan*. El Dorado, 1943. I realize I didn't even know my grandmother grew up there, just 45 minutes north of my own hometown, half an hour from my grandfather's house in Mulvane.

On the inside cover of the annual my grandmother had written her name, Alice Brogdon, in loose, angular cursive, above a scattering of classmates' autographs. I trace my finger over the notes, reading 58-year-old messages to my grandmother from friends, people she grew up with, many of whom were probably dead now. Mary Ellen wrote, "Alice, Lots of luck & happiness in the future. (Not that you need it. With your looks you'd get it anyway.)" Bill, #71 on the football team, wrote in barely legible pen, "Alice, Here's wishing a swell little gal all the best of luck."

And then, down in the corner, Doretha wrote, "Alice, I hope you have gobs of happiness throughout your married life. Tommy's a lucky fellow." My finger freezes on the words. I read them again, stare hard at the girlish swirl at the end of "Tommy." I feel the cold prickle of something on my neck, like the damp breath of the concrete wall behind me. My grandfather moves in front of the shelves, and I glance up at him. His brows are creased together, eyes squinting at the spines of books. He bends over, hands braced against his thighs, bringing his face closer to the weathered letters. I don't move my finger from the page, from the name Tommy, as if I could somehow cover up what I have just discovered, as if I could hide it from myself.

My grandfather's name is Douglas.

I hear the muffled roll of thunder growl above. I turn the pages, scanning the handwriting for mentions of Tommy. Audrey wrote, "I think you and Tommy look swell together." Several classmates wished her luck in her marriage, but none of these messages

reveal anything more than her husband's first name. I don't find anyone by the name of Tommy listed as a classmate. In a typewritten litany of inside class jokes and prophecies, the yearbook editors poked fun at my grandmother: "Maxine Caywood and Alice Brogdon are still advising all us girls to settle down, but after all, we can't all land men."

Land men? I think of one of the last times I saw my grandmother, her swollen body slumped forward in her chair, the clear thin tube from the oxygen tank coiled around her pale neck and into her nose, her eyes red and bruised from lack of sleep. But then I think, too, of a photograph my grandfather once gave me, my favorite, of my grandmother at the age of sixteen or seventeen. In it, she wears a delicate white cardigan, open at the neck, and her reddish-brown curls swept back on one side with a white-flowered barrette. Her lips, painted a shade of red I never remember seeing my grandmother wear, part in a smile that reveals her slightly crooked teeth. She looks sweet, somehow innocent in this photograph, and inexplicably removed from the woman who, years later, would reach her one good arm up from her chair to touch my hair or my face as I bent over to hug her at the end of each visit. It seems both impossible and unavoidable that my grandmother and the young woman in the photograph could be the same woman.

In her bedroom, which she shared with my grandfather, but which I always thought of as *her* bedroom, I used to sit on the edge of the bed and stare at her old jewelry box—the kind with ornately carved wooden doors that open out like an armoire—filled with precious things. More jewelry than any one woman could possibly wear: sapphires, rubies, and her favorite, emeralds. A butterfly pin my mother brought back from a trip to Mexico when she was sixteen. A tiny plastic case with my mother's baby teeth.

In her last years, when she stopped reading romance novels and took to watching the Home Shopping Network, and to following the stories of the “young people” on the country dancing channel, the precious things moved over to make room for delightful junk. Silver charms shaped like cowboy hats and boots. A calculator with jewel-colored keys. Silly things, but she brought them out to show my mother and me, fingered them with obvious pleasure in her soft, shaking hands, waited for our murmurs of approval.

I remember this: by her bed, a porcelain lamp, its stem the shape of a young girl in Victorian dress, painted pastel pinks and greens. A girl with a parasol, fair-skinned in sunlight. I liked to imagine she was my grandmother, sometimes, in an earlier time. Another precious relic.

The halting grind of the computer printer interrupts my thoughts. My grandfather shuffles from the printer, sitting on a stand against the wall, to his computer, and back again. He grins at me. “I’m making a copy of my branch of the family tree for you. It goes back twelve generations.” I smile and nod with as much enthusiasm as I can, but my mind is still in 1943. I suspect my grandfather already knows about Tommy, and I suspect that he could tell me much more than the paltry information I’ve found in my grandmother’s annual.

The desire to ask trembles in my body like a peculiar exhaustion in the bones. If I were not afraid of upsetting him, I would do it. I argue with myself, the longing to know silenced by a sense of protectiveness and discomfort. I cannot bring myself to make him cry, not even to know my grandmother’s story. I tiptoe around her memory as though it were a precious thing, a porcelain girl with a parasol, too easily broken.

I can, however, ask my mother. That evening, I sit on her blue quilted bedspread, watching as she puts away laundry. My mother bends to stack a pile of clean shorts on the bottom shelf in her closet. I trace the lines of the quilt with a finger, stopping to tug absently on a broken thread. I stare at the frayed thread in my fingers, still attached to the material, dividing blue flowers from lighter blue swirls. I think of my grandmother's annual for perhaps the hundredth time. I glance over at my mother's back as she crouches in front of the closet, straightening the leaning stacks of clothes.

"I was looking at Grandma's old yearbooks today," I say.

"Yeah?" The closet muffles my mother's voice.

"Well, I found this interesting message in it, from one of her friends. Did you know she was married to someone named Tommy?" I see my mother's hands stop moving as she twists around to look at me. She exhales, a long, slow breath, and nods.

"Yes, I did. She never told me about it. Your Grandpa did, after she died."

My mother sits on the floor, leaning her back against the closet door. I shake my head. I might be able to imagine my grandmother keeping a secret like this from me, but from my mother? How could she not know?

"Well, who was he?" I ask. "I mean, what happened?"

"I really don't know the details. Grandma never talked about it," she says. She twists my father's wedding ring on her finger—she took it away from him years ago, when she realized he was probably going to lose it. "I only know that she was young, about sixteen, and that it didn't last long. And actually..." She glances at me, as though she has just remembered who she's talking to.

"Actually what?" I press.

“Well, she was married twice.” I stare at my mother. She looks worried, the creases around her lips set deep with tension. Then I remember her telling me once, with a gravity that almost frightened me, that if I knew everything there was to know about her, everything bad she had ever done, it would change how I saw her. I wonder now if she’s afraid she’s told me too much, compromised my grandmother’s memory in a way that was not hers to compromise.

“Twice? You mean, before Grandpa?” The back door slams, and I can hear Kairee and Jay’s voices and footsteps as they run through the house. Amazed, I lean forward on the bed, beneath the loud buzz of the ceiling fan, as if being closer to the source of the words could somehow make them more believable.

“Yes. She had the second marriage annulled, after she found out the guy’d had a vasectomy—he’d never told her he didn’t plan on having kids. I don’t remember what his name was. Your grandpa showed me the marriage certificates after she died.”

I look back down at the thread I’ve twirled around my finger. “That’s unbelievable,” I say. “She was only 21 when she married Grandpa. How could she have managed that?”

My mother sighs, and I imagine for an instant that I see the tiniest bit of a smile in her face. “Well, you know Grandma. When she wanted something... Anyway, I suspect she married the first guy to get away from her mother. Your great-grandmother Brogdon was pretty awful to her. And like I said, it didn’t last long. Neither did the second marriage—maybe six months?”

“But why didn’t she ever talk about it? I mean, we didn’t even *know*,” I say.

My mother shakes her head. “That I can’t answer. I suppose it was important to her to keep it a secret. Appearances mattered very much to her.” She laughs. “I suppose that’s why she was always telling me to hold my stomach in.”

~

My grandmother knew quite a lot about secrets and appearances. My mother once suggested to me a flirtation that had taken place between my grandfather and a neighbor lady, sometime when my mother was young. If it was true, my grandmother never spoke of it. She told me stories—my memories of her are shaped by the stories she told me as I sat, knees pulled to my chin, at the foot of her chair. She told me about her struggle with polio when she was a toddler, a devastating experience that left her permanently weakened on her right side. She told me about Betty Gaines, her best girlfriend in high school, who died in an apartment fire when she was eighteen and they were both working for Sunflower Ordnance Works in De Soto, Kansas. And I remember once, in grade school, when she whispered to me the name of the baby boy she’d lost in childbirth in 1958. But never did she speak of past marriages or indiscretions.

I struggle now to think of my grandmother, traditional lady that she was, as a thrice-married woman, especially in the 1940s. This, after all, was the same woman who nearly cried when I told her that Ben, my then-fiancé, and I were not going to be married in a church, neither of us being “believers.” “Oh Miss Jenny,” she’d said then, “you’ll be so sorry for that one day.” Now I can’t help but wonder: was she sorry for her two failed marriages? Did she mean to protect me somehow from that kind of regret?

~

Since my grandmother's death, my mother has been having lunch almost weekly with my grandfather: if she drives to Mulvane, they go to Laura's Kitchen on Main Street; if he comes to Winfield, they go to Carma's smoky Chuckwagon Café, with its life-sized John Wayne cut-out standing in the corner and plates of appallingly greasy fried chicken and barbecued beef brisket on the tables. They never seem to talk much at these lunches—my grandfather will ramble sometimes about his latest computer gadget, or a trip he's planning to Junction City to do research in the genealogy library or city cemetery; my mother will tell him, in great detail, how much work she's having to do for her Master's program in Spanish—but for the first time in almost fifty years, my mother and grandfather share a kind of closeness. A bond of loss, the memory of the years they shared with her, that I can only touch the edges of.

Perhaps for this reason, this new intimacy, it is my mother who finally broaches the subject of those early marriages with my grandfather, one day when I've tagged along for lunch at Laura's. I have not asked her to do this for me, have only told her of feeling divided between discomfort and a need—one I struggle to explain, even to myself—to know this story, but I think she understands I may never ask him myself. And perhaps she also feels a longing to know, because of the way grief compels us to fill emptiness with something, *anything*, to make the loss seem somehow smaller. More tolerable. Not so darkly real.

"Dad," she says, after the waitress has brought our lunch. "Didn't you say you still had Mom's old marriage certificates?"

My grandfather is silent for a moment, staring at his mashed potatoes. In the long quiet, I rearrange the green beans on my plate, piling them like logs against a bowl of gravy. Now that the question has been asked, I want to snatch it back, to restore the careful facade

we have all created around the subject of my grandmother. It feels as though we are breaking some unspoken rule by being direct about grief. How is it, I wonder, that of all the unconscious lessons my family has to teach, I have learned this one so well? Hide your pain. Bury it. Lie, if you must, but above all, remember that hurt is a private thing.

My grandfather's voice is rough when he finally speaks, and I press my fingers into the vinyl booth seat, uncomfortable at the sound of so much emotion from one who rarely expresses any at all. "Well," he says. "Well. I don't know if I've got that stuff anymore."

My mother quickly glances at me. "Would you mind looking, Dad? Jenny's writing an essay, and she needs those things," she says.

I'm almost embarrassed that she's speaking for me, but how could I ever be the one to ask? How could I explain this yearning to know, as though it were a stay against a different kind of loss altogether? As if, without this knowledge, this understanding of how she lived her life, I might lose my ability to keep her in my mind? My memory of her smile, her smell, her soul—all of her emotional, spiritual self—tied up somehow in how much I can recover?

My grandfather sighs, and his shoulders slump forward. "All right, I'll see what I can find."

~

He cannot find the marriage certificates, only two sets of divorce papers, faded green. I wonder if this is because my grandmother wanted the only proof to be her correction of the mistake, and not the making of the mistake itself, but of course I can never know. He presses the papers into my hands and I read, hungry perhaps, as Hampl suggests, "for a world, one

gone or lost.” A woman whose history I sense could tell me so much about who she was, and perhaps, if I search long enough, even something about myself.

This is what I discover: my grandmother, Alice, sixteen years old, married Thomas Bliss in Wichita Falls, Texas in March 1942. They divorced six months later, in September. She married Clifford Turner in January 1944, when she was eighteen. She had the marriage annulled less than two years later, again in September. And this, my grandfather tells me: my grandparents were introduced on a blind date the first weekend in May, 1946. They were married four weeks later, on June 2. I try to puzzle out the logistics of this in my mind: a swift courtship during war years would make sense, but why marry so quickly in 1946, when the war was over?

I look over my shoulder at my grandfather. He is still shuffling through papers, grumbling about how my grandmother kept *everything*: dental appointment cards from fifteen years ago, yellow with age; drug store receipts; the little note cards that come with boxes of trinkets, telling you when and where and why they were made; newspaper clippings concerning people they barely knew and events they had long since forgotten. “Don’t know why Mama kept all this damned stuff,” he mutters. He seems grouchy, but I have a feeling he is grateful, in a way, for all this activity—it allows him to focus on something other than grief. Or perhaps this is simply grief in motion. But I still want to know why: why marry after only four weeks?

My grandfather tries to stand, grunting a little as he pushes himself up, bracing his hands against his knees. He wavers for a moment, and I almost reach out to help him, but something holds me back. He takes a deep breath, then, and stands, sighing softly as he does. He doesn’t look at me. I wait. Finally, I speak.

“Grandpa?”

“Yeah,” he says.

“Why did you and Grandma get married so soon? Was there a reason you had to, or did you just want to?”

He stares at me, silent, and for a moment I think he will choose not to answer. Then he sighs and says, “Well, Jenny, I don’t know. I guess I thought I was ready to settle down.”

I wonder if, by this, he means that he really *wasn’t* ready to settle down—I can’t help but remember my mother’s story about his flirtation with the neighbor lady, all those years ago—but I don’t mention these thoughts. Instead, I say, “Something else I’ve been wondering, wasn’t divorce kind of unheard of in the 40s? Was it scandalous for Grandma to have been married three times?” I hold my breath. I feel as though I’m gaining courage with each question out of my mouth; as though, as long as he keeps answering them, I will find still more questions, and the strength to ask them. I have so many questions, I realize suddenly. So many questions, and he is the only one left to ask.

“No,” he says gruffly. Then, “There were a lot of divorces in those days. People married quick during the war. A lot of marriages didn’t work out.”

I have never considered this possibility before, but it makes sense. You met someone during the war, you wanted to marry before he was shipped overseas, in case—though you never mentioned the possibility—in case he never came back. But what if, maybe a year later, maybe two, he did come back, what then? What if you discovered you were two very different people? What if you realized you weren’t in love, after all? Did you stay together, or did you leave? Of course, I don’t know if my grandmother’s husbands were in the military—I’m not sure my grandfather knows, either—but maybe this happened.

My grandfather returns a box of files to its place on the shelf. He moves to the door, his slippers scuffing across the old carpet. "Grandpa," I say to his retreating back. He pauses, turns. "Did you know about...did you know Grandma had been married before? I mean, did she tell you, when you married her?"

"Yeah," he says.

"Oh. Well, did it ever bother you?"

"No." Then he sighs, looks at me with a sad, almost wistful expression. "When Mama told me she'd been married before, I told her, the past is in the past. No need talking about that anymore." He turns, then, for the stairs. I sit on the cool basement floor, the papers still in my hands, listening to the soft scuff of his slippers on the steps.

~

Weekends, when I was a kid, my parents sometimes drove my brothers and me the 28 miles from our home to Mulvane, where my grandparents lived. Ten miles north, past the bluegrass festival sign, then 18 miles northwest, the highway curving around the front lawn of the first mansion I ever recognized as being a mansion. Then Mulvane. Quiet, nostalgic Mulvane. My grandparents' house, two blocks from my mother and father's high school. My parents left us there those weekends. I remember unrolling sleeping bags on the living room floor, pretending with my brothers, while my grandparents slept, that the bags were floating barges in a roiling sea. Stones in a cauldron of lava. Safety beneath our bare feet. And below the surface of it all, the soft snore of my grandmother, asleep in the next room.

I still know her in my dreams, the smell of her thick against my skin like oil from an orchid's lip. And perhaps my grandfather is right, in a sense: the past *is* in the past, and in some ways irretrievably so. There may be some relics of ourselves, of our families, we can

never recover. But my grandmother still has breath and life in memory, and I believe she has things she means to tell me. I will listen as long as I can.

Long Slow Distance

From my perch at the kitchen table, I could see through the window the thick branches of the maple tree in the backyard, shadowed by light as the red glow of the sun spread itself across the long horizon. Soon, the parched summer earth would sigh waves of heat into night, and the humid air would finally be made bearable by the absence of sun. The mosquitoes and gnats would be out in droves, but there would be a pocket of coolness in the air over the creek bridge, and the occasional whisper of breeze through the cottonwoods along the gravel road. And the sky would be glorious: clear and ink black away from the lights of town, clusters of stars and constellations brilliant against that dark backdrop of space. It was my twenty-fifth summer, and a perfect night for running.

I stretched my bare legs under the table, feeling the restless ache of my muscles, that familiar longing to be on the road, to run, to feel the stress of the miles on my lungs and legs. It was a feeling cultivated by so many years of training, it no longer seemed possible to me that I had ever not been a runner. And night running, especially, was one of the most divine pleasures of a Kansas summer. On this night, like hundreds of others, I would run miles along Quail Ridge golf course and down the dark highway before I reached the base of Cemetery Hill. I would lean into the familiar curves of the short, steep climb to the mausoleum, breathing in gusts from my open mouth. At the top of the hill, I would feel my shoulders relax, and I would be surprised again, as I always was, by how much effort and strain the hill demanded, no matter how many times I had climbed it in the past. I would cruise past the cemetery, then, and allow my rubbery legs to recover. After four miles, I

would turn downhill again, crossing over the train tracks on my way back home.

Sometimes I would run farther, looping around the golf course again in the opposite direction to add a couple of miles; sometimes, if a thunderstorm was moving in, or if it was especially cold, I would cut my run short. If I felt angry, or there was a train coming, or my head just felt clear and strong, I would run faster, urging my legs into temporary flight.

Sometimes, if I was waiting for my father to catch up, jogging in place while I listened to the leaden pull of years like too much gravity on his legs, or if I was exhausted but too stubborn to take a day off, I would trudge through the long slow distance, feeling heavier than the weight of my own body with each step. But long or short, fast or slow, I would run to bring myself, if only briefly, back into my body.

~

My father stood by the back door, tightening the ties on his orange reflective vest while he waited for the twins to put on their shoes. My youngest brother, Jay, finished lacing his shoes first. He bounced up and down on the balls of his feet, eager to be out the door, his blond hair lifting like wings from his head. He and Kairee, his dark-haired, dark-eyed twin, my sister, had only recently begun begging my father to take them running with him, and their enthusiasm for the sport was torrential in its intensity. Of course, I secretly suspected it would pass just as quickly, like a crush, as sudden interests do in seven-year-olds, but I didn't even attempt to tell my father this.

My mother and I sat together at the kitchen table as she worked at whittling away a stack of bills and I nibbled on a peanut butter sandwich. With both hands on his hips, just below the slight new bulge of his stomach, my father sighed and shifted his weight. Kairee

bounded to his side and said, "I'm ready, Daddy. Are we going to go *all* the way around the loop tonight?" My father rested one of his large hands on her head and smiled.

"We sure are, sweetie. A whole mile. Do you think you and Jay can do that?"

Jay shot a scrawny arm and a clenched fist into the air. "Yeah! That's *easy*, we can do *that*!"

"Well, let's go then," my father said, waving them towards the door. He looked back at my mother and me. "Are you sure you don't want to go with us, Jen?"

I shook my head, thinking of the torture of running a slow stop-and-go mile with two little kids. "No, thanks. I think I'll head out later."

He shrugged. "Suit yourself," he said. Then to my mother, "Looks like maybe now I'll have a real runner in the family." She looked up from her checkbook, distracted. He turned, then, followed the shrieks of the twins out into the yard. My mother must have felt my stare, because she shook her head slowly and sighed into her pile of bills.

~

My father came to running relatively late. He was thirty years old and significantly overweight before he ever attempted to run the mile-long gravel loop around our home, and for those first difficult weeks, he once told me, he couldn't finish the loop without having to walk. This kind of physical humiliation might have deterred some less determined people, but for my father—a man I've always imagined driven by demons of perfection—embarrassment only served to solidify resolve. Within months, he was training for his first marathon, and within a year, he had established the first Walnut Valley Running Club in our small town of Winfield, Kansas. This was 1980, at the peak of the running boom first

inspired by Frank Shorter's gold medal marathon at the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich, and the energy of the sport drew my father as surely as any drug. He encouraged my mother and older brother, Jeff (and my younger brother, Justin, too, several years later), to join him in his enthusiasm for running, and they did, for a time. But I was the one who most took to running, and my father began entering me in short road races, at my insistence, when I was six years old.

I remember clearly the dark Saturday mornings my father would slip into my bedroom and wake me with a gentle shake. "Jenny," he would whisper. "Are you ready to run?" By 6:30 a.m., sometimes earlier, he and I would be in the car, driving to Wellington for the Wheat Run, Wichita for the Turkey Trot, or Derby (my favorite) for the Fourth of July Firecracker Run. And even though at that young age I must have been terribly slow, he always stayed with me from start to finish, encouraging me when I was tired and cheering me to the finish line just ahead of him. After the race, we would walk the parking lot to cool off and my father would wave hello to runners he recognized. Sometimes, if he stopped to talk to someone, he would gesture proudly to me as he introduced me to the stranger. If the stranger commented, as they sometimes did, on "how wonderful it must be" to have a daughter who liked running, I would try not to grin, even as I felt my spine stiffen with pleasure.

Later, on the way home, my father would stop at a convenience store to buy me a soda and powdered donuts—my treat for doing so well, he would tell me. As he drove all those miles home again, whistling to the Beach Boys on the oldies radio station, I would lick soft white powder from my fingers, watch the sun climb into fresh blue sky, and marvel that

my brothers were still at home sleeping—that they had missed *this*.

In a relationship which could be characterized as rocky, at best, running quickly became the only neutral ground on which my father and I could safely meet. My father talked to me (and, I believed, loved me) because we shared this passion for running. Sometimes I think I ran in literal pursuit of his acceptance.

~

Ask any runner, and they will probably tell you that consistency in training is one of the definitive marks of a true runner. By this definition, I didn't really become a runner until the summer I turned fourteen and joined the high school cross country team. George Sheehan, late writer and running guru, once described cross country as "free running at its best. Just me and the land. Me and that crisp air. Me and the leaves underfoot. Me and the silent hills," and today I would agree with his definition. But in 1989, when I first began running competitively, cross country meant belonging. It meant my first legitimate boyfriend and a band of friends who spent all their afternoons running. It meant inside jokes, carb-loading pasta parties before each meet, and a collection of race medals. It also meant the first time I felt my father taking a real interest in me.

I have photographs of my meets taken by my mother and sometimes by other parents; those sort of redundant but obligatory pictures most parents take of their children in sports, repeating the same motions over and over. In them, I always seem to be barely moving—head bent forward, muscular thighs flared, mouth opened in a soft *O*, hauling in air. I imagine I look angry and focused, my *Vikings* singlet dark with sweat, my fingers treading air, almost as if I were reaching for that next step. And then, in many of the pictures, there is

my father's dark beard, his team cap, his clipboard, and he is running alongside the course, yelling at me. I know his words are encouragement—I can still hear him shouting, “You’re almost there, Jenny!”—but in the photograph I can only see him pushing me.

~

None of the other fathers volunteer as assistant coaches, but my father loves that I am on the team. He runs the stopwatch, he writes down our times, he consults with Coach Juhlin. He begins hosting Sunday morning runs at our home, and runs with the guys on their long loops through the country. He knows all of my teammates by name, he goes to all my meets, he wears our team t-shirt. Sometimes I feel just a little bit proud that my father devotes so much time to us, but sometimes the overlap between my family life and my teenage social life irritates me. Sometimes it mortifies me.

One Sunday, during my first season, my father announces to the entire boys’ team that I’d come home late the night before, over an hour past my curfew. He teases my boyfriend, a teammate, for keeping his daughter out without permission. Maybe he intends the teasing as a warning—maybe he feels protective of me—but my father’s indiscretion, and my “wildness,” make me the butt of an entire season’s worth of jokes. I want to kick him for it.

~

Our coach, David Juhlin, a wiry, balding man, takes the sport of running seriously. “Run through the pain,” he says when someone’s hurting. The afternoon he announces our LSD days, those “long slow distance” runs I most look forward to, are no longer to be run at “conversational” pace, but by his watch, my teammates groan. Gone are the days when we

can duck into the Dairy Queen for ten minutes to escape the summer heat—now Coach Juhlin either runs with us or drives his van around in loops, picking up the injured or the victims of heat exhaustion. One day, as we approach 9th and Main in 100-plus temperatures, Lisa staggers from our group and leans her thin, brown body against the limestone wall of Graves Pharmacy.

“I can’t,” she says, gasping. We grab her arms and walk her down the street. Less than a minute later, Coach Juhlin slides up in his plain white van. He hops out, lifts Lisa into the passenger seat, and leaves us standing, dizzy with thirst, on the sidewalk. “Keep running,” he calls out the window as he pulls away.

The number of injuries among team members increases. Everyday after practice, large plastic trash barrels are dragged into the coach’s office and filled with buckets of ice and water. Whoever happens to be nursing an injury (and I am soon one of them) climbs into the barrel with one or two other people after practice and stands, thigh-deep in ice water, until the skin on our legs turns red and numb. We joke about this, but the pain in my left knee is so real, I resort to wearing a brace during runs.

Coach Juhlin is aggressive in his training—he wants us to make State this year—and soon competition stresses the friendly camaraderie of the team. We find ourselves competing, not as a team against other teams, but as individual runners against our own teammates. There are only seven spots on varsity, and because we are focused now on being the fastest runner and winning, above all *winning*, we battle each other for those precious seven spots. My father admits to my mother that he sometimes disagrees with Coach Juhlin’s tactics—“He ran those kids into the ground today,” he tells her—but to Coach Juhlin

he says nothing, suggests nothing.

My teammates begin to distrust each other, and I sense the undercurrent of rivalry like a knot. I struggle with the anxiety of being on a team where acceptance comes in the form of faster times, and where, no matter how hard I push myself, I can never keep up. I feel my father chasing me down to each finish line.

~

Perhaps he didn't speak his concerns because he was not asked and, outside of family, not being asked usually meant it wasn't your place to offer advice. That would certainly be like my father: always cautious and polite with outsiders. I can't help thinking, though, that there was more to it than that. My father didn't run cross country in high school—he didn't participate in sports at all, he says, because it just didn't occur to him—and he will tell any stranger on the street, without hesitation, that not having been part of the cross country team has been one of his most lasting regrets.

Once, when my father earned a B in a Spanish course he was taking as a nontraditional student, he insisted on retaking the course. "And I'll take it again, and again," he told my mother, in a fit of angry frustration, "until I get it right." "Right," of course, meant "perfect": an A, or at least better than everyone else in the class. He is a perfectionist in almost everything he does: his teaching, his work, his flying, all those pursuits that require a kind of mastery of the mind. But in running, both the mind and the body determine the limits of perfection. Even at its swiftest, his middle-aged body could never have reached the speeds of the fastest teenage boy. Sometimes I wonder if he kept silent about our rigorous

training because part of him secretly admired such dedication to discipline, and envied the sight of all our slim bodies, pursuing the perfection he desired for himself.

~

One by one, we clambered down the steps of the school bus into soft grass and the shade of oak trees. We didn't stand still for long. With leg muscles already tight from the half-hour bus ride to Ark City, and the first race less than an hour away, we began peeling off sweats and eyeing the hilly course.

In my third year on the team, I was a veteran of the course and intimately familiar with the up-and-down jags of the two-mile loop. But it wasn't the course that concerned me this time. I squatted next to the bus to retie my shoelaces and tried to shrug off the twist of anxiety in my stomach. *Relax*, I tried to tell my body, inhaling and holding my breath before releasing it again. Nervousness before a race was normal, even desirable, but this was too much. I knew it wasn't just anxiety about the race I was feeling.

Behind me, I could hear the excited chatter of my teammates, and then Rita's shrill, staccato laugh. Rita, with her dark skin, slightly hooked nose, and long, thin legs, was what we in the cross country world called a "rabbit": she would take off at the beginning of the race in a great burst of speed, but she could never maintain the pace. Her inability to pace herself had given me a slight advantage over her early in the season. No sprinter even at my swiftest (I had what Coach Juhlin referred to as "slow-twitch" muscles), but I was steady as a rock in my pacing, and I could run for longer distances than most of my teammates without ever tiring. I quickly learned to pace myself far enough ahead of Rita so that, by the time we came down to the last couple hundred yards, even her impressive, long-limbed sprint could

not close the distance between us.

Unfortunately, Rita seemed to have caught on to my strategy. During the last two meets, she had stitched herself to my side and used my internal metronome to establish her own rhythm. Then, with the finish line in sight, she exploded ahead of me with a “kick” I could never hope to match, and I was left to straggle to the finish after her. Now, she and I had occupied the seventh, and last, spot on varsity an equal number of times, which meant that the outcome of the Ark City meet would decide which of us would be on the bus when the team traveled to the regional and state championships in November.

After we had stretched and jogged through our two-mile warm-up, the girls’ team lined up at the start with seven or eight other schools. I breathed deeply the October air, still warm from summer, and focused my eyes on the ground in front of me. When the gun went off, I found myself, as usual, at the back of the pack. I looked for Rita’s thin shape in the crowd of runners and, finding her, concentrated on her bobbing ponytail. I knew my only chance would be to get past her somehow and not let her stay with me. As we rounded the first bend, I saw my father running alongside the course. “Go, Jenny!” He yelled. “Get her!” He knew as well as I did what the outcome of this race would mean.

A quarter of a mile into the race, the “rabbits” began falling back, and I slowly, surely moved towards the middle of the pack. Here, the unmown prairie grass on either side of the course stretched up over our heads, making it difficult to see the runners not directly in front of me. Finally, at the half mile mark, I caught sight of Rita’s dark hair. Then her body. Then the careless shuffle of her feet. She swung her arms in erratic, pinwheel circles at her sides as I moved up beside her. *She’s getting tired*, I thought. *She’s wasting energy*.

Rita sensed another runner at her side, and glanced wildly over at me. “Jen,” she whimpered. “I’ve got to stay with you.” *Not if I can damn well help it*, I thought. At that moment, I surged past the runner just ahead of us, attempting to place a body and some distance between me and Rita. But she followed my lead and stayed with me. I tried to lose her again and again over the next mile, but it was if she were tethered to my shorts—she just wouldn’t let go. With a quarter of a mile to go in the race, we topped the last hill and turned onto the home stretch. I could see my father gesturing wildly from the side of the course, and I suddenly realized that this was it: if I didn’t go now, Rita would surely outsprint me to the finish.

I trained my eyes straight ahead, focusing on the distant open v shape of the finish chute. The cheering onlookers blurred at the edges of my vision, but I could still hear my father’s voice shouting, “Go now, Jenny! Go, go, go!” My arms swung in a tight, rigid motion, and my legs churned awkwardly as I tried to find my rhythm at this faster pace. The uneven ground beneath my feet threatened to drop me, but I didn’t dare look down. My lungs flared and flamed, and then it felt as though I were no longer breathing at all, just falling, falling towards the finish. My body exhausting into light as I burned out of myself—not flying, exactly, more like transcending. I was particles of energy hurling toward triumph.

Twenty yards from the finish, Rita flew past me, her feet barely touching the ground. I could feel shock wrench itself from my chest as I cried out, *Noooo. No. No.* And then I was across the finish line, doubled over and heaving. When I lifted my eyes from the toes of my shoes, I could see Rita’s heels in front of me. I vomited. As I walked out of the finish chute and away from the other runners, I wiped my mouth and wept, embarrassed and ashamed.

My mother caught up with me and wrapped her arm around my sweaty shoulders.

“Oh, honey, you did such a good job! I’m so proud of you!”

I shook my head miserably. “I didn’t beat Rita,” I sobbed. “I didn’t make varsity, and now I won’t go to state.”

My mother glanced at my father, but he just patted me on the head. “You did your best,” he said, but he sounded frustrated, disappointed somehow. I didn’t lift my eyes from the ground.

~

As it turned out, I did go to the state meet that year, but only because Rita decided to travel to California during regionals for her boyfriend’s graduation from the Naval Academy, and Coach Juhlin told her she had to be with the team for both meets or not at all. So I ran the state meet in Manhattan that November, but something had changed inside me, and I no longer cared how hard I tried or how fast I ran. When I came across the finish line that day, all I could think about was my singular promise to myself: *I will never run again*. And I meant it. I didn’t run all that winter, spring, and summer, and when cross country season came around again in August, I told my parents I’d had enough. I think my mother understood—she’d seen the anxiety in my face before each meet, she knew about the upset stomachs and the gagging sobs that followed each race—but my father was deeply disappointed, a feeling he made little attempt to conceal. He reminded me how much he regretted not ever having gone out for cross country when he was in high school, and *what he wouldn’t give* to have my opportunity.

Even Coach Juhlin was disgusted with me. He called me a week before the start of

practice (my father, it seemed, had enlisted his help in trying to bring me back into the fold) to insist that the team needed me. “You may not be the fastest runner,” he said, “but your dedication holds the team together.” When he realized I wasn’t giving in, he resorted to veiled threats. “Twenty years from now, you will regret missing out on your last year. I can guarantee you that.” But it was a waste of time. The joy of the sport had gone for me, and even my father’s displeasure couldn’t change my mind.

~

In *The Other Kingdom*, Victor Price’s hero is Colin Warnock, an Irish miler who returns to running after several bad races tempt him to give up the sport for good. Something has changed him, though—a fight in a bar room—and his attitude towards the run takes on an almost spiritual light. “What now stood revealed was enjoyment: he realised he was a human being well fitted to enjoy. Astonishing but true: in all his years of running he had never positively enjoyed a race.”

I had no bar room brawl to transform the experience of running for me overnight. For months after my last race, nearly a year, I dreaded the thought of ever feeling that kind of exertion in the body again. I wondered if I would always associate the physicality of running with the anxiety and disappointment and competitive nature of cross country, with my father’s unspoken expectations, and my failure to meet them. For months, I drove past the country road—the road I used to run—on my way home from school, and I felt angry and determined: angry that others had ruined for me the thing I loved most, and determined that I would not miss it.

Somehow, though, the months of stillness began that strange work of disconnection,

of unraveling ties between the race and the run, between the cross country courses where I sometimes felt as though I'd left my heart, and the country road that seemed to beckon to me still in that sharp Midwest winter light. I wish I could remember the day I ran again for the first time, alone, down that familiar path. What did it feel like, that long stretch of legs, the heavy beat of my heart, after so many months abstinence? Did I feel sadness, the old anxiety twisting inside me, or only the pleasure of recovery?

When Colin Warnock runs his first mile, post-transformation, he realizes, finally, what has changed. "He had renounced ambition, the tyranny of schedule and stop-watch, the profit-and-loss accounting of his training to date...retaining one thing only: the satisfaction of doing the thing for its own sake. Foley [another runner] was said to offer up his running to a saint; he could offer up his too, but to some divinity that did not need to be specified: to the spirit of running perhaps."

For Colin, the run becomes an act of self, spiritual in the sense that he has reclaimed it from the coaches, from the clock, even from the race. He recovers the power of purpose, and in doing so, rediscovers the original pleasure: that running is both body and mind, but only for one person. "A controlled jubilation came over him," writes Price. "Christ, I'm full of running! he thought. I'm absolutely full of running."

On my own, running the country road long and slow all through that winter, I learned what it meant, finally, to pursue pleasure rather than perfection. I learned, or perhaps just recalled, how it felt to run for nothing other than the deep satisfaction of the sweat on my neck and the burning in my chest, the feeling of being absolutely present in my body. Later, in college, I joked with my friends on Sunday mornings, as they headed for church and I

headed out for a run, that running was my “religion.” Sometimes I think I must have been only half joking. In her story, “Running,” Joyce Carol Oates writes of “this sacred time, this running time, this time of namelessness and flight and happiness.” I think I had to leave running to recover its sacredness for myself.

~

I still run with my father. I don’t remember how many months I shied away from that kind of return, after my last cross country race, and strangely enough, neither does he. But somewhere, I know, I must have wished for his company. It was really the only thing we shared, after all. The nature of our runs have changed, though: now I am the one who determines our pace, how long the distance we will cover, even, sometimes, what we will talk about, or if we will talk at all. Now, when we wind our way up the steepness of Cemetery Hill, it is my father who trails behind, his breathing heavy, while I slow down to wait for him.

~

My father and I run in silence for miles, kicking clouds of snow into the air with the toes of our shoes. He breathes in strained gusts, clearing his throat often with a cough that sounds brittle in the cold morning. I breathe more softly, in through my nose, out through my mouth, in rhythm with my steps. Once in a while, a car passes on the highway, or a bird flies overhead, but neither of us speaks. The cold stuns us both into silence.

I am home from college for the weekend—already my thoughts are on the three-hour drive back to school this afternoon, the laundry I will need to put away, the reading to do for class tomorrow. This is the only time I have spent with my father, alone, all weekend. This

is the only time I ever spend with him, anymore. Running. I don't even think to ask myself if this is enough; I just know that this is all there is.

When we reach the driveway, we stop, staring at the smooth, flat field of snow, like a giant down pillow, stretched out in front of us. Its perfect surface invites play. I hesitate for a moment. To play would be to let down my guard, and I have not felt that comfortable with my father in years. He stands beside me, hands on his hips, still recovering his breath. I bend down, shape a small snowball, and lob it gently into the air. It hits the snow and sinks clean through, leaving a perfect circle of entry. I look at my father. He grins.

"I'm going to make an angel," I say. I stand at the edge of the field, my back to him, arms outspread, and fall into snow. He watches me. I don't really expect him to join me, but then he does: he falls next to me with a thump and the soft crunch of snow, and a startled laugh escapes his mouth.

I wear tights and a hat, so I'm not afraid to let every part of my body sink into snow—it crinkles around me like clean sheets. My father's legs and head are bare, and he keeps them lifted half in the air while his arms glide up and down, packing the snow. When we stand together at the edge of the field to admire our work, I have to laugh. His headless angel has only wings.

In the Absence of Faith

Just before the church bells chime midnight, the dark-haired teenage boy slumped to my right in the pew leans toward me, his shoulder brushing mine, slim white candle in his hand glowing a soft yellow. The hymns and carols have stopped. The trio of curvy Callison sisters stand next to their mother's piano, hands clasped in front of their long skirts. The minister folds his arms across his white robes, eyes cast downward, the dark wood of the candlelit altar behind him. For a moment, there is silence.

I tilt my own candle to touch its unlit wick to the boy's shifting flame. Light snakes down the wick, a sparking orange vein that wavers for a brief instant before springing up, a tiny bloom of fire in a pool of white wax. The minister speaks to us, then, in his midnight voice, a soothing storyteller voice, as he reminds us gently, *You are all messengers of God, carry his light and his words of peace and love with you into this dark and holy night.* I turn my body slowly away from the boy and toward my mother, holding the cool wax bottom of my candle with just the tips of my fingers as she lights her own from mine. Briefly, I catch my mother's glance and she smiles.

The tallest Callison sister begins to sing, her long blond hair shifting in the light as her chest rises and falls. *Silent night Holy night.* The minister lifts his hands toward the tall domed ceiling of the church, and we rise, singing with the Callison sisters and the minister and the chords of the Callison mother's piano as we slip into our coats and gloves and scarves, as we smile at one another and brace ourselves for the cold December night, as we step out the heavy wooden doors of the Grace Methodist Church, as we walk down the steps

of the limestone building on College Street on this early Christmas morning, toward our cars and homes and children already asleep, as our tiny flames flicker and flutter and finally extinguish themselves in the brisk winter wind. *All is calm, all is bright.*

~

The Christmas Eve Candlelight Service at the unassuming little church in my hometown of Winfield, Kansas, has become something of a ritual for my mother and me. After my nine-year-old twin brother and sister are asleep; after the packages have been wrapped on my parent's bed and lie, waiting, for adornment with ribbons and bows; after the first preparations for tomorrow's Christmas dinner—those dishes that can be whipped up the night before—have been made; after all the hectic necessities of the day are finally out of the way, we bundle ourselves up and drive into town for our one hour of quiet, of reflection, of hearing the hymns and carols we both love.

The Grace Methodist Church was never our church—my mother once belonged to the wealthier, flashier First United Methodist Church on Tenth Street, the one to which many of Winfield's well-to-do belong, the Country Club members, the businessmen, the doctors, the bankers and their charity-organizing wives—but after my best friend in high school, Kim, introduced me to the Candlelight Service when I was sixteen, I found, for the first time in my life, something appealing about a church. In the years since, it has been my mother who has gone with me. Even when we're tired and would rather sleep, there is something about the coming together in that beautiful, warm room, with its stained glass windows and circular balcony, that draws us out into the cold winter night. We never miss it.

~

But I don't believe in god, and I'm not sure I ever have. No one in my immediate family does. I suppose my mother believes, in her own fashion, but even for her, faith has shifted over the years, away from the church and toward a more personal relationship with "something bigger than us," as she calls it. Whatever that something might be. But if my brothers and sister and I are all heathens, it isn't for lack of exposure to the teachings of Jesus Christ and the well-dressed folks of the First United Methodist Church. My mother forced my two older brothers and me to attend Sunday School, and even sit through the unbearable boredom (as it seemed to me at the time) of the Sunday service, until we were "old enough to decide for ourselves," which must have been somewhere between the ages of ten and twelve because that's when we all chose to stop going.

Actually, I think the turning point was when my painfully shy older brother, Jeff, had nearly completed the requirements for his confirmation in the Methodist faith. The final hurdle turned out to be an overnight church rally in Wichita, an hour away from our home in Winfield, Kansas—a hurdle which proved to be insurmountable for my brother. He was, and still is, something of a social misfit, and the thought of being *away from my parents, overnight, with strangers*, was just more than his tender heart could bear. My mother pled his case, first with the teacher of his confirmation class, then with the minister.

"You have to understand, this is really an upsetting thing for my son," she said. "Are you sure there isn't some other way he can complete the requirements, without going on the trip?"

First the confirmation teacher, then the minister, replied, "No, no, he really needs to take part in this rally. It's a good, community-building experience, and all the kids are

required to participate in order to be confirmed. No exceptions.”

My mother came home and relayed the verdict to Jeff—that he would have to go on the rally if he wanted to be confirmed. Before she had even finished, his eyes filled with tears. He pled with my mother not to make him go. Already infuriated with the church’s unwillingness to compromise, and unwilling herself to see my brother traumatized over something she considered “absolutely ridiculous,” she decided to support his desire to abandon confirmation, and to stop going to church altogether. “This isn’t what religion is supposed to be about, going to rallies and camping out on church floors with a bunch of other kids,” she told us. Soon, we’d all stopped going. Even my mother, who finally decided she didn’t need to be sitting on a hard wooden pew to feel close to god—he seemed just as present to her in her garden, or at the kitchen sink, or in the faces of her children.

~

A few years after my mother and I discovered the Candlelight Service, my friend Rachael and I sat huddled over mugs of hot chocolate on the floor of my dorm room, the flicker of a candle—that always forbidden fire hazard—throwing crazy shadows on the pink walls. A deck of cards laid scattered on the carpet, finally abandoned after who knew how many rounds of Spit. It was too late to play anymore—we had a habit of waking my neighbors with our excited shrieks and floor pounding—but it wasn’t too late to talk. It was never too late to talk.

Tonight I wanted to tell her about my twin brother and sister, whose second birthday was only days away. I wanted to tell her their amazing—and true—story, of how they were conceived through *in vitro* fertilization, how they were my parents’ last attempt after several

miscarriages, frozen eggs with only a ten percent survival rate. I wanted to tell her how my mother, at 41, came to resemble a beached whale in those last months, lying for endless hours in bed, always fearful that something would go wrong; and then how, after my mother carried them to term and was lying in her hospital bed, waiting for the caesarian that would deliver the babies to us, something did go wrong: one of the placentas ruptured, inexplicably, without warning, and my mother and the twins began to bleed to death.

Most of all, though, I wanted to tell Rachael how I didn't know any of this was happening, that I was still in school that day, still believing that, as my mother had promised the night before, everything would be fine. I wanted to remember for her the feeling of walking into my mother's recovery room after school, of seeing her tired face, so pale, so white, of thinking to myself how awful she looked, but that her eyes were open, she was looking at me, and everything was okay, just as she'd promised. And then, smiling a little at the memory, I wanted to tell Rachael how the nurse came in with two clear carts containing babies, how she laid one, a little girl, on my mother's chest, and then turned to me and asked, *Are you the sister?* Yes, I said, almost laughing, and she pressed another baby, a boy, my little brother, in my arms, and he stared up at me with his red face and watery blue eyes, and for the first time, I understood why people in films always cry when a baby is born.

I wanted to tell Rachael all these things, but in the end, I think the only part of the story she heard was the doctor saying to my father, much later, that if my mother had been more than five minutes away from the hospital when the placenta ruptured, all three of them would have bled to death—first my brother, then my mother, and finally, cocooned in her own protective sac, my sister. *It's a bloody miracle they're alive*, he said to my father.

"Yes," Rachael whispered I finished, nodding, "It was a miracle."

I shifted uncomfortably, uncrossing and recrossing my legs. I stared at the tiny marshmallows floating in my hot chocolate. Miracles were not what I'd wanted to talk about. "I don't know about that," I said, "but we were lucky, for sure."

Rachael smiled. "You don't really believe things like that just happen, do you? For no reason?"

"Well, why not? Seeing as how I don't believe in god, wouldn't it be a bit of a lie for me to attribute this to divine intervention or something like that?" I blew on my drink. The marshmallows had all but disappeared.

Rachael leaned back on her elbows. "But didn't you feel it?"

"Feel what? The moment? Of course I did. I was scared, happy, thankful, all at once. Mostly scared. I remember sitting in the hospital cafeteria that night, eating french fries for dinner, and my hands were shaking so bad you could see the fries shaking, too."

Rachael shook her head. "No, that's not what I meant. I mean, did you feel His presence?"

This was really not what I'd wanted to talk about. Why didn't I just tell her so? I suddenly remembered a discussion I'd had, weeks before, with my anthropology professor, an intimidating, silvery-haired Dutchman. I told Dr. Prins I was an atheist, and he stared hard at me for a moment from his great height. *As an aspiring anthropologist, he said, you must be willing to admit that there are things you cannot know or understand. You are not an atheist, you are an agnostic.* I wanted to protest. I wanted to ask how a Catholic or Methodist or Jewish anthropologist could know what she believed, but I could not. I wanted

to ask how what I believed, personally, had anything to do with being an anthropologist, professionally, but I didn't, and I didn't know why. Perhaps it was because I wasn't sure; at least, not as sure as my friend Rachael, who was Catholic. And perhaps this was the reason I didn't want to change the subject that night: because I wasn't at all certain that I was right, or even that, right or wrong, I knew what I believed.

I looked down at the floor and ran my fingertips over the carpet, grabbing individual strands and tugging gently on them. I should have known better, letting myself get pulled into a religious discussion with a Catholic friend, especially one who seems to have all the answers. "No," I said, "no presence. I'm not sure I'd know what that feels like, anyway. I was just grateful my mom was okay, and the twins. Why does it have to mean anything else?"

Rachael shook her head. "But don't you see? God showed you he was there by protecting your mom. She's alive because of Him."

"That was some pretty fancy footwork, just to make a believer out of me." I laughed. And then I wondered, why was I not convinced?

~

In her essay "Memory and Imagination," Patricia Hampl writes of her first piano lesson and her discovery of the importance of middle C. "I remember thinking, Middle C is the belly button of the piano, an insight whose originality and accuracy stunned me with pride. For the first time in my life I was astonished by metaphor." I remember clearly the first time I was astonished by metaphor. I was a child, old enough to read, but not old enough yet to have decided I didn't want anything to do with religion. I found on the

bookshelf in my parents' room a green-covered copy of *The Living Bible*, and I sprawled out across the blue and white star quilt on their bed to read. I skimmed through the Book of Genesis until I found a story I recognized: Noah's Ark. The story concluded with the most beautiful and moving passage I thought I had ever come across:

Then god told Noah and his sons,
"I solemnly promise you and your children and the animals you brought with you—all these birds and cattle and wild animals—that I will never again send another flood to destroy the earth. And I seal this promise with this sign: I have placed my rainbow in the clouds as a sign of my promise until the end of time, to you and to all the earth. When I send clouds over the earth, the rainbow will be seen in the clouds, and I will remember my promise to you and to every being, that never again will the floods come and destroy all life. For I will see the rainbow in the clouds and remember my eternal promise to every living being on the earth."

I thrilled at the idea of the rainbow—that ghostly, intangible ribbon of colors—being a promise from one equally ghostly, intangible being to another. I read the passage over and over again, even marked it with one of my own bookmarks—the one with the picture of a galloping horse and a quote from the Bible—so that I could find the rainbow and its magical meaning again whenever I wanted. And I remember retreating to the cool quietness of my parents' room often after that, sometimes to hide from my brothers, sometimes just to be alone, but always to read that passage and wish for a sudden rainstorm, so that I could race out onto the porch and wait for the rainbow I knew was coming. For the first time in my life, really, it occurred to me that something could have a meaning beyond what I knew.

Somehow, though, the notion of god was lost on me. Was there something lacking in me because, with all the creative power of childhood imagination, I still just could not fathom what it might mean to believe in a thing called god? Or is it possible, as I wonder now, that some people are born to be religious, in that organized, ritualized, I'm-a-Catholic-Methodist-Episcopalian-Jew-Muslim sort of way; while others, like me, are simply not?

It isn't, after all, as though I don't believe in anything. I considered this as I walked to class today, taking my circuitous route through the bare trees around Lake LaVerne, enjoying the wonders fresh air and a little sunshine can work on a nagging headache. I suppose I just believe things don't necessarily need to be anything more than what they are: their most basic, elemental selves. This CyRide bus trundling through campus, spewing brown exhaust each time it accelerates. This lone woman walking toward me, her eyes focused determinedly on the sidewalk. This late afternoon sunlight, firing the red brick walls of Pearson Hall, reminding me, for just an instant, of a brick oven. Basic. Elemental. Sometimes metaphors, if we make them so, sometimes nothing more than what they are.

My grandmother died almost three years ago; three years on January 8, to be exact. When she died, it was my responsibility to write her obituary for the local newspaper. I imagined something lyrical for my grandmother's obituary, something so lovely, so precise in its rendering of her life, it would have moved her to tears to read it. Then the awful realization: there really was not much to write about. Housewife, mother, dead at 72. Her ashes in a brown cardboard box on my grandfather's dresser.

Is this all that's left, my mother asked me one day, as we stood there staring at that cardboard box, her mother's remains. *Seventy-two years of living, and this is it?* My

mother's tone was despairing, grieving, but I remember thinking, almost stunned, Yes, this is what's left, and isn't it beautiful? That no matter how complicated the life, in the end we can be that simple: we can be what we are. In my grandmother's case, ashes, that final essence of her, and my grandfather's love, which holds her even in death. My religious friends tell me that it is in times such as these, *the death of a loved one*, that god's presence is most comforting. How strange, then, that I am most comforted by his absence, by an absence of faith which allows me to see what is truly there, and to rub the grit of what I love between my own two fingers.

Broadcasting into the Blind

Some people say flying in a small plane gives them an unearthly kind of perspective, a strange, new detachment from what they imagined they knew: fingertips and foreheads pressed to the window of the cockpit, breath creating a little circle of moisture on the glass, they peer down at the landscape, at the familiar fields and rivers and streets made suddenly unfamiliar by the fact that their eyes are seeing them now from above, from this lofty, gliding perch of four thousand feet. Just high enough, in this little Cessna 150, or that Piper Tomahawk, to make cars creep along dusty country roads like lonely ants, but low enough, still, to float below a misty ceiling of cumulus clouds, and to make the local bank on the main street in that little town just barely recognizable.

The heat from their fingertips burn temporary prints onto the cool glass, and they can't hear anything but the unsteady roar of the engine, can't feel anything but the shudder of the plane as it buckles through another pocket of turbulence. They look down at the buildings and parks and trees, the landscape stretching in every direction toward a hazy, indistinct horizon, and they murmur, softly, to no one in particular, *How small everything is*. Perhaps in these moments they think about something more than the smallness of the windmills, so far below; that they see something more in all this than merely the cattle dotting the pastures like tiny plastic figures on a child's train set.

~

I have not gone flying with my father in years, but for some reason, this warm May afternoon, he has convinced me to ride along. Perhaps it was the promise of dinner that

tempted me. Enrique's, the Mexican restaurant in the Ponca City airport thirty miles south, serves delectably soft, flour tortilla chips—even now, standing on the tarmac in full sun, watching my father meticulously run through his pre-flight check list, the mere thought of those chips makes my mouth water. So maybe he has bribed me with food. Or perhaps it was the pleading, almost sad tone of his voice as he made the rounds, once again, in search of someone, anyone really, to keep him company on his flight.

“Mom,” he said to my mother (I have never, in all my life, heard him call her by her name). “Are you sure you don't want to come along?”

“No, thanks.”

“Kairee?”

“No. I already told you no!”

“Jay?”

“What? No.”

So maybe it was appetite, maybe it was pity. I turn slowly in a circle on the tarmac, staring at my feet, at the cracks in the concrete where weeds have sprung up. I stop with my back to the sun, facing the metal hangar where my father is laboring over his plane. It is a small, two-person plane, a Cessna 150 with red and black stripes, the wings stretching like long, flat fingers from the roof of the cockpit. My father adores his plane. He frets over it as though it were a living thing, poking, prodding, checking and double-checking. I glance at my watch and wonder if I will faint from hunger before we even get airborne, let alone reach Enrique's. It occurs to me, then, that perhaps I came along for the ride—the same ride I've taken a hundred times before—less out of pity or hunger and more because I'm still trying to

figure him out, still trying to make sense of this man whose love is of the kind that teaches you, finally, to be always on your guard.

It feels almost involuntary, this sporadic sense of longing and obligation: to be close to him, to hear him say, just once, “You’re okay, Jenny.” A few weeks ago, my father and I ran our familiar loop around Cemetery Hill, near my parents’ home. It was almost dusk as we approached the railroad tracks, and I only half listened to everything: the steady *shushush* of my breath, the rhythmic creak of the cicadas, and my father’s impatient voice, listing my brothers’ faults—the smoking, the drinking, the irresponsibility—as though I had not heard them a hundred times before. Still I winced to hear one of my brothers described as “worthless and selfish.” Not because it was entirely untrue—I thought my brother terribly selfish—but because it seemed wrong, somehow, for a parent to speak this way of one child to another child. And what, I wondered, did my father say about me when I wasn’t around to hear?

Probably nothing worse, I realize now, than the hateful words he sometimes spat out in anger to my face. When my mother went to Mexico the summer I turned 22 to study Spanish for six weeks, she left me in charge, more or less, of my youngest brother and sister, who were not quite five years old. They had never been away from her this long before. The first night she called from Puebla, they were both unhappy and desperate to talk to her. Kairee seized the phone first, chatting enthusiastically, while Jay sat on my lap, crying, terrified that my mother would hang up before he got a chance to talk to her. My father hovered over us, hands on his hips, glaring.

“Make him be quiet,” he said. I could almost hear the grinding of his teeth as he attempted to control his temper.

I gave Jay a little squeeze and whispered, “Hey dude, don’t cry. You can talk to Mom right after Kairee, okay?” He only sobbed harder, reaching for the phone cord, trying to yank it from Kairee’s grasp.

“Jay!” She shrieked, and spun away from us, wrapping the cord around her legs.

“That’s it,” my father said, his voice cold and low. He grabbed Jay by the arm and jerked him from my lap, pulling him toward his bedroom. He set Jay down on the bed, hard, then switched off the bedroom light and slammed the door. I could hear Jay’s screams, broken only by sobs. He was an extraordinarily sensitive child and terrified of many things, but these two—darkness and a closed door—were the worst. I took the phone from Kairee.

“What is going on there?” My mother said. “I can hear Jay crying.”

“Dad,” I said, so angry I could hardly speak. “Dad shut him in his room. In the dark.”

“Well, for chrissakes, let him out. Tell your dad I said to let him out.”

I carried the phone with me to the bedroom door, opened it. Jay was standing in the middle of the room, head dropped to his chest. When he heard the door, he looked up and stepped toward me, his thin arms reaching, but before I had a chance to pick him up, my father stepped around me and slammed the door shut again.

“Don’t touch that door again or I’ll break your arm,” he said, holding a finger in front of my face as though to confirm the seriousness of the threat.

“Mom said to let Jay out. She said to tell you.” I held the phone at my side. My mother was still on the line, listening to the sounds of her family erupting, a thousand miles away.

“You,” he said, his fist clenched now. “You can kiss my ass.” He dragged the words out, pausing between them, as though each breath were a physical blow. For the first time in my life, I was truly afraid of my father. I believed, for an instant, that he might really strike me. This seems crazy to me now—I know my father would never hurt me, not physically—but in that moment, I felt only a kind of wild, sick fear. I said nothing, simply handed him the phone and backed away. He turned and walked down the hall, carrying the phone with him to his own bedroom. As soon as he turned the corner, I opened Jay’s door again and snatched him up. I hugged his little body to me, tight, and felt his wet cheek against my neck. We both cried.

My boyfriend once told me, after a long weekend spent with my family, that he thought I was confused about what I should feel for my father. “I think,” he said, as we were driving north out of Winfield, on our way home. “I think you want to both love him and hate him, at the same time.”

“No,” I said. “That isn’t it. I want to love him. He makes me hate him.”

~

My father is pulling the plane from the hangar now, guiding it out with a long pole he has attached to the front wheel. It looks like a playground toy, this tiny plane, like something children would fight over, not something that has the ability to carry a man and his daughter roaring into the still, blue Kansas sky. My father looks around, grins, waves me over.

“Ready to go?”

“Ready,” I say, and I jog across the concrete to the open passenger door and bend myself inside, my knees almost touching the dash. The cockpit is tiny, cramped, and forces me to sit shoulder to shoulder with my father, a proximity that feels vaguely uncomfortable—I cannot even hug him without my body tensing—but in the plane is unavoidable. I glance over at my father’s empty seat; he, apparently, is not ready. He stands just behind the propeller, lifting the lid of the engine to fuss over some last detail. The sun beats down through the window while I wait, my door still open so I can feel the breeze. I press the heels of my palms against my knees and stare out the window at the desolate runway.

We are flying out of Strother Field, a tiny municipal airport between my hometown of Winfield and the neighboring city of Arkansas City, nine miles to the south. For three years during World War II, my father has told me, when it was known as the Strother Army Air Field, the airport served as a basic training field for the Air Force, with several thousand pilots, flight instructors, and other air force personnel stationed here. Inside the terminal building, mostly offices now, there hangs a photograph of the airport during its war days: rectangular army barracks set back from the tarmac, where more than a hundred war planes forming neat rows extend beyond even the camera’s range. Now, only a few small private planes dot the landscape, tethered to the concrete with chain leads.

I have seen the barracks. Only two remain, and they are in sad shape, white paint peeling, only the faintest traces of red on the worn trim, window panes missing, block foundations crumbling under the weight of years. I once poked my head inside one of the barracks and found the door of a Weir furnace, rusted closed, and the door to the next room,

painted medical green, hanging haphazardly from its hinges. Ugly and dilapidated, to be sure, but I couldn't help finding them beautiful, somehow, in comparison to the metal shed buildings of the industrial park which have sprung up around them in the years since. Something about their simple shape, their wornness, and their having survived all this time.

I imagine those bare rooms now, bits of plaster and wood rubble littering the floors, and I wonder for a moment about the lives that have passed through them. What became of those pilots, all those years ago? I think of my grandfather, who was an Air Force pilot just out of flight training when the United States dropped the first atomic bomb on Nagasaki. I remember the sad grimace on his face when I asked him one day, several years ago, what he thought about the bombing. He sighed, looked down at his hands, curled in his lap. "I think Harry Truman saved my life," he said.

The afternoon light has lengthened, creating a glare on the window. I shift in my seat, resting my head against the glass. I can hear the rumble of my empty stomach. I think again of Enrique's. *I could really use some of those chips now. That, and a little salsa, too.* With a quiet sigh, I wonder what I'm doing here. Why I still feel compelled, after all these years, to make the effort. And what is it, I wonder, that I'm hoping for? Finally, after what seems like ages (though I know it has only really been a few minutes), my father snaps the engine cover shut and steps into the plane, gripping the door frame as he swings himself up into the seat.

"That ought to do it," he says, finger moving quickly over his check list. He flips the visor down to keep the sun out of his eyes, pulls his dirt-stained Grouse Creek Ranch ball cap

down a little further on his forehead, and glances at me. "Buckle up," he says. And then, as though I'd never flown with him before, he adds, "Take offs can be a little bumpy."

"I know," I want to say, but the sudden noise of the engine makes conversation in the cockpit impossible, so I don't bother. I stare out the window at the shimmers of heat reflecting off the runway, squeezing my palms together in my lap to quell a flash of unreasonable irritation. We taxi to the end of the runway, the plane bouncing over the ridges of weeds growing up through the tarmac. The wind socks are snapping in the strong breeze, pointing straight north. My father notices them, too.

"Wind out of the south today," he nearly yells over the roar of the engine. "Hot weather is on its way."

At the end of the runway, he circles the plane around to face north, toward Winfield. The engine shudders as he pushes the yoke in, shaking the entire plane. It feels as though we are inside an angry bee, trapped in a bottle, buzzing and bouncing against the glass walls.

My father picks up the radio, speaks slowly as he glances around us. "Strother traffic. Cessna 7276 Sierra, departing runway 35. Strother traffic." He pauses for a moment, as though waiting for an answer, though none comes. He calls this "broadcasting into the blind," because there is no air traffic control at such a tiny airport, only the occasional other plane taking off, landing, or flying somewhere, up there in the vast, open sky. If there is someone out there today, they will hear his announcement and know to look out for us, just as we must look out for them. My father once told me that this is my job, to keep an eye out for other planes, in case they don't announce themselves, or in case we don't know where they are, exactly. This strikes me as a somewhat adventurous approach to flying—sometimes

I imagine planes appearing out of the clouds to our side, and then do we head up or down?

What if they choose to head the same way? But I do as I'm told.

The plane moves forward, slowly at first, then quickly picking up speed. We bounce along inside the body of the bee, and it feels as though we are barely touching the ground, just skipping over the surface of the runway. Long before we run out of pavement, my father pulls back on the yoke and we lift smoothly into the air. I can see my father's lips moving, but the buzz from the engine drowns out his words. I lean my forehead against the rattling window and watch the brown earth, the spring grass, the buildings of the industrial park drop away from us as the nose of the propeller—shaped, appropriately I think, like the stinger of a bee—edges us up into pale blue.

The roar of the engine fades into a steady drone as we begin to level off. I glance over at my father. He looks pleased, his mouth open in a kind of unconscious, halfway smile. "...Sierra is off of 35 Strother northbound," he says.

Strother. I remember the photograph I saw hanging in the county historical museum, a few weeks before, of a young man: dark-haired, thin-lipped, a narrow, serious face, eyes gazing at something above the camera's lens. Below his picture, his name, Donald Root Strother. Husband, father of a young son, youngest of four brothers, first Cowley County Air Force pilot to be killed in action during World War II, his plane shot down over Java on February 13, 1942, one day before Valentine's. *Happy Valentine's, sweetheart.*

I remember, too, photographs of his young widow and son, standing on the tarmac of the airfield, accepting Donald Strother's medal of honor. In one photograph, his beautiful, dark-haired widow is smiling as she takes the medal, and his son, perhaps four years old,

stands with his lips pursed, his arms lifted in his little military pea coat, as if he were pretending to fly.

My father banks slightly to the right, just enough to press my shoulder against the door. I stare down at the landscape, looking for familiar landmarks. We are still flying north; he wants to show me our house, once more, before we head south to Ponca City and Enrique's. I see the limestone barn first, then the windmill. My gaze travels a hundred yards south to the house, where my mother, brother, and sister are inside, engrossed in the same activities, I'm sure, as they were when we left an hour ago. *Big lives are being lived out in small spaces.* For a moment, I wish I had not left at all—I wish I were still there, doing something, not thinking, my feet firmly on the ground.

I watch my father guide the plane, his thick fingers loose on the yoke, his black beard shot through with silver, his mouth set in concentration. The noise of the plane makes speaking difficult, but I realize I'm not sure what I would say to him, even if I could speak. We get along best, it seems, in places like this, with no room for conversation. I remember a time, though, when I was a little girl, before my father became a pilot, and he would drive me to the Green Door, a Mexican restaurant in Arkansas City, for father-daughter dinners. I don't remember what we talked about, but I do remember feeling elated somehow, satisfied on the short drive home, and not because my tummy was full. Perhaps because there were no criticisms to fear then, no hurts to reel from. Perhaps because he could be kind for those few hours while he was simply being my dad.

The radio crackles to life in my father's hand. "Ponca traffic. Cessna 7276 Sierra is entering left downwind for 77 Ponca. Ponca traffic." The sun has dropped lower on the

horizon now. In a few hours it will be dark. I shift in my seat, straightening my back as I watch the runway loom toward us. Landings still make me nervous, whether in a Boeing 737 piloted by a stranger whose capability I must simply trust, or in this small plane guided by my father's sure hands. Something about the slight wobble of the plane's wings as we plummet toward the earth, that clenching realization that we are not on solid ground, but are most definitely headed straight for it, causes me to suck in my breath, involuntarily, and hold it until I hear the screech of the wheels on the runway.

"Flying is safer than driving," my father tells me, again and again.

"I *know*," I retort, inexplicably angry, as I always am, that he insists on telling me things I already do know. And that he insists on using that irksome tone of voice—authoritative, absolute—which not only suggests but outright assumes that, in fact, I *don't* know. My father as teacher, me as ignorant child.

My anger comes, always quick and unbidden, as though it were my body's physiological reaction to some stimulus: my father. It comes, real and irresistible and familiar, yet it both confuses and embarrasses me. What is wrong with me, I wonder, that I would react so strongly to something so small? I know it is, in part, a reaction my father simply elicits—I have seen my family respond in irritation to his questions and repetitions too many times not to believe this. But why should I be so petty and angry, as though I were punishing him for a lifetime of small wrongs?

Once, when I was in high school, my mother scolded me for responding with sarcasm to my father's attempts to communicate. "You are so mean to your dad sometimes," she said. "You should be ashamed of yourself."

“Me?!” I wanted to cry. “What about him?”

But I felt small and mean, and I knew then, perhaps unconsciously, what I am only beginning now to find myself capable of articulating: that my anger is not so much for what my father does, or what he is, but for what he doesn’t do. What he isn’t, and can never be. The things he will never understand about me, and the distance I am afraid will always exist between us.

“I *know* flying is safer than driving,” I want to tell him. “But it’s that feeling of being out of control. Knowing that you have to trust someone else to keep you safe, and you can’t—you can’t trust them—that’s what scares me.” I want to tell him this and see him nod, that light of recognition in his eyes, but he won’t. The world can only exist in one way, there can be only one set of rules to the universe—I think he believes this—and the realization that my father may never understand any other reality than his own angers me. I *want* him to understand me. I want him to at least try.

After we’ve taxied to the tiny terminal and my father has killed the engine, I hop from the plane and head inside to get us a table. Enrique’s is quiet tonight, and from a seat by the window, I can see the tidy row of small planes lined up like automobiles on the tarmac. My father kneels by his plane, braking it with yellow, triangular blocks of wood. His polo shirt, a little too snug on him anymore, I notice, stretches across his back as he pushes the blocks against the wheels.

Strange how much less intimidating he seems from here, I think, from behind this pane of glass. How much less powerful. I feel oddly detached, from both him and the moment. It’s as though I am watching an old home movie, where the characters are all

familiar and their actions mostly predictable, but I, the daughter as viewer, am just a little outside of it all. Nothing he could say or do in this moment could either hurt me or heal me, I realize suddenly, and this gives me the oddest perspective: he seems so much less fierce, so much more fragile, out there, on his knees. Almost, for a moment, not even my father, but merely human.

~

Some people, if they're flying in farming country, look down at the checkerboard pattern created by fields of wheat, corn, barley, milo, alfalfa; with their eyes, they trace those big, flat squares of earth like quilt blocks, dusky shades of gold, brown, and green stitched together by country roads in nearly perfect one mile intervals. With a finger pressed against the window, they trace the slow, sensuous curve of the brown river, follow her as she slips and sways, like a beautiful woman, first to the east, then south again. They sigh when they see her cut through the meadow behind their house. *I found it*, they whisper, almost as if in prayer. *That's where I live.*

Perhaps they dream in these moments of the years lived out in those matchbox homes. Maybe they are startled by that sudden smallness of existence; maybe it frightens them, and so it is with relief that they step foot again on the concrete tarmac, their perspective shaken but restored by the hot wind against their faces and the snap of the runway flags.

The Ache of Travel

This August evening in Munich, my first in a year's worth of evenings, I push open the door of my concrete apartment building and step into the alley, kicking up a stone with the toe of my running shoe. The heat of the day still shivers across the brick street. I stand still for a moment, pressing my fingers against my back, at the base of the spine where I ache with exhaustion and something else: that peculiar pang of motionless, of hours at rest while the body's muscles twist and tighten; making movement, when it finally comes, both painful and oddly pleasurable, in the way that making love can sometimes be. I watch the sun dip behind the grey walls of the Studentenverein next door, the sky's vivid orange blaze almost exactly the color of the neon sign facing me: Bierstube. Through the bar's windows I can see the faces of people enjoying a Maß of beer, the company of others, and Breze, their fingers tearing off bites of the soft, oversized pretzels as they talk. The glass fogs slightly with their laughter, muted by the transparent wall that separates us. I wrap my arms around my waist, a small hug, almost shivering in the humid air.

It will be dark soon, I know, but I have spent too long at rest today: first the long flight across the Atlantic, then the long sleep that followed, and always the persistent ache of momentous upheaval. I have moved farther in this one day than I have in all my 22 years together, a fact which sets my mind reeling; and yet, it is my body which seems to feel the change most acutely. It complains in the way that a runner's body will, the cramping and contracting of muscles a physical plea. *Stretch me out*, my body almost begs. *Lay me out*

with long, familiar strides. Run these limbs into sweet sweat. And I will, I want to answer, because this is the one thing I know to do.

I bend over, reaching for the toes of my worn Asics with the tips of my fingers. The stretch feels delicious, a small flame along the backs of my thighs. I close my eyes, feeling the pulse of my heartbeat in my temples as the blood rushes to my head, listening to sounds of evening in a new country. The pigeons, so noisy when I first stepped from the U-Bahn, are quiet now, nesting somewhere on the roofs and in the balconies above me. From the street café across the way, I hear the soft murmur of voices, occasional laughter, the clink of glasses, silverware against dishes; but otherwise the evening is quiet, a hush which feels somehow lonely to me tonight, though normally I crave such solitude. How different it feels to be alone, I think, when the choice to be otherwise is no longer ours to make.

I lean into the wall of my apartment building as though I mean to kiss that streak of dark concrete, both hands pressed flat against its cool surface, my face so close I can see the tiny grains of stone embedded there. I straighten one leg, heel to the ground, toe against the wall, and feel the pull of muscle in my calf. Something about focusing on the body grounds me, I realize: the stretch of limbs, the feel of skin against a surface cooler than myself, even the curve of my belly beneath my fingertips. Perhaps it is the reminder that, whatever else I might be able to leave behind (or whatever else might leave me), I can never abandon the body. Strange comfort, I think. I wonder if this is what it means to finally discover that, yes, you can exist on your own? The realization that, wherever in the world you are, you already have all that you need? I press my cheek against the cool wall and close my eyes again.

~

There in the alley, my foot propped against the wall, I think of that morning, all those hours ago now, of the long series of flights from Kansas City—where I left my mother and my boyfriend, Ben—to Munich. There were long hours in between the two cities, hours passed helplessly, alternating between crying and hanging my head over the toilet in the airplane lavatory, my sudden illness the shock of having left behind everything familiar and loved. There was the sickly sweet body odor of the man sitting next to me on the plane, and the way he would cover me with the small airline blanket each time I returned from the lavatory, waiting until I'd curled miserably again in my seat before draping the thin fleece over my shoulders.

I think, too, of the resolve I'd had, stepping through the glass doors of Customs, finally, in the Munich airport, looking for the face of a man I would recognize only from a photograph—the friend of a friend who had agreed to meet me—and of how determined I was to take the next available flight home again. Immediately. With or without luggage. My body had ached then, though with fatigue or misery or illness, I couldn't be sure. I searched for the man, my eyes burning and red. When I finally saw him, his handsome face smiling back at me from the crowd, I nearly fell into his arms. *This is crazy. This is an entire year in another country. I don't know why I thought I wanted to do this.* I didn't cry, though I longed to, but my body seemed to weep with each stiff step through the terminal.

The long train ride back to the city, past industrial parks and open fields, was a blur of color and noise. I clutched my backpack in my lap and told Andrew—the man who'd come to fetch me—that I already wanted to go home. He laughed, ran a hand through his dark hair,

and said in his perfect Queen's English, "I think we all wanted that our first day in. You'll get over it." He shook his head, his brown eyes sparkling with amusement. I leaned my shoulder against the glass, feeling the *click-clack* of train wheels rocking beneath me, and turned my gaze out the window.

Andrew had a tiny apartment in the same building where I would be living, come Monday. I collapsed on his bed and begged him to let me sleep, even as he insisted I stay awake until evening. "You'll never sleep tonight, otherwise," he said. I nodded, almost dizzy with exhaustion.

I fell asleep, anyway—I just couldn't stay awake—and when I opened my eyes again, seven hours later, I sat groggily on the edge of the bed, not remembering, for a moment, where I was. How far I'd traveled. Forgetting, or perhaps just not recalling, for an instant, the slow, teasing blink of the airplane's tedious progress, charted on the screen at the front of the cabin, as all those miles of dark Atlantic passed beneath us. I felt only the deliciousness of waking from good, sweet sleep; I imagine that is all we ever want to feel in those first fleeting seconds, thousands of miles from home.

Then, as though my mind woke after the body, after the solace of that soft delay, the feeling of panic returned, an old, small stone pressing again inside my chest. I felt sick. *What have I done? I can't do this, I can't stay here.* I stared at Andrew's back and, beyond him, through the wall of glass separating us from the balcony, at the slow ripple of black netting strung up to prevent the nesting of pigeons on the cold concrete floor. Andrew sat quietly at his desk, reading, chin cupped gracefully in his palm, late afternoon sunlight warming the pages and his dark hair; as if this were any other day for him and the stranger

sleeping in his bed. I stared at him for a long time, conscious of the strangeness of our intimacy, of my foreign skin against his sheets.

How such moments steal my voice, the sweet awkwardness of it all sticky in my throat. But already I felt the small aches of my body after so much travel: the tightness of my legs, bent beneath me, my back, sore with immobility. I could feel my body tremble with the desire to move. I squirmed with restlessness, at the slow downward movement of the sun, reaching toward the horizon. Soon it would be dark, and I was in a strange place: I would never find the nerve to run without light. I stared at his back, searching for my voice. Finally, I coughed and said his name. He twisted around in his chair and smiled at me.

“What’s up?”

“I think I need to go for a run,” I said, and pushed myself up from the creaky bed.

~

Now I crouch down on the brick pavement to knot my shoelaces. The heavy door creaks open and slams behind me, and three students step around me on their way to the bar. One of them, a thin woman with long, dark hair, seems to speak with her hands as she talks, her laughter a buoy of animated words. I watch them walk away, straining to listen, to understand, picking out only the occasional, familiar sound—*der Mann, heute, nein*—and feeling more than a little forlorn.

Slowly, I rise and walk down the growing shadows of the alley. I watch the ground as I walk, witness the swing of one foot, then the other, as I move forward. Familiar feet in familiar shoes, walking through this unfamiliar place. When I reach the corner, I turn toward the heart of Olympia Park and exhale, my breath leaving my body in one long stream through

slightly pursed lips. I start running, stiffly, arms swinging awkwardly at my side. I run not to the crosswalks over the highway, but up the hill, away from all the people, around the lonely outside curve of the vast park. I run through the trees, the quiet buzz of evening interrupted by the beat of my footsteps against grass and cobblestone and concrete. I run past a monument, a thick, horizontal bar of stone—I have to circle it twice to see that it is a memorial to the dead of the 1972 Munich Games massacre—and suddenly I feel the strange, earthly eeriness of running on sacred ground, the same sensation I'd felt for years, whenever I passed through the cemetery near my parents' home.

I run slowly, until I can feel the stiffness dissipate, and then, finally, I relax. Sweat trickles warm down my neck, soaking into my t-shirt. My legs move across the ground, stronger now, more certain, as my body settles into this familiar routine of motion. On the far end of the park, I cross over the highway, over the roar of Audis and BMWs, and down along a footpath that leads me to Dachauerstraße. I can feel the ache of travel in my legs, the stiffness of muscles as they stretch and pull, lengthening themselves with each step. I can feel the pulse of my heart, the warm, humid air in my lungs, the dampness of my shirt where it clings to my skin, and I sigh, almost in relief.

I know I wasn't the only American student in Munich that year, or any year, probably, who relied on running to keep her sane. One friend, a woman I met soon after my arrival, had finally managed to track down her biological mother just weeks before she left for Germany. When we ran together, she would tell me about their phone conversations and letters and her mother's impending visit. She would tell me about the tension her new

relationship had created between her and her adoptive parents, and how she felt as though she were straddling a divide between two mothers, two fathers, trying to keep one foot on either side, trying not to hurt anyone. She would also tell me how much she missed her boyfriend, who was studying in Italy—much closer, granted, than mine, who was thousands of miles away in Kansas, but still painfully distant. She would share these things with me as we ran, making familiar the unfamiliar streets and alleys and pathways of Munich, making familiar this new territory in our lives.

In February, when Ben decided he'd had enough of being on opposite ends of the Atlantic, and took an internship in Munich so we could be together for those last six months, then he, too, ran the streets with me. He ran perhaps out of frustration: he didn't speak German, he needed me to take him through all the complicated bureaucratic steps of obtaining an Arbeitserlaubnis, a Reisepaß for the U-Bahn, a Sparkonto when he finally received his first stipend check. He didn't even feel comfortable going alone to Tengelmanns, the grocery in Olympia Dorf, for several weeks. I think running was perhaps one of the few times he felt he had control; I know it was that way for me sometimes.

But my almost daily runs in Munich, even through the dark winter months, became more than a release for me. They were my way of connecting to this place which had at first seemed so unfamiliar, so remote. I had long since learned that if I could put my feet down in a place, if I could run there, then I could live there, too; almost as if my steps made all the necessary introductions. The stride of my legs became a means of measurement, of knowing the terrain beneath them, perhaps a little like the way a person who has lost her sight will use

the tips of her fingers and the point of her cane to know the shape and substance of her obstacles.

In any place, though, running eventually transforms those obstacles into landmarks, welcoming and familiar: the memorial to the slain Israeli athletes, the shop windows on Dachauerstraße, the winding cobblestone path to the top of Olympia Berg, where Ben proposed to me one cold night, after we'd run to the peak of the little 'mountain'. The route I take when I head out for a run, so well-worn I imagine I could follow it with my eyes closed, so familiar I can see its every curve and hill in my mind, becomes something real, certain, trustworthy; it greets me like an old friend whenever I return, offering the kind of comfort and solace I can carry away with me for the time between. These routes, and my running them, are how I *know* a place; the beat of my footsteps on that familiar pavement or grass or wooded path offer connection, not only to a past and present place, but to a past and present *me*. Running *in* places, whether for the first time or the last, grounds me, if only briefly, back in my own body.

The poet Marge Piercy has made a similar connection between running and the way we come to know a place. In "Morning Athletes," she tries to convince us that to run in a place is to create a kind of intimacy with its landscape:

It is not the running I love, thump
thump of my leaden feet that only
infrequently are winged and prancing,
but the light that glints off the cattails
as the wind furrows them, the rum cherries
reddening leaf and fruit, the way the pines
blacken the sunlight on their bristles,
the hawk circling, stooping, floating
low over beige grasses.

I would only argue that, for me, to love the “light that glints off the cattails” means to love the running, as well, since it is most often through my runs that these small intricacies of place are revealed. At what other time, after all, are we so attuned to the path beneath our feet, the landmarks of trees and homes, the sounds around us, as when we are running and know we must be able to find our way back again?

~

Tall, straight-faced buildings line the wide avenue of Dachauerstraße, and for the first time all day, I pay attention to their names, to the names of the streets, to the people passing by me in the opposite direction. I try to read the film and theater advertisements plastered to the long, broad wall along this side of the street, but I don’t want to slow my pace. I thrill a little bit with the thought that I am running in Munich—a small-town Kansas girl, loping along Dachauerstraße and back through the hilly northern edge of Olympia Park, as though such a thing happened everyday.

I loop around Olympia See on Rudolf-Harbig-Weg, the last of the sun’s rays turning the sky crimson, then fading to blue. From here I can see my apartment building, stolid and grey and like some jagged puzzle piece in the day’s last light. I run toward it as though it were pulling me home.

Resisting Joy

“Jenny!” my mother says, stepping into a store and holding up a slinky, floor-length violet dress. “This would look so good on you!”

I grin, holding the same dress from the other side of the rack. “You think?” I laugh.

My mother and I walk the high-ceilinged avenues of the Manhattan Town Center Mall, gleeful shoppers, our conversation interrupted by interjections of “Ooh, look at that!” and “Isn’t this a cute dress?” We no longer walk hand in hand, as we did until I reached junior high, but tenderness connects us invisibly. Like twins, or life-long lovers, we sense each other’s needs, understand each other’s thoughts, know each other’s tastes.

We go wild in one clothing store, and by the time we’ve reached the dressing room, I’ve draped my arms with two dresses and half a dozen tank tops and skinny t-shirts. My mother tries on nothing, just sits on the little bench behind me, resting against the wall of our cubicle. She watches me in the mirror as I shimmy out of one dress and into the next, a little smile of indulgence on her face. I turn to face her, pulling the stretchy sky blue fabric down over my hips.

“What do you think?” I ask.

She grins, pushes a lock of her wig behind one ear. “I think you’re going to have to get that one,” she says. “You look very sexy.”

I smile. I like it, too.

~

Five-years-old, I stared into the mirror of the tiny, poorly lit dressing room at Sears, letting my gaze travel the length of my body. I wore a dress that seemed only to touch me at the shoulders, and then hang like a ruffled curtain to my knees. It was white, with tiny blue flowers and a bow of blue ribbon at the collar. I twirled on my toes, the way I imagined a dancer would do, inspecting myself from every angle, and finally turned a toothless smile to my mother.

“I like this one, Mom!” I declared.

My mother smiled, her brown eyes crinkling at the corners. “Cow eyes,” my father calls them, because they have that same wide, lucid appeal, the color of melted chocolate, of earth wet with rain. She touched her hand to my straight, dark brown hair and nodded.

“You look very pretty in it, too. But why don’t you try these other dresses before we decide, okay?”

I bobbed my head enthusiastically. I was soon to be a kindergartner, and I thrilled with the knowledge that *all this*—the shopping, the quiet lunch table for two, my mother’s undivided attention--was for my benefit. Pleasure made me wildly agreeable.

I think there must have been only one dress style in the early eighties for girls under the age of ten—free-flowing and easy to play in, to swing from monkey bars and straddle the wide plank of the teeter-totter— because the five dresses we brought in were nearly identical: the original blue flowers merely replaced with red, then yellow, lavender, white on green. I liked each one with equal energy, giddy with desire, and in the end, my mother bought all five.

She never could resist joy. She tells me now it was the pure pleasure of watching my small face shine with delight—the easy simplicity of it all!—that tempted her to indulge me in that little extravagance. Pleasure, and perhaps the knowing that, while I was still five years old, she possessed a super hero's ability to make the world perfect with candy pink happiness, and to heal the ache of all my small wounds.

With what sadness parents must relinquish such innocent power as their children grow older, I wonder now. I have never been a parent, and yet I know I have seen my mother's pain—even to the point of being almost able to step outside of my own—each time my twenty-something heart has been hurting and she has discovered herself powerless, finally, to mend me. How many times in these recent years has she held me, letting me cry over some small heartache, whispering softly into my hair, “Oh Jenny, I wish I could just kiss away the hurt, the way I did when you were little”? More times, I know, than I could ever possibly recall.

I imagine this kind of loss only a parent could truly understand. I have never been a parent; and yet, I have known the helpless ache of wanting to comfort and having nothing to offer. Of wanting the strength to kiss away suffering and leave lightness in its place. I have known a longing, so terrible it broke my heart, to hold my mother in my arms and make her well again; and then, if I still could, to return her to the joy with which she once gifted me.

~

In my dream two years before my grandmother's death, my mother and I sit, late afternoon, at the edge of a lake I have never seen before. An autumn wind whips the dark water into sharp, crested waves, which arch higher and higher until they collapse, falling

apart in white eddies against the rocks beneath our feet. On the far shore, a heavy growth of trees stops just short of the water's edge. Behind us lies a vagueness I cannot remember, like the part of a picture that has been erased. I only know it is the direction from which we've come, and to which I will return when we are done here.

The lake must be either remote or forgotten—I see no one else on the water or the shore. Beside me, my mother pulls her knees to her chest, gaunt and silent, and touches a hand to her matted hair. I shiver with cold. Somehow, I know the reason she has grown so thin roots in the cancer that riddles her body, but I don't understand that I have come here to watch her die. I don't know that I will lose her.

When she rises and steps into the water, I panic.

"Mom, what are you doing? Where are you going? Mom!"

My mother doesn't answer, doesn't even look at me, but drops swiftly into the water, swimming now, away from me. I stand, my feet frozen in place, pleading, then screaming in anger, but she doesn't seem to hear. Wild with rage, I look behind me and see my father standing at the edge of blankness, running shoes in hand.

"Dad," I say. "Dad, help, she's gone."

He shakes his head, says, "You'll have to talk to your mother. I'm going for a run."

"No, Dad, please don't leave."

He looks at me strangely, then turns and begins running away, shoes still in hand.

When I wake, my clock blinks 6:58 a.m. My face and pillow are soaked with tears—I have been sobbing in my sleep. I call my mother then, wake her, just to hear her voice.

It is the New Year, 1999. My grandmother drifts in and out of consciousness in Via Christi Hospital, the click of the respirator steady like a heartbeat beside her bed. My mother and I take turns holding her feverish, swollen hands. We don't say it, standing in this room rank with smells, but we both know that my grandmother will die soon. And yet, the needs of the living do not cease: we are hungry.

Driving away from the hospital, in search of a good Chinese buffet, my mother turns slightly in her passenger seat to look at me.

"Jenny," she says. "There's something I need to tell you. It isn't serious. I'm only telling you now because I know you will be mad at me later if I don't."

How does the mind intuit what is wrong before it hears the words, I wonder. Do we somehow train ourselves to expect what we fear most?

"I've found a lump in my right breast," she says.

I glance swiftly at my mother, wondering first why she tells me this when I'm driving, cars whipping along Wichita's narrow, pot-holed Harry Street, and then thinking, *Well, of course you have*. Surprised by my lack of surprise, I feel as though I have been expecting this for years.

"Dr. Stevens checked it out, though, and he's sure it's nothing," she says, watching me. "He said tumors usually anchor themselves down, and this felt like it was rolling all over the place. You know, like a marble in my breast."

She laughs at this, then sighs and stares out the window. I know she is thinking of her own mother now, a tiny burning in a hospital bed. Grandma would have been the first to know. Silent and thinking, navigating mid-day traffic now seems to somehow require all my

attention. I remember a speech I gave in my college Public Speaking class, impassioned information about breast cancer—my terrifying nighttime visitor—and my anger when my mother, at 43, admitted she still hadn't had a mammogram.

"Mom!" I almost yelled when she told me. "Are you completely crazy? Don't you know you have to do this? If you don't do it for yourself, you should at least be thinking about *us*."

I remember her stunned expression, her quick promise to make an appointment. I felt guilty for playing on her one weakness—a mother's responsibility to her children—to move her, but how could I explain then my unspeakable fear, irrational as a lightning strike, that I would lose her someday?

My mother touches me on the shoulder, smiling, her face determined reassurance.

"I have to have a biopsy, just to check it out, but it's going to be fine, Jenny," she says. She drops her hand into her lap. "I'm sure it will be fine."

I look at my mother, her tired eyes, the slope of her chin, all the familiar fabric of her, and I lie. "Of course it will be fine," I say.

~

The day after my brother Justin's 20th birthday, a Friday, I nap for several hours in my small apartment in Manhattan, Kansas, exhausted by a swift week of classes at the university. When I wake, groggy, I listen to the three messages from my mother on the answering machine. She says nothing unusual, simply asks me to call, but in the way that we know the very tone and texture of each other's voices, the tiniest nuanced shift sinks dread in my stomach like being caught in a lie.

When my mother answers the phone, her voice echoes thin as a whisper in my dark room, three hours away. “Oh Jenny,” she says. “I wish I didn’t have to tell you this. The tumor they removed: it was malignant.” She pauses, and I realize I have been holding my breath. “Sweetie, I have cancer.”

I say nothing, almost convince myself that I feel nothing. Listen. Taste the strange sensation of tightening in my chest. Hold my hand to my throat to stop the welling. *Listen, damnit.* Before we hang up, I promise my mother that I will be home in the morning. Then I crouch on the floor of my room, head to the carpet, prostrate, and cry.

~

My relationship with my mother begins to change quietly, temporarily and almost imperceptibly, after her diagnosis. For the first time in my life, something exists between us which neither of us knows how to approach, and the terror we both feel silences us. We don’t talk about our separate fears, about my mother’s easy tears and almost daily struggle to remain cheerful, about my sudden rages which leave me pounding the flat of my palm against walls. Terrified and angry, I seem to have forgotten how to cry. I sometimes lash out at other people, but protect my mother always from the intensity of my emotions.

One night, talking with my friend Alan, he tells me about his aunt, a breast cancer “survivor,” and how sickness ultimately made life more precious for her—a *success story*, he calls it. *He has no idea*, I think. His casual cheerfulness tears through my body like an icy wind, a fury. I want to throw the phone against the wall, reach through a thousand miles of telephone wire to strangle Alan’s optimism. I have to fight the impulse to scream.

“What the *fuck* does that mean, a success story,” I say. “There are no successes. Even if my mother survives cancer, she’s never going to *escape* it. She’s going to live with cancer, and the fear that it might come back, for the rest of her life. How in hell is that supposed to be success?”

Alan breathes, stays quiet for a long moment. I can feel the pulse of my own heart in my head. Outside my window, the long shadow of the sycamore tree shifts in the yard as the sun drops. Finally he says, “You’re right, Jen. You must be tired of people telling you to be positive all the time. I’m sorry.”

I stare at the tree, at the arching, limestone wall of Old Stadium. My mother once told me she used to sit in that same banner of stadium seats and watch my father perform with the university marching band, thirty years earlier. Now the limestone turns almost white in the last blaze of sunlight. I realize no one has offered me permission to be furious at my mother’s cancer before. For a moment, I don’t know what to do with it. Then, for the first time in weeks, I cry, aware of the anger I wear, a Band-Aid to protect me from dark grief.

~

I am reminded, whenever I call home, how my mother mourns my grandmother’s recent death. She talks about the strange, unfamiliar newness of it, how she longs to pick up the phone and call her, as she has done for so many years. I hear the pain in her voice as an echo of my own, but my sympathy limits itself. How can I be properly sorry for my mother’s loss, when she had my grandmother’s steady presence in her life for 48 years? I am 23, and at this moment, I would give anything to know that I could be allowed to keep my mother so long. Cancer steals this security from me, and I rage at the loss.

~

Valentine's weekend, my mother calls me in tears. Four days ago, she lost her right breast to surgical mastectomy, the insidious, precise violence of cancer. But surrounded by friends and numbed by drugs, she assumed the role of poet Audre Lorde's "Amazon warrior": strong, resilient, indefatigable. Now, alone for the first time since her surgery, she looks naked into a mirror and sees the horror of bodily mutilation. Her breast, swollen and bruised with reconstruction, tissue torn from her abdomen to replace what the doctor has taken, has an incision line shaped like the bottom of a small child's shoe. It circles around where the nipple once was—the toe of the shoe—then narrows on its way toward her arm, where it widens again to connect with an older incision, the original biopsy—the heel of the shoe.

I haven't seen her since before the surgery, and I can't visualize what she describes to me (*A shoe? It looks like a shoe, Mom?*), but I hear the devastation in her voice, her breathless words between choking sobs.

"It's so ugly, Jenny," she says, gasping. "Why couldn't they have made it a straight line? I would've been okay with that. I've lost my breast, and I'm okay with that, too. But why couldn't it at least be straight? It's awful. I'm so ugly now."

What can I say? *No, Mom. No. You're still beautiful.* How can I know? I am choked with helplessness. I cry to know this pain.

~

A month after the mastectomy, a bright, clear day, I sleep late. I am home for spring break and too lazy to drag myself from bed. At ten, my mother sends the "troops" to wake

me: I can hear the squeal of the twins' laughter and the pounding of their feet on the stairs for one groggy moment, before they spring onto my bed and breathe little kisses in my face, jabbering loudly to each other over my head.

"Jenny, Jeeenny," they chant. "Mommy says it's time to wake up now."

"Okay, in a minute," I mumble. I put a pillow over my face.

"Jenny!" Jay says. "You *have* to wake up now!"

"Why?" I growl. "What do I have to get up for?"

"Mommy is sick," Kairee says, quiet, her cheek touching mine. "You have to watch us."

"Oh." I sit up, suddenly awake. "Where is she? Is she lying down?"

"Yes!" Jay says. He dances on one foot, then bounces up and down like a pogo stick, his little Olympic calves flexing with each spring into the air. People have been asking us for years, "What do you *feed* that kid?", but I love his energy. It invigorates.

Kairee grabs my hand, pulls me coaxingly out of bed, and Jay races ahead of us, yelling, sprinting up the stairs. I leave them at the kitchen table with a pile of markers and Crayolas and a big stack of clean white paper, and then I slip quietly down the hall to my mother's dark bedroom. In the dimness, I see her shape under the blankets, curled up on her side. I sit on the edge of the bed, touch her shoulder.

"Mom?" I whisper. "Mom, are you okay? Do you need anything?"

She turns her head toward me, her eyes half open. She looks so tired, so suddenly old, her dry hair pressed flat against her head. I want to put my arms around her, give her my strength somehow. I feel my eyes burn, and I hope in the darkness she can't see.

“No, I’m okay,” she says. “Just tired. Would you mind watching the twins for a while?”

“Sure,” I say. “That’s fine. We were just about to do some coloring.”

My mother smiles faintly. I can see even, white teeth against the paleness of her lips. Her face relaxes and she closes her eyes, far away in sleep, like Kairee’s baby doll that never quite comes alive.

“Just a little while,” she says again. “I know you have things to do.”

~

In the afternoon, my mother comes downstairs, still wearing her pajamas, and finds me painting my toenails “celestial silver.” She holds up a video, grins.

“I got this from the hospital,” she says. “I thought you might want to watch it.”

“Sure,” I say. “I’m always up for a movie.”

She laughs, starts the video, and curls up on the couch across from me. Not exactly industry quality, the film is titled “What You Need to Know About Cancer.” After a poorly-recorded elevator music opening, a Lebanese doctor, Shakir Dakhil, appears in front of a seated roomful of people. He beams at his audience, sweating, his dark hair slicked back against his head.

“Today,” he says, “I’m gonna tell you what you need to know about cancer. Fighting cancer is...” He pauses, looks gravely at an elderly woman in the front row. She looks wide-eyed back at him. “...Like fighting a war. The cancer is the enemy. Your doctors and your body are the army. And what we want to do in cancer treatment is defeat this enemy.”

I look at my mother, she shrugs her shoulders. Dr. Dakhil paces across the room, one finger to his forehead, then he stops and points it toward a young man in the middle.

“Your oncologist,” he says slowly, “is your general. He’s gonna lead the battle for you.”

I snort at this. “Is he kidding?” I ask. My mother grins.

“I know,” she says. “It gets even better.”

Dr. Dakhil pauses again, dramatically. A drop of perspiration slips down his temple and soaks into his hair. He smiles.

“With cancer,” he booms, “the battle is just beginning. We have many weapons.” He leans forward, as if to share some highly secretive information. “We have artillery. This is radiation. We have smart bombs. Surgery. And we have nerve gas. Chemotherapy...”

“Oh my god,” I laugh. “This is too much. The irony! He’s Lebanese, for chrissake!” My mother giggles.

“That’s terrible, Jenny!” she says. Then she looks at me, a little bit coyly. “It is pretty ironic, though, isn’t it? He probably grew up thinking in terms of war, for everything.”

“Even sex,” I say. “It’s a horizontal invasion.”

Laughing, my mother cradles her stomach where the incision from her reconstruction still hurts her. I smile at her, wagging a finger.

“Don’t laugh too hard, there. You’re going to split yourself right open.”

“Oh,” she breathes between spasms of delight, “they’ll just sew me back up again. I’m the patchwork lady now, you know.”

My mother begins losing her hair on a Sunday, a bright warm day toward the end of March. Streams of short, curly brown hair, streaked with blond—more like the shedding of a cat than the shocking clumps we have been expecting. I find her sitting by the window in the family room, her head in her hands, crying. The veins of her left arm, collapsed and pale where chemotherapy has coursed through them. Every third Friday, she sits in the cancer wing of the local hospital, her arm strapped to a board for 45 minutes while a machine pumps Cytoxan and powerful Adriamycin, a drug she calls the “red devil” for its color, into her body.

Kairee and Jay have left their toys scattered on the floor around her, and I hear their shrieks of laughter from outside. Through the window I see Kairee dangling from a branch in the maple tree, Jay clambering to catch up with her. I kneel down beside my mother, put my arms around her and hug her bent figure to me, rubbing her back the way she does whenever I am sick and aching with fever. I know why she is crying—I see the strands of hair clutched in her hands, more slipping from her head and catching on the back of her grey sweatshirt—but I need her to talk to me, so I ask, anyway.

“Mom, what’s wrong?”

At the tender sound of my voice, she cries harder, her body shaking with the effort, shuddering gasps of sound. I squeeze her tight and wait. Finally, she uncurls her body from my arms and looks at me. Her face shines wet with tears and weary, pale white. The lines around her eyes seem to have deepened, the passage of years in a few swift moments. She raises one hand to her chest, a dozen hairs falling free to the floor, and smiles weakly.

“I knew it was coming,” she says. “I knew it, and yet...you can’t know what it’s like. Everything that identifies you as a woman, your hair, your breasts, and then suddenly it’s gone.”

~

My boyfriend Ben’s stepmother, Cindy, faced a breast cancer diagnosis less than a year after her marriage to Ben’s father. Ben remembers the six months she spent in experimental chemotherapy, receiving unusually high dosages of cytotoxic chemicals, which kill the body’s cells. Chemo made her violently ill, like having a stomach flu that alternately lessened and increased in severity, but never completely vanished. Her remission has lasted for three years.

By the fireplace in their kitchen, there stands a wedding photograph of Cindy and Ben’s father, Paul. Her smooth, pale face beams at the photographer, short, almost black hair softly curling around her head. Next to this, another photograph, dated August 1996, shows Cindy wearing a pink baseball cap, tank top, and shorts. A race number pinned to her shirt reads *Breast Cancer Survivor* in bold pink letters. Every summer since, most of the family and a handful of friends and employees in Paul’s company have run or walked the Kansas City *Race for the Cure*, large tags pinned to the backs of their shirts saying, *This Race Is For Cindy*.

After my mother’s diagnosis, Cindy calls her to share what she knows about cancer treatments, hair loss, the fear that invades when you live with a life-threatening illness. She tells my mother about the night when, tired of the sadness and mess of her balding scalp, she shared a bottle of wine with Paul and then sat quietly while he shaved her head.

My mother, too, reaches this resignation. But it is my brother, Justin, who runs the buzzing clippers over her pale head. When he finishes, he sits and my mother shaves his hair, too: a communal act. It falls in shiny blond chunks on top of her thin curls.

~

“You know what your father told me the other day?”

My mother and I sit by the window of Espresso Café Royale, sharing a piece of banana walnut bread. She’s in town for the weekend, visiting me at college between treatments.

She takes a sip from her coffee, looks at me. “He says he wants to sell out this summer and move! Can you believe that? I told him there was no way I was moving anywhere this summer, while I’m in the middle of chemo treatments and Grandpa’s health the way it is. I told him it would be next year, at least, before I’d even consider it.”

I shake my head, irritated. My father has hated his work as a veterinarian for as long as I can remember, and for almost as long, my mother has been trying to convince him to sell the practice, go to graduate school, become a teacher, anything—so long as he would be happy about it. Angry complaints and slammed doors wear thin, and I know she doesn’t care about the money. “We lived on less before, we can do it again,” she has said, over and over.

But my father says he has too many responsibilities to leave: mortgage payments, house repairs, children to put through school, ski trips in winter, camping trips in summer, a car for each member of the family. My father allows responsibility to trap him, just like the leather muzzle he straps over the mouth of a Chow, to prevent the vicious dog from biting him. A responsibility we don’t ask him, have never asked him, to carry. Until his wife is diagnosed

with cancer: then, inexplicably, his needs somehow supersede responsibility. All the years she would have followed, gladly, and he waits until she finally can't.

I twist my fork in the bread, tearing off another bite.

~

At fifteen, I experienced my first hangover. My older friends, seniors or already in college, took me out into the country, and we sped along rough gravel roads while they fed cans of Keystone beer to me in the backseat. Thrilled by their laughter and encouragement, I downed eight cans of the noxious stuff in an hour and a half, then spent the rest of the night stumbling off to the ditch to pee, giggling at my own clumsiness. When I woke in the middle of the night, head pounding, I dragged myself and my sleeping bag to the bathroom of the dark house we were sleeping in and retched, off and on, crying miserably, until after sunrise.

The next day, too sick to even be driven home, I lay asleep in the middle of the living room floor for hours, feet stepping over me and voices fading in and out. Finally, in the afternoon, my mother called, and one of the girls half dragged me to her car, where I huddled the entire ride, trying to anticipate nausea-inducing turns and sudden stops. I couldn't decide what I was more frightened of: dying of what I was sure had to be alcohol poisoning and dehydration, or facing my mother in this wretched state.

I walked quietly through the backdoor, trying not to jar my tender stomach or make any noise that would alert my mother. When I pulled the door shut behind me and turned around, she was standing twenty feet away at the kitchen stove, looking at me thoughtfully. I attempted a smile.

"Hi," I said.

"You've been drinking, haven't you?" she asked.

"What?"

"Drinking. Your skin is absolutely pasty. You have a hangover. Jenny, your face is an open book—I can see what you've been up to."

"Oh," I said. Then, "I'm sorry, Mom. Please. Please don't be mad at me."

My mother shook her head, hands on her hips, clearly upset. She steered me to the couch in the living room, sat down beside me. I stared at my clenched hands, waited for her anger.

"I am so disappointed in you, Jennifer Lynn," she said quietly. "You know how I feel about drinking. I trusted you."

My stomach twisted, and I thought about running for the bathroom. I wished for her to yell, to threaten violently, the way my father does. To tell me I was grounded and send me to my room in a fury. Anything but this. Her restraint devastated me. *Please don't stop loving me*, I wanted to beg. Instead, I sobbed, ashamed. She sat silently for a moment, then put her arms around me, stroked my smoky, tangled hair.

"Okay, that's enough now," she said, soothing. "I bet you're feeling pretty sick, aren't you? Well, I think that's probably punishment enough this time. We won't tell your father about this, okay? Because I'm giving you a second chance. But the next time it happens, Jenny, I'm not going to protect you from him. Do you understand?"

I nodded my head against her shoulder, aching with relief and exhaustion. I didn't tell her that I was more grateful for her forgiveness than her protection, that I feared her

gentle displeasure more than my father's temper. I don't think she knew her power, how completely her love controlled me, how desperately I needed it.

~

The poet Audre Lorde died of breast cancer in 1992, fourteen years after her original diagnosis. In her biography, *The Cancer Journals*, she includes one journal entry dated October 10, 1978, in which she writes:

I want to write of the pain I am feeling right now, of lukewarm tears that will not stop coming into my eyes—for what? For my lost breast? For the lost me? And which me was that again anyway? For the death I don't know how to postpone? Or how to meet elegantly?

I'm so tired of all this. I want to be the person I used to be, the real me. I feel sometimes that it's all a dream and surely I'm about to wake up now.

I show this to my mother while we are in the library, studying together, her Spanish poetry spread out next to my volumes of breast cancer books. *The Cancer Journals*. *Dr. Susan Love's Breast Book*. *Cancer in Two Voices*. *Spontaneous Healing*. She reads the entry and then looks at me, sadly, and says, "I've felt that way, too."

~

In the dressing room, I slip out of the dress, hand it to my mother while I pull shorts on and tug my t-shirt over my head. My mother rubs the blue fabric between fingers, thoughtful.

"Mom, are you sure you don't want to try anything?" I ask.

She looks up at me, smiles briefly. "Oh no, Jenny. I won't look good in anything right now."

“What, so you’re just going to buy all this stuff for me, and nothing for yourself?

That’s no fun.” I poke her in the arm, playful.

“But it is fun,” she says, gently. “You don’t know what a pleasure it is for me to see you wear things like this. I never had your body, even when I was younger. And now I certainly don’t. Patchwork lady, remember?”

I’m quiet, wondering for perhaps the thousandth time how to tell her she is beautiful, how to show her the lovely soft whiteness of the new skin where her breast once was, and the graceful curving line of her scars where they cut her like a fruit, and where her body—her beautiful, strong, resilient body—is healing itself. I want to show her what I see: the smooth, fragile softness of her bald head, the trace of veins like buried rivers beneath her skin. I want to tell her how I love to see her shed the wig and wrap her head in a scarf, how the dark brown floral silk against her pale skin makes her look somehow earthy and wise and hip. I want her to believe me when I tell her she is more beautiful now than I can ever remember her being, but I know she won’t.

Still, she smiles at me, and her face is all the grace I think I will ever need to know. I touch her shoulder as she stands, put my arms around her and hug her body to me. She doesn’t hesitate: she hugs me back.

What I Hear

Today, on my way home from the coffee shop, I got caught by a train. The railcars—Santa Fe, Hanjin, Northern Pacific—clicked and rattled through the blinking gates, revealing glimpses of the other side like fleeting bits of insight: the driver facing north, waiting to cross to my side; me facing south, waiting to go home. I let my car idle while I waited, and rolled down the window to enjoy the new warmth of April. I tapped my fingers against the steering wheel in time to the music in my head. I read the graffiti emblazoned on the walls of the railcars. I waited. No use getting impatient. In a city like Ames, Iowa, where the trains come through at least twice every hour—and where my favorite coffee shop, bookstore, diner, and library lay on one side of the tracks, while I live on the other—interruptions have to be expected, sooner or later.

Finally, I gave up trying to entertain myself and rested my head against the seat, my eyes closed, and listened to the familiar sounds of the train: the blaring cautions, the clanking rotation of its wheels, the cawing of crows as they lifted, startled, from the trees along Clark Street. The sounds of going somewhere. The sounds of traveling along a certain path, precisely laid out. The sounds that orient us in place, even with our eyes closed. How interesting, I thought: we experience a caesura of movement, like waiting for the train, and suddenly sound becomes the most telling sense we have.

My parents' home, the home I grew up in, some 450 miles from Ames, lays within hearing distance of the train that slithers, north and south, along the western edge of my hometown. I used to lie awake at night, summers, windows open, and listen to the sound of

the train traveling over the Walnut River and along the highway, a half mile to the west at its closest point. Impossible that passing by so distantly could create breeze in my sticky hot bedroom, but I imagined I felt the cooling touch of air on my damp skin whenever I heard the train's whistle. Sometimes, in the night, when I would wake with a start from dreams and felt myself cut loose from the gentle tethers of my bed, I could hear the iron rumble of the train in the lonely dark, and the sound of it grounded me. I knew where I was when I heard the sound of the train: I was home. I was safe. I was firmly in place.

In Ames, the trains travel east and west, intersecting the city almost exactly at its middle. For several minutes while the cars rattle past, the city is interrupted north from south into two ragged, half globes, and we wait in our cars, our passage suspended, compelled for these few seconds to listen to the sounds enveloping us. Some people consider trains an annoyance, an aggravating delay on their way to somewhere else, and so perhaps they don't hear the laughter of the two boys crossing the street behind them, the bang of that screen door slamming shut, the soothing mechanical click of the train's wheels as it rocks back and forth down the tracks. But for someone like me, who often stares unblinking, unhearing, absent to the whisper of someone's voice, or the squeaking meow of her cats, the ability to perceive these small sounds is precious.

~

Jeruschka sat behind me in our seventh-hour algebra class, long blond hair fanned out as she draped herself across her desk, giggling at something the guy next to her had just said. It was our junior year of high school, and I had already failed every hearing test administered by the school nurse since middle school. As long as I sat in the front row, though, I thought

my hearing remained an invisible problem in the classroom; I thought I could hear well enough. And especially in algebra, with Mr. Cannon's round body sending out reverberations of his booming voice, amplifying every word. This day, though, my classmates were restless, bored with algebraic formulas and the stuffy, windowless room. Jeruschka, raucous and adored, volunteered herself to provide the afternoon's entertainment.

At first, I ignored the giggles and snickers from behind me, thinking them directed at the quick ripple of Mr. Cannon's huge belly as he scrawled something on the blackboard, or the sheen of perspiration on his rosy bald head. But then, as the amusement grew in volume, I heard Jeruschka's hushed voice panting rhythmically, unintelligibly behind my right ear. My skin burned, and I held my breath, waiting. Then I heard it:

"Jennifer. Jeeennifer. Jeeennifeeer."

I whirled around, whispered loudly, "What?!"

That was all they needed. The rest of the class hooted with laughter—it had taken me *so long* to hear her—and Jeruschka leaned back in her seat, grinning and pleased with her successful prank. I stared at her, ashamed, embarrassed, my face flaming red, and then I laughed, too, keenly aware of the 24 pairs of eyes watching to see how I would react. When I turned back toward the front, Mr. Cannon looked at us, bewildered and a little flustered, and demanded, "*What* is going on?" I stared hard at the curve of my fingers clenched on the desktop. No one answered.

~

I can still see the dark little room, sound-proofed, the door closing like a suction cup behind me, and the audiologist peering at me through the window as he adjusted the pitch

and volume of sounds, waiting to see if I would respond to his signals. The room hummed with silence. Afterward, I remember being fascinated by the large, flesh-colored model on his desk, an ear in cross-section. I traced my finger along the length of its pink canal, swirling when I reached the snail shape of the inner ear, while my parents sat together and listened as the doctor told them my hearing was normal. If I seemed not to hear things, he said, it was most likely by choice, not condition.

I still remember the drive home that day, my parents talking quietly in the front seat while I stared in silence out the window. I don't know if I remember the hum of tires on highway, but I'm sure I felt it, just as I'm sure I sat with my fingers curled around the book on my lap—probably *Nancy Drew* or *The Secret Princess* or one of the Black Stallion's many kin—wondering whether the reading would be worth the car sickness that always followed. Just as I'm sure the wheat fields blurred through my window like an old, silent film, and that later, when I nuzzled my face against my tortoise-shell cat, Heather, I didn't hear her purring, but only felt the vibration through my skin.

~

Thirteen years passed between that first hearing test when I was eight and the day I finally learned I suffer from what is called a moderate sensorineural hearing loss: the destruction or deterioration of tiny, hair-like nerve endings in the inner ear, which are responsible for the neural decoding of sounds to the brain—similar, in a sense, to the tactile function of a cat's whiskers. I might never have returned to an audiologist's office at all, except that in the fall of 1996, one of my college roommates sat down with me and explained that she and the others were both irritated and concerned that I might have a problem—often

I would not hear the phone ringing in the next room, or realize when someone was calling for me from downstairs. They insisted I do something about it.

Embarrassed that a problem I'd thought I'd somehow outgrown had followed me beyond high school, I found myself somewhere I thought I would never be again: sitting in a sound-proof booth, large headphones muffling my ears, and a knot of anxiety pulling tight in my chest as I strained to hear the tiny *beeps* of pitches I felt sure not even dogs would be able to hear. The audiologist, a friendly woman named Dr. Maata, with dark, short-cropped hair and wide eyes, smiled, and her voice spoke to me through the headphones:

"Jen, I stopped sending signals over a minute ago, and you're still pushing the button. Why don't we try again?"

I nodded and sat in suffocating silence while the room closed in around me like a compressed balloon. My ears buzzed with faint, tinny pitches, and I scrunched my eyes shut, struggling to separate out echoes from real sounds, pressing the red, hand-held button with what seemed like erratic frequency. In an awful, panicky instant, I realized that this test would not be like the one before. I knew I was failing miserably.

Five minutes later, I sat down in front of Dr. Maata. She said, "I don't think I need to tell you that you have a hearing loss, do I?"

I shook my head, though some small part of me was still disbelieving. I asked, "Do you know why? I mean, what could have caused it?"

"There's no way to tell for certain," she answered. "Did you ever have a serious ear infection when you were younger? A high fever? Any sort of head trauma? It could also be genetic."

I shook my head. I just didn't know.

I did know that my great-grandmother Koepcke had been terribly hard of hearing—to the point that we were forced to yell before she could hear us, even with the volume on her hearing aids cranked all the way up—but this had been in her later years. No one in my family had any sort of genetic hearing loss, that I knew of.

My mother once told me about a high fever I'd had when I was a year old that sent me into convulsions, but Dr. Maata thought this was an unlikely cause: my speech development would have been noticeably hindered if I'd lost hearing at such a young age.

Once, when I was a few years old, my parents took my older brother and me for a bike ride—they strapped us into child seats on the back of their bikes—and the bike my father and I were riding slid out from beneath us on loose gravel. My mother says my head bounced like a basketball on the asphalt—this, unfortunately, in the days before the helmet craze. But did this cause my hearing loss?

Like many people with a mysterious illness or disability, I wanted to know *why*. I wanted answers I knew I couldn't have. In the end, though, it didn't much matter what had precipitated my hearing loss. I needed hearing aids, and this news I'd dreaded almost as much as the discovery of the deafness itself.

~

The kind of relationship we form with a place is shaped profoundly, I think, by the sounds it creates and the ways in which we hear them. This perhaps is one of the things that so clearly distinguishes “city-people” from “country-people”: someone who loves the urban environment, with all its car horns and jackhammers, sirens and shouts, seems to have a

different way of listening to these sounds—or, at least, a different way of perceiving them—than does the person who prefers her home in a more rural landscape. The urbanite often, though of course not always, finds these sounds exhilarating and energizing in a loud sort of way. We have probably all heard New York City referred to as “the city that never sleeps,” but of course a city that never sleeps is a city that is never quiet, never at rest, never at peace. The true urbanite, it seems, is the person who thrives in this environment of constant, manmade stimulation, this onslaught of the senses—sight, smell, touch, and taste, as well as hearing.

It would be a mistake, though, to assume that the alternative—the rural life—is, by contrast, somehow the city’s polar opposite: void of sensation. The person from the country is equally barraged by sounds, but sounds of a different sort: birdsong, the howl of the coyote, the burble of a creek, wind in the trees, wind in the grass, the high-pitched whine of fierce, dust-blowing wind, the wind of one’s own breath. I have often heard urbanites call this “too much quiet”; the lover of the rural, though, has ears tuned to the perception of the smallest sounds, and so the country for her is not quiet at all, but literally alive.

Of course, many of these sounds exist in urban areas, as well, but most of the time we never hear them—they are drowned out by the roar of all our manmade sounds. So perhaps the real difference in the aural landscapes of city and country, and in the people who inhabit them, is not wholly the existence and our perception of the sounds themselves, but rather how well they are revealed and our ability to even hear them. In his philosophical history, *I See a Voice*, Jonathan Rée writes of the importance of hearing in orienting ourselves in place; how, a little like whales or bats, perhaps, we use the reflection of sounds to ground ourselves, to

make familiar the unfamiliar, to find our way. “Becoming acquainted with buildings or landscapes,” Rée says, “is partly a matter of getting to know their acoustic profiles—listening to the sounds they produce, and the echoes they give back. You are not really home in a place until you have made yourself familiar with how it sounds and resounds.”

What happens, then, to someone who loses her hearing, whether totally or in part? Does my inability to perceive certain sounds of a place alter the kind of relationship I can create with it? And is it a matter of degrees, so that the more my sense of hearing deteriorates, the more alienated I will become from the landscape in which I live? Already I wonder at what I miss. When I go to the prairie, I see more than I hear: the red-tailed hawks swooping overhead, the rutting of buffalo in soft earth, the bend of big bluestem in a breeze so slight, I can only feel it, like a deaf person feeling the vibrations of music through the floor.

“Did you hear that?” A father said to his son, on the Neal Smith prairie trail one day last summer. “It’s a field mouse, probably.” I crouched on the edge of the trail as they passed, leaning close to the ground to photograph Indian grass against a backdrop of blue Iowa sky. My ear almost touching earth, so much closer to the source than father and son, and yet I couldn’t hear the sound of the field mouse.

“No!” I wanted to call after the father. “I didn’t hear it! What did it sound like?”

In *A Natural History of the Senses*, Diane Ackerman writes that “the world will still make sense to someone who is blind or armless or minus a nose. But if you lose your sense of hearing, a crucial thread dissolves and you lose track of life’s logic. You become cut off from the daily commerce of the world, as if you were a root buried beneath the soil.” Now I

wonder, if it is true that we locate ourselves in part through sound, is it possible that we might become lost ourselves, once we lose our ability to hear? And if we live, still, in a familiar landscape, does our familiarity with that place degenerate, too?

~

It's amazing how long a hearing impairment can go unrecognized. Ruth Fulton Benedict, a prominent American cultural anthropologist in the early part of this century, was five years old before her widowed mother discovered the source of what she had assumed was "willful disobedience" on the part of her young daughter: Ruth was partially deaf. Suddenly, according to her biographer, Judith Schachter Modell, Ruth's aloofness and preference for playing alone, along with her "obstinate" refusal to answer when her mother called, now made perfect sense. No one had ever questioned the little girl's strange behavior; even her fondness for spending long hours with her grandfather went unremarked. After her diagnosis, says Modell, it became clear that Ruth's attachment to her grandfather stemmed in part from the timbre of the older man's voice: Ruth could simply hear him better than she could the higher pitches of her grandmother and mother.

And of course Ruth herself probably had no idea that there was anything wrong with the way she heard the world. As Modell writes, "If Ruth...wondered why voices merged into one another, why she couldn't distinguish her mother's calls from other people's, why too much talking drove her into a near frenzy, she had never spoken her fears out loud." Now, however, there was an explanation for Ruth's shy, withdrawn personality, and both she and her mother slowly learned to cope with this new disability, sometimes resorting to written words when verbal communication failed.

My third grade teacher, Mrs. Rhodes, was the first to notice the difficulty I seemed to have in hearing. She told my parents she marveled at my ability to tune out sounds around me: I could share a table with the most talkative child in class, and still get my work done, reading for long periods of time without distraction. And this was true—I did love to read, and perhaps because of this I somehow managed to ignore noises more easily. I remember one day at the end of our reading period, Mrs. Rhodes called my name several times before her voice seemed to penetrate my consciousness, faint like the *chirrup* of crickets in summer. She even used my *full* name, something that usually only happened to misbehaving children—the talkers and the clowns—of which I was neither. Quiet and a little withdrawn, perhaps—my mother still remembers the long stretches of time I would spend alone in my room, content to chatter with imaginary friends Roosta and Kepka, and play my own solitary games, paper dolls, dressing and undressing plush babies—but hardly ever was I *bad*.

Not long ago, Mrs. Rhodes, now my younger brother and sister’s teacher, asked me if I remembered the worst thing I ever did in her class. “I gave a spelling test one day,” she said, laughing. “Got through the entire thing, collected the papers, and there you were, nose still buried in your book. You were so oblivious, you’d missed the entire test.”

Mrs. Rhodes had recommended early on that my parents take me to the school-appointed audiologist in nearby Ark City, but he found nothing abnormal, and chalked my “problem” up to selective hearing: I heard what I wanted to, and tuned out the rest. Afterward, if my mother had to repeat my name three or four times before she had my attention, she didn’t give it much more thought. That I appeared a child with a busy

imagination, too engrossed in fantasy worlds and daydreams to hear the reality around me, seemed a reasonable enough explanation.

Often, people who suffer from hearing loss find ways, sometimes even unconsciously, to compensate for what they cannot hear: lip-reading; complaining that others are “mumbling,” and then asking them to repeat themselves; even relying on context and a native’s command of the language to “fill in the blanks” of missed speech. There are other ways, too. Beethoven lived in increasing deafness for years before more than the most intimate of his friends and family became aware of his handicap, a feat he managed, sadly, by avoiding most social contact. So I suppose it isn’t surprising that my teachers weren’t more suspicious, or that my parents didn’t seek a second opinion from another audiologist. Why would they, when this notion of selective hearing seemed to fit so well with my quiet, dreamy personality?

My father did not share my mother’s difficulties in getting me to answer when she called, and only now do I realize that the lower pitch of his voice probably made his speech easier to hear and understand than my mother’s. The fact that I answered nearly every question or bit of conversation with “Who?” or “What?” became something of a family joke. My father affectionately called me his “who” owl, and my brothers mocked me, chanting “what-what-what” when they tired of repeating themselves.

When I talk to my mother now about my history of not hearing, she regrets her failure to be the vigilant mother, to explore every possibility, to protect me from the teasing and alienation of even the mildest disability.

“I feel as though I should have been paying more attention,” she told me, not long after I began wearing hearing aids. “I wonder sometimes if I just didn’t see it because I was trying to do too much. Run after three kids, take care of the house, help your dad with the clinic.”

“Mom,” I said, “it wasn’t that bad, you know. I think I got along okay, don’t you?”

She looked at me, reached across the kitchen table where we were sitting to squeeze my hand. “Yes, you got along okay, most of the time. I guess I’m just remembering the times you came home from school, crying because someone was being cruel. Even when you got into high school this happened. I should have been more on top of things.”

But if my hearing loss went undiagnosed for years due to negligence, I can only feel that the responsibility, in the end, was my own. My mother still recalls the notes the high school nurse sent, recommending that I have further testing done by an audiologist, but she says I was (and I remember being) adamant about not going. *I can hear fine*, I would insist each time she broached the subject. Even if I had agreed, and an audiologist had discovered something wrong, I know I would have refused to wear hearing aids. I thought those were only for *old* people. Looking back now, I can see how my stubbornness was tied up in unvoiced fear: I’d been living with this ridiculous theory of selective hearing for years, long enough to convince myself I really just had an innate, unconscious ability to “tune out” even the things I *wanted* to hear. In reality, I think I was afraid of finding out that there was really something physically wrong with me.

Since my diagnosis, I've discovered that I share much common ground with the anthropologist Ruth Benedict. Besides a mutual interest in anthropology and an overlapping history of hearing loss, Ruth was, like myself, also a poet. Her exuberant work contrasts with my own careful restraint. At times intensely emotional, sometimes despairing, at other moments almost euphoric, she risks much in her writing. Perhaps for this reason, Ruth published most of her early poetry under various pseudonyms, including the name Anne Singleton, in an attempt to separate the personal from the public, the professional from the heart. As Anne Singleton, Ruth writes:

We weary of the earth, its madrigal
Of still-renewing autumns, and the sky
Spread as an azure curtain on the heavens,
Marking our sight its confines.

For Ruth Benedict, the different facets of her life often interwove themselves. In fact, she developed the poet's fine attention to detail, perhaps in part due to her deafness. She devoted much time in her early years to wandering the countryside surrounding her grandparents' farm, imagining different people and situations, a private world of solace far removed from her own. In this separate reality, Modell writes, "Ruth banished voices and confusion, people who urged her to answer and to 'join us'...sound gave way to color and form, dignified figures skimmed by, and nothing disrupted the gentle harmony—a rhythm of visual detail not of sound."

Ruth saw because she could not hear. I wonder how senses compensate, if my eyes see details, moments they might have skimmed over if I'd had the distraction of sound. Or if

physical touch descends on me with a power not quite its own. Does the body articulate its losses? Does intuition respond to the silencing of sound?

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I've learned that denial is not an uncommon reaction for people with problems of hearing impairment. Richard Carmen, an expert in the field of audiology, writes, "Denial is the rejection of what's really happening to your body...an act of concealment, and sometimes the ultimate deception to oneself." It can also be a way of coping with the things we don't yet know how to accept, and it is sometimes years before a person feels prepared to confront the limitations of hearing loss.

Ruth Benedict tried—once. In January 1926, she received a trial earphone from Western Electric, which she kept for one day before returning it. Modell writes that Ruth "found the idea difficult to accept and the mechanism awkward and embarrassing." For a woman who had managed to cope with deafness rather successfully for 39 years, such a change in hearing, in self-perception, must have presented a challenge far more complex than resigning herself to a life of limited sound.

I've been lucky, though. My moderate hearing impairment means that I don't hear very soft or high-pitched sounds, but I do hear. And the discovery of my loss came at a time when the field of audiology had just made tremendous advances in the technology of hearing aids. Unlike a friend of mine, Kyle, who has an 80% hearing loss in one ear and must wear a bulky, flesh-colored aid which extends behind his ear, my loss can be corrected rather simply. I wear tiny, dime-sized hearing aids which fit completely inside the ear canal (called CIC for completely-in-the-canal) and automatically adjust themselves to the type and volume

of sound passing through them. No volume switch, as on the aids my great-grandmother wore for years; just air-activated batteries no bigger than a pencil eraser, which have to be changed about once a week. The most awful thing about them, actually, stems from the incredible intensity of sounds they sometimes give me—a barrage of the senses—and it is this characteristic which has remained most constant over the years.

“The original hearing aids were as large as lamp shades,” writes Ackerman, “and only added twenty decibels; now they are small and discreet and much more powerful. But, in amplifying the world, they don’t select what’s meaningful from it, what needs to be heard from the sheer pour of noise.” They don’t, in other words, make sense of sound for us; we must still train our ears to tune out, or turn down, the horrible roar of a motorcycle, the scream of sirens, the voices of the people at the next table, and we must learn to listen for the sounds that matter to us.

The first day I wore my aids, almost four years ago now, I heard foreign and frightening sounds. Shutting my car door, a small explosion, like a thousand pounds of metal crashing down on my left side. The jingle of keys grated, a metallic clanging sound amplified out of control. The crush of leaves beneath my shoes, sharp like the sudden *pop!* of a campfire or fireworks—a string of Black Cats. After half an hour, I felt nervous, uncomfortable—I wanted them *out*. But then something amazing happened.

Walking to class one spring day, in my last semester of undergraduate study, trying to ignore the waterfall-roar of wind past my ears, I suddenly heard very distinct birdsong. Neck craned back, I stared at the top of a tree in the parking lot by Old Stadium in Manhattan, listening to the liquid twitter of barn swallows too far away for me to even make out. But I

could *hear* them. Twenty-three years of silenced birdsong coalesced into one moment, and I felt as though I were hearing the call of a prehistoric animal for the first time. It made me think of a letter written by Beethoven in 1802, in which he describes his sadness and frustration at not being able to hear: “But what a humiliation for me when someone standing next to me heard a flute in the distance and *I heard nothing*, or someone heard a *shepherd singing* and again I heard nothing.” These were the sounds Beethoven could not hear, and I was hearing them.

Ackerman says that there is a “geographical quality to listening,” and this seems true to me. Especially if we leave the city, if we go to the woods, the ocean, the prairie, if we stand there with our eyes closed, listening, who could not locate themselves in space? If we hear the hollow whistle of wind in pines, the crash of waves, the lonely, empty gust of a prairie wind, who among us would not know where we were? When I woke from dreams all those summer nights of my childhood and could hear the sounds of the passing train through so much darkness, I was never frightened. Whatever might have been hidden there under the cover of night, I knew where I was—the train’s whistle had become part of the geography of home. “We live,” Ackerman writes, “in a landscape of familiar sounds.” Without the ability to hear, then, something is irrevocably lost: our bearings, a sense of ourselves, located in space, and our ability to know the landscape of our lives.

But with this loss come strange and unexpected blessings: we can retreat to silence, take refuge in the eerie, beautiful muteness of sound, recollect ourselves, as Wordsworth would say, in true tranquility. Ackerman writes of using sound as an “emotional curtain,” of retreating to the back of a stable to listen to the splashing of melting ice water on hay, rather

than hear the horrible sounds of a “razor-boned cat harrowing a mouse until the ruin of its bloody carcass whined and thrashed, but would not quite die.” She focused on one sound, she says, in order to ease the other from her mind. When hearing deteriorates, though, we can sometimes choose not to hear at all; or, at least, to soften and fade sounds so that we might be alone with the thoughts in our minds.

I, too, have used sound—or rather, the absence of sound—as an emotional curtain. There are times when I can barely stand the indiscriminate amplification of sounds: the roar of the wind when I’m on my bike, the crunch of chips in my mouth, even the sound of my own voice, vacuous and remote, as it vibrates from my vocal chords and echoes back through the digital chips in my ears. In these moments, the ability to retreat to my world without hearing aids transforms into relief. Anxious, confused, sometimes simply weary, I can step back where sounds vibrate soft and muted, and there I feel strangely as though I have just become invisible, wrapped in a cloak of auditory distance, protected from the noisy clamor of the hearing.

Seeds of Something Native

"The wild grasses are waiting... Let those fields be abandoned
by man—as they will all be, someday—and the...native prairie
will reclaim its ancient holdings."

—John Madson, *Where The Sky Began*

Turkey vultures, at least five or six of them, circle slowly in the warm October air above the Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge in Iowa. I stop in the middle of the paved prairie trail to watch the silent birds, their bodies swaying, rolling with the currents. They soar lazily, searching for their next meal with an uncommonly acute sense of smell. Their silvery flight feathers darken almost black against the blazing sun. They're too high for me to see more than their color and the v-shaped angle of their wings, but I know from photographs that these are not the most beautiful birds: their red, featherless heads on black bodies look almost cartoonish. Still, there's something graceful in their lazy spinning that I admire, a confident kind of ease. They ride the sky on the strength of six-foot wing spans and invisible currents; they survive on an instinct which leads them to the bodies of the dead.

Something about the nature of this bird, the way it circles, searching for carcasses, makes us inexplicably uncomfortable. Perhaps, if we've come to accept the idea of predation in the wild, of animals killing and feeding upon one another in sometimes brutally graphic ways, we can think about a red-tailed hawk snatching its small prey in noble terms. Like the original human hunters of the prairies, the hawk must kill to survive. But the turkey vulture

occupies a lower sphere in our estimation: a scavenger, one who feeds on carrion, on flesh unfit for food.

Flesh unfit, that is, except for this bird whose body is capable of processing putrefying flesh, of regeneration. Once, while touring the buffalo reserve of the Konza Prairie in northeast Kansas, I circled around the bleached skull of a bison cow, the bones of its skeleton scattered, half-hidden in the grass. It might have lain decomposing, rotting, stinking for weeks, if scavengers had not sped its return to something more elemental. Energy. Nutrients for the little bluestem now concealing its bones.

I glance again at the turkey vultures still circling overhead. They are the only wildlife, besides a silky black and mocha brown caterpillar creeping across the asphalt path, that I can see from here: the bison and elk herds have wandered far out into their prairie pasture, and the only evidence of them are the red and black-lettered warning signs strung from the fence that say *Danger: Free Roaming Buffalo*.

Around me grow clumps of towering native grasses, many of them easily more than six feet high and already turning the rich brown, gold, and wine colors of fall. The trail I've followed winds down behind the Prairie Learning Center, a ground-hugging exhibit and research structure, before it loops back toward the east for a mile along the high buffalo fence. At the eastern end, the trail circles around just short of a wooded stream and climbs up a ridge, past a small outdoor amphitheater, and back the last half-mile to the Learning Center. The building itself, architecturally designed to meld with the surrounding landscape, emerges from the hillside, with large glass windows and exposed wooden beams opening to the southwest. Impressive headquarters for a prairie that didn't exist at all ten years ago.

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For the time being, the tall grass prairie at the refuge consists of patches; a virtual quilt that can only be completed as the landowners in and around the refuge are willing to sell their scraps of land. Piecing together prairie on a “willing to sell” basis creates a waiting game, one which Nancy Gilbertson, a manager at the refuge, tells me could take another twenty years to play out, as farmers grow older and their children sell the land rather than take on the responsibility of cultivating it themselves.

Initial support for the refuge, now the largest prairie reconstruction effort in America, came in the form of Iowa Congressman Neal Smith, who envisioned a preserve of restored prairie for future generations to learn about their grassland heritage. In September 1990, the United States Congress approved the creation of a national wildlife refuge containing more than 8600 acres of farmland and tiny (at most 20 acres in one area) pockets of prairie relicts. So far, about 5000 of the total acres have been obtained, threading together a patchwork of land degraded by over a century of agricultural cultivation. Land which must not only be replanted with native grasses and forbs, or prairie flowers, but actually *re-created*. Seeds must be collected and cleaned for planting, the earth sculpted to undo the leveling effect of crop farming, foreign species culled, long-vanished animals reintroduced. The re-creation of a prairie is, by anyone’s measure, a massive undertaking.

It isn’t difficult to see that it will take time to restore the farmed land back to its original prairie state, and even then, it may never be what it was. When I ask Nancy how long she thinks it will take before they are able to achieve even a semblance of true prairie at Neal Smith, she shakes her head and says, “I tell people, give us a hundred years.”

I think about all this as I stand on a bench in the tiny amphitheater, alongside the prairie trail, looking down the hill covered with big bluestem and Indian grass to the road which winds through the park. I think, too, about the Konza, a Nature Conservancy preserve of virgin bluestem prairie in the Flint Hills, just south of Manhattan, Kansas, where I lived for five years. I remember crouching on the slope there above Kings Creek one autumn Saturday before dusk, letting my eyes unfocus and the long horizon of russet and bleached brown grasses blur, shivering with the thrill that these roots, this earth, had never been turned. I wonder now, in this Iowan manmade prairie, how much can truly be restored once it's been taken away; I wonder if *native* is something that can be remade.

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Sometimes I think part of the essence of wildness lies in our perception of it. I once spent three days backpacking through the New Mexican wilderness, only to hear one morning, with a profound sense of disappointment, the roar of a plane overhead. I realized then that the manmade follows us everywhere—even into what we think is the wild.

By the same token, I wonder if we can't find traces of wildness almost anywhere, including our own backyards, if we have the ability to imagine what lies just under the surface. I think of the times I have stepped barefoot out the back door of my parents' home in Winfield, Kansas, curled my toes in that cool summer buffalo grass, and felt the hum of the earth beneath my feet, like the breath of an animal lying in wait. For years, my father insisted on mowing every inch of our six acres; a chore that seemed, to my idealistic mind, not only an unnecessary waste of hours and fossil fuels, but downright *unnatural*. Who

decided that huge, neatly cropped lawns were to be considered beautiful, while letting the grass grow was somehow a sign of laziness and disorder?

In his essay on the history of lawns in America, Michael Pollan traces our national obsession with the “unbounded democratic river of manicured lawn” to the nineteenth-century and a growing effort to define our American identity through our relationship to the landscape. He suggests that the American lawn serves as a “collective, national, ritualized, and plain...vehicle of consensus,” and to deviate from this consensus would be something akin to treason in the mind of the community. I can’t help but wonder, though, if there isn’t more to it than that.

In my father’s case, mowing seemed like an attempt to impose order on a disorderly world, and to keep wildness at bay. If I asked why even the fields away from the house needed to be mowed, he would grumble about snakes and rodents making themselves at home—as if sharing space with these animals was somehow distasteful or threatening.

Finally, this last spring, my father relented: my mother and I broadcast wildflower seeds in the meadow in front of our house, and let Nature have her way. The usual weeds and dandelions grew up, but amongst them were beautiful flowering plants and seed bearing grasses such that I’d only seen in remote corners of fields. And while I recognize that there is nothing truly wild about that small acre of free growing land, I imagine its possibilities, the wildness it could someday be if simply left to its own devices. The seeds of something native *might* still be there.

My friend Michael, a philosopher by profession and habit, once told me that the seed of beauty in the prairie lay in its subtlety. Unlike the more dramatic landscapes of mountain, desert, and ocean, which clobber us over the head with their awesome magnificence, the prairie reveals itself only to the patient eye. Anyone who has grown up in the Midwest, or lived there for any length of time, knows something about what it means to be a lingering suitor of beauty. To follow a country road for miles, with only the unbroken line of the horizon for company; to stumble drunkenly after fireflies in a backyard that doesn't end; to trace the lazy curve of a muddy river in hazy summer heat—these are not things one can see from the window of a car blazing through on the interstate.

And yet, this is the lore of the Midwest: unending flatness, monotony, desolation. I've lived all but one year of my life in Kansas, and still I bristle whenever I hear an "interstater" say, in all seriousness, "There's *nothing* in the Midwest but farms and sunflowers." I only very recently happened upon John Madson's *Where the Sky Began*, a lovely history and meditation on the tallgrass prairie; I never realized until then how sorely I'd felt the lack of a writer who had the patience to see beauty in a landscape of grass.

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Late afternoon, in the sort of light that sets color on fire, I leave the prairie trail and follow the auto tour road west of the expansive, low-slung Learning Center. A flock of ring-necked pheasants—nonnative birds a refuge brochure refers to as "the 20th century replacement for native prairie chickens"—turn their rust and gold backs to me in a roadside field, and I watch as their vivid green heads bob slowly up and down.

At the western edge of the refuge, the gravel road heads north; I slow my car to a crawl when I see bison just on the other side of the fence. There are six of them, their great woolly heads low to the ground as they graze. One butts his forehead against a bare patch of earth, raising fine clouds like ash around his horns. He paws at the dirt, then rolls to the ground, wallowing energetically in a storm of dust. Nancy has told me that the bison were brought from developed herds in Montana, Nebraska, and the Wichita Mountains of Oklahoma. At the moment, the herd numbers 53 individuals, but that number will most likely increase come spring; a recent round-up of the bison revealed that several cows are pregnant.

When I turn back east, with the falling sun behind me, I see an elk's regal antlers like a swaying tree as he swings his head around to look back at me. He pauses on the hillside long enough for me to see where the dark brown coat of his head and neck fades to a soft tan near his rump, before he trots up over the crest of the hill and slowly vanishes down the other side. I've learned that this elk, one of fourteen at the refuge, is part of an attempt to reintroduce the species to the grasslands of Iowa, where it was exterminated more than 140 years ago. One focus of the refuge mission involves the restoration of these native animals, as well as grasses and plants, to the "new" prairie.

But the absence of traditional large-game predators, such as the extinct great grey buffalo wolf, reveal the inherent limitations of this kind of latter-day re-creation: we cannot restore what has already been obliterated. A prairie without predation makes me think of the glass snow globes my mother used to unpack each December for the holidays: those tiny, self-contained worlds that required a godly hand to put them together and to make the

“snow” fall. I wonder now if something made by humans can be called *wild* at all, whether here in this prairie or in our backyards.

Environmental writer Jack Turner would call the refuge at Neal Smith a “fake” wild, an “illusion” we create and accept because we have become so emotionally distant from true wildness, we no longer care about it. And perhaps he’s right. No amount of replanting and reshaping the land will return the wild tall grass prairie to Iowa, when even the nature of the soil itself has been radically altered. However we might respond to the destruction and loss of our native prairie—with sadness, indifference, or, in Turner’s case, deep anger—the result remains the same. The original wilderness prairie has gone. Aldo Leopold acknowledged this more than fifty years ago in his *Sand County Almanac*: “No living man will see again the long-grass prairie... We shall do well to find a forty here and there...”

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Madson writes that the last report of a prairie chicken in Iowa, “a single cock bird on the old booming ground south of Corydon,” came in 1956, so I don’t really expect to see one here today, on this fledgling Iowan prairie. I remember clearly, though, the chilly April morning I set out with a group of adventurous and bundled souls to watch the mating rituals of prairie chickens on their native “booming” ground in the Flint Hills.

We walked in darkness that morning across the prairie to the blind, beneath a clear black sky so incredibly vast, it made me think, as it always does, of the unbounded Atlantic from an airplane window. Already shivering from the cold wind, I followed gratefully into the tiny shack and slid down a narrow wooden bench to make room for the others. We opened our little windows on the dark prairie and sat in hushed whispers beneath our blankets

and sleeping bags, listening to the whistle and rattle of the wind on the sheet metal roof, waiting for the first chickens to wander into view. It was a long, cold wait.

Just before dawn, and about the time I began having hallucinatory visions of the warm bed I'd abandoned what seemed like hours before, the first few male chickens appeared, scratching at the ground and tossing their orange-tipped heads. The females would arrive later, feigning boredom and disinterest at the whole display, but already the males were warming up, hopping and strutting, the horn-like feathers on their heads raised in anticipation. The birds had clearly taken a territorial stance towards one another; each had his own defined bit of ground where he spread his brown speckled wings, head lowered, and drummed the earth frantically with his feet, creating a low rumble in the still prairie morning.

When the females finally appeared, casually, almost nonchalantly wandering into the midst of the frenzied males, I held my frosty breath and leaned slightly forward on the bench. One of the males bobbed his head to the ground and inflated the bright orange air sacs on his neck like small balloons, pounding his feet furiously. Another male hopped aggressively into the air, beating his own feet in challenge. As the female moved away, seemingly unaware of the excitement, the two birds leapt at each other belligerently, flapping and butting against one another like two drunks. The eerie "booming" noise, a kind of low drone, echoed through the cold morning air. All of us in the blind were breathless at the display; this ancient ritual, played out on the same traditional site, year after year, for as long as any of us knew. It was almost unearthly in its ordinariness. What I heard, that frosty morning on the prairie, was the faint sound of something wild. The sound of *native*, humming beneath my feet.

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After my drive around the outskirts of the refuge, I return to the Learning Center.

Nancy walks outside with me into the tall grasses, letting the slender stalks break and slide through her fingertips as she names them. She's a small woman in her forties, with close-cropped reddish brown hair, and she moves with the sort of purposeful energy I imagine only comes with confidence—the kind I admire, and can sometimes pretend, but never really feel. I've just told her that I haven't yet learned to identify the grasses and forbs that fascinate me, and she looks at me and murmurs, "Hmm." Then, without another word of introduction, she gives me a crash course in the defining characteristics of some of the native tall grasses.

Dropseed, I discover, is aptly named, with its stems drooping toward the ground, heavy with seeds. Indian grass and big bluestem (or "turkey foot," as it's sometimes called) look similar once their seed heads are gone, as they are now, but Nancy tells me that in summer, the Indian grass will have a feather-like plume at the end of its stalk, while bluestem terminates in the claw of points which give it its turkey-foot appearance. And there are others: sloughgrass, little bluestem, switch grass, sideoats grama.

And that's just the grasses. There are hundreds of different forbs, or prairie flowers, such as the cheerful sunflower-like compass plant, with its north-south oriented leaves, the drooping petals of the purple coneflower, and the spiraling tentacles of the lead plant. I begin to think I will need the training of a biologist to ever gain the kind of confidence Nancy has in naming this prairie.

Madson writes, "There are old men in the Flint Hills who have lived their lives on the

land without seeing this.” I feel like one of those old men now, having lived my entire life, a grasslander amongst remnants of prairie, and not ever having known what it was I saw.

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Nancy describes the Neal Smith Refuge as a “prairie in progress.” In a reconstruction of such enormous proportions, it would take a powerful imagination to look at these degraded lands now and be able to see what they might one day become: a damn good facsimile of a tall grass prairie. Today, I struggle to see it. Discouraged by the paved trail through young grasses and a sudden longing for the grazed but still intact Flint Hills, I leave the prairie for the savanna, a grove of oak trees just down the road from the Learning Center.

The trail through the savanna, at least, looks something like a trail, and less like a pedestrian highway. I follow the gravel path up a slope and into the cool quiet of the trees. A few minutes in, the trail loops around and leads back out; I stop at this bend in the path and sit in a pool of leaves that have already dried and browned on the earth floor. The underbrush is thick and scrubby, a fact which Nancy tells me has presented the refuge staff with some difficulty in their attempts to restore the grove to true savanna.

Savanna, in its original state, is an open wood, with trees widely spaced and prairie grasses growing underfoot. In such a timber “oasis,” grass fires swept through quickly, clearing the earth floor for new growth without killing the hardy trees. But here, after so many years of fire suppression, the savanna has been transformed into an overgrown thicket, through which Nancy says they have been unable to carry a fire. It will take several years and more work clearing out the foreign invaders and excess brush before any real restoration can be achieved.

Right now, though, the old bur oaks form a welcome reprieve from the wind. I listen from my low perch on the ground, but the only sound I hear is the creak and rustle of the trees and the crunch of dry leaves beneath my legs. The quiet reminds me of home, of the “woods” behind my parents’ limestone barn: a tangled thicket of trees and bush and abandoned childhood forts. These woods, in spite of the nonnative brush, are spare; not the dense forests of the Rocky Mountains or Appalachia or even the Ozarks. But I grew up on the prairie, and have never needed thick dark stands of trees. I like that I am not hidden from the sun, only sheltered and shaded. Savanna is a careful compromise between prairie and forest—between that quality of unending open spaces that makes it so hard to focus, and the enclosure of trees that prevent me from seeing at all.

Madson likens the shifting border between prairie and forest over thousands of years to “an incredibly hard-fought war,” in which changing climate conditions lend advantage to one side or the other: a cooler, moister environment favors forest, while a warmer, dryer climate aids the advancement of prairie. He muses about whether today’s savannas constitute the latest advances of forest into prairie territory, or whether they are the relicts of a long-ago “invasion.” When I pose this “chicken or the egg” question to Nancy, she laughs and mutters something about “philosophy.” And I think I understand what she means: either way, the savanna belongs, and she has work to do.

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I hike out of the long shadow of the trees and into the last blaze of prairie sunlight. The sky is on fire, burning pink, violet, and orange: the kind of colors that always resist my best efforts to describe or photograph. I leave my camera in my bag, and walk instead up the

little hillside across the road, into the grasses. I feel the chill darkness of the savanna close behind me, the withdrawing seclusion of oak and brush. My arms hang empty. Silence. I stare. I imagine the crimson heads of turkey vultures, returning us all to energy. Prairie soil. I breathe as if I'm running, with my mouth open and my lungs hauling in air for hungry blood. The cool wind stings my open eyes, but I don't shut them. I see Iowa prairie. I see the Flint Hills, the green summer Konza. I see the broken field behind my parents' home, a thousand sunsets filtered by prairie dust. I see the landscape of my life like the line of my body: the big sky, the grasses, the long, unending horizon. It enters me and becomes me. I feel it there, a presence like memory, the heart of some unremembered instinct, long after I've turned onto the highway toward home and left the prairie in darkness.

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I think of Jack Turner's anger in his essay "The Abstract Wild," how he argues that by creating an "intimacy with the fake," with national parks and refuges which are only illusions of wildness, we prevent ourselves from the possibility of coming into contact with true wildness and being affected by its loss. But to accept that this "intimacy with the fake" is the absolute reality of our condition, is also to submit to the idea that the experience of wildness can only occur "out there," in some indefinable, abstract space. Wildness, itself a place to be reached, can be lost. Turner's definition of what is wild leaves little room for hope; his anger moves us to despair, and makes foolish the nurturance of what wildness we *can* find.

I wonder, though, if that isn't all we have now. To re-create prairie; to let grass come to seed; to honor what we know of the native; to make a space for wildness—perhaps this is

all we can do. If, as I believe, something of the wild exists even in our most cultivated landscapes, then regeneration cannot cease to be possible.

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I trust the instinct that pulls me to the prairie and the savanna, and to the seeds of wildness that I find there. I retreat to savanna whenever I seek stillness, within and around me. If I would see, though, if I would remember the scale of this earth, I go to the prairie, to its most exposed and desolate point, and the blur of the horizon opens me.