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Delicate Maps

Ashley Gabbert

A departmental senior thesis submitted to the Department of English at Trinity University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with departmental honors.

April 13, 2011

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Table Of Contents

Introduction	3
The Wide Country	9
Warm Chocolate Milk	10
Old Love	18
Solitude	19
Hospital Flowers	20
The Rain Came Down In Blankets	21
Gloomy Cloud Day	26
No Language But A Cry	27
Winter	28
Not On The Mountain	29
Dusk	34
The Taste Of Blood	35
See, I'm Like Rubber And You're Like Glue	36
Take Me To The Ocean	37
Big Times	43
Keeping Things	44
Tea Party	45
Delicate Maps	46
Stomping On The Ground	53
Hot Hands	54
Little Boots	55
Ugly	56
Bread Crumbs	62
Letting Go	63
On The Surface Of A Lake	64
Moon	65
Happy Blue Planet	71
Dawn	72
Glad Animal Movements	73
Catch And Release	74
Quiet Love Poem	80
Wild Night Cries	81
A Great New Thing	82

Introduction

This thesis, in many ways, simply reflects the issues that have concerned me over the past few years. My family, my meditations, my likes, my desires, my discomforts, and my sorrows. Sometimes, therefore, it judges. Sometimes it becomes irrational. But each essay and poem in this collection seeks to capture an element of truth, as all good writing does; this happens to be my truth. One theme this collection deals with is nature – a topic that often haunts my fears and inspires my creations. The nature I’m referring to is not just the kind we associate with the outdoors, but also the nature that drives one person to love another, the nature that dictates our choices to us, and, yes, the nature that grows and blooms as well. In Middle English there was a word for this type of all-encompassing nature: “kynde.” It refers to one’s origin and kin, one’s inherent disposition and character, and also to what is natural in itself – the outside kind of nature. I’ve found this term to be particularly useful to me because it was often used not only to describe the different aspects of what is “natural,” but also to highlight how one attribute of nature can often contradict another. You may be kin to another person but still not share their natural qualities; your “kynde” may oppose another of your “kynde.” Adding to this, the play on the modern word “kind” is also ever-present and contributes to the struggle. That is what this collection is about. I chose to include poems and non-fiction in this work because I feel they not only capture this multi-faceted concept; they also allow me room to examine myself – either as observer or participant. My thesis is comprised of eight personal essays and twenty-five poems. The work opens with a poem, then after the opening I have selected three poems to pair with each essay. While the poems were not written explicitly to accompany a particular essay and *visa versa*, they are meant to compliment each other in various ways.

In my essays I look to explore my own history, even as it evolves, to better understand the people who created me. These pieces are about the human part of nature. I ask myself, for instance, how did we all get here? What happened before I can remember? Who was my mother before she was a mother? How about my grandmothers? What was my Uncle Larz like before he died? And what was my dad like before he did drugs? The subject of my family came naturally to me in these essays because each member opens countless doors to the unknown, to those questions about what “kynde” we are, and I’ve always been fascinated by these questions. For each essay, I looked first at what I knew about my family and used that as a starting point. As I wrote, I attempted to catch the little threads of metaphor and symbolism wound into each story. In these I found the sinking ship my mom drove once, the valleys my dad visited, and the seashore where my Uncle Larz and I met between our births and deaths. Once I had those threads, I tried to pull them out and weave them into something else – a story that was more complete. Once I had written several essays in this style, it was fascinating to find that even though they are ultimately meant to explore human nature, each one also seems to draw in an element from the outside natural world – an element that would not otherwise be present – through my use of metaphor.

The essays in this collection are not decorated, so to speak. They are brief and often somewhat distant in their tone. The short length of these pieces was initially unintentional, but after having written several I found that they were all characteristically concise. This, I think, is due to my tendency towards the matter-of-fact, which stems from a desire not to seek pity or sympathy from others. After finishing some of these essays I felt that their short length was a compliment to their tone, so I decided to stick with it. The tone I assume when recounting the events of my past or meditating upon them is not necessarily a calculated statement or a

reflection of my emotions; I simply chose this tone because I wanted to appear unbiased. By leaving out my own thoughts and reactions, I can become an observer to the situation. I can bring myself outside of an event and look straight at the conflict, and this is something I need to do. While I'm aware that some may seek to psychoanalyze this work based on the unusual lack of emotional response included, I intended my distanced approach to avoid such interpretation. When I say, "When I was a senior in high school Gran had a stroke. She did not die, but we thought she was going to and I told her it was okay to when I saw her in a coma," I don't mean to say that I don't care. I mean to tell what happened, not only without convicting myself of anything but also without overtly faulting my family, whether they do or don't deserve it, and the only way to accomplish that is just to tell it how it was. No flourish, no needless speculation, no biased commentary. The learning experience, or the "moral of the story" – if either of these exists – is meant to be an individualized concept that comes through the reading of these pieces. In other words, my lack of decoration, both in tone and in length, intends to leave room for the reader to draw conclusions on their own.

Nevertheless, I do try to build small beauties into my work. They can be found, I think, at the level of words, phrases, or images that flit through each piece like daylight through the blinds. Sometimes they can encompass humor, tragedy, and irony all at once. This quote referring to my Uncle Nick, who was afraid a flood was coming and had packed his car up with supplies to leave town, is one example; "There was spam, and newspapers, and statues, and blenders, and bibles, and cat food (though he didn't own a cat) [in the car]. This was what he had packed for the flood, but in the end there wasn't enough room for him to get in and drive." Other meaningful passages in these essays may only elicit one response; this memory of me talking to my maternal grandmother shortly after my Uncle Larz had passed away is one of those:

When I got home I remember telling Grammy that I thought it was my fault that Uncle Larz had died. I think what I really meant to say was “can we talk about it?” What I really wanted was someone to get down on my level and say something I could understand, but my words just proved I was too young to know.

There are moments, even whole stories, in these essays that make me feel uncomfortable. There are moments that I don't want my family to read. Still, writing about these types of moments helps me learn to face my demons. The more difficult passages are the ones without any secrets. These are the places where finding a meaning means coaxing and prodding are necessary, and perhaps even fighting with the possibilities. Where do you go from a passage about my grandmother's daily chores and activities in the mid 1960's? Can the conflict be faced if it is not immediately evident? I don't have all the answers, but I know that a part of who I am is there. And there is another advantage to writing in spite of my discomfort; writing about these personal issues and failures has also allowed me to think more about what it means to *be* a writer; what are my obligations? Where am I going to draw the line? Is it okay to say my Granddaddy was very smart and kind, but also a little dull? Is it okay for me to say my Grammy never felt she loved him? I learned it is okay for me.

In poems I surrender to a more comfortable side of myself. What already exists in my mind leaks small moments out onto the page. There is no fight to seek or reconcile; there is only the satisfaction of saying something I mean. I try to recreate sensations that have pleased me through images, abstractions, and sounds, and in this the best poems always seem to succeed. When I re-read some of my favorite poems by Hopkins or Cummings, I again feel the rushing, smiling sensation that I felt the first time I read them. When I look back at my own poems, I am

often fortunate enough to again feel the sensation that led me to write them: that is the success of reading and the satisfaction of writing a poem; “And you are free from any thing/ that was not born/ or did not grow.” I cannot say that everyone who reads my poems will feel the way I feel, but it is my hope that, whatever the response each poem elicits may be, it is one that can be experienced again and again each time the poem is revisited.

The verses are free, and the poems are small. They are sometimes separated into several drops of stanza; sometimes they are only just a line or two: “Now that you’re dead/ I hope nothing washes/ your fingerprints/ off of my room.” I have put forth an effort to write longer poetry pieces, but I keep coming back to the small and contained, and I think that means it’s right for me. So often I see fiction, non-fiction, and yes, even poems, diluted of their spirit and beauty by an excess of words – reiterating, justifying, apologizing – and my aesthetic choice is to work against that. The poems I write, therefore, are concentrated down to the marrow. I avoid the use of adjectives, unless I feel they add a surprising or essential perspective, and I try not to linger on visual descriptions. I write in a meter that has musical qualities but is not rhythmically constant, and I put line breaks in areas where I would like to allow an extra moment of consideration: “I watch the wholeness twinkle out/ and I feel like/ I’m in all the great places at once./ I feel the heat of dream/ and the skin of autumn.”

Meditations on animals, the sky, the way I feel, and sometimes the way others feel are where my words feel most at home. They are about my “kynde:” about my nature and the nature surrounding me. In some ways they are a juxtaposition to the material in my essays, but nevertheless they are still me. Perhaps even more me, because I exist and have life within my poems, while in my essays I often leave myself to peer in through the windows. I would go so far as to say the essays in this collection show where I came from, while the poems show what I am.

The desire to be outside of a reality is what led me to write my essays; what led me to explore. In writing poetry for this collection, I looked to create my own reality. When thinking about which poems I'd like to include in this collection, I asked myself this question: what little glimmers can I find in these that take me back to where I came from? I did not set out to write about my family; instead I wrote the poems that were in my heart, that were meant to be written, and then tried to trace them back. Some of the poems here are easily linked with parts of my past: "I'm thinking how grotesque/ all the inflated skin/ the gauze/ made everybody seem/ at the hospital that one time." Some still cause me to wonder: "The wide mouth/ of the native people speaks/ in a language that we/ can't understand anymore."

Though it may seem, at first, that these poems and essays are utterly their own separate selves, I have combined them in such a way that I hope each will shed light on the other. I've chosen poems that, without even meaning to, seem to know a secret about the essays they are paired with. I intend for each essay and its corresponding group of poems to exist together as an episode. The poems are not about the essays in this thesis, nor are the essays about the poems, but nevertheless they compliment each other and they are, without question, all about me. These pieces are not the tip of an iceberg. They do not intend to harbor any hidden or exclusive meaning. These pieces are simply the condensed expression of what I think is beautiful or what keeps me awake at night. And though that is, in a sense, everything there is to me, there is nothing I mean to conceal or leave anyone in search of. Rather, I mean to build a place of knowledge – maps, I think, are an appropriate analogy – that can be viewed objectively. Despite the fact that there will always be a few places left deserted, uncharted, or yet to be discovered.

The Wide Country

Lay out in the wide country.

City skin shed on
sharp grass blades.

Lay out
in light clothes, white clothes.

Cotton. Thin.

You don't mind getting damp.

Lay out
and dream.

You are the tallest, highest thing
before the far-off forest trees.

And you are free from any thing
that was not born
or did not grow.

Warm Chocolate Milk

I was raised in my Gran's house in Dallas, Texas on Boca Raton Street. I spent time at my mom's small apartment when she wasn't at work, and some afternoons at my maternal grandparents' house after school, but most of my memories before fourth grade are at Gran's. She and my Grandad moved in to that home on Boca Raton when my dad was four years old, and just from the time I was born it has been remodeled three times, but despite all of the changes, it has remained, in my memory, the same place.

There has never been a time in my Gran's life when she was not beautiful and, as a consequence of my parents having me in college, she began as a young grandmother. She had blonde, curly hair and blue-green eyes. She was thin for most of her life, but later as her body began to decline she became too thin. She considered and prided herself on being extremely stylish and she and Grandad socialized with other Dallas Baptist elites, many of whom made their fortune in oil as my grandfather did. Gran was not shy in proclaiming that I was the daughter she never had, and even later when my half-siblings began to arrive she made no mistake as to which of us she claimed as her own.

Gran's house was in a nice neighborhood but not a gated one. It was very large but it didn't look as big as it was from the outside. The front room always had the grand piano in it along with precious antiques and collectibles that my grandparents' bought on their many trips over sea. That room was painted light yellow, Gran's favorite color, and had a huge, gold-framed picture of me as a small child hanging in the entry way. Other rooms in the house included the sunroom that looked out onto the backyard – it was almost completely windowed and housed Gran's exotic talking parrot, Padre. There was also the "big TV room" that had a really big

screen TV, along with several couches and a massage chair. It connected to my Grandad's office area where the computer was. We also had a den where the fireplace was located and where there were more couches and another TV. That was the room where Christmas happened every year. At Christmas time, Gran's house always had the biggest tree and the most decorations. The backyard had a lagoon-style pool with waterfalls and several sitting areas. There was also my room, a guest room, and Gran and Grandad's room. Later, there was an upstairs with another bedroom.

Before first grade I remember eating macaroni and cheese at the small picnic table in my room while I watched Scooby-Doo. At that time I would only drink warm chocolate milk and only from a sippy cup. I loved being at Gran's because I had my own room, which was decorated like a princess' room and even had curtains around the bed, and because there was a pool and I had my own dog there named Stacy. I also had my own TV in my room and I was allowed to fall asleep with it on if I wanted to, which I did. On random nights when my mom asked me to stay with her I would cry for hours wishing that I was still at Gran's, having fun. I regret that now and I wish I had made my mom feel like she was fun too.

The first time I remember the first time Gran remodeled her house was near my second grade year. Gran wanted a bigger bathroom and French doors leading out to the pool from her room. I wanted my room to have the kind of walls that were covered with fabric instead of wallpaper that you could stuff on the inside. Grandad wanted different tiles in the sunroom. One day that year while I was in the big TV room, I remember hearing Gran scream from across the house. I ran in to her room and saw that she had fallen through the plywood flooring that covered her bathroom and she said she needed help. I ran outside and got Grandad. It was scary seeing

Gran need help, in fact it might have been the first scary experience of my whole life, but Grandad was a very big man, six-foot-four and 300 pounds, and I knew he was strong. What I mean is, he could save me if something tried to get me. Nothing bad could come inside.

I spent those days making home movies starring Barbie dolls and playing with a little girl named Hannah who lived across the street. Gran would sometimes take me to the fabric store in the nearby shopping center and I would use the fabrics I chose to cut and sew clothes to wear to Gran and Grandad's parties. I used Stacy's lock-in-place leash to measure my waist and then lay it out to cut the right length. My grandparents' parties were huge and fancy and they always had to hire a valet when they were held at the house – and even though Gran could afford to buy me any dress I wanted she always let me wear the ones I made myself. In those days, I loved that I never had to go home right after school when Gran picked me up because she would ask me if I wanted to go shopping, go out to eat, or hangout at Grandad's office.

In the summer before fourth grade I was hospitalized with a heart virus for a few weeks and it nearly took my life. When I got out my mom thought it would be nice for me to go to North Carolina, where her parents had just moved, to get some fresh air. The day I arrived at Grammy and Grandaddy's new house their dog was run over in front of me and I wanted to go home to Gran's. I loved my mom's parents very much and still do, but at nine years old I felt sad to see how far away they had moved and I didn't like the smell of the guest room they had prepared for me. I wasn't allowed to watch TV at night there and it was hard to fall asleep. Eventually they told me I couldn't go home for a while, so I stayed for nearly a month. During that time Gran was diagnosed with a brain tumor and had to have surgery. Her mother, my great-

grandmother, died a week or so later. I was told that when I got home Gran would be bald and I shouldn't be afraid of her.

The next time I was in Gran's house my whole family was there, even my dad who I wasn't expecting because he lived in a treatment center called Hazelton in Minnesota. That day I found out that Grandad had died while I was out of town and suddenly Gran's house felt very big and I didn't like the wall of windows that had no blinds in the sunroom anymore. I also didn't like walking through the big TV room at night to get a drink anymore. It felt like something bad was outside, and who was there to keep it from getting in? From then on I didn't live at Gran's house because my mom had a better job and was getting remarried so she got a house of her own. Gran still picked me up from school most days, since mom wasn't done with work until later, and almost every time Gran would ask if I wanted to spend the night. I usually only did about once a week.

After Grandad died Gran wasn't so shy about drinking, although she was still a Baptist, and she took sleeping pills at night. The few nights that I ended up staying in my old room were tense because Gran said things I didn't understand and she would sometimes wake me up in the middle of the night to bring me food that I didn't ask for. Sometimes I would hear plates breaking in the kitchen but I usually didn't go see what had happened. A few times I heard Gran fall in the hallway and I would go help her up and try to get her into bed, but I wished that my strong Grandad was there to do it for me. One night when I was twelve years old, I heard Gran fall in her bathroom and when I went to check on her she was bleeding from the head, rocking back and forth, and reciting the ABC's backwards. I was so afraid I called my mom instead of

the police – so she talked to me while my step-dad called them, then she came over as fast as she could.

From then on I never wanted to spend the night at Gran's, but it hurt me to try and explain why to her, so instead I just made up excuses. After I turned sixteen I would sometimes drive by her house at night and be seized by fear and guilt. I felt guilty because I knew I was old enough to help, I had done it before, but selfishly I didn't want to do it again. I knew that Gran loved me more than anyone else, more than her own sons who had disappointed her so much, and I knew that I owed her everything my life would ever amount to. I should have stopped to check on her and see why the lights were still on. Maybe once I would even have noticed how she fell in the front driveway and lay there till morning. Instead I just kept driving to my friend's house. Seeing Gran's house from the outside at night and knowing what might be happening inside sent a chill down my spine that could still pinch my bones to this day. I began to realize then that the bad didn't come from the dark of the night, or from someone outside of the windows.

When I was a senior in high school Gran had a stroke. She did not die, but we thought she was going to and I told her it was okay to when I saw her in a coma. My dad told me on the phone that he would not have wanted to see her like that even if he had the chance. I saw my Uncle Greg in her hospital room once lying across her swollen body, crying, and telling her not to leave him. As I walked out of her room after my own visit the nurse told me she was proud of me for telling Gran how my day was at school and for telling her that I wouldn't hold it against her if she wanted to go. She told me that Gran really could hear every word I said even though I could barely recognize her. When Gran came out of it weeks later she was partially paralyzed

and her speech was unintelligible. Since she had the money, we all decided it was important for her to have a full-time nursing staff at her home so she didn't have to live in a nursing home. At the time my dad was in prison so my Uncle Greg moved back to Dallas from Lubbock with his wife and they remodeled Gran's house again to make room for their three sons too.

During the summer after I graduated I moved back in to Gran's house because I was very close with my uncle and I didn't have to follow all the rules my mom had for me at her house. Uncle Greg let me drink and have friends over whenever I wanted and he even bought me a new car for graduation. I remember there was a string of robberies in the neighborhood that summer, but my uncle was six-foot-four and 250 pounds so it didn't concern me much. I liked that Gran had nurses full time so I didn't have to worry about anything happening to her and I liked that the house was full of life again. I felt that I would never be alone in that place with no one to ask for help again, and I once again began to enjoy the beauty and luxury of my childhood without remorse. At that time I was afraid to leave for college because I thought my closest friends would forget me, and towards the end of summer I threatened not to go. But Uncle Greg promised me I could come home once a month and said he would even buy the beer for parties if I was making good grades.

Right before I left for College my dad called me from the prison, he told me Uncle Greg had just died of a heart attack at our beach house in South Padre and his wife, Aunt Ashley, and the boys were on a plane home. My uncle was only 44 years old and his three sons were ages seven, eight, and nine. During my first year at Trinity Aunt Ashley and her kids got a new house because she felt uncomfortable living at her mother-in-law's with Uncle Greg gone, and plus Gran still had her nurses. On weekends when I went home to visit my friends and family I still stayed at Gran's house. Not in my old room, which now had sailboat cabinet knobs and was

painted blue, but in the new upstairs room that Uncle Greg had built for himself. The room was enormous and led to a private upstairs balcony overlooking the backyard and pool. It also had a huge black-marble bathroom with a six-headed shower and a Jacuzzi tub and a walk-in-closet bigger than my old room downstairs. I could do whatever I wanted in the house as long as I wasn't too loud, and it was fun having my friends over to stay the night and drink upstairs in what we affectionately called "Chateau Gabber" (pronounced in a French accent). Sometimes I hoped my uncle would visit me there and let me know he was still around if I needed him, but to my knowledge he never did.

I reverted back to not liking the windows without blinds in the sunroom during my sophomore year in college, and to not wanting to walk through the big TV room at night to get a drink. I began taking anxiety medicine. During the summer before my junior year I would wake up sweating in the middle of the night and call my friend Rachael and leave to spend the night at her house. I checked to make sure the doors were locked more times than I needed to. When dad relapsed again and started bringing dealers to the house asking for money I left for San Antonio, got an apartment, and never spent the night there again. What I thought had come from without had actually been coming from within – and I suppose I'm talking about fear.

Now when I go home I stay with my friends or at my mom's house on occasion. I don't see Gran as much as I should. It would be easy to drop by her house whenever I have a free moment, I still have my own key, but Gran gets tired easily and she still doesn't communicate well so it can be awkward at times. The fact is that, to my shame, I avoid the discomfort it causes me to see her, just as I repress the thought of her being alone in that house at night with only her

nurse for companionship. I drive past Boca Raton without casting a glance, as I did many years ago, on my way to other places that aren't empty with too many windows.

One day this year my Gran's lawyer called and asked what I would like to do with the house if something were to happen to her while I was still in college. I thought about my uncles – my dad also had an older brother named Johnny, who died in a car accident when he was eighteen – both dead now, growing up there with their little brother from the time he was four. I thought about drinking warm chocolate milk after school and dressing Stacy up in my ballet outfits. I thought about the parties I had there with my friends and how they always asked me to have another. The truth is, something about that house takes the grown-up out of me. Something unspeakable has festered there and it terrifies me to think about ever being alone there. No matter how many priceless memories that house ever holds there will never be enough to keep me in it one second after dark on my own. I wish I could, it's a very nice house, but I can't. So I told him to sell it.

Old Love

I see an old man
whose knees crack when he stands
and whose hands shake when
he writes
and I think, perhaps,
that he couldn't possibly love anymore
or know the curves of a woman,
and that all he might have with
his wife of forty years
is familiar conversation.
But then I think he knows,
and is
saddened by the
soft and thinness of her skin,
so he feels it all the more.

Solitude

I can hardly remember the scratch of your cheek,
the showered smell at the nape of your neck
when your skin was warm and damp,
or the way your muscles would mould into me
like putty when they were slack.

Without you,
I'm walking towards something.
There's a simple song in my head
that's keeping me company.
This road isn't paved and
it gives an earthy feeling in my heart.

Hospital Flowers

I would say formaldehyde.

I'm thinking
without wanting to
what your body looks like now.
I'm thinking how grotesque
all the inflated skin
the gauze
made everybody seem
at the hospital that one time.

Even as I said,
I know you hear me now
I know what you would say,
I saw your eyes begin to wax
and I looked around for God
or someone that I knew
to be long since dead.

When I left the room I heard,
she'll really squeeze your hand,
but I had only touched your hair.

I thought of the rotting stems
and floating pieces
in vases of hospital flowers
cut from their body
and possibly I decided
it's just that flowers
remind me of the smell
of hospitals

even though we weren't in a hospital,
we were in your room.

I wish that I could say
just a couple of things
that aren't real.

The Rain Came Down In Blankets

The flood occurred sometime in the mid-nineteen nineties. I don't remember exactly what year, but I was six or seven at the time. That night my mom had taken my friend Hayleigh and me to see *To Give A Mouse A Cookie* at the Dallas Children's Theatre. We were going to stay with my mom and have a sleepover when we got home. As we watched the show, we heard loud, clapping thunder from outside the theatre and the lights began to flicker. The noises bothered me, but I wasn't really scared.

Later, when we left the theater, it was still storming outside. In fact, it was storming so violently that groups of people had decided to wait in the lobby until the rain subsided. On the sidewalk outside the water was up to our ankles. Despite all this, we left. Mom said she just wanted to get us home.

In the car, I felt the water seep through my socks. I felt the wet strings of hair that had plastered to my forehead lead droplets down to my nose. I could see from the backseat that the rain came down in blankets, and that other cars had stopped on the sides of the road. I could only make them out as blurry yellow flashes. "Maybe," I said, "we should stop like those people." I could feel the pull on the car as it pushed through rising water.

Mom didn't want to just stop by the road. She said she would try to find a restaurant where we could sit and get some food. She said she wanted to find one with a TV, or something we could do. We passed by a few places, but she didn't seem to like them. "Really," she said, "we could just make it home."

The thing was, that night had been a special surprise treat for my friend and me, and mom didn't want it to end in an uncomfortable place with nothing to do. In truth, my mom was pretty strict back then, and she tried her best to be responsible. She had a full-time cubicle job and had

purchased a small house. She was dating a man who lived in Michigan, but she still could not have known that years later they would marry. She was constantly low on time and money, but would not take handouts from her wealthy ex-in-laws. She wanted to build a life on her own.

Mom was still young then, maybe twenty-seven, and she was nervous about how her first kid would turn out. My dad was addicted to cocaine; my grandparents spoiled me. Back then I still lived most of the time with my Gran and Grandad. I didn't spend the night with mom very often because of her work schedule. Gran took me to the symphony, to musicals, on vacation overseas. On that night, mom wanted to show me that she could be fun too.

As we drove, Hayleigh and I decided we were on an adventure. We were on a ship in turbulent seas. Maybe we were pirates. We tried to speak in strange accents to each other about raising sails, putting more hands on the deck. We were both captains, of course, and we shared a crew of toys and junk.

Eventually my mom decided that we should stop, and we exited the highway. Then, as we rounded the corner onto a side street, a strange thing happened. All at once, our ship was afloat. We were rocking and swaying, but not driving anymore. There was water all around us. It came all the way up to the windows of the car. It was dark, but I could see little splashes of streetlights reflecting off the liling surface of our new sea. What was my six-year-old mind thinking? A dream maybe.

Mom was far from dreaming then, but her face showed that her ship was sinking too. She saw that even her calculated attempt to be fun and different wasn't going to pay off. She felt stupid, maybe, for straying from the beaten path. The precious time she had taken off work and the money she had saved up for this night were wasted on disaster. And she was acutely aware

that she did not have a husband there to help. Her older sister and brothers did not have any children yet; after graduating from Ivy League schools, they were all traveling the world, climbing up the corporate ladder, and just beginning to fall in love. They were starting off the “right” way. Mom already regretted going to Texas A&M, she said that openly, but she never spoke out loud about her other regrets.

From the back seat I could see that she was desperately trying to push open her door. She was crying. She finally discovered that, for some reason, the electric windows were still working, though at my age I didn’t understand why they wouldn’t be. She rolled down her window to the edge of the water.

Across from us, we could see a crowd of people gathered outside on the covered patio of a big restaurant. They were holding drinks in their hands and being very social with each other. My mom pressed her head and chest outside of the window and began to scream in their direction. She held up her hand in the gesture of a peace sign. “Two kids! I have two kids in the car,” is what she said. She screamed that we needed help. I was too young for it to occur to me that we had become a spectacle, and it didn’t seem that anyone was interested in helping us.

Hayleigh and I decided that we should say a prayer. We knelt down on the floorboard of the backseat and began to recite *Our Father*. We knew that we should pray, that this was a time to pray, but we didn’t really mean it. God was still abstract to me, and so was the notion of death. We prayed to make a show. We prayed, in other words, to say that we were good kids; we knew what to do; and to help make my mom feel better. “God’s coming,” I said nonchalantly.

After my mom had been yelling for some time, two men in yellow raincoats and hoods began wading to the car from the restaurant patio. They were the restaurant valets. The water

came up to their stomachs. When they approached the car, they asked if we could all fit through the window. Luckily, we could. My mom was five feet tall and weighed only ninety pounds.

Hayleigh was the first to be pulled through the window. She had to climb over my mom in the driver's seat because by then the other electric windows had now given out. Mom wanted to make sure that Hayleigh was safe first since she wasn't her own child. One by one we were pulled from the window of the car and carried across to the restaurant. The crowd on the patio cheered as though they had helped us after all. They clinked together their glasses. I remember being held by the valet man and reverting to sucking my thumb. I looked back and saw the second man still helping my mom get out. I remember feeling cold and tickled by the running drops of water down my face and arms. The rain was still coming down.

Inside the restaurant people flocked to meet us. The manager came to give us free t-shirts and free mugs of hot chocolate. People took our pictures with the two valet men. We were the restaurant heroes. As it turned out, this was also a place with TVs and good food. Hayleigh and I loved the attention, and we lived it up. We ran around to tell our story. I hardly noticed my mom sitting by herself in a booth. She was very quiet and polite. She thanked the two men with a little money from her purse.

We all had no choice but to stay there all night, so the restaurant stayed open to continue serving its stranded customers. At some point Hayleigh and I fell asleep on opposite sides of our booth. My mom drank hot coffee and spoke with the waiters. At daybreak, when the water had finally drained, we walked down the street to find my mom's car. It had floated a block or so away. "Totaled," said a man who came to help us. I can't remember who we called from the restaurant phone to ask if they'd come pick us up.

Several years after the flood I asked my mom, “Where you really afraid we would die?” By then, I had already lost a grandfather and seen a dog get run over. “Yes,” she said, “the water could have come into the car and drowned us. It could easily have happened.” I felt a weight fall on me then, a weight my mom had carried.

In the weeks following the flood I told everyone in my class how we had been rescued. I told them what a fun time we’d had in the restaurant, and how we were given hot chocolate for free. I brought some of the pictures to school that people from the restaurant had sent. I showed my friends one of my smiling wet face and a big, hooded man in a yellow raincoat. “This guy is my hero,” I said of the valet. I just wanted to have heroes. This was still a pirate story.

Gloomy Cloud Day

heavy on me like
a blanket
full belly
and sleep,
this day knows
it's not
especially beautiful
but

you know what I think?
I think
your clouds look like cream
as it rises in a coffee cup.

No Language But A Cry

Today I watched a squirrel play
and I read about some lovers,
and I wondered,
how could anybody ever say
“I don’t want this anymore.”

But then, maybe it’s a little nice.
Because when I see the boy I love
it hurts to feel so much
and I wish a little that
I’d never seen a baby animal
or had my back scratched at night.

Winter

My body silences in warm thought.
The veil is thick at this time of year.
No wonder every
body feels
alone.

We wade through the slathering
of thick red libraries,
through endless ladles of brown,
in search of other bodies.
Heavy.

The air is pressured full of loss
and we can feel the sucking
pull as it is vacuumed clean
and filtered out beyond the veil
that holds it back.

Heavy.

Not On The Mountain

They used to tell me that my dad was off exploring mountains. It was a little joke my family had instead of saying he was smoking crack or snorting cocaine, which was, of course, the truth. At those times we wouldn't see or hear from him for days, sometimes weeks at a time – and he was always sure to turn his phone off and hide wherever he had parked his car in case someone drove through south Dallas looking for him. Sometimes, on the most important occasions, I liked to imagine he was exploring far off mountains too. During my eighth grade graduation, as he managed to disappear between the luncheon we'd had nearby and the ceremony at my school. During my performance at the Texas state voice competition. During the nights when I was home alone. At all of these times and on countless others, he was, I imagined, at the peak of the mountaintop – the highest and the mightiest.

My dad grew up in a very wealthy home with two older brothers, John and Greg. My Granddad got his law degree from Baylor, but after serving time in the Air Force he went on to own and operate oil refineries, car washes, convenience stores, and other businesses that he built from the ground up. Gran occasionally taught elementary school, though she had no need to work. Mostly she just led a very active social life. My Granddad was strict with his sons, and Gran was doting but reasonable.

If I had to guess, I would say that the change occurred when my dad's oldest brother, John, died at the age of eighteen in a brutal car accident. He had been driving an oil truck for my Grandfather and it exploded upon impact with another car. At the time my dad was only nine years old. From then on, it seems, Gran was unwilling to spare any expense on her two

remaining sons, and, since my Grandad often worked late into the night, her laxness overruled his discipline.

My grandparents rented (but did not live in) a house in Highland Park, the most expensive neighborhood in Dallas, after dad had been kicked out of two private high schools for selling or using drugs. This was so that he could attend Highland Park High School, but he never managed to graduate anyway because he skipped the second semester of his senior year. Dad did this by convincing a friend who was home with a broken back to write his excuse notes and call the school daily pretending to be my grandfather. Despite this setback, dad managed to be the only student with a GED accepted to the University of Alabama the following year. He then used that opportunity to expand his drug selling market and was kicked out of college soon after with his name headlining the Tuscaloosa paper. It was during this tumultuous period in his life that my dad met my mom, a timid, petite senior at Texas A&M, and consequently I was born later in the year.

My parents didn't stay married for more than a few months after I was born, the marriage had really just been a formality for my respectable grandparents on both sides, and afterwards, with my mom working and dad exploring mountains, I spent the majority of my time with my grandparents. I never saw the times when Gran would sneak out of the house wearing black sunglasses and no jewelry to pay my dad's ransom to various drug-dealers without my Grandad knowing, but I heard about it years later. I do, however, remember taking trips to Minnesota to visit my dad at the Hazleton rehab center where he spent a year, and to other facilities in Miami, south Texas, and Arizona that he went in and out of over seventeen times all together.

What I remember most vividly of all is the drug awareness presentation I went to during school in the auditorium when I was in fifth grade. I couldn't stand hearing the speaker from D.A.R.E tell us how awful drugs were and what they did to people who took them. I couldn't sit there and think of what could be happening to my dad right then, so I ran out of the building crying. When my Spanish teacher, Mrs. Wheeler, came to ask me what was wrong I said, "My dad does all those things the speaker is talking about, he's exploring mountains *right now*...no, I mean he's doing drugs." From then on I never had to attend drug awareness day at school, and whenever we talked about drugs in class I was sent to hangout with the school chaplain and drink soda from the vending machine.

As I got a little older, once my dad had remarried (for the third time) and had two more children plus a stepdaughter, Taryn, whom he later adopted, I started spending Wednesdays and every other weekend at his house instead of with my Gran, whose health was declining. He was still gone just as often, but I would do anything to be with him even for a little while. I loved being around him despite the drugs, which by the way I really never saw since he left when he did them, and I felt like I had missed out on so much fun with him when I was younger. During that time, dad would wake me up at five in the morning to go get a few dozen Krispy Kream donuts. He would take me and my brother and sisters on spur-of-the-moment RV trips, or fly us down to our condo in South Padre just to get lunch and go fishing. Dad would take us to the mall and buy us what we wanted. We went out to eat for every meal. He even let me watch cable TV while I went to sleep. At mom's, I always ate at home. I did homework at the kitchen table. I went to sleep early in my room without a TV. At mom's I felt trapped and alone.

When I was fifteen or sixteen my dad and step-mom got divorced, and from then on dad would have random friends stay at his house for long periods of time and he hardly ever came

out of his bedroom. Now, whenever he left, I was home alone, unless I had friends over or my half sisters and brother were there. I didn't really mind taking care of my siblings, but I especially enjoyed hanging out with my friends with the house all to ourselves. My mom, of course, didn't see it that way.

One night, close to 1 AM, my mom drove up to his house and told me she was picking me up. "I know he's not here," she said. She knew that leaving dad's house would really upset me, so she bought me chocolate chip pancakes at IHOP before taking me back to her house. That was one of the few times she did something out of the ordinary. I couldn't even believe she was up so late at night. Mom said she couldn't understand why I still liked or wanted to be around my dad so much when he was always on drugs. At the time, it was because he let me do whatever I wanted while she was moderately strict. At other times it was because he was funny, because he drove really fast, because I hardly ever saw him when I was little and wanted to, or because he was my friend. I liked him because my mom, hard as she tried, was boring and predictable; my dad was spontaneous and exciting. It's still hard to admit that.

Dad went to prison during my senior year of high school for pulling a gun on my step-mom back when they were married. At first, I didn't believe that this could have occurred. Dad was a drug addict, yes, but gentle and loving to his family and friends. As it turned out, the prosecution had surveillance footage (from cameras my dad had placed around the house, ironically to protect himself from the police) and it showed the event, complete with my three-year-old brother crying in the background.

After a year in jail dad came out a seemingly changed man. He was sobered not only by his imprisonment, but also by the death of his only remaining brother at the age of 44. For over a

year my dad was the model citizen; he attended AA meetings, went to my brother and sister's school events, and helped take care of my Gran who had suffered from a stroke. When I came home from college on breaks, I enjoyed spending time with him more than ever, and was proud to bring new friends home to meet him. They could never have guessed the person he once was.

Sadly, once his probation ended, things went back to normal. He attempted to pawn some of my Gran's priceless jewelry, though luckily we got it back, and he was once again off the map for days or weeks at a time. My dad is not a villain, though he sometimes appears that way. He's a helpless slave to an angry addiction. I still love him more than ever, still love to be around him, and my friends are still charmed by his charismatic personality and humor despite what they might know. Right now my dad is living with his new fiancée, Sarah, who is very attractive and funny and who I like being around too – despite the fact that she's an alcoholic. I hope number four is his lucky number this time. He works some, but he is struggling with Hepatitis C and emphysema, and it is no secret to anyone that when he is gone he's not on the mountain; he's in the valley.

Dusk

There is a certain spark of fear
When I feel the sun descend.
There is
a tense and anxious wonder.
And even though I love the stars,
even though
God knows
I love the vertigo
of our little planet spinning,
sometimes I have to breathe in slowly,
close my eyes
and watch the colors grow.
I tell myself

somewhere the sun is rising.

The Taste of Blood

in my mouth
is just like dirty pennies.

See, I'm Like Rubber And You're Like Glue

You said you liked my
paisley dress print.
I knew you'd like to
stare;
just set your eyes
softly down.
You think I'm not violent?
You think I don't have a little
violence in me?
What if your lips were
bursting at the seams for me?
What if I measured out
your breaths like cough syrup,
and made sure you took them down
slow?
Would you like that?
I'm sold if you'd like that.

Take Me To The Ocean

Today I called my Grammy to ask her a few questions about her son, my Uncle Larz, my mother's brother. Whenever I think of him, which isn't often anymore, my mind is filled with little memories and stories I might have heard years ago – or maybe I only wish I'd heard. I was coming in at the time, and at thirty-three he was going out. I often wonder what I meant to him then, what did it feel like to look at a baby child? I'd like to go back and see myself in this place and be a part of what happened. I was alive then, I just didn't know it yet. My mind was still a wet ocean of senses that couldn't be molded together. Now the things I really know about him go in and out and I feel embarrassed to ask if what I remember is the truth. So I called my Grammy today and told her I was going to write about Uncle Larz and I'd like to know the truth. Now that I know, I have to revisit this place to discover him for myself. I'd like to write myself back into the story, the story that really happened, and fill myself back in to the life of Uncle Larz.

Before today I did know that Uncle Larz was there during those years in New York. I knew that he was there and he was a part of it. I also knew that before New York he had gone to Princeton, just like my Grandfather did. I knew this partly because I have his "Princeton Freshman" and "Princeton Crew" t-shirts, and I still wear them to bed at night. I did not know that he had majored in architecture. I learned, today, that Uncle Larz ended up in New York when he went to grad school at Columbia. When he graduated, he passed the exam to become a chartered financial analyst and he stayed there. I remember visiting him in New York one summer and watching *The Land Before Time* in the guest room of his apartment. Then I remember being scared and turning it off. I remember I loved the way his building's elevator had a little cage door and a man who always stood inside to close it and drive the elevator to Uncle Larz's floor, and I remember mom said they only had that in New York.

I did know that his favorite color was purple. One day when my mom and I were driving somewhere I remember seeing a purple car (a Cadillac maybe) and saying, “Mom, my favorite color is purple, like that car.” My mom said that Uncle Larz’s favorite color was purple too. I didn’t think that was unusual. Today I learned that purple became Uncle Larz’s favorite color when he was very little. Grammy had just done a new load of laundry and when she took it out of the dryer there was a big ball of purple lint left over. She said that little Uncle Larz came running in and took the purple, fluffy ball and said, “Mom! My favorite color is purple!” Then he took the ball of lint to school for show and tell.

I do not remember the summer when Uncle Larz and I made sandcastles on the beach, but I’ve seen the pictures many times and I see that I was happy. I didn’t know it then, but we were two people caught between the sea and the shore. We were both on the brink between two worlds; one of dreamy, wet, secrets and one of soft, solid sand. I was still fresh out of the water, still had water in my ears, and he was already on his way back in.

The only vivid memory I have of Uncle Larz takes place during my third Christmas, which we had at my mom’s parents’ house when they still lived in Dallas. Uncle Larz got me the best present that year and he said it came all the way from F.A.O Schwarz. He tied a ribbon to one end of it and trailed the ribbon all through the house, then handed me the other end tied with a bow. I followed the ribbon through the white entrance hallway, through the high-ceilinged living room with old paintings, into the dark dining room with the chandelier, then finally I found it behind the heavy curtains. It was an enormous, stuffed Paddington Bear (easily three times my size) which I tried unsuccessfully to pick up and carry out to show everyone else. I did not know then what Uncle Larz already knew. I did not, in fact, know until today that he knew it then.

I knew that Uncle Larz lived with his friend, who I called Uncle Bill. Uncle Bill was a little younger – still in his twenties – and was tan, blonde haired, and blue eyed. I remember thinking about how pretty Uncle Bill was when I was little, though it has only occurred to me recently how pretty Uncle Larz was too. He had jet-black, wavy hair. He was lean-muscled and thin. He had dark eyebrows and a sharp, jaw-lined face. I still visit Uncle Bill every summer in New York. He still lives in a swanky apartment, though not the same one he lived in with Uncle Larz, on the upper west side. He is a lawyer who mediates between Japan and corporate businesses and he is cheerful and talkative. I did not know until six years ago that Uncle Bill was not just Uncle Larz's friend. No one had ever really told me. But now I know that they were in love for over ten years. It's not, I should say, that my family didn't approve, or didn't want me to know – it was simply that it didn't need to be said. It was the ordinary; it was Uncle Larz. I did not know until this year that Uncle Bill has been sick recently, though they've said it's not the same. He's been to the Mayo Clinic and they said it's not the same thing. They said they don't know what it is. He now has blood transfusions once a month and is considering going on disability.

I remember, not too long after that Paddington Christmas, that my mom told me she was going to New York to see Uncle Larz in the hospital. I remember asking if I could go and being told no. I learned years later, after I had been given Uncle Larz's photo albums, that those were still the days when nobody knew for sure and everyone had to wear a mask on that floor of the hospital. Uncle Larz was an excellent and avid photographer, and I suppose he had somewhat of a sense of humor when it came to those visits. There are pages and pages in his 1992 photo album of people cut out from Polaroid pictures, all wearing surgical masks. He left the white tab at the bottom of each visitor's picture and everyone signed his or her name. Some people, like

my mom, had balloons or stuffed animals. Some people tried to ham up the mask, wearing it with funny poses and laughing faces, but it was obvious that some people used it to hide their twisted, crying mouths. It felt awkward seeing my mom in those pictures, at the place where I had not been allowed to go. It still feels uncomfortable seeing her there, in the hospital, in a way she never wanted me to see her. I wasn't really meant to see those things, but now I feel like I've gone back in time and been there for myself, and somehow it doesn't feel right.

I learned other, happier things from those photo albums too. I had heard before, but never seen, that Uncle Larz and Uncle Bill were friends with Andy Warhol. In the albums Uncle Larz had documented trips with the three of them in Italy and other places. All the photos were candid. They were gesturing, talking, making plans. They were exotic and free-spirited. He had photos from glitzy parties with Mick Jagger and Brooke Shields. There were other kinds of pictures, too. There were nature photos by the dozen. Beautiful – more beautiful than real nature – photos. Pictures of every kind of beautiful thing. Pictures I recognized. In New York with baby me in his high-rise office, in Dallas with the family, the Paddington Christmas, with me on the Nantucket beach.

I did not know until today that mom came home before he died. In reality I did not know much of anything about when he died until today and I am very thankful for that. I now know he died at home. He did not die in the hospital I had visited only in pictures but in the apartment I had been to in real life, the one where I watched *The Land Before Time*. Grammy said that she was there, Uncle Bill was there, and Aunt Cate was there. Mom, Uncle Nick, and Granddaddy had already left when he died. Grammy said that he didn't take many visitors then, he thought he looked too bad and was too thin, but when people did come he tried to get himself up and dress

in something nice. He said to Grammy one day that he had a doctor friend and that when he couldn't stand it anymore his friend said he would help. He told Grammy he was nervous, he didn't think his friend would go through with it, and he said that if the doctor didn't do it he would swim out into the ocean farther than he could ever swim back. He said she would have to drive him there. He told her those things on the first day of August, and around the fifteenth day they called his doctor friend.

He never had to swim out into the ocean, but I think a little part of him wanted to. We scattered his ashes off the coast of Nantucket along with a wreath of flowers, so he got there nonetheless. I thought I remembered that day, but since then I've learned that I wasn't there. I do remember Grammy taking me to see *Little Women* in the theatre sometime later that year and I remember crying. When I got home I remember telling Grammy that I thought it was my fault that Uncle Larz had died. I think what I really meant to say was "can we talk about it?" What I really wanted was someone to get down on my level and say something I could understand, but my words just proved I was too young to know.

I remember going to kindergarten at St. Alquin's Montessori school where we had a "prayer request time" every day. I remember raising my hand for weeks, maybe even months, every day to say, "My Uncle Larz just died of AIDS." I didn't know what AIDS was then. I didn't know I was really telling my teacher that my uncle was gay. I didn't know what those years in New York were yet. I only knew that my mom loved "Rent" and played the soundtrack all the time. My Uncle Larz had known, but he didn't want to, and he had even refused to get tested, but they found out when he got the shingles. Everyday I made my announcement to the class until one day my teacher asked my mom to explain it had already been prayed for. I didn't know that what she meant was that I shouldn't say it anymore.

I still didn't know how many there were, even when we made my Uncle's five foot by three foot quilt patch and later, when I saw the whole quilt laid out in front of the Washington Monument, I couldn't distinguish the tiny speck that was his. And I didn't know until today that Grammy had a sister – because that sister had said that Uncle Larz deserved it and they have never spoken since.

I was planning to end saying something like that, but today as I took my dog out for a walk, I was stopped in my tracks by a ball of soft, purple lint resting on the grass in front of my apartment. I won't go any farther than to say that I have never seen lint, never mind purple, in the grass there before, and there's no reason I should expect to again. It felt like I'd just landed home. I had been haunted by this ugly world after everything I learned about the end of Uncle Larz's life, but that world isn't me and it wasn't Uncle Larz. I started writing because I wanted to find an old place in my life that was lost and to put it back where it belonged. I wanted to wade through all of the soft memories I had and build something solid and stronger. And I wanted to know Uncle Larz as a person who I once saw in real life and made sandcastles with, not just as a person who ended saying, "Take me to the ocean."

Big Times

There's nothing to know but change
these days,
and I'm glad we've turned to change.
But I'm so glad the world
still has a few Queens.
I'm so glad we still
have a few empty plains.
Sometimes I can't even find any dirt.
Where is the ground these days?
Where is the dirt?
These times are hard.

We all saw when New York
went down.

Keeping Things

Now that you're dead,
I hope nothing washes
your fingerprints
off of my room.

Tea Party

The air is close with age.
Hey, what was my name?
My body doesn't fit
inside my bones
anymore

so I am long since someone else.

hanging from my redwood:
cups of forgotten memory.

Delicate Maps

One night, shortly after I turned sixteen, my mom and two younger siblings pulled into the driveway of our house. No one else was at home at the time; I was over at a friend's house and my step-dad was working late. It was already dark outside. As the electric gate swung open, the car's headlights splashed onto the grass in the backyard. Amid the pale light and shadows, mom saw that there were toys, clothes, books, and appliances scattered behind the house. She stopped and called the police.

Soon after, while the police searched for an intruder, my mom took my brother and sister (she and my step-dad's children) to the neighbors' house. My brother was three and my sister was four. Then she called me and asked me to stay at my friend's for a while. By the time all this was done, my step-dad had made it home from work. When the house had been cleared by the police, mom carefully walked through each room. She began to notice that many valuables were still in place. Piles of household items lay thrown around at random, but mostly only mundane things were missing. The police discovered that the intruder had entered through my second-story bedroom window. It was unusual, they said, because we lived on a busy street and the window in my room faced the front of the house. After surveying the strange damage, mom told them she thought she knew who it was. My manic-depressive uncle, Uncle Nick, who was on a manic high.

Uncle Nick was the third child of my Grammy and Granddaddy. Before him they'd had Larz and Cate, and after him they had my mom, Carey. Uncle Nick attended the prestigious boy's prep school that my grandfather taught at in Dallas, as did my Uncle Larz. My mom and Aunt Cate went to its sister school where Grammy worked in administration. Growing up, Uncle

Nick appeared to be a fairly normal boy. Only once had he tied himself up and jumped into the family pool to see if he could escape. He was also a good-looking kid. He had beach blonde tinted hair, was tan, and had blue eyes. He made very good grades in high school, and I'd imagine he was pretty popular. After graduating, he enrolled at Wake Forest.

Mom has told me that she didn't notice anything unusual about Uncle Nick until after his junior year in college, when his grades suddenly declined and he nearly dropped out of school. Aunt Cate, on the other hand, had noticed that in high school he would sometimes sit on the couch, depressed, for days. It's generally agreed, but always goes unspoken, that my grandparents must have seen the signs long before they forced him to move back to Dallas two years after college when he couldn't hold a job.

Still, despite all of this, there were some good times for Uncle Nick as well. He was, for instance, a great musician. He played at least three instruments, in addition to singing, and recorded catchy, original songs in the studio he put together in his apartment. He had great ideas about opening up shops and businesses. Before "You Tube" ever existed, he wanted to found a website called "YouOnTV.com." His greatest happiness came when he married and had a daughter, Sydney, though a divorce was soon to follow. He was always a favorite with kids, especially my younger half brother and sister, because he knew how to play the way kids do and he had the best imagination.

The police left our house by ten o'clock. They instructed my mom and step-dad to make an inventory list of everything that was missing, which would be difficult since nothing was in its place and all the random piles had to be sorted through. In the alley behind our backyard, the police also found several white trash bags bursting with more stolen things. The toys and clothes

in the grass that had alerted my mom to the trouble turned out to be spread into several small trails leading in that direction. The bags looked like they were dropped suddenly, and their contents spilled out of the tops like little comet tails.

Mom was worried that Uncle Nick would be back before the night was over, and she said as much to the policemen. The condition of house persuaded them to agree with her. If it was her brother Nick, rationality wasn't going to keep him away. They told my mom a special word, a code word you could say, and said that if the intruder came back that night she need only call and say the word. The word, I'm told, meant that this was the second invasion of the night, and the intruder was in the house. The police said that was their highest priority call and every available officer would come.

During this time I was still at my friend's house, but I was getting regular updates over the phone. My brother and sister were still at the neighbors' house. Now that they were alone, my mom and step-dad carefully began combing the house and writing lists of missing items. They would select a pile to work through, then they would bring it into the kitchen to sort it and divide it by the room. My clothes and jewelry went in one pile. My sister's dolls went in another. My mom's makeup and shoes in another. The house was silent and uncomfortable as they worked to record their finds.

After an hour, maybe two went by, there was a small disturbance of the peace. It was the sound of running water. My step-dad thought it was coming from the backyard, which was just on the other side of the wall. He grabbed a wooden club and headed to the back door. My mom followed timidly behind. Outside, they found that it was a sprinkler. They began to search together through the bushes at the edge of the fence, and then moved towards the gate at the back. They found nothing, and eventually decided to head back in. As my mom turned towards

the house she saw, through the glass French-doors that led to our living room, that Uncle Nick was coming down the stairs.

In the previous months, Uncle Nick had been giving regular sermons outside coffee houses and restaurants all over town. One time, at night, he had been caught breaking into our gothic-style neighborhood church and it was discovered that he had been sleeping there. He had also been frequenting the Lover's Lane train station, where he'd discovered the entrance to the core of the earth. The high had been long overdue, and its onset was explosive. In general, my family anticipated that Uncle Nick would have three years of depression, a relatively normal but subdued state of mind for him, followed by one year of mania. This episode had come after nearly five years of depression, and many of my relatives had finally invested in the hope that he was cured. At first, when he bought a new leopard print hat, it was passed off as eccentricity. But the shift would occur in a matter of days. The purple glasses and skirts could not be refuted.

Every time I'd seen him that year his eyes were red-rimmed and blazing. He'd lost too much weight, and it made his face and teeth appear large and imposing. His skin was thin and sunburned. Eventually, he settled on wearing bright patterned fabric in various toga styles. He wasn't sleeping often. The world, he told me, was beginning to unlock its secrets. Everything was encrypted with delicate maps and codes. These were our chance to tell the future, to delve into our past, he said. He read the codes of music to me, the codes of money, of the Internet. He took me to the Lover's Lane train station and read me the code that revealed the ancient entrance to the earth's core. In his mind, he was building shimmering webs; he was piecing it all together.

Uncle Nick especially enjoyed my company because I didn't mind indulging him. I once tried to write his lecture down, but it proved impossible. It was no surprise to me that he made

others feel uncomfortable. Not simply because of his unnerving presence, but because he could be so convincing. He spun out his theories quickly but clearly. Sure, I could see that the patterns were there. Was this the cosmic code? The fabric of existence? Of course, the answer would always be no. But sometimes I thought it was simply because everyone else would have to be wrong for Uncle Nick to be right.

My step-dad wasted no time in running inside with his club. Mom could see through the French-doors that Uncle Nick had run back upstairs. She heard his soft landing in the front as he escaped through the my bedroom window. My step-dad followed after, but left through the front door. Mom, in the mean time, went back inside to call and say the word. By the time the police arrived, barely over two minutes later, my step-dad was already headed back towards the house sweating and breathing heavily. He'd gotten in one hit with the club, but Uncle Nick had kept on running and now was nowhere to be found. No less than twenty police units arrived to give chase. There were two ambulances, in anticipation of a heated encounter with the criminally insane, and a fire truck for good measure. Not long after, the sounds of splitting wind accompanied by blinding beams of light alerted the neighborhood to the arrival of the helicopter.

It didn't take mom long to realize that the gate to the alleyway had been locked since the first time the police had come, and was still that way. The front door had been locked too. No entrance into the house remained except my unlocked window, and there was no longer a ladder there. In other words, mom realized that the entire time she had been sorting through piles, even as she pulled up to into the driveway; Uncle Nick was waiting on the roof.

The helicopter used an infrared camera to scan the nearby streets and alleys for the shape of a warm human body. Squad cars assisted on the ground. My mom was afraid that he would try

to kill himself, or to fight the arresting officer, but when Uncle Nick was finally discovered several blocks away, he crouched timidly behind a fence. Six months of jail time awaited him, along with a new regimen of medication. As for me, I got a new dog, and alarms on all my windows.

One morning at around 4 AM, only weeks before the break-in, mom answered a frantic call from Uncle Nick. He said a flood was coming and she needed to get to higher ground. He said he was already ready to go, had already packed up his things. Mom casually told him she'd wait it out, and then hung up the phone.

I recalled this phone call as mom and I pulled up to his apartment after he'd been put in jail. My grandparents had asked that we go check the place out, make sure everything was turned off and try to clean things up, since he wouldn't get out for a while. Uncle Nick's car outside was stuffed to its breaking point, literally. We couldn't discern everything inside, but the most obvious addition was a TV that had been thrown through the back windshield – probably after the car had become too full to open the doors. There was spam, and newspapers, and statues, and blenders, and bibles, and cat food (though he didn't own a cat). This was what he had packed for the flood, but in the end there wasn't enough room for him to get in and drive.

Inside the apartment was the smell of burnt bananas, and of stale water and soil. The bananas, we found, had been cooked on the stove in their peels, without a pot or pan, and left there without being eaten. There was an enormous watermelon on the floor that was impaled by a tall glass vase. There were piles here, too, not unlike the ones we'd seen in our own house. Paintings and writings were scattered across the walls and ceiling.

We approached all these things with not a little wonder. There was a kind of majesty. What we saw in this place was a way of worshipping. There were offerings and scriptures and sacrifices and monuments. There were the remnants of dance and celebration; of cold-sweating fear and doubt. So much passion was here, so much energy. In his mind, Uncle Nick had found God, and I still envy him for that.

Stomping On The Ground

And we live our lives in animal skins.

The wide mouth
of the native people speaks
in a language that we
can't understand anymore.

It says there's nothing like stomping on the ground, there's
nothing like a crying song, there's nothing
like your face burning towards the fire and
back steaming towards the plain.

Out here the day the bright buffalo,
the night the charming wolf.

Hot Hands

You have them.
Heat
and health-
reverse the Big Bang in between them.
Rave of the Cosmos
and you,
the glow.

Little Boots

If your last breath were next to my next
I would whisper back,
“you didn’t fall so far,
not any more than most.”
What color was your hair?
I’d like to know more about you.
I’m sure I would have loved
your dresses and
your party barge.
If I could spend some time with you
I’d smile on blood,
The way you did,
and paint each chamber red.
You deserve that.
Little Boots, they set you in the stone,
you only let it dry.

I would have followed you.

Ugly

Throughout my life I've had difficulty feeling sympathy for people who blame their problems on their childhood or their family. I instinctually attempt to avoid soliciting pity from others, and this might be why I dislike that type of excuse. It may be, also, that deep down I think the problems people often refer to when "tracing back their issues" don't seem that bad compared to some of the obstacles I've faced myself. When others say they are violent because their father beat them, or say other, similar things, it honestly makes me angry. I think about how my dad's addiction hasn't fated me to become addicted to crack, or to be violent, irresponsible, or to flunk out of school – and I think to myself, "why should any one person's mistakes have to determine another's?" As far as I'm concerned, I don't feel sorry for myself, hate my dad, or feel that I've been ripped off in life. I've very much enjoyed my life so far. But when I really take the time to meditate on it, maybe I'm asking too much when I expect others to react to their hardships the way I do.

Recently, my focus on this issue has turned to my own little brother, and it has caused me to reflect even more on why I react so negatively to those who've had it rough and can't seem to get back on their feet. I've begun to wonder if maybe the reason I don't blame my problems on the past is because I never lived the past I've been brought up to imagine. Maybe I never had it as bad as some. I can't help but look back on my upbringing and wonder whether my brother is just making excuses or if, in fact, I never really knew the ugly world I've always staked my claim to.

Matthew was the first sibling that I knew from birth. I'm the oldest in my family, and Taryn is the next oldest after me – but not by blood. My dad adopted her when he married her

mom. Then Matthew was born to my dad and step-mom, Jeanette, when I was nine years old. He had blonde, curly hair and blue eyes. As a baby he resembled the fat, pink-faced cherubs of the Renaissance.

Looking back, I now realize that from the beginning we were raised in different environments. While I was shuffled between my grandparents and occasionally my mother's house, Matthew always lived with dad and Jeanette. Even when dad was gone for weeks at a time. I was hardly ever allowed to see my dad, so I envied Matthew for that. When I was a kid all I could think of was how Matthew didn't have to follow the strict rules of my mom or hang out with my grandparents' old friends. I imagined him going to movies late at night, going out to eat every day, and never having to go to bed by a certain time.

It was in first grade that Matthew started to encounter problems at school. He, my sister Catherine, and my sister Taryn all attended public in a remote suburb of Dallas. One day Matthew reportedly bit his teacher, other days he ripped up other children's homework. He said he had trouble focusing. He started expressing little interest in his assignments. Before the year was over, Matthew was sent to an alternative school. Meanwhile I was making straight A's at a private school closer to the heart of the city.

Dad was in and out of rehab at the time, and I don't know what, if anything, Jeanette did to deal with his misbehavior. What I do recall is hearing other members of my family, as well as Jeanette's five sisters, lamenting that these issues may be permanent fixtures in Matthew's life. They whispered that his problems were expressions of the trauma he experienced at home, and that it was only a matter of time before the youngest member of our family, Catherine, would have the same trouble. As far as I knew, however, I had never seen or experienced anything

traumatic when I visited my dad's house. Besides, if dad was going to do drugs, everyone knew he would leave first.

As I think back on my relationship with Matthew, there is one day in particular that stands out in my mind, a day when I actually felt sorry for him. Dad had recently established his own limousine company, "getalimo.com," and would sometimes pick me up from school in a limo on Wednesday afternoons (this was embarrassing, by the way). On this particular day I was a freshman in high school and Matthew, who was still in first grade, was in the back seat when they came to get me in the carpool line.

On the way home we heard the sirens of a police car and soon realized we were being pulled over. As the limo stopped by the side of the road, I noticed that Matthew had started shaking uncontrollably beside me. He was crying hysterically by the time the officer approached the driver's window, and before long he'd wet his pants. For a moment I thought he was having a seizure. I asked him what was wrong and he said that he thought the police were going to take dad away. I tried to calm him down and explain that dad was just getting a speeding ticket, but he could not be comforted. It was only later that I discovered Matthew had been at dad's house when the SWAT team raided it looking for drugs, and he was terrified of the police ever since.

I also remember the deep sadness I felt when, after months of defending my dad and insisting that he would never act violently towards his own family, I saw the surveillance tape that eventually put him in jail. I didn't see or even know about the tape until I was a junior in high school, the year dad's trial was held, but the incident had occurred years earlier, when Matthew was only three or four years old, and had been the cause of dad and Jeanette's divorce. The tape was captured on one of four cameras that dad had set up in our home and around our

property to alert him to unwanted visitors. In it, dad waves one of his guns in Jeanette's face and threatens to shoot her. Matthew is also in the tape, crying, and asking him not to hurt mommy.

Despite these, and surely other hurtful times in Matthew's life, he seemed to level out a bit after first grade. He began making better grades in school and getting positive reports from his teachers. I noticed how much more calm and polite he seemed. Out of all my brothers and sisters, five total including the two on my mom's side, Matthew and I became the closest once dad got out of prison. He and I spent the most time with dad during that year when he was clean and sober. We all went to the movies, out to eat, and to the mall together. It was then that I saw Matthew grow from being a little boy into a kid that I could actually talk to and laugh with. I was, we all were, starting to think that Matthew's misbehavior as a little kid was nothing more than a phase. Then, just as dad began to slip back into his old habits, Matthew seemed to go down with him.

At age twelve Matthew began to get suspended from school regularly for fighting with other kids and cussing out the teacher. He started flunking out of all his classes because he refused to do any homework. Dad tried to help Matthew by switching him to another school where hopefully he would make better friends, but the trouble continued wherever he went. He fought bitterly with our sister Taryn, who still lived at Jeanette's where Matthew and Catherine spent most of their time, despite her driving him to meet up with his friends and making dinner for them when Jeanette worked nights as a nurse. His attitude became defensive and sarcastic. On the days when Matthew was supposed to go stay with dad, he would refuse, calling him a fucked up drug addict. Once dad arrived to pick him up and was greeted with a TV that was

thrown at him from the front door. It's true I wasn't there, like Matthew was, for some of dad's lowest moments, but I know he never deserved that.

One day that year dad called me crying. He said that Matthew had just been arrested for beating up his mother. It wasn't the first time he'd hit Jeanette, I heard, but it was the first time it hurt bad enough for her to call the police. She didn't want him to go to jail, and neither did my dad. They were both shocked and distressed when he was sentenced to two full weeks in juvenile detention. I wanted to feel sorry for Matthew too, but I didn't. I thought jail was exactly what he needed. I thought he was selfish and cocky, and I was disgusted by the hurtful things he'd been saying.

I thought and hoped that two weeks in jail would be enough to straighten Matthew out, but only six months later I received more bad news. This time Jeanette had called dad when Matthew began to hit her. She didn't want him to go back to jail. Dad came over in time to catch Matthew in the act, and he responded the way I expect any angry father would. He smacked Matthew across the face and asked him how it felt to be hurt by someone you care about. It's still to my great shock and disappointment that Matthew's response was to say that he didn't care about dad, and then to call the police hoping to have dad arrested for child abuse. Luckily, despite dad's record and unfavorable reputation with the police, it was Matthew who got taken back to jail.

Once again, I feel no sympathy for such a selfish, loveless act. But should I? It could be that I just don't know how bad Matthew really had it growing up. It could be that my distance from dad while I was growing up caused me to idealize him and all the things he did and kept me from seeing the ugly truth. Either way, I really do feel sorry that Matthew went through those

hard times as a little kid, but no, I don't think that should make what he's done okay. Still, just because I don't feel sympathy for Matthew's destructive behavior, doesn't mean that I don't love or want to help him. I wish I could take those hurtful times away from him. I wish I could be there for him more. I wish he would talk to and relate to me about what gets him down. After all, didn't I have hard times too?

I did have some hard times, of course, but it's no secret that my grandparents shielded me from a lot as well. Now that I've really considered how privileged much of my childhood was, I've even started to wonder if, in truth, my problems weren't any more than average. If that's the case, perhaps my view of "childhood excuses" is somewhat unrealistic. I do, at least, feel bad that I was chosen to be loved and protected in a way that my brother and sisters weren't. In fact, it's hard to talk about. But the fact is that I don't feel bad enough. Not bad enough to think it's okay to act out and blame your actions on others, or to fail and say there was nothing you could have done to succeed. And even though I love my brother, even though I try my best to help, I don't think he will ever change that resolve in me. I might become more tender, more understanding, yes, but I will continue to push Matthew to dream and achieve and prosper the way I would push anyone else – because I think he can do it, because I think anybody can.

Bread Crumbs

Maybe you believed
in a world
of strangely secreted things
– that soothing waterhorse –
and then you thought
that even churches
have to buy their bread
when you saw the Eucharist wafers
at the grocery store.
And you wonder why you're still
leaning,
rocking,
mumbling your prayers –
why you're still slipping
please and thank-you's
between the cracks of stone.

What I've got now
is the grahm-crackered smell
in my dog's fur
to remind me of a place called home.

Sometimes the earth
will shake away the city
like crackers into crumbs.
And you might not feel
a thing.

Letting Go

Sometimes when I don't know how
to let go, I take my thumb
and twist it around my two middle fingers.

I pull and twist energy
out of my body
through my veins; the things I love,
the pain sometimes,
the rake that churns my guts.
I slowly fight
it out of me like
a tapeworm I pull and wrap
it around my middle fingers.

On The Surface Of A Lake

There is a pull like the sucking moon
into the coolness of this
whose surface isn't broken.
There is a forgiving mirror
which has to be undone.
At least, I'd like to be undone.

We know this place,
but we can't live here.

I want to dip my feet inside
and let my soul swim just
a bit.
It's familiar to my skin.

Moon

“While grazing in the forest, I see lots of things, likes rabbits and birds and bears. So many things to see in the forest that you’ll probably see me.”- Grazing in the Forest, By Ashley

Gabbert, 1st Grade, 11/13/95.

Lately I’ve been looking through pages that Grammy sent me of stories I dictated to her as a toddler and illustrations I colored around her letters, and I see that she saw the spark of language ignite in me long before my sentences were whole. I realize, sadly, that as I was growing up I never gave Grammy much credit. My dad’s mom, whom I called Gran, was the one who usually picked me up from school, took me to see musicals and plays, and the one who I usually spent the night with. But when I think about it now, I spent lots of time with Grammy too. Yes, she also picked me up from school sometimes, and I often spent afternoons at her and Granddaddy’s house while waiting for mom to get off work, but what’s important is that during those times I learned to look around. I learned that I wanted to learn and record. There was no TV in bed at Grammy’s house, or any of the other “luxuries” I enjoyed so much with my dad’s mom; at Grammy’s there was the backyard, there were books, there were puzzles, and there was pen and paper. Grammy’s house is where my need to start from scratch began. The need, I mean, to create. And it is where I learned to look around and find the things I loved – the animals, the hills, the clouds that turn to things – the things I still love and write about today.

“Once upon a time I saw a little lost basket in the kid sky. And when I saw it, flowers began to grow in the basket. When the flowers bloomed they did not die.”- Hill Ploppers, By Ashley Gabbert, Age 5, 1/28/93.

Grammy used to tell me stories about when she was a youngster. She could walk to school alone by age five and was also allowed to go to the movies alone on weekends. She told me that several times she was caught skipping school to get treats at the soda shop and that once she was almost sent home from school for mouthing off to a kid who kept poking her with his pencil. She smiles with pride every time she recalls how all the other children in her class stood up and said “If Marylou goes home, I’m going home too!” That’s why the teacher let her stay.

I don’t think Grammy ever went to college. Granddaddy went to Princeton, and so did their oldest son who shared his name, Larz. The three younger kids went to Duke, Wake Forest, and my mom went to Texas A&M – a decision she still regrets. But I don’t know much about Grammy when she was still a young woman named Marylou Bilski. I know that she met Granddaddy at a Dude Ranch called Valley Ranch where rich kids were sent to vacation, somewhat like summer camp. I know that they married when they were still very young, Grammy was only eighteen or nineteen, and that shortly after my Uncle Larz was born.

Grammy told me that from the beginning she never liked Granddaddy’s mother, Connie. His family came from a long line of Anderson’s; one had been an ambassador to Japan, one the captain of Fort Sumter during the Civil War, and two reportedly married into the Kennedy and Roosevelt families. According to Grammy, Connie Anderson was particularly fond of relaying the great family achievements to others and of preserving the integrity of the Anderson name. Grammy told me that she felt pressured to marry Granddaddy, who was head over heels for her, because Connie wanted her son to have his way. And so Grammy became Marylou Anderson. Later, after my uncle Larz (who everyone called Fergie for his middle name, Ferguson) was born, Grammy thought of divorcing Granddaddy. But she said that Connie threatened to take

custody of Fergie away from her and promised she had the money to do it. This is not to say, according to Grammy, that Granddaddy was a bad guy. He was very smart and kind, if not a little dull. It's just that she never felt she loved him.

From that point Grammy was a housewife for some years and the family moved frequently. Eventually, however, she took a job in administration at the Hockaday school for girls in Dallas, the sister school to St. Mark's School of Texas, a boy's prep, where Granddaddy taught. Consequently my mother and Aunt Cate attended Hockaday while Uncle Nick and Uncle Larz attended St. Mark's for high school. Things were quiet, from what I hear, and very average.

“One time there was two mouses. One little mouse said, ‘Oh oh! It’s starting to rain!’ But then the sun grew bigger and bigger – it was bright! And shiny! But it grew so bright that the clouds turned into things.”- Hill Rocks, By Ashley Gabbert, Age 5, 1/28/93.

Grammy did not buy me all the toys and amusements that Gran did, and she did not have cable, but Grammy would always help me make anything I wanted to. She would buy ridiculous amounts of cardboard, markers, fabrics, and stencils for me – as long as I intended to be creative. Yes, she bought me dolls and things too, but she liked it best if I made their clothes and houses myself. She also gave me games and books and she always made sure to have time to read to me whenever we were together, at least for an hour or two. When I stayed with Grammy and Granddaddy, instead of going to sleep watching TV, Grammy would put on cassette tapes of Indian storytelling.

There was something stable about the time I spent with them. The smell of grilled cheese, the walks we would take with their dog to look for frogs and toads, the chime of the old

grandfather clock passed down through the Anderson line. Grammy and Granddaddy were not judgmental towards my dad or any of his side of the family. In fact, Grammy still says there was a certain charm to him and those Texas Baptist parents he had. She even sends my dad postcards still, and calls him on occasion. Perhaps I should say that the fact that Grammy never had something to say to me about the Gabberts doesn't necessarily mean she never had something to say about them; it just means that in general I know she really liked them. Grammy always has *something* to say – I've especially heard a lot about the Republican Party, the awful people on TV, and the boys I dated in school – but she did know where to draw the line. And it meant a lot to me.

“Once upon a time there was a man that always lit a fire in his house. Once he lit a fire and he accidentally put his fire on his chair, and when he sat on it he bounced on his bat! And a witch came along and the moon popped out to play like a down!”- Hill Marle, By Ashley Gabbert, Age 5, 6/15/93.

Grammy and Granddaddy took me on road trips as well. Each summer from the time I was six or seven years old we would tour a portion of the country in their van. The first summer was the East coast, then the West coast, then the South, the North, Midwest, and so on. I enjoyed these trips in the van far more than the ones I took overseas with Gran and Grandad. In the van I could bring coloring books, puzzles, and stuffed animals. And I could take more comfy naps than on an airplane. I liked listening to books on tape the whole way there and being able to stop whenever we wanted for food or to find a hotel. In the van there were no planned tours or unfamiliar foods like we had in Europe. Often, it was during those rides in the van that I told

stories to Grammy for her to write down. I could look out the window and see a thousand things I needed to tell about. I would talk until I went to sleep. Together we went to forty-eight states in that van.

Today Grammy and I still take trips together every summer. She has since divorced Granddaddy, after being married for forty-nine years, and lives in North Carolina by herself. We usually travel from there up to New York City to visit my Aunt Cate and Uncle Bill, Uncle Larz's life partner, and then head North to the Adirondacks where we stay for several days on Lake Hewitt without TV, radio, motorboats, or even other people. Today I like more than just the books on tape or the coloring books; I like looking around, finding new places, and wondering a little still. I like remembering the far-away places I've been to and dreaming that I'm there again. When I'm home, I'm always wishing to be alone in the woods of the Northwest, silent in the bigness of the Arizona desert, cool from the wind of the rocky East coast.

The most magical memory I possess took place at Grammy's house, shortly after she and Granddaddy first moved up to North Carolina when I was nine years old. It was late at night and the fields and woods behind the fields made only the sound of animal's breath. Grammy woke me out of bed with a hush and walked me through the house until we came to a large, walk-in closet at the back of the house with windows facing out towards the empty land. When I got to the window and stood on my toes I saw a wild pack of deer grazing near the house, then I saw one deer whose white coat shone as if the moon reflected him. Grammy whispered, "That deer is an albino. It could be the only one in North Carolina," and then she walked away. I remember the smell of fresh paint in the closet, the glow of the deer through the pane without blinds, the light from the moonlight, and the large, empty space where nothing had yet been moved in where

I sat on the floor and wondered in silence. That white deer was the only real magic I've seen in my life, but I've been spending years wanting and looking for more. I'll always be hungry for some magic in this world.

When I'm with Grammy now I think back to the days when she would encourage me to tell stories and would write them down for me and make them into little books. Reading them now, I can see how even then all the pieces were there – she just helped me begin to put them together. I remember that Grammy was the only person in my family who encouraged me to write, even when I didn't want to or forgot that I ever had before. Year after year, even when everyone else around me pushed the other way and said to sing or dance, Grammy reminded me that I could still write – even if just when I was alone. And she gave me the tools to learn how to write. In fact, Grammy was the only person with me, and I don't think it was a coincidence, when I spoke my very first word, “moon,” while we took a walk in the night – the night that it began.

Happy Blue Planet

When I wake up and the sun is still
a grapefruit
hanging low,
and the wind washes my face,
I watch the wholeness twinkle out
and I feel like
I'm in all the great places at once.
I feel the heat of dream
and the skin of autumn
and I am filled
like a fat blueberry; bursting
like this heavy planet
and ready to speak my first word.

Dawn

On the cool, swept porch
where I drink my coffee

the earth accepts my company.

We are old but cleaner.

Still.

And I quiver with the day
here,

the air is thin.

The foiled taste of silver
secrets beneath my tongue:

today you will be yellow.

Glad Animal Movements

I like to watch my puppy trot along the sidewalk
and know that the world stays new for him.

We have been on this patch of grass before,
but there may be some new insect or breeze that makes him excited
and he will pull on his leash
to be near it.

At home he makes soft noises and flexes his feet while he sleeps.

I still wonder that he likes to be next to me on the couch
even though I don't let him nip my ears,
and I am glad when he pushes himself against my legs
to protect him from a passing car.

He doesn't know yet that soon it will be cold
and he will have to wear his pumpkin sweater.

Catch And Release

From the beginning I wanted to sing, and by age seven I was entered into several private and group voice studios where I learned, along with my family, that I actually knew how. And that I was good at it. I liked to sing, firstly, because I loved the attention it brought me; I loved being heard by everyone, I loved the pride on my mother's face, I loved dressing up and being on stage. But there was something else I came to love even more, and that was the endless rivers of emotion I could release with my voice. I could show how I felt with my voice. I could let go of pain when I sang, or hold on to love – it was something of a catch and release. People liked to hear me sing too, and I knew this because I could see them leaning in close to whisper when I performed. It was this knowledge that would come to shape the next decade of my life.

By the time I was seven I was encouraged by both my mom and Gran to audition for several musicals and plays around town. I was cast in shows at the Dallas Children's Theatre and the Dallas Theatre Center. I was even allowed to leave school every day for a full month during the third grade to perform in matinee shows of *A Christmas Carol*. Later that same year, Southern Methodist University sought me out to become a cast member in a play that was so graphic I had to wait in a basement until it was my turn to go on stage and I was never allowed to read the script. The play was called *A Balm In Gilead*.

By this time, virtually my entire family had invested in the notion that I would become a child star. Even at school my previous teachers were singing my praises, stopping their classes when I passed by to introduce a "real singer" who they had once taught. The good news is that I wanted to sing and be a star, so I really felt no pressure. I performed well under stress and enjoyed having an audience. And most of all I enjoyed the escape that came from singing. When

I was singing, I only had to be what I wanted to be in my mind. I could live the fantastical life of each character whose words I sang and I could feel the powerful emotions that held sway over them. I could be someone great, someone famous, someone followed. I could *be* someone else – and I wanted to be.

At age ten I was accepted into Cherry Lynn Hanes' voice studio. Mrs. Cherry, as I called her, was revered in Dallas and regarded among music teachers across the country, as one of the best. She *was* one of the best teachers, but she also became a friend to me and a stable mentor when I needed one most. Mrs. Cherry helped to accelerate my dreams by entering me in local and state competitions where I won several titles. I went to voice lessons twice a week for two hours each time, and sometimes more when a performance loomed.

That's how things went all through lower and middle school, and then I got to high school. I worked for months perfecting my audition pieces to the Booker T. Washington High School for the Performing and Visual Arts in downtown Dallas, sometimes referred to as "Grammy High" by news and magazines for the well-known alumni like Norah Jones, Roy Hargrove, and Erykah Badu. I ran the songs in my head; I heard them in my dreams. I went to lessons three or four times a week to practice every gesture, every thought, every breath. On the day of the audition, I remember sweat running from my head to my feet when I entered the judging room and the thoughts flitting past like faces on a train. But as I started singing my Italian piece, the waves in my voice subsided and the smoothness I had practiced took over. It was two tense, guarded months before I found out the decision, but I did, in fact, get in. From there, everything changed.

You would think that such an accomplishment would have been followed by continued success and greater achievements, but for me it was not. I loved my school; it wasn't that. In fact, to this very day my closest friends are the people I met there. And I treasured my time in that rich and inspiring community. But while I was at Arts I learned something important, and I was forced to rethink everything I'd ever planned for myself. I learned that I wasn't the best. I wasn't even close. My mom would say things like, "You never close your eyes when you sing. Doesn't closing your eyes mean you really care?" And I started, a little, not to care. Because I didn't feel good at what I did, and I envied everyone else around me who seemed to be the best at what they did. Other times I didn't care because the words just didn't mean anything to me. Some of the songs I performed spoke to me, spoke rivers to me, but some said nothing at all – and I didn't always get to choose the ones that made the river flow.

By the end of high school, despite the exponential growth of my passion for the arts, I was left with the realization that I didn't have what I needed to become a great singer, and even if I could have learned it, I no longer had the will to. For most of my senior year I found myself a living contradiction, knowing that everything I loved and stood for was just beyond my reach. I did not apply to conservatories as most of my friends did for college – I didn't think I could get in and, consequently, I didn't want to try. Instead, I applied to Trinity University to study the liberal arts. At the time this just seemed like the right thing to do, but the truth is, I was lost.

I came to Trinity as a music major with word from the chair of the voice department that she would accept me into her private studio. That was consolation to me at first, but once the Fall semester of my freshman year came to a close, I realized that not only could I not become a great singer, I also could not recreate the beauty and magic that had existed at my high school – a magic that had kept the music alive for me even as I lost the will to sing. And I realized that, by

trying, I was only bringing myself down more. Music was still important to me, yes, but I didn't know where to fit it in. None of the songs my professors chose were songs I felt inside, and when I looked around it didn't seem like anyone else was feeling them either. I decided by my sophomore year to switch my major and just minor in music. But I kept singing, if just for the sake of saying I still did it. It wasn't until my vocal cords were damaged and I had to have surgery on them my junior year that I stopped all together.

My family started asking me what I thought I was going to do after college. How would I make money? What about business? What about communications? It felt like they had turned on me. Hadn't my mom and Gran been the ones backing me up the whole time? Now that I couldn't sing, I didn't know where they'd gone and I didn't know where to turn. I became depressed, and I wanted to go home. I started filling out transfer applications to schools in Dallas, just so I could get a ticket home.

During this time of questioning and second-guessing myself, while I thought I was just waiting to go home, I was accepted into a poetry class. I had written little poems before, but only at home without instruction. There had been a time when I knew how to write for fun, but that was years ago when I was a just kid and I could hardly remember it. Since then, the only things I had written about were movie stars and forth-grade boyfriends – the kind of writing I'd be embarrassed to read now. But this class was about a different kind of poem. The class was about the kind of poems that spoke to me the way some of the old songs I used to sing did. This class was about *writing* those poems. It made me hungry in a way that I only remembered from before my voice was broken. I felt the sensation of being able to control whatever words I wanted to

say. I felt stomach-turning catch and release of the tension and passion I felt inside coming out in waves when I wrote. I loved to write. The river flowed. I felt like it would always flow.

I started going in to my professor during breaks to talk about poetry writing. I was hooked on this new control I had over my emotions. *I* could write the misery; *I* could write the joy – and I could feel each thing I wanted to feel anytime I read the poems again. I wrote new poems day and night. I read and read and read, and tried to learn. I took more classes. I made new friends. If I was destined to suffer from addiction or depression, as all those in my family seemed to, then I had found the perfect outlet. If I became depressed, I could still make it something beautiful – I could write it into a river. And maybe, even, someone else could come along and read it, and know the flowing sadness and feel the beauty in the river. It was the best obsession; it was the sweetest high. Through my unforgiving passion, an old familiar sensation began to creep back inside me: I was good at writing poems. Maybe not the best, maybe not even close, but for the first time I was not discouraged. It made me want to get even better.

I took advanced poetry writing. I enrolled in a poetry seminar course. I changed my major to English and added a creative writing minor. I took other courses on writing, like fiction and non-fiction. I learned that there were other ways to build a temple out of words. I tried them all; I loved them all. I learned how I could talk about my family and myself by writing essays. I learned how I could talk about my dreams and fantasies, or even my nightmares by writing fiction pieces. I learned that these all complimented each other; they all captured a certain facet, they all worked together. My life became about my writing. I could not feel an emotion without writing it down. I could not feel it, really feel it, until I read it. My parents were relieved that I had switched my plans from singing. And yes, they even started to feel some pride when I became the co-editor of *The Trinity Review* and when I was awarded a creative writing

scholarship. But unlike the disappointment of knowing that people judged me when I didn't close my eyes, I didn't really care at all. I didn't care whether mom "got it" or not, or even whether anyone was offended.

Writing was, and is, a selfish thing. In that it *is* like an addiction. I love to share it, I'd love if I could change the world, but at the end of the day I write for me. To make a home when I don't feel I have one. To say something I want to say. To say something in a new way. I will always keep writing because now I wouldn't know how to stop. I'll write to keep the river flowing, to keep the world turning, to keep my heart beating. People often wonder aloud why I turned out okay, despite the ugly things that happened in my past and despite genetic questions of whether I'd remain sane, whether I'd fall into depression, addiction – I think it's because I started to write. I came close, closer than I want to say, to going down a different road. I was lost and looking the wrong way. And it even scares me a little that chance, and maybe some of the grace of God, is all that stood between me learning to live or going back to Dallas and finding a different kind of high.

Since the surgery on my vocal cords after my Junior year, my singing voice has recovered, and sometimes I sing in the shower or in the car, but I will never go back to that. I've learned now how to say what I need to.

Quiet Love Poem

I'd like to write
you a love poem
but firstly I am not in love,
plus poems don't pull
too much weight
anymore.

What I can say is that your eyes
are blue
and mine are black.

Wild Night Cries

Don't worry, I'm the right kind of crazy: wrapped for the cold, I sit on the porch reading my book, and maybe drink hot coffee or tea, but I wish I could dive into the pretty lake and send out wild night cries the way the loons do, you know, you know, and you like that about me; at least you know I look the part; to be the right kind of crazy you can't just write poems, you have to be the poem of course: the black-eyed lover, the dog in the street, drops in the moss, the recipe, the passing petal face that is the bough, you have to be the old oak tree at least you have to be dappled, red, at the very least.

A Great New Thing

Maybe someday someone will say,
“Who was the Hollywood?”
the way we sometimes say,
“Who was the mighty Homer?”

We don't marvel anymore
at the silver ships in the sky.
I want to see a great new thing,
but maybe now the greatest thing
is wide sky,
forgotten mountain,
empty sea.