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The Raconteur's Dreams

A Thesis

Presented To

Eastern Washington University

Cheney, Washington

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Masters of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

By

Briana S. Loveall

Spring 2017

THESIS OF BRIANA LOVEALL APPROVED BY

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DR. DEBORAH SVOBODA, GRADUATE STUDY COMMITTEE

MASTER'S THESIS

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The Cotton-Picker's Recitation

My grandmother says: "In life, one thing takes the place of another." It's an old-world mentality she practiced as a child-laborer sixty years ago, still practices today. She shares it, like a parable, with anyone ready to listen. I am ready to listen, to live beside her through the retelling. "You," she means her brothers, sisters, and herself, "didn't think about waking up and going to the fields and picking cotton. You just did it. Was it hard? Sure was. But if you weren't picking cotton then you were washing dishes, or bringing water up for dinner, or gathering chicken eggs, or grabbing green beans and tomatoes off the vine for dinner. It just was."

Her current home, classic white siding with forest-green trim is not a reflection of her earlier life. A refrigerator hums, an ancient coffee pot trickles and spits delightfully, and yellow warblers cry out to each other from her back porch. The sliding door is open. A slow Santa Ana wind finds its way into the darkness of her living room. Bright lights bother her eyes, she's told me. She coughs a little as she settles into her couch, a steaming cup of coffee, her third or fourth of the morning, cradled in between hands dotted with lines, bruises, and sun spots. I've come here, to her home in Southern California, to ask her questions about what it means to have grown up poor and white, working beside your family. Though I'd heard her stories throughout my childhood, I'd only ever listened half-heartedly.

When I was a child, every day was infinite. There would be time for stories later. So I listened for bemusement, for filling idyll gaps in the lengthiness of my days. I am old enough now to believe in the power of story, and its ability to blend history and future together.

I was seven or eight when I first began unconsciously layering her life over my own, a practice, once recognized, I adopted in an effort to wrap my narrative around her own.

I winced as the red-black thorns of the berry bushes sliced the tender flesh of my hands. Midday sun cooked my exposed shoulders, but it wouldn't be until after I left my grandmother's garden, returned to the cool air-conditioned home, that my skin would tighten against the cold until tightening turned to tingling turned to burning. "Oma, how come you don't get pricked," I whined.

"Because, I've been pickin things all my life. I've got tough skin." I sighed and kept working. My grandmother, barefoot, and Indian-tan, picked in the space between the fence and the bush, a narrow tunnel she navigated with confidence. "Here, like this," my grandmother said as she came to stand next to me. She reached into the thorny depths, fingers and thumb close together and quickly procured a fat blackberry. "When I was little my fingers used to get pricked all the time when we were pickin cotton. Mamma would say, 'don't get blood on the cotton boll,' and then she'd tell us kids to hurry up and pick faster or we'd be late for school. When you pick cotton you have to make this shape with your hand," she showed me her hand, hard and knobby knuckles covered in calloused and

weathered skin, “that way your fingers don’t get pricked when you reach in and twist the cotton out.”

We kept picking and I tried to imitate the litheness of her hands. My own hands were Scandinavian pale-smooth as paper, my feet covered in new shoes from PayLess. I was picking and letting my imagination turn the plump, bulbous berries into soft tufts of white, images of lazy creeks and fields that burned hot on bare skin, except I would not get in trouble if I didn’t finish helping my grandmother pick berries.

“Did you always have to pick cotton,” I asked, bored.

“Hmmm mmm,” she hummed, plopping a berry into her mouth. “Didn’t pick cotton then you didn’t eat.”

“What if you didn’t want to?” I pulled my hand away burn-quick, and sucked on a finger that’d been stabbed by a thorn. I tried to imagine an entire day spent in one place, doing one thing until I was so sick of it I could scream.

“Ha. Then mamma’d give you the switch. Plus, family comes first. Have a berry.” I opened my mouth like a baby bird, and crushed the berry she placed in there, felt the way the seeds hid in between my teeth, like a secret.

Now, twenty-years later, she points to a picture frame up on her wall. It contains what appears to be a sheaf of cream-colored paper, a picture crackled with age placed next to it.

“Your cousin made that for me,” she says, “it’s a story of my childhood. That’s a picture of my sisters and brothers out in the big white house.”

I move from my place on the couch to inspect this artifact like the present reimagining the past.

"Did you always pick cotton," I ask again as I take my seat, aware that this is a question she has probably answered for me, before.

"Hmmm," she hums into her cup. Her language is like this, syllables long and drawn out, voice wet and warmed with hot coffee. "We picked lots of things. Strawberries, apples, we grew mushrooms. You didn't pick, you didn't eat." She drops the *t* sound off every contraction, so her sentences are rhythmic and soft. She continues: "Mamma used to say, 'if you're tired of beans and potatoes, have potatoes and beans.' She didn't have time for our whining. My sister, Sammie Sue, she wouldn't eat her oatmeal in the mornings, hated it. Mamma'd give her the switch. We didn't have the luxury of being choosy."

She tells me: cotton picking looks like the shadowy slope of tired figures moving forward through the fog until they arrive at the edge of the field. It isn't their field. They don't own it. It owns them. The first figure to break through is her mother. She escapes the foggy bank first, like she's leaving the tail end of a dream. Her children shuffle behind her. Slavery had ended some years before but economics hadn't stopped to consider the color of skin. In this secluded Arkansas town, in a small one room house, her family woke to pick the cotton they would give to the sharecropper, to earn enough money for oatmeal in the morning and potatoes in the evening, and start again the next day. She didn't know a world outside her own, filled with rows and acres of white, white, white. When a

neighbor came to help her daddy slaughter a pig, her mamma invited the man to stay for dinner.

“I thank ya, but I can’t,” the man said, wringing his hands. Mamma had insisted. “I’d appreciate to eat on the porch if thassa right wit you.” My grandmother was sitting to a rare meal of hot and crispy ham with their staple, mealy potatoes. She watched their black neighbor eat his on their back porch and hadn’t understood why. Of course she understands now.

“That was my first introduction to racism, although I didn’t know it,” she says. She slurps at her coffee, sucks it through her teeth and recounts the first time she saw segregated drinking fountains. “I was fourteen and I’d just stepped off the Greyhound bus in Fayetteville, North Carolina. Girl, you’d never seen someone so culture shocked. I was thirsty and I went to get a drink of water,” she says it with a drawl, *wuter*, “and there was a sign saying Colored, and Whites. I had no idea what it meant. Luckily my sister showed up right then to take me to her house, or I’d probably drank outta the wrong one.” She sighs. “I was so sheltered. Imagine that, a white girl from a cotton farm in the South who didn’t know what racism was.”

She was a teenager during the civil rights movement. I try to imagine myself, deep in the south, oblivious to the differences in skin color. Warm smells roll from her kitchen: bright acidity, thick sauce, salty, garlic marrying thyme dancing with bay leaf. She’s making spaghetti for me. I imagine her home later

this evening filled with great-grandchildren who have heard what's for dinner at her house, dancing around her feet, begging to taste her sauce.

"What did your childhood smell like," I ask.

"Well, now you have to be specific to which part of my childhood," she holds her coffee cup but hasn't had a drink in minutes, "because we moved so much I have so many different smells for each place. In the early years, when we lived in Arkansas, it was hot dirt and cotton. The weird thing is, I think dirt smells kinda nice. There's a smell when you're picking cotton,"

I play with the feeling of sweat moving in cool lines down my dirty face, the way dirt clings to the inside of my nose and traps the odor there. I transcribe this sensation of grime, hopeful it says more than the words I have recorded.

"Then when we moved to Washington, everything smelled more open," she's taking deep breaths through her nose as she tells me this. The smells are coming back to her on imagined breezes.

"More open?"

"I know, but the air felt lighter I guess. Cleaner."

I want to ask her if it's possible that the changes in air quality were merely dependent upon the differences in humidity, but I don't. I don't want to analyze her memory.

She tells me a story. She remembers that when she lived in Washington, there was more free time. I interject: is it because there was less to do in the long winters? Yes, probably, she muses. So one winter, she and her sister, Sammie Sue,

crawled out of their bed and out onto the windowsill. It had been snowing. They shivered in their thin nightgowns and held hands. Out in front of them was the whitest, purest, most perfect blanket of snow they'd ever seen. It covered the rows of apple trees. The moon was out and she could see everything: moon reflecting snow, snow reflecting moon, until her whole world was alight with the ache of cold, white snow. Horses ran across the orchard, legs lost in clouds, like a dream, covered by the reality that in the morning there would still be work to do.

"Have you ever felt that way since?"

"No. When you're a small child and everything is so quiet, and there's no sound except for what God created, and then it snows and the only sounds are your breathing, it's the most peaceful thing in the whole world."

She fades in front of me. Her body relaxes. Her eyes are half closed as she returns to the windowsill to hold her sister's hand. From her back door, warblers call to each other. They startle her back to the present.

"So what happened after Washington," I ask.

"Well," she sits upright as if preparing to recite a memorized lesson, "Mamma's mamma was sick back in Arkansas. So Mamma went down and left us kids with Daddy. Daddy always had wanderlust, and she hadn't been gone more than a few days before he decided to move us down to Watsonville to pick cotton. So we packed up our things and five of us kids, plus daddy, plus a hired hand who was coming with us, all piled into a Model T Ford. Dog came too. Chickens were strapped on the roof of the car. We were the first Beverly Hillbillies. The night we

left was so foggy, the man sat on the hood of the car with a flashlight, and shouted directions at Daddy. So we made it down to our house in Watsonville. Wasn't much more than a shack. Clay floors. One big room. Just the wood frame, no walls. So Daddy writes to Mamma and says to meet us in Watsonville. When we went to pick her up from the train station and we came up the road and Mamma saw the house, it was the first time I ever saw her cry."

"I wonder what my mother felt," she trails off. I imagine my great-grandmother, without choices, still disappointed, still powerless in her poverty, still telling her children they weren't poor if they had clothes to wear, places to sleep, potatoes to eat.

Her father, my great-grandfather, had taken cardboard packing boxes and nailed them to the inside of the house for walls. He smeared mud-like plaster on the cardboard, where it hardened like a scab. Those were their walls for years. She was then ten, the fourth of seven children, in a family of gypsy laborers. She'd been picking since she was little, but a certain amount of grace was extended to the youngest children. In Watsonville though, she was now old enough to work full-time. She would walk barefoot in dirt rows of cotton, bending and picking until her fingers bled. She and her sisters would sneak out to dance in the rain, the brief and wild waves of wet that unleashed from the sky and seeped into their clothes, cleansed them from the land. She greeted the slow summer mornings, waking as the fog rolled in from the coast, and her Mamma called them to breakfast before a full day of picking. She spent a decade growing up alongside

the cotton rows. When I was ten I got snorkeling gear and pool toys for my birthday. I spent hours in my aunt and uncles pool diving for weighted toys. My skin burned from my leisurely play.

For my grandmother, there is *then*, and there is *now*. Then, they rose at six, to a breakfast of coarsely ground oatmeal. Now, she wakes to the sound of the garbage man and his rumbling machine, the clang and bang a familiar melody of the city. Then, they trudged out to the fields, vast oceans of white and fog that trapped them in a silent world of work and sweat. Up and down the rows they worked, hands moving slower than their mother's. When they tired, mamma sang hymns to quicken their fingers. Now, she sings to her great-grandchildren, songs from her past, in her deep, smoke-scratched voice.

"Did you know the scientific name for the cotton grown in America is *Gossypium hirsutum*?" I ask.

"Really?" she cocks her head at me. What must it feel like to layer such a technical word over a childhood of memories of dirty rust-stained fingers and lumpy burlap bags of cotton? Scientists may have named the plant, transcribing field notes into tiny leather-bound journals, but scientists weren't dragging scratchy brown sacks behind them for pennies to pounds of cotton. How could they accurately name something they weren't intimate with? Did scientists know, as they kneeled beside thick stems, the leaves and bolls drifting lazily in the afternoon heat, that cotton would eventually become an economic burden? That cotton wasn't just thirsty for water, but the sweat of those who worked it? Did they

know, as they sketched and labeled and called it good, that the biggest burden might come at the worn hands of the people who picked it?

She says a field of cotton looks likes rows of tiny clouds hovering precariously over the dark earth. It is an innocuous looking thing, deceptively soft and nestled inside the jagged maw of the boll. She used to tell me stories of picking the fibrous material, from the early morning when the fields still hung wet with dew, to the late evenings, when her burlap sack was lumpy and full. I only half-listened to these stories while my grandmother yanked and pulled at my hair, brushing it into tight ponytails while I tried not to yelp. I'd draw my knees to my chest and shiver as the air conditioner hummed loudly in protest against the hot Santa Ana winds. I tried to imagine what my grandmother looked like as the small girl of her stories, trudging through row after row of dusty, prickly fields.

It was the image of the final product, dark blue Levi's and simple t-shirts that I imagined whenever my grandmother began a story. I'm sure as a child my mind even drifted so far as to see a field of shirts and pants growing off thick vines, a sea of clothing waiting to be plucked and sent to the store. I was too young to weave my grandmother's narrative into the fabric of a time I could not comprehend.

"I'll tell you the first time I saw a cotton picking machine." I have poured myself another cup of coffee, refilled hers. "We, my family and I and some other hands, stood at the edge of a field and watched this machine doing what we did, but ten times faster. We noticed afterwards though, that the machine left a lot of

cotton in the boll. We would have been in so much trouble for leaving that much cotton behind. I don't know if I was more scared or amazed. I didn't know that that machine would replace human labor. Because I'm pretty sure that no one picks cotton by hand anymore. Makes me feel sad." Why, I ask. "I don't know why, except in our lives that was our livelihood, and now one machine could do more in one day than we could in a week? And I always thought that people would go hungry because they wouldn't have jobs to do. So maybe it was faster than us, but it certainly wasn't more efficient."

"My daddy was a lousy cotton picker. Mamma always said he was all thumbs and no fingers. Mamma was the fastest cotton picker in the whole world, she could move out. I can still see her cotton sack, just strapped around her body. When you're a kid you have a tiny cotton sack, but it still takes forever to fill. Have you ever seen a cotton field?" Only on the internet, I tell her. She continues to paint her life like a kaleidoscope of monochromatic hues, weaving her past into my present, gifting me with these images: browns of the earth, the dust, the soles of her feet, the crust of baked bread; white skies, white rows of unpicked cotton, singing *Jesus washed me white as snow,* at church on Sunday at the little white chapel, a farm with no running water or electricity. Water carried from a well down the road. I lean in closer to her, note the shadows under her eyes, the tension moving in waves across her shoulders, neck, and forehead.

Her eyes flash and her back straightens as she leaves the current thread. She has something important to say. "There's so much that we never ask our parents

about. Daddy used to tell us stories. Real silly things." I ask her what she knows about her parents' childhood. "Nothing. Daddy didn't finish the third grade and then went to work. Mamma finished the third grade. That's all I know. I guess in reality, there wasn't time for talking." We are making time now, I tell her. "Yes," she replies, "or maybe I've just forgotten," she quiets, her silence an inaudible choice to end the interview. She had been spinning her experiences for me, so I could weave them into my own narrative. The warblers call again. She sinks back into the couch, spent.

I eye the pages of notes I have taken. This is my opportunity to ask and receive her lessons, to keep her life like the cadence of a familiar childhood song.

What to Expect

1. When you pull the white newborn sized onesie from the drawer while looking for an outfit for your second child, you will wonder whether it's time to put the onesie away. It's the first thing you bought along with the book, *What to Expect When You're Expecting*, for the baby you'd never get to hold. You bought the book and the onesie on a whim while walking past a second-hand store. You thought this would be the first of many tiny tops. Later, you placed the simple onesie over your abdomen and imagined your child, the size of a poppy seed, big enough to fill and stretch the seams.

2. *What to Expect When You're Expecting* has a small section on how to deal with the loss of a baby. The book tells you many things. It's a manual for new life, a postscript on early death. What it doesn't tell you is how to hold your husband in the parking garage while he cries, after the doctor confirms what you will have already known. It doesn't say how to sit in your gynecologist's waiting room, weeks later, surrounded by swollen-bellied women, without aching. When the nurse takes you back to a room and asks about your last period, the period which contained the broken pieces of yourself, you'll search for the words the book told you to use. You won't find them.

3. Nor does it say how to respond to those who insist that you can just *try again* or, in quiet whispers to their spouses, *it isn't as though someone had died.* They are quick to think because the life was so brief—*was it even life at all*—grief hadn't the time to burrow deep inside you, that grief only accompanies loss of a larger measure. This is their attempt at sympathy.

   Others will try to understand your days dulled of color, blurred by deep emotional fatigue. They are not you, not missing a piece of them, not empty, wishing to be filled.

4. Time will stutter along, but halt when you are slicing strawberries at your counter. Amidst the vibrant red berries will be the tiniest green strawberry you have ever seen. You will hold it in your hand and wonder when you can ever look at anything without thinking about the child you met for only an instant as he or she slid from your pelvis.

5. You will ask yourself how much time must pass before you can stop remembering the anniversaries for things that never happened. *What to Expect When You're Expecting* doesn't tell you how long it takes until you can forget, that this child's first birthday, would have been in twenty-five days.

6. When you do get pregnant again, your hope will be dulled by fear until this second baby is pink and naked and screaming in your arms. Then, you will think you are ready to let the ghost of that first baby go.

7. But then, when you are searching for an outfit for your new baby to wear, you pull out the onesie that was meant for this child's brother or sister, and can't decide if you should put it away. Perhaps you will give the onesie to another couple you know, due to have their first baby soon. But this will feel like passing on a shroud of bad luck. You will fold it up and place it in a box downstairs, among the unused camping equipment, the winter clothes, and the miscellaneous wedding gifts you've still never opened. You will tell yourself this means you are ready to "move on," from your son or daughter who was and then wasn't.

8. You will hear of couples with lost babies of their own, clumps of multiplying cells that quickly passed and were forgotten. You might feel angry at their seemingly easy dismissal, while wishing yourself capable of the same. You cannot have it though, because grief is the price of love.

Sundown

"I'm sorry Miss," my grandfather cleared his throat before speaking in my direction, "but do you know what time it is? I can't read what it says on the clock."

I told my grandfather that the clock read a little after seven. He leaned forward in his recliner, hands gripping knees, the soft muscles on his arms hung like stretched taffy off the bone. I repeated the time to him a little louder. He nodded and sat back in his recliner. It hugged his shape.

It didn't bother me that my grandfather saw my face as another nameless adult drifting in and out of his peripheral vision while he watched HGTV all day. The events that eventually led to his diagnosis were told to me by my mother in a pattern as erratic as his behavior. I built a new image of my grandfather based off the complicated threads these new narratives dictated. *Grandpa ran over Aunt Eva with his car when she told him he couldn't drive to his appointment alone*, my cousin texted one afternoon. *I'm retiring*, my grandfather told me of his job at the Vietnamese church where he worked as a janitor. *Your grandfather is being let go*, my grandmother clarified when he wasn't around. *He's forgetting things. Your grandfather isn't allowed to drive anymore*, my mother told me one night on the phone. *Your grandma has to hide the keys now.*

Six years ago, there'd been an increase in the amount of endearing stories about my grandfather's forgetfulness. *Old age and rigor mortis is setting in*, my grandfather has said since I was five, and he was fifty. Six years ago he began repeating this phrase in earnestness, to make others believe this lapse in memory was only old age, to believe it himself. I haven't lived close to my grandparents since I was nine, and at the end of each trip I took to see them, as a child and then a teenager, my grandfather would end the visit with a fierce hug. He would pull away, pat my shoulder, and declare that he might not be around the next time I came back. *Old age, you know*. I didn't know.

I usually fly to visit my grandparents twice a year, with children and spouse in tow. For the last six years, perhaps even since the start of this metamorphosis, I have made it a priority to see my grandparents more. We leave our home in the chilly northwest in January or February, so vitamin D deficient we shiver as the sun penetrates and warms our pale skin while we walk on the beach. Our second visit might happen anytime between August and September. The last time we'd flown during October, when I finally met the version of my grandfather who didn't remember my name, my decision was based on my ability to purchase the cheapest plane tickets possible.

I'd stepped out of the John Wayne airport in Orange Country, children and husband blinking into the sunlight behind me. We were enveloped with a thick blanket of sun and the Santa Ana winds blew and flicked our hair into our eyes. We drove to my grandmother's house, where my grandfather had just woken up. It

was early afternoon. He smiled. I greeted him and then saw the way his face remained empty. During previous visits, I would have walked him through my lineage. This time it seemed easier for him if I remained a mystery. If I didn't walk him through it the first time, it wouldn't pain me when I had to do it a second, third, fourth time. If he didn't know who I was he didn't have to pretend making connections up and down the family tree: *I am Briana, daughter of Christine, daughter of your wife, Tommie. I have children of my own but you can't remember their names either. You once took me to the reptile museum where I saw a snake devour the shivering flesh of a tiny mouse. Before you began choking on everything, you loved macadamia nuts.*

If he didn't know who I was, he didn't have to remember all he was forgetting.

Six years ago, before our family routinely called it Alzheimer's, my grandmother asked me to run an errand with my grandfather. He did nothing to conceal his irritation when she handed me his car keys. He began to mumble under his breath, shuffled behind me as we walked out the front door. In his car he began to rant. *The doctor never said I couldn't drive. It was my damned wife who decided it. I'm an excellent driver*, *never been in an accident, not for a long time.* Although I'd heard it was his doctor who suggested he stop driving, it seemed easier for my grandfather to blame his wife alone. I tried to joke that I was his chauffeur service for the day, as though the fact that he was being shuffled around

by a girl a quarter of his age was supposed to make him feel special. He crossed his arms and stared out the window, silent. When we arrived at the store I grabbed the requested items and was ready to leave. *Wait, there's um something I need too*. I trailed behind him as he stared in frustration at the neatly packed items on the shelves. It was like he was begging the boxes of crackers and bags of beef jerky to speak to him, to tell him what it was he was looking for, what he'd forgotten. An employee wandered up to us, *did we need any help*? My grandfather tried to explain himself. *I'm looking for something, maybe you don't carry it anymore*. The employee wanted to know the name of the product. *Well I um can't exactly remember what it's called, old age and rigor mortis is setting in ya know*. My eyes ached at this dialogue between the two men. I needed to let the tears fall to relieve the pressure there, at the new image I had of my grandfather standing in an aisle, berating himself for forgetting. Instead, I gave the employee an apologetic smile. We left the store.

During my grandmother's party, I sat in the chair next to my grandfather, and watched as he beckoned my seven year old daughter to come see him. She bowed her head and shuffled awkwardly towards him. She knows him even less than he knows her. I had in that moment the uncomfortable feeling that I was watching a younger version of myself. When I was seven I sat on my grandfather's knee while he taught me to say the alphabet backwards. Watching my daughter with the man I'd known as my grandfather was like watching a

familiar movie while falling asleep. I knew how the next scene ended but behind my eyelids the image became distorted and warped as I moved through the stages of consciousness and into a deep sleep.

My daughter eventually bounded away to play with her cousins. It was my grandmother's seventy-third birthday and various aunts, uncles, and cousins walked through the door. I watched my grandfather stare at them. His blue eyes seemed to struggle to decipher the chaos of coats being removed, hugs being issued. Or maybe I struggled to see him go blank.

He pointed a bony finger in the direction of my uncle. *Who's that*? He asked me. I wanted to tell him it was his son, Joe, the one who plays the guitar and sings, he set your garage on fire when he was fourteen, you have matching dress blues from your services in the Marines, he's the uncle who took me to Disneyland on the only day it rained hard enough to flood Toon-Town. I said nothing because I knew I'd have to yell it in my grandfather's ear and I was embarrassed for my uncle to discover he'd been forgotten.

My aunt kneeled beside my grandfather to say hello. Because I hadn't answered his question, he asked my aunt instead.

"That's your son, daddy. His name is Joe. We call him Jodi, remember? He's going to call you dad." My aunt moved back to the kitchen and I asked my grandfather how his day was.

"The military isn't what it used to be, they flip a coin to make a decision and before it's landed they've changed their minds."

My question went unanswered. I wanted to ask him, do you see that faded green table outside on your patio? We sat there years ago and you taught me how a compass works. The sun shone through the slats of the roof. You explained how lost people could get. You may have referenced your time in Vietnam, when you'd moved through thick jungles that smelled wet with despair. Or maybe you simply told me that using a compass was a basic skill everyone should possess. On a sheet of blank paper you drew the ordinal points in your careful writing. North, East, South, West. You showed me that our sense of direction could get even more specific if we continued to dissect the points. How many different points were there on the compass, I wanted to know? As many as it took to get home.

Although he hadn't remembered his son, Jodi, when Jodi walked up to my grandfather and saluted him, my grandfather straightened in his recliner, his eyes brightening at the familiar signal. He returned the salute, his posture perfect.

In those twilight hours before sunset, the ambiguity of the day became almost palpable. *It's called sundowners,* my grandmother told me when I asked her why visits at night were harder for him. Time ceased to exist for my grandfather in the evening. He would be in the middle of a TV show and suddenly become worried that his two youngest daughters weren't home yet. My grandmother, her patience as worn as his mind, would remind him that they were grown and didn't live there anymore. These answers, quickly forgotten, only made

him more worried. Eventually, my grandmother was coached to say *they called and they'll be home soon*.

One of the mornings at my grandparents, I picked a book off the worn coffee table that has existed since my childhood. I have a scar that runs across my head, evidence that at the age of three or four, I fell on the table's corner. The book is called *The 36-Hour Day*. It is the equivalent of an Alzheimer's for Dummies book. I flipped through its pages and wondered how often my grandmother sat studying these words, trying to construct a new life with my grandfather, one where she had to show him where to put his TV tray when he was done using it, the hall closet where she kept the same spare jackets for the last forty years, one where she had to show him where his bed was every single night.

I picked up the book because I hoped I might have a better understanding of who my grandfather was becoming. I coursed through its pages for only a few minutes. Reading about the deficiencies of rotransmitters, specifically acetylcholine, the importance of maintaining a neutral nonverbal body language when speaking with an Alzheimer's patient, and how to baby-proof a house the man had lived in all his life, didn't help my grandfather remember that on Saturdays, when I was a child, he'd take me with him to get donuts, or that his favorite was the maple bar.

A few hours before I left to fly back home I offered to put gas in my grandfather's car. My grandmother uses it once a week to go grocery shopping. It's the only time she leaves him unattended. She asked me to get it cleaned too, and so my husband and I departed to the nearest car wash. The phone bleated out instructions: *a left on Euclid, another left on Harbor Blvd, arrived at destination.* I told my husband that when I was a child, my grandfather took me with him every Saturday to get his car washed. We pulled in, handed over our keys, and walked inside the low squat building to pay. It took being in the muggy office, the shelves of the walls stacked with candy's, and magazines, the vending machines dustier than I remembered, for me to realize out of the eight car washes near my grandparents' house, we'd chosen the one my grandfather had used. My husband stood at the long window like a small child, entranced by being able to watch the car move through the building, being soaped and scrubbed and hosed off as it glided along the track. I trailed behind my husband and let the memories come back to me in vapors. Was this how my grandfather felt as he studied our faces, our children, as he tried to piece his life back together when his memories came at him in wisps his mind struggled to grasp?

The first full day we were there with them, I asked my grandmother if my grandfather could still read. He was at that moment sitting in his recliner staring at the paper. *I don't think so*, she said. She'd watched him for a half hour before, looking at the same paper, never turning the page.

At her birthday party, when I'd sat next to him and he'd forgotten his son, he'd held a glossy coupon in his hand. As if I'd asked a question he answered my presence saying, "This here's a coupon I get from the military. They've got these discounts on beer and wine and stuff. You know I never was much of a drinker. I'd have a glass of wine or two a night, nothing much. I like to look at the coupons though." He set it down on the table in between us. It was a coupon for tires.

I imagine my grandfather's mind two different ways. In the first, memories have decomposed to resemble dust motes. They drift in an empty labyrinth of corridors. In the second, the same twisted maze of halls are bursting with eighty years of evidence to a life brilliantly and painfully lived. The memories are stacked and shoved, tucked tightly together into every crevice, but they are covered in a thick ash of burned synapses. I want to believe that my grandfather's memories are still there, whole and untouched but draped in dark fabric like possessions in the house of a dead man. Instead, I've seen only the motley of purple and black spots that cover his arms, his hands.

Does he know her name? I'd asked my aunt earlier in the day, referring to my grandmother. She shrugged, did it matter?

"Tommie doesn't let me do anything anymore, but I think it's because she wants to take care of me," he had whispered to me in confidence, sitting there beside his coupon that wasn't for beer, near the patio where he'd taught me how to navigate, in the recliner where I'd learned the alphabet backwards, down the street

from the reptile museum and Dey's Donuts, to this granddaughter he couldn't remember.

Songs of My Father

I met my father when I was six months old. There is a picture of him holding me for the first time in the doorway of my grandmother's house. A military issued-desert hat, the color of sand and rock rests on his back, the string pressed against his weather-worn neck. I sit precariously on his tanned arm, a pudgy wary-eyed baby, while he grins into the camera. He had just returned from a year in Saudi Arabia.

This picture defines my childhood. There are others like it: yearly photographs that capture his returns to our family. These pictures act as evidence that we were growing up and apart during his long absences. As the photo series progresses, his grin seems to fade and his eyes grow more distant, while I become less cautious and cling to his khaki uniform tightly. Instead, my reality was always this: orders were received, gear checked, bags packed, boots shined, and my father's hair trimmed. He put his jeans and t-shirts away in the back of his closet where his clothes went musty from the humidity. There was nothing for me to do then, except wait.

Days after my father was gone, I'd stand with other swollen-eyed children, friends whose fathers left with mine, in the school gym to sing patriot songs: the *Marines Hymn*, *This Land is Your Land*, and *America the Beautiful*. As our voices rose, I felt the great sweeping elation of our unity, our collective anger and pride

and fear bubbling up and out of us, loud enough, we hoped, for our fathers to hear us from their tents in the sand. When the last off-key voice quieted, there was only the sound of our ragged breathing, our beating hearts.

I am a parent of a daughter now, a petite seven-year-old with a gregarious and inquisitive nature. Madison was one when I left her father, Brian, forcing her to become a child of a poorly functioning fractured parent home. In the first few weeks of our separation, her father and I worked out a makeshift custody agreement. He would get her every other weekend and one evening during the week. The total number of days he saw her in a month came out to around six. He didn't ask for more time, and then I was happy. I had purposefully never stopped to count the number of days I'd seen my own father, perhaps because I was afraid to reduce our relationship to a number that small. I had hoped Madison would grow up accustomed to seeing her father a handful of times a month. This arrangement might seem normal to her, and she would never question the immediacy of his love.

It has been six years and she cries when she cannot see him. A few months ago, after calling and getting his voicemail, her voice thickened with grief, and she cried fat tears. She missed him. She was angry at him. He never answered her calls. Why? It is not the amount of time that has passed that bothers her. At least I don't think so. Time is merely the physical remnant of the absence of her father. The absence of her father looks like a driveway that stays empty, the smell of

gasoline and fresh cut grass missing from her clothes, the phone that remains silent. Madison knows it is supposed to be different. Is this subconscious understanding some co-evolutionary trait? At the most basic biological level, parents and their children exist symbiotically and inter-dependently. But this deconstructed explanation removes the dull ache of parental absence. It reduces the situation to a stream of facts. Small girls care nothing for facts. The Portuguese call it *saudade*: the feelings that remain after a person is gone, someone who may or may not be coming back. There is no word for it in English. When you say it, it sounds like a sob, like the way grief feels. She is filled with the ache of uncertainty: will she see her father again?

My father's departures were the images of him kneeling next to me, the sky grey with early fog, the air cool, and me shivering inside my jacket. The hug of him all starch and Kiwi and salt water: the smell of formality. He was saying goodbye and I was glaring at the ugly ship behind him, grey and imposing. I wanted to bury myself into the scratchy uniform on his chest until I felt delirious from the fumes oozing from his jacket. And then we would walk away, my mother, sister and me, back to the car without him. As the weeks bled into months, his scent dissipated from the house. I distinctly remember kicking the wall next to my bed when I was four or five after my father had left. I howled, the hurt inside so great I thought it might crush me, turn me inside out. The pain of my bare feet meeting the walls matched how I felt inside. We called his absence *away on ship*.

It meant eight to ten months of my mother, sister, and me, alone. It meant packing cardboard boxes full of homemade Rice Krispy treats, packs of gum, playing cards, letters, socks, magazines, chapstick, and cookies. It meant a fierce desire to hide myself in the box.

I tell some of these stories to Brian. *I don't want you and Madison to have the same relationship that my dad and I do*. He instantly panics at the thought of being compared to my father. *Of course we won't have a relationship like yours*, he reassures me. *I promise I'll be there for Madison more*. And he will. For a few weeks he's present and available and pours out his love for her. She notices the extra attention, and she notices the way it ebbs and then stops. She is presented with the potential of a better relationship and then watches while it fades away. She cries, *I wish my dad lived with us, like other girls in my class*. I want to believe that I wish he hadn't put forth the extra effort at all. But that is a lie I've told myself for years.

Once, before my parents divorced, my father stayed home with me while I was sick. This memory hazed with fever and time, prevents me from remembering why it was my father and not my mother who stayed. I was sick and still I was eager at the prospect of spending uninterrupted hours with my father. His presence was a commodity we, my mother, sister, and I, fought for. I lay on the cool sheets of my bed, faced the big blank wall, and shivered. Our house was ugly, my grandmother said so, but I loved it. I loved the cool tile under my feet, and the big

windows that commanded a view of the ocean. Our house often boasted a slew of invaders. Troops of maggots and slugs advanced toward the threshold of our slider door at night. In the morning my mother would open the door—she loved the smell of salt-water moving in currents throughout the house—and cry out in disgust when she accidently tramped on the slimly battlefield.

The day I was sick, skin taut and prickly against the cool air, the wall next to my bed lit up like a TV screen. I blinked my eyes hard, but the images stayed. Cartoon characters bounced around on my wall, each inside its own little box. At first I was thrilled. I tried to focus on a single TV screen, but found that I couldn't. I was taking in all the images at once, and I felt like I did when I floated on my back in the ocean: body weightless, my heavy head filled with salt water. I called out to my father, rolled over, and threw up violently onto the floor.

He rushed in, dressed in jeans and a shirt. His blue Levis were a shock to me. I rarely saw him without his uniform on. I don't think my father was good at taking care of me that day. I'm sure he cleaned up the mess I'd made, and probably called my mother to ask her what to do. He seemed frustrated and helpless, wiping up chunky regurgitated bits of cheerios and curdled milk with large handfuls of paper towels. What I remember though, is that after he cleaned me up and I was back in bed, he sat beside me in his crisp blue jeans. And he did not look like my father and maybe that was the fever rendering him foreign, but when he sat down beside me he still smelled like Kiwi, like my father, the Marine, and sleep found me.

A memory: we were going to the beach. I was riding in the backseat of daddy's car, and my legs were sticky against the black seat; each time I moved my skin pulled away like a band aid being ripped off. Daddy rolled down his window. Ocean air hit my face, my hair was in my eyes but I was grinning, mouth open tasting the salty ocean air, the way it burned going down.

At the beach I would beg him to carry me across the hot sand. I knew I was too big to be carried, but I was going to make up for all the times he hadn't been here, smelling like Kiwi and starch. I would beg to be carried and when he said yes I would rest my head on his shoulder, feel his skin on mine, how small I was next to him, and I would say in my head, *do not forget this, do not forget this.*

We were going to the beach without my baby sister or mommy. This meant that daddy was mine, that I was his, that right then, wind rushing up my nose, the blue line of the ocean coming closer, I could pretend he loved me the most.

He did carry me across the hot sand. I didn't try to hide my smile. His face scrunched up but he didn't complain about his feet, the way I knew they were burning as he raced towards the shore. It was enough to be held.

We got to the shore and I jumped from his arms and raced through the layers of foam and seaweed until I was stomach deep in cold salty water. I dove under and felt the water numbing my thoughts, filling my ears with the deep pounding quiet.

When I looked for Daddy he was laying out the gold and red blanket, the one with the Marine emblem on it. It's the blanket my sister and I hid under when he was gone and we were afraid and scared and lonely. It seemed wrong to bring it to the beach but I didn't say that. Instead I waved until he saw me.

"Come play with me," I shouted. I watched him shiver as he entered the water. "Take me to the big waves," I commanded. I didn't actually like the big waves, they scared me. They rolled up with speed and I was afraid of drowning each time. But when Daddy held me it was safe. I could wrap my legs tight around his body and laugh at the big waves that couldn't knock him down.

He picked me up, shivered as my wet skin clung to his and walked farther into the deep. It was enough to be held. He ran with me through the water. When I got cold he carried me back to the blanket and wrapped me in a towel. My legs stuck out like broken pelican wings. He opened an orange soda for me, dug a hole beside the blanket, and placed my soda in the cup holder he fashioned in the sand.

"Daddy, what would happen if bad guys came here," I asked.

"Bad guys won't come here," he stated, so precise I almost believed him.

"But what if they do?"

"Then the Marines will protect you."

"But what if you're away on ship?"

"Then I would leave and come back. I would run and rescue you and your sister and mommy." I was placated by his lie, and returned my attention to the soda.

We were back in the car, driving home to mommy and sister. My skin was warm and tingled like goosebumps. My hair was drying crunchy from the ocean. I was tired but I didn't close my eyes because I didn't want to forget Daddy's arms around me, squinting in the sun, hot sand, sand on our soda cans, splashing in the ocean, the roar and crash of waves as I hummed a song I learned at school.

My mother once described to me a time when she and my father were stuck on the freeway together—typical Californian traffic. They were wedged in between thousands of other cars, all sputtering and humming on the hot asphalt. *And there I was with your dad*, she told me, *hours alone together with nowhere to go. It was wonderful*.

My father saw me for two hours every year from the time I was ten until the time I was eighteen. A formal custody agreement gave him three months annually. I spent summers with my mom's parents, and it was there that he'd stride through my grandmother's back door. He returned every year, always looking a little older, a little more harried. (On at least two uncharacteristic occasions, I stayed with him for a full week. His house was bright and too clean. Countertops empty of crumbs. The sink gleamed with newness; I doubt it ever held a dirty coffee cup. Bare white walls threw back the silence. The visits were marked by trips to movies, a place where our silences could be filled with the problems of archetypal characters whose plot lines were cleaner than ours. *Let's go swimming*, my father would

announce, and my sister and I would clamber to get our suits on. When we arrived at the pool we watched our father swim laps: a pale fish slicing through water. By the time he was finished, he was too tired to swim with us.)

It was the same every year. I leapt into his arms, despite months I'd spent planning to act indifferent to his arrival. Then he drove my sister and me to Claim Jumpers or Denny's. We ordered, and filled awkward silences with stories that began with "remember when," since we had so few new stories to tell. My father always inevitably said the same four things: "I'm proud of you," "You know the value of a dollar," "I'm praying for you," and, "You know I love you." The words fell onto the empty table in front of us, splattered there like the menus we'd already looked at. He stared at us awkwardly, unsure of himself.

I didn't think my father knew who I was. I was a girl who measured her worth by how many boys led her into quiet corners to grip her back with their sweaty hands, and breathe hard into her neck. My father, unaware, praised me for my resourceful and level head. He claimed that God loved me, and in this love I might find the peace my earthly father couldn't give. But my father prayed to the God of Abraham, who bound his son with rope, a blade held over pale neck. I prayed to the man who pulled children into his lap to tell stories, and taught them how to love.

So we ate our salads, our pancakes, our ice cream, and he drove us back to my grandmother's house. Then he hugged me goodbye, repeated the lines of the role he played, and was gone. Over the next year he would send me a few emails,

and some hand-written letters, and I would rebel at the idea that our relationship was defined by the amount of money my father spent on postage stamps. His phone calls were brief, three to four minutes where he told me he was praying for me. His letters were always cryptic, always signed, *I'm proud of you. You know I love you, Dad*.

My father came to my high school graduation. The day he arrived, he, my sister, and I sat around a sticky table eating burritos. My father began speaking in the only way he knew how, until my sister and I stopped him. *Dad*, we said*, if all you're going to do is say the things you always say, then you should leave now. We want to have real conversations with you. We want to know you, our father, not the man who commands men*.

He sat there shocked. I think we were shocked too. To have taken a stand and said the things that had been on our minds for the last ten years.

For the next three days he told us stories. He made us laugh. We hadn't known he was so funny. Or that he was a trouble-maker in high school and had plastered bologna on someone's car in the midday sun and it had fried there to the paint. We didn't know he liked the Food Network Channel. We didn't know he was capable of that with us. When we knew, we wanted more.

When I was twenty, Madison, Brian, and I visited my step-sister, Alexis—my father's second wife's daughter—at her home in Southern California. We

drove through Camp Pendleton's brown gates, past bored-looking armed guards, and they lazily waved our vehicle forward. Alexis's military-issued-house was, like my childhood house had been, within a few miles of the ocean. Standing on her patio, the sun on my back, briny air whipping hair into my face, the years away melted and unearthed the image of my father and me, at the beach, my small hand in his.

In her house, the air-conditioner hummed and ticked, and the tiles were cold and sticky on my bare feet. I introduced her to my one-year-old daughter and her father, my boyfriend. Later Alexis pulled me into the kitchen to ask if I was really happy with Brian. I shrugged. I knew even then that he and I weren't going to make it. It seemed instead a matter of how long we might ride it out, our relationship a turbulent wave that had peaked and was slowing as it reached the shore. Leaning there against my step-sister's kitchen counter, just a few miles from my own childhood home, I felt strangely impartial to the prospect of our eventual dissolution.

Alexis was throwing a birthday party for her daughter the next day and asked if we wanted to come. She mentioned my father would be there and then seemed shocked I hadn't known. Her relationship with my father had always seemed more complete than my own. She once told me she didn't understand why he didn't return my calls. I called him then.

"What are you doing tomorrow?" I blurted out as he answered, his "Hello" as precise as his service in the military had been.

“Oh geez,” he hemmed and hawed, “well I’m actually in California right now, we’re still trying to sell the house, and I’m going to a birthday party for Kaelynn.”

“Dad, we’re here right now visiting. We should get together. You can meet your granddaughter.” The ocean rumbled in my ear.

“Oh well I’ll have to see if we have any other plans and get back to you, I’m not sure what we have going on.”

“Ya, no worries,” I forced myself to say. I said goodbye and hung up the phone.

From the time of my parent’s divorce when I was five, my relationship with my father had been as wild as the ocean’s currents. If I looked far out across the span of our relationship, everything seemed glassy and smooth. It was only when I paused for breath with longing—for a dad who wanted to know what books I was reading and who’d I’d gone to homecoming with and what my favorite color was and how I imagined a different life with him and how I hated that he sent money for my birthday every year because it felt like a bribe, a buy-out for a father who wasn’t ever there— that I noticed the way dirty foam bubbled on a shore littered with trash. As a teenager I would often call him during the months I knew he was home. Two or three minutes into the conversation he would say he was busy and could he call me back soon? Then months would pass before I called him again. He was still in the service and moved around every few years. Despite this, he and

his wife frequently visited her daughter in California. He had visited me twice in the eight years since I'd lived in Washington. The last time he came I was pregnant. It was his first time meeting my boyfriend. *He seems like a good guy*, my dad remarked to me after visiting with him for only a few hours. *It's weird*, my mom had said, *how similar your dad and Brian are*.

Months after our last phone call, when he was too busy to see me, he texted me to ask for my address; he wanted to send a Christmas card and gift to his granddaughter. My address had changed since I'd separated from Brian. I asked him not to send us anything anymore.

When Madison was two she threw a tantrum so violent, kicking walls and screeching in my face, that I became livid, then silent. When she was calm enough, she sat in my mother's lap and sobbed. I sat in the chair next to them, arms crossed, hands clenched.

"Why are you upset," my mom asked. At first, Madison refused to answer, instead issuing a series of aggravated grunts. My mom persisted.

Madison finally bleated, "I just really miss my Daddy," and the torrent of tears that had mostly subsided began again.

I hid my face in my hands and wept. In that moment I lost track of who I was. Was I my daughter, sitting in her mother's lap, or was I my mother? Or were we collectively the female version of the trinity, all existing within each other's pain?

When my daughter cries for her father, I am incapable of detaching myself from her grief. Not because I am her mother but because when she tells me that her throat hurts from her sadness, I am once again that same child, weeping for my father. I'll say, *When I was little my dad was gone all the time,* and*, I haven't seen him in eight years,* so she won't feel so alone in her suffering.

My mother used to beg my father to see my sister and me. She'd cry, threaten, bargain, and plead, whatever she thought it might take so he would take us for more than a few hours a year. When I was angry at his absence and needed to find fault with someone, my mother was always closest. *Why can't I live with him*, I'd yell at her. And always, unflinching, though she later admitted the great pain these statements caused her, she'd tell me simply, *He's allowed to have you for three months out of the year*. She never added, *but he doesn't*.

So I do the same. I call Brian and I beg. I plead. I want to document Madison's tears, record and send them to him and say, *See how she aches?* I want his tears to match her own, until he says, *Yes, yes, I can see her needs, and I can meet them now, now that I know.* But I don't.

How do we measure our fathers' love: In the amount of money he spends on postage; the brief phone calls filled with the static of thousands of miles of distance; hugs that feel formal and forced; emails that are cryptic or go completely unanswered? In the beginning it was easy for me to find fault with Brian. Now, I understand that people can become accustomed to anything. Because we have had

our current unofficial custody agreement for so long, I believe Brian is complacent with the schedule. It works for him. When Madison asks him why she can't see him more, he says that he's busy at work, or he's already made plans. He promises to see her later. "Later" never means "now". For years I never considered what it must feel like to have to ask to see his child. Perhaps the pain of feeling like he wasn't allowed to be the primary parent anymore, because he had to ask for what was rightly his, was greater than the pain of not seeing her for days on end. Perhaps he felt as though he had been typecast by me: one day he was the father playing airplane with his daughter, stopping for breaks of Cheerios and cups of milk; the next day he was only allowed to see his daughter every other weekend. Perhaps the situation itself—he is not the primary parent—is the reason he stays away. In which case, I am equally and painfully at fault.

My father too, had his own reasons for his absence. He was away for a year at a time, home for only a few months, and then gone again. It wasn't a choice, he'd tell me over phone calls. *I know your mom is taking really good care of you girls*, he'd say. *I'm sending you some money; look for it in the mail*. *I don't want money, I want you*, I'd tell him, to which there was never a response.

By the time she was three, Madison could call her father unassisted. She'd wait patiently for him to answer. Except that he rarely did. She is seven now. "I want to call my dad," she'll state, "I know he probably won't answer, I'll leave him a message."

Madison makes more phone calls to her father than I ever did to mine.

Brian and I still don't have a custody agreement. I think when we separated around the time of our daughters' first birthday, we were both too afraid to go to court. We liked the idea that we were mature enough to figure out visitation rights without the ruling of a judge. So on the weekends when she goes to her dad's house, I'll sit to my bowl of oatmeal at breakfast, and I'll pray that God nourishes the food to my body, keeps my loved ones safe, and helps strengthen the relationship between my daughter and her father, amen.

On Sunday night she trudges through the door, usually with frizzled, unkempt hair, clothes she has been wearing since the day before, and tells me that the only thing she ate that day were cookies and a pickle for breakfast. I ignore the hair, the clothes, the food, and I ask her if she had fun. Her father will have just pulled out of the driveway, and she will turn to me with red eyes about to spill over and say, "My dad didn't spend any time with me."

"Well what did you do?" I'll ask as I pull her into my lap.

"He played video games and I played by myself." She'll bury her face into my shoulder. "He said he had work to do on his computer and he ignored me. He took me to grandma and grandpa's house and I spent the night there, without him."

In those moments I struggle to remain only her mother: stable and emotionally capable of helping her separate her feelings. What I want to do is shrink, grow smaller, until my body closely resembles hers, and I can take her hand in mine and tell her that I'm angry at my father too—we are sisters in our pain.

Madison's relationship with her dad is not always turbulent, and it is unfair of me to paint it so. I try to help my daughter concentrate on the good. When she has an exceedingly great time with him—when they have read books, built ships out of Legos, and watched shows together—we talk about it in detail. When she is able to spend extra time with him, she waits half anxious and excited by the door until his silver sedan pulls into the driveway. "He's here, he's here," she shouts, throwing on her coat and running outside to leap into his arms. Her excitement is painfully beautiful. I ache for the possibility of her continued joy. I worry that my insistence that they have a better relationship has more to do with me than it does with her. Because I do not want my daughter to grow up angry and unwanted, I push at her father to be there more. But perhaps the gestures I use to push him towards his daughter are only pushing him away.

Five years after my visit to California, when my father had chosen something else—a wife and step-daughter—over me, my grandmother, my mother's mother, called me to talk about love. I do not remember who brought up the conversation. But I do remember these exact words.

"You cannot give up on your father."

"Why," I begged her, sobbing into the phone. "Why do I have to be the one to try so hard? Why do I always have to call him, why doesn't he ever return my calls, why doesn't he want to see me more? Why can't we have a different relationship?"

“Briana, I can’t answer that. But I know that when you get to the end of your life you will regret the opportunity you might have had.”

“Grandma, it hurts to love him. It hurts to have him in my life.”

“Of course it does. Love is pain.”

The wounds I’d pretended were healing had only festered over time. My anger and love and pain bubbled beneath the surface of a deteriorating skin. I knew enough about medicine to know that I’d have to cut the wound open again in order to clean it. I trapped my frustration onto a page and sent it to him. *I want something different from you*, I wrote. *I want you to be the dad who’s there, the one who wants to know what I do for fun, the one who shares jokes with me, and takes me to lunch, the one who doesn’t have to say he loves me.* He responded with his own misunderstandings. He blamed me for shutting him out. I blamed him for pushing me away. We didn’t see that we were fighting for the same thing.

Eventually, after several angry emails and the dwindling possibility of our relationship moving forward, I wrote, *You had the opportunity to see me and you didn’t. Why didn’t you love me enough to be there?* I specifically referred to the time in California when we’d been less than fifty miles from each other, but I realize now that I was asking the question for a lifetime of absence.

I can’t remember what his response was, but I can remember that he didn’t blame the military, my mother, or me. He apologized, not as a captain of the Marines, or the ex-husband of a mother doing a good job, but as my father. And

there seemed to be a shuddering intake of breath issue from both of us, in this admission.

When I emailed him a few years ago, my father had told that we might never have the relationship I wanted. It just wasn't what he could give. He'd asked if he could call me and I had said no, that I felt less vulnerable on the safety of the page. And that was true until the day, years later, I'd found out I was having a miscarriage. After his career in the Marines he had become a nurse, a healer of wounds. I was broken and empty and I called him to say, *I'm bleeding*, and *I hurt*. He talked to me for an hour: as a nurse, as a friend, and as my father.

I call my father more often now.

"What's up," he'll ask.

I need to speak to a nurse, I'll tell him.

"Shoot."

And then he'll listen while I explain the symptoms. He interjects to specify: pain in the abdomen or the belly button? Does she have a temperature over 101? I can see him nodding on the other end of the line before he begins to give me his advice. We use medicine as code to talk about other things. He says, *my knees are shot, I can't run marathons anymore, I had to find new hobbies,* and *I'm lonely*. I say, *Madison complains of stomach problems. Is something actually wrong; should I take her to the doctor, am I a good mother?*

Recently I called him on behalf of Madison. On the other end of the line, his voice sounded deep with fatigue. After explaining her symptoms he told me to take her to the ER. It was almost midnight. *Call me back and let me know what happens, ok*, he'd said. In the car on the way to the hospital, Madison, shaking in the back seat asked, "Is my dad coming?" I'd called him after I got off the phone with my own father. Her dad wouldn't come. He said he had to work the next day and besides, the hospital was too far away. I told her he wasn't. She began to cry.

"Why?"

"Because sometimes people don't make the right choices."

"When he does these things I don't think he loves me." She shivered from her fever and sobbed.

I couldn't respond. At the hospital, her father sent me text after text, asking if we'd been seen or not, and how was Madison doing. I asked Madison if she wanted to call her father.

"No, it's not the same as seeing him," she grumbled from her hospital bed. I nodded. I knew.

On the phone my father had closed our conversation with a familiar hymn.

"You know I love you and I'm always praying for you."

I know, dad, I know, I'd whispered.

And I did.

I hoped that someday my daughter would know her father loved her too.

Opal Ring

I was twelve when my aunt—my father's half-sister—was almost sixteen. In this, the surest memory I have of her, we lay outside in her Nebraska backyard on beach towels that looked out of place, a west coast symbol of relaxation amidst a thousand worked-over acres of hardy corn fields. The air is cool and sweet with wet farmland and manure. I study my aunt's figure. She is a pale swan in the midday light, her body practically trembling beneath the sun's weak rays. She occasionally flips from her stomach to her back, and maintains a fast paced conversation about music, school, and boys. I listen and am embarrassed when I don't have anything to add.

"I'm hungry," I say awkwardly. She smiles.

"Ok, let's raid the kitchen." She is swift to her feet, her body lithe and sure of itself. I struggle like a colt to find my footing, my body too tall and ungainly to attempt a cartwheel. In the kitchen my aunt unearths bags of Doritos. She tells me a story about ghosts living in her house that I want to believe but don't. Back outside she munches on a few chips and continues to tell me what being fifteen is like.

I shove a few chips in my mouth while she talks, the salt and sharp cheese coat my tongue in a happy residue. I have eaten several handfuls when I notice my aunt has stopped eating. I am embarrassed at my hunger and although I think I

could consume the rest of the bag, I force myself to stop. She doesn't seem to notice.

Later, we are eating dinner with her mother, my Grandma Dixie. My aunt is trying to convince her to let her buy an opal ring she saw at the mall.

"It's eighty dollars and I can do a payment plan," she argues across plates of noodles and sauce.

"You're only fifteen, an opal ring isn't appropriate. Besides," Grandma Dixie replies, "I don't think a payment plan is a good idea. That takes a lot of responsibility."

My aunt continues to plead her case while I silently gobble my way through dinner, in awe of the scene unfolding before me: a fifteen year old asserting her place as a woman in her parents' world.

At night I sleep on my aunt's floor. She's cleared a spot for me by kicking clothes and shoes out of the way. There are posters of singers I've never heard of, and pictures of my aunt smiling with friends, a boyfriend: a collage of life that litters the wall behind her bed. She has a computer in her room and her screensaver plays a Mariah Carey song on repeat. Mariah's high pitched crooning pierces the deepest part of my dreams.

I am twenty-seven and my aunt is thirty-one when she dies. Our ages do not define us and yet I cannot stop myself from ruminating on the number, thirty-one. Twelve, fifteen, twenty-seven, thirty-one, thirty-one, thirty-one. She leaves behind three daughters, ages five, three, and eighteen months. My own daughters are

seven, and ninth months. I write Grandma Dixie a letter. I haven't seen her in fifteen years.

Her response is dutiful. She talks about the diagnosis, quick decline, my aunt's decision to put herself in hospice, the hardiness of her granddaughters. She says, "How blessed I am to have known her for thirty-one years, to have been there when she took her first breath and her last." She says that she knows she will see her daughter again.

I stare at opal rings on the internet. At twelve I hadn't known what opal was. I'd been a silent observer to a girl fighting her mother to become a woman. The ring had seemed a symbol of what leaving girlhood behind looked like. Girls became women when they did not consume entire bags of Doritos while sun-bathing. They fought their mothers to buy rings that looked like a dime-sized portion of heaven on a payment plan.

I don't know if she ever convinced her mother to let her buy the one she'd seen in a store window and fallen in love with. I hope Grandma Dixie said yes. That she'd looked at the fierceness in her daughter's eyes, the determination set in her full lips and slender face, and she'd seen a woman-warrior there, trembling with anger, desire, love, with life. I see it like a silent movie: my aunt striding up to a counter, pointing a long finger at an object beneath a thick sheet of glass, a delicate ring extracted and placed upon her hand.

I want to believe the ring is resting in a box somewhere, dust forming a thick layer and clouding the opaque center. I want to believe that buried away with

her other things are pictures of my aunt, proof of a life lived, and that in these pictures the ring is there, a tiny anchor on her hand. I want to believe I will be there in ten years, with my own daughters fighting to become women, and we will watch as Grandma Dixie presents the opal to my aunt's eldest daughter and says, "This was your mother's, it's time to make it yours."

Roots

The skies are gray again and my garden is dead for the winter. The correct term is "put to bed," and implies that I, the gardener, have taken the steps necessary to remove the weeds, turn the soil, and cover the beds with a thick protective blanket. I can stand at my kitchen sink, coffee cup in hand, and see my garden from the window. The green raised beds are ugly against the backdrop of motley colors of mud-splattered earth and gray skies. The beds do not look restful. They look cold, alone, and out of place. They look dead.

I have taken to staring at my garden a lot lately. Partly because I am not ready for the next six months of aching cold, the way my carpets will turn wet and dingy with shoes that haven't been wiped off properly when entering the house from the bleakness outside. I'll stand in my kitchen, hip resting against the laminate countertop, while the noises of my oldest daughter, Madison, crescendos in the background as she orders her toys around, the quiet void that means the baby, now six months old, is asleep, and I will think about my garden.

The tomatoes were budding. In the early days of summer I walked barefoot through the wet grass, up and down the garden I had planted. I pushed aside the broad leaves of the zucchini, encouraged the beans to climb the trellis, yanked the weeds that surrounded the basil and peppers. At the tomatoes, I lifted the fragile

arms of the vines, and gently maneuvered around leaves and the wire cage that surrounded the plant until I uncovered green orbs no bigger than my thumb. In the last few months of grey streets and wet shoes, I shoved tomato seeds into containers of dirt, watered and watched them break free of their perfect husks. I imagined the roots beneath the soil, a complicated pattern of long white tendrils reaching farther into the depths to secure the plant's existence for another season. In the garden, the tiny green tomatoes in between my fingers, was proof that roots had taken to the earth.

I gazed at my second daughter, Clarke, then eleven days old. She was a collage of wrinkles, soft pudgy skin, and fine hair. I fed her with my body, nestled her against the crook of my arm, changed her diaper, the clothes she spit up on, sang her songs, and told her stories. Unlike my experience with Madison, I met Clarke's cries with smiles, and enfolded her in arms unencumbered with anger, fear, and frustration. When she woke for the second, third, fourth time in the night, I didn't lie in bed unmoving, loving and hating her, hating myself.

As a species we're biologically designed to become addicted to our offspring. A flood of hormones is released as a baby is passed from womb to hands to chest. Oxytocin and prolactin speed through the mother's body, giving her an experience similar to that of someone riding the euphoric waves of cocaine. Her body is physically unable to resist the small, soft creature she has just birthed,

and the new-baby smell is similar to pheromones. These primal responses after birth help seal an instinctual contract between mother and baby.

When I was pregnant with my Madison I clung to these scientific statements like weeds to the cracked earth. My desperation came from the fear that I was incapable of loving the child growing inside me, and that at her birth this insufficiency would be exposed and condemned. I braced myself for this possibility by googling my symptoms: anger, depression, fear. I learned that twenty percent of mothers didn't bond right away with their babies, that it was not, as some thought, the gorilla glue that could hold my daughter and me together. My research did nothing to reassure me that I would ever love my baby, and couldn't stop my growing apprehension that I wasn't fit to be a mother.

I was every stereotype you'd expect from a young unwed and essentially single mother: my child was a product of a short relationship. I was callow, poor, and selfish. At the grocery store or the mall or the DMV, I absorbed the perceived but probably imagined, accusative stares of the men and women around me. Standing there, uncomfortably swollen and every part of me aching, it seemed everyone could tell that I was too much of every negative quality I possessed and not enough of anything good. I was in all ways, inadequate.

When Madison was born people joked, *Too bad there's no manual for that baby*, and *Where's the book that tells you how to turn that thing off*. When they said this, she was inconsolable, her face red and streaked with her tears as well as

my own. I desperately patted her back, jostled her up and down, anything to get her to stop, for the love of God, stop her incessant crying.

I realize now that what I really hungered for wasn't a manual but a farmer's almanac, one that could help me predict the coming storms ahead, and teach me how to weather them.

I stood in the garden, Clarke close to my body in a baby carrier. It was hot and I was sweating but pleased as I twisted fat cherry tomatoes off the vine. I dropped them into a glass bowl with a pleasant plop. I pulled weeds as I saw them, just like my grandmother taught me as a child: grab at the base where the weed meets the soil, twist and pull, make sure you've gotten the root. *If you leave any piece of the root, it will take hold again. Do it right the first time*, she'd instructed. I thought about the weed's resistance to eradication. The roots of tomatoes and zucchinis are not nearly as hardy. Ask any seasoned gardener and they will list for you the ways your plants can die. The roots are only the beginning.

I was harvesting my garden and yanking weeds. I was thinking about the love I had for the baby hot against my chest. I was worried about my oldest daughter, who was on a playdate with a friend, for which I was grateful. I needed the break from her and I'm sure she needed one from me. I went to the garden to find peace in my plant's productivity. I liked the heat of the beds, the hum of bees, and the sticky residue that collected on my fingers when I pinched white flowers off sweet basil. Tending to the earth was a simple task that I could dig into with

mindless pleasure. It was only my second year gardening but already I felt better at it than I did at nurturing Madison. Dirt collected under my fingernails, and I gathered my scattered thoughts, attempted to place them as neatly as I did the tomatoes in the glass bowl. I could see that the root of this problem with my daughter was me. And I didn't know if my love for her was like the weed or the plant. One was resilient, capable of growing back with only the smallest sliver of cells left in the soil, and the other weak and easily removed. Or perhaps that was a ridiculous thing to compare love to. Surely my love was there, hidden beneath layers of exhaustion, and a growing list of things I wasn't accomplishing. The roots were only the beginning. It would take hold again. It would take hold again.

Madison's face is losing its softness. She looks less like the toddler I cared for and more like a small adult I'm not sure is mine. During the summer she would play in the corner of the yard, next to the dollhouse she had constructed out of mismatched pieces of wood, sticks and leaves. It was less a dollhouse and often what she called a worm habitat. When my husband and I found thick pale worms, we brought them for her to care for. In these moments I rediscovered my joy with her. I felt it reignite as I watched her tender compassion for something as simple as an earthworm. My heart ached with the burdensome weight of love. Always, too quickly, this sweet moment was followed by whining when we asked her to help us pick green beans or tomatoes or zucchinis, and the swelling in my chest was replaced with weariness.

At some point it became apparent to me that my children have different mothers. When my husband struggled with the baby, clumsily trying to fasten her diaper, or when he struggled to burp her, his hand barely patting her back, I could take her in my arms with confidence and know exactly what she needed. In that exact same moment we would be trying to decide a consequence for Madison, who would have committed some nominal crime that needed reprimanding. *What should we do*? My husband would ask. I would shrug my confidence and certainty gone. *I don't know*, I'd tell him, *I'm making this up as I go along*.

The tomato plant's root system makes up a third of the plant's total weight. It anchors the prickly stem, absorbs and conducts water, and stores the products of photosynthesis so that the plant will thrive despite its conditions. The root is an easily forgettable component, buried beneath the layers of soft earth, but vital to the fruit the tomato will produce. This year our tomatoes seemed strong. They flourished in the spring and the sun sent hot waves into the thick green stalks.

One day I asked Madison to come outside with me. I wanted to imprint my love of gardening, of watching life take root and bloom to her. It didn't matter that I was still largely inexperienced in the way of tending to my growing eggplants and peppers. Perhaps my confidence came from knowing that I could always begin again. That day I dragged her outside, I hoped that she would love the garden's potential as much as me, and that it might be something we could enjoy together. But when she came to stand beside me at the garden bed she screamed at

the sight of bees and ants and aphids. She complained that it was hot and she was thirsty and why couldn't she have ice cream? I went back inside the house to tend to my youngest daughter and Madison shuffled in behind me.

I wondered if Madison could sense the complicated turn our love had taken. Children are native speakers of body language and can construct an entire narrative out of a few spoken words. I cooed and flirted with the baby as I changed her diaper. Madison stood beside me and her eyes absorbed the scene before her. She tried to pat her sister's head and I snapped at her. *Go wash your hands, they're dirty*. She bounded off while I silently scolded myself for my harshness.

Later, I asked her if she wanted to play a game. The baby was down for a nap, and that was my feeble attempt at apologizing for my earlier attitude. I didn't want to play a game. I wanted to lie down on the couch, read a book, or take a nap. Playing games with Madison is almost never fun. She whines when she loses and gloats when she wins. Each game is an unwelcome opportunity to practice playing fair and losing with grace. Playing with her is rarely as enjoyable as the animated pictures on the cover of the games make it appear.

Her smile at my invitation was so enthusiastic it made me ache. She ran to her room to grab her favorite games and chattered at me with an energy she'd probably been withholding in the wake of my constant irritation. She just wants you to love her, I scolded myself. Why, if I could see her thirst for my attention, was I so unwilling to give it to her? How could I smile at the baby, feel my chest

expand with warmth, and then turn cold on the child whose deep blue eyes were burning with desperation for her mother to pay the same attention to her.

I hated the mother I had become for her.

I was fighting back angry tears when she returned with Mancala, Go Fish, and Slap Jack. We sat on the living room floor to play. We had just distributed the Mancala pebbles, four in each cup, when the baby cried from the other room. Madison pretended not to hear and I rose from my place on the floor with a sigh. When I came back to the living room with the baby in my arms, Madison's face was hard to read. Her eyes seemed larger and more alert, like a leery animal taking in her surroundings. We resumed the game but after a few minutes I had to change the baby's diaper. Madison silently put away our unfinished game, and asked to watch TV instead. I was relieved and hated myself for it. We sat together on the couch, Madison and I, the baby in her usual place, close to my body. Occasionally Madison shot me looks of intense longing. Or maybe that was my imagination.

That night I talked to my husband about my guilt. *I think I love Clarke more*, I admitted while we lay in bed. *I think I love her more because she is biologically yours*. She, Clarke, was created in a time of my life where I found stability, and a healthy relationship both with my partner and myself. Perhaps I unknowingly lumped Madison into a heap of feelings I carried around from *before*, when I was young, alone, and afraid. Had I, in my happiness with my new life, rejected my first daughter because she was from my old one?

My infant was nestled close to my body. She suckled sleepily at my breast. My husband's rough and callused hands pulled me in tightly to his chest. Our legs were intertwined, his arm reached across my body to help cradle our daughter. He told me he understood. He agreed that it'd been difficult to parent her. His words were supposed to make me feel better. Hearing him say he felt the same way I did, made me ache for my child's place in the family: a lonely figure drifting.

Across the house I heard Madison cough and talk a little in her sleep. My husband heard it too and sighed. The past few nights she had crawled into bed with us, demanding we scoot over to make room for her. Part of me wanted to be angry. *You have your own bed*, I had told her, my voice thick with sleep. But the other part wanted to welcome her into this sacred space, where we could rest together as one.

We stood beside our garden. *I don't know what happened*, my husband mumbled and gingerly lifted a crisped leaf away from the vine. It disintegrated at his touch. Earlier in the year he'd installed an automatic drip system for the plants—it was a complicated network of hoses and timers that were set to slowly release two gallons of water over a twenty minute period. The roots were not the problem. I lifted the underside of the zucchini leaves, and saw tiny red eggs clustered together in hexagonal patterns. Two Box Elder bugs were in the process of creating new eggs on the next leaf over. I looked away in disgust. *What are we*

going to do, I asked. The question hung in the air and was broken by the sound of scissors snipping.

Of course I am two different mothers. I was a girl who'd watched with horror as the faint lines lost their ambiguity and became real, two lines that formed an invisible scarlet letter on my chest. My pelvis throbbed with a new weight. When I stood in front of the mirror again, seven years later, I was in many ways still filled with the same trepidations. I leaned on the cool countertop and inspected my face for blackheads—was that a new pimple on my cheek? I willed myself not to stare at the test. I was no longer the same girl, single and terrified beyond hope. I had seven years of living to teach me that pregnancy and motherhood was a journey like any other, one that I learned to embrace with hope. Even as I saw the two lines that announced the presence of another life, I felt my stomach sink a little with the weight of responsibility. But woman-me knew what girl-me hadn't. I was going to be alright.

There is nothing to apologize for. I know this. Madison has had to stick with me through my separation from her father, the years I spent being dismissive of her emotional needs, the cumulative hours I spent avoiding reading her books, playing with her, or holding her hand. I was unwilling to put her needs first. It's a story with an unfortunate beginning and happier ending. I changed, I did. I grew up alongside my first daughter. There is nothing to apologize for and yet I am sorry for Madison that the girl I was, was the mother she was born to.

Anyone who has ever thrown seeds into the ground can tell you the unpredictability of each season. Last year we shoved fat ripe tomatoes and huge zucchinis into the hands of our friends and family. We couldn't give them away fast enough to keep up with our plant's productivity. On a trip to a local nursery, the seasoned employee gave us this helpful advice: *Gardening is simple. It's not like being a doctor where if you make a mistake you can kill someone. If you ruin your garden you just start again the next year*.

This year, with the invasion of the box elder bugs, we hoped we could trim away the dead part of the plant and that it might grow new leaves and survive. But as we ripped and yanked and pulled and saw that it was useless. The plants were dying and had to go.

Once, before the baby, when Madison was four she brought home a solitary sunflower growing in a tiny pot. It was a project from her pre-school. At some point the sunflower would outgrow the brown cup and need to be transplanted outdoors. It was a joy to watch her water and care for the plant. She talked to it, played near it, and much too often tried to touch the delicate stem and leaves. Don't touch the flower or it will die, my husband and I constantly repeated.

I came home one afternoon to find the sunflower, now almost eight inches tall, bent at an odd angle and covered in a tight band of tape. I asked my husband what happened. He sighed as he began his story. Madison was playing with the

sunflower when she broke it. The stem had snapped in half. *Tell mommy what you told me*, he said when Madison shuffled into the kitchen to hear the story retold.

"I was playing with it." *Yes*, I sighed, head nodding, *go on*. "I was trying to make it dance." She lowered her head in shame while my husband and I shared a look I think could be described as tired love. Our daughter, distraught at her now broken plant, had cried for her father to fix it. He taped the broken stem together to appease her, but told her it would probably die.

The sunflower sat on the windowsill. The tape grew gummy in the heat of the midday sun, and each time I walked past the sad-looking flower I grew weary at the reminder that her and my relationship felt just as broken. It was unfair of me to try to relate the behavior of my free-willed daughter to an entity that followed a consistent and natural order. Yet even then I wondered, if I cared for her just a little bit more, a little bit harder, more fiercely, might I be doing her more justice than the attention I spilled into the flower beds, might our relationship be more fruitful, beautiful, and hardy?

About a week later she ran to me. *Quit running in the house*, I barked.

"But Mommy, my flower is growing!"

I followed her to the windowsill. Her sunflower, once hunched like a withered figure, had shed the sticky binding of the tape and now stood upright and strong. Proof that even among plants, brokenness is sometimes made whole again.

I thought my garden was a metaphor. I went there to find respite from my daughter and when my garden began dying, I filled my mind with thoughts of her. I tell myself now, as I stand beside my kitchen sink in the mornings, that my constant conflicted feelings between my two daughters means I am not as lost as I think. If I am capable of recognizing when I fail Madison, like watching the leaves on the tomatoes curl inward and shrivel, then I can do something, anything to keep us from dying. This is where the construction of the metaphor ends. Because my tomatoes died anyways, beside the zucchini and the eggplants and the peppers and the green beans and the cucumbers, despite my attempts to fertilize, water, and protect them from the invasion of foreign insects.

Had I taken more precautionary steps to ensure my plants' survival than I had the relationship with my daughter? The garden was a simple beast that I threw myself into with confidence. But each day with my oldest daughter is like the last day of my failed garden; I struggle to unearth the root of the problem, all while hopelessly debating about whether to keep going or not. I tend to the baby with seven years of carefully preserved experience. But with Madison I am filled with frustration, weariness, and most devastating to me, a lack of empathy. Each day with her is new for me. And every day I am still a first time mom to her, unsure of myself, afraid, unable to predict what lies ahead. I will never be experienced with Madison like I am with her sister, and herein lies the difference in my feelings. I can take comfort in the confidence that comes from being Clarke's mother. But with Madison I will always doubt myself. I will struggle because it's hard and in

my struggle I will lose my patience, and I will parent with a lackluster sort of love. I ache for my daughter, but in this aching I think I have found hope for another day.

Two nights ago I'd collapsed into bed, exhausted. The baby slept in her bassinet by my side. My husband wasn't due home from work for another three hours. I awoke to him coaxing Madison out of our bed. *When did you crawl into bed with me?* I asked. She smiled, not a triumphant smile, but one that moves across her face and is simple and full of joy. *I thought you might need some company*, she said. She rolled over to hug me, her arms warm from the heat of our bodies. I tightened my arms around her, and burrowed my face into her neck, like I sometimes did when she was small and new and foreign. For a moment I could forget my fear that the roots weren't taking hold. And then slipped from my bed, gave me a tiny wave at the door, and walked away.

Always Right

The customer has been right for over on hundred years. At the onset of this consumerism mantra, the customer, a tightly corseted woman, hair pulled away from a face pale with Richard Hudnut's Three Flower Talcum Powder, could spend an entire day lingering at brilliant displays designed to evoke and satiate her desires. Prior to this the term, *caveat emptor*—let the buyer beware—had hovered over patrons as they watched linens, meats, or flour being weighed on scales. But by the early twentieth century the industry had changed; as the woman gingerly crossed the threshold into a department store, she shed herself like a cloak that a uniformed boy came to take for her, and became a cherished commodity herself. The first floor of Marshall Field's department store was dedicated to cosmetics: Pond's Extract Vanishing Cream, Proctor and Gamble Ivory Soap, Pompeian Massage Cream, rouges, cold creams, polishes, weight loss tablets, and exotic French perfumes of White Rose, Lustrous Lavender, and Lily of the Valley. At the fourth floor she would take up one of several hundred seats at the Walnut Tea Room. There she would sip fragrant tea from delicate cups while waiters in crisp uniforms brought her salmon pâté, cold plates of cheese, fruit, butter and bread. A white crock of Mrs. Herring's Chicken pot pie was set before her like a gift. She broke through the buttery crust to take small bites of steaming chicken, sweet corn, and sharp-tasting leeks. For dessert she'd order a helping of Frango Mint

Cream. Her lips would be coated with the finest layer of grease and butter, which she had forgotten to dab off. After lunch, coffee, the wait-staff appeared at her elbow as if by premonition that she should need another cup. The waiters asked: did she require another Frango Mint? Would she like her bags sent down to her apartment on Wabash? Could they entice her to visit the fifth floor, where they'd just received the latest Parisian fashion? She may have been one of a hundred other carefully dressed women in the tea room, but she was handled as carefully as she handled her own bone china.

While several theories circulate about the true origins of the maxim—the customer is always right—accounts state that a clerk argued with a female customer inside the first floor of Marshall Field's Department Store until Fields himself was called down and demanded that the clerk "Give the lady what she wants."

When I was seventeen my stepdad said, "The McDonald's down the road is hiring smiling faces." My face was not the type that smiled. But I was desperate both to make money and to spend time away from my parents, even at the cost of permanently smelling like old grease and exposing my already acne-prone face to even more opportunities for hideous breakouts.

Where I really wanted to work was the mall, maybe at one of those trendy teen clothing stores where I could get discounts and a boyfriend because of my new hip huggers and tube top. The first day I stepped into my black work pants, a

style clearly designed for men—the crotch was huge on me and the button fastened neatly at my navel—I sighed at myself in mild disgust. My black, non-skid shoes looked like the kind my grandfather wore when he went to work as the janitor at a Vietnamese church.

That first shift I learned how to drop fries into the fryer—*don't forget to push the timer, let them drain for a few seconds before tossing them into the fry station, generous layer of salt, not too much, here's how we bag them*. I learned that when handing a bag out to a customer, the top of the bag should always be folded down twice, in one inch increments. My trainer showed me how to make coffee, wipe down tables and chairs—one towel wipes the table, the other towel wipes the chair—and how to lug the trash behind the building to the dumpster that reeked of rotting food and cigarettes. I also learned the customer was always right.

On perhaps my third or fourth shift, I went through the lobby wiping off the tables and chairs with rags in hand. *They're not called rags*, my manager had said. *We call them towels*. Towels, I repeated to myself, towels. As I wiped off crumbs and pools of ketchup, a man walked up to me with a smile. I returned his smile, I think, though being the smiling face McDonald's had hired me for was still a struggle.

"How do you spell cat?" he asked. His voice did not match his smile. Confused, I answered him. "And what's two plus two?" he followed up. I answered him again, correctly of course, and he coldly finished with, "Very

good," like I was a small child, "I'm glad to see you have the average intelligence of the McDonald's employee."

I was still waiting for the joke when he left and tossed his hamburger wrapper in the trash. It ricocheted and fell on the floor.

Emotional labor, or the strict emotional control and outward enthusiasm, is an absolute requirement in almost every customer-relation based industry (except perhaps for the well-known restaurant, Dick's Last Resort, where wait-staff debase and demean their customers as part of their obnoxious aesthetic). The emotional aptitude necessary to remain pleasant amidst harsh circumstances is not only taxing, but for most of the population, inauthentic. Restaurant chains demand staff be cheerful toward every customer, while setting impossibly high standards for speed and quality of service. Customers want fresh food fast, but what the customer doesn't know is that mid-level managers get in trouble for high wait times (which happens when food is made to order), high product waste (which happens when employees try to speed up wait times by having some food pre-made), and following necessary food safety regulations (where cooked chicken nuggets and beef patties expire after twenty and twelve minutes respectively). A McDonald's drive-thru visit should take less than two minutes from the time of ordering to the moment the car leaves the last window. Yet a basket of fries cooks in three minutes, Chicken Nuggets in five minutes, and Fish Filets take nine minutes.

An industry that once depended on short order cooks to prepare food has rapidly evolved to create "de-skilled jobs." Product is shipped to stores and requires only basic food safety knowledge and the use of machinery to re-create items off the menu. Hamburger patties, at least at McDonalds, aren't even "flipped" anymore, and instead get pressed between a clam-like grill. Everything is designed so that the most unskilled of workers are capable of performing simple tasks without error, and the three hundred to four hundred percent employee turnover rate doesn't cost the company money lost in training and education. The simplicity of the job doesn't change the atmosphere of the job itself.

During any moment of a consumer's visit, the employees are expected to remain positive, cheerful, and engaged in emotionally sincere conversations, but this act of repressing true feelings and generating artificial ones creates psychological dissonance. Arguably some employees are capable of authenticity during their shifts, and do not fall into this category of disenfranchised laborer. For everyone else, the truest feeling of any shift is the relief accompanied by the sound of a car door unlocking.

Once, during a morning shift, a man came in and placed an order for a sausage muffin. Simple. Sausage and muffin. I took the order and my coworker placed it in a small bag with a napkin. She handed it to him and he left.

It took him about thirty seconds to come back. He had the "face." Anyone who has ever worked in the fast food business, and probably several other

industries as well, knows the one I'm talking about: the furrowed brows, the tight mouth, and the tense and tight shoulders. They come stalking up to the register with their bag of food, and throw it onto the counter like it's no-man's-land between you and them.

This man had the face. He stormed up to the counter.

"This is a freaking muffin. No sausage. How hard is it for you people to make a fucking sausage muffin? It is sausage and fucking muffin. There's no sausage on this muffin." I looked at the coworker who'd handed it out. A muffin-only order had apparently been placed at the same time. She had simply grabbed the wrong item from the grill. His muffin, the one with sausage, was still sitting there. I explained what had happened while the man practically spit at me that my job was not that hard, that a monkey could make a sausage muffin. Later I tried to laugh at the image of a monkey wearing a visor and grandpa-shoes, but my stomach still churned with indignation.

At the time I was only eighteen and my voice still trembled when I became upset. "Sir, we are fixing the problem and there's no reason to talk to me that way," I stumbled. It didn't sound as firm as I had hoped it would. He was handed his order, a sausage muffin, *with sausage*, and left without another word.

Often times it was not the customer who yelled or belittled that upset me the most. I would be sent out to clean the lobby and find trays strewn about the tables, a ketchup war had ensued, someone had been hit, and the remains of him were still scattered ketchup red on the wall. People left bits of food, dirty napkins,

and half empty drink cups within a few feet of the nearest trash can. A mother with her children in tow even explicitly said, "Leave your mess here, they'll clean it up."

At the end of every shift I would be weary with the litany of people who'd dressed themselves in robes of entitlement, angry at their treatment of me, and as equally confused. My emotions were all simply named, and yet their responses could not answer the complicated questions of the consumer-employee relationship. Every day there I experienced a miscarriage of emotions: a painful separation of disbelief from the expectations I had for decent human behavior. I let myself be surprised by these attitudes and in this found the consequence of hope is bitterness.

When I'd worked at McDonald's for two years I was sent to manager training school. We learned how to run the floor, manage time, the importance of proper inventory counts, and how to appease customers. The instructors gave us pretend scenarios to which we had to find the answers. They encouraged us when we saw the angry customer stomping into the lobby with their bag full of food, to see it like a Christmas present instead of a bomb threat. They told us to give the customer what they wanted. "Even if you know one hundred percent that they are lying, give them what they want because you'll end up having a customer who returns."

As part of the course I read Ray Kroc's book, *Grinding it Out*, an account of the work ethic that took him from selling paper cups, milkshake machines, and eventually billions worth of hamburgers. The McDonald brothers may have started the small shop in San Bernardino, California, but it was Kroc who took their dream and made it a multimillion dollar corporation. Of the book, I remember these two things: there were accusations that Kroc had swindled the brothers out of money when he purchased the enterprise in 1961 for a no-royalties 2.7 million dollars, and that a McDonald's customer buys french fries nine out of ten times. McDonald's french fries are one of the reasons that Kroc was inspired to purchase the brother's business in the first place. The potatoes are now so valued in the industry that I think, although I could be wrong, they receive better treatment than the employees.

The fact that corporations that embolden this idea of a consumer's inherent right to exceptional treatment and goods, also illuminate the desperation of companies to keep their base customers. It wasn't long after the maxim,–the customer is always right– gained popularity before a series of articles began questioning the honesty of potential customers. What happened if you treated the customer like king—der Kunde ist Konig—but the King turned out to be Nero? If customers knew they could take advantage of companies, would they? For every positive experience a customer will tell three people, but they will tell up to ten people when they have a negative one. If the customer was king, employees are probably never going to be more than servants or more likely, whipping boys.

I'm drawn to a memory of my employment at McDonald's. I stand at the counter. I've just clocked in when a customer approaches the register. I greet the customer with a real smile, a hello. The face in front of me is blank and makes no move to respond. The order is given dispassionately; the customer's eyes will not meet mine. The dollars the customer passes to me feel greasy in my hands. I plop a clean tray onto the counter between us and place a carefully wrapped burger and fry down. I thank this first customer of my shift, the one I can give the most authentic and pleasant and true encounter to. I will not be able to recreate this same feeling for the next person and by the end of the shift I will feel used up. Later, when I'm out wiping down tables, I will note the same customer, burger half eaten, a small smear of ketchup at the corner of a pursed mouth, a wrapper on the floor, looking unimpressed and bored.

How to Play Mancala While Your Uncle is Dying

History of the Game: There are many ways to play Mancala. In fact, Mancala is only the name of a type of game; there are many different names and ways to play, all of which are dependent upon the region of the world you're in. The word mancala comes from the Arabic word *naqala*, which means "to move."

We play it desperately, while your uncle, who is dying, is taken off life support. Your uncle lives in Hawaii. Underneath the palm trees in front of his apartment, he had a heart attack. He wasn't found for several minutes. The opposite of move is stop; stagnation; stillness. When he was found, he was resuscitated, stabilized, taken to the hospital, and placed in a coma.

Objective: To capture more stones than your opponent.

We already know how to play Mancala. It was a gift for our daughter's seventh birthday and we spend several nights a week with her, hunched over the Mancala board, heads almost touching.

Now we sit on our haunches, leaned back and away from each other. We don't meet each other's eyes. We have sent our daughter to bed and still we are playing, capturing stones like thoughts and redistributing them.

Set-Up: Each cup of the Mancala board receives four stones, except for the largest cups on the ends of the Mancala board, which receive none. These large cups are

where opponents will place their captured stones, like a resting place until the end of the game when they are counted. There are forty-eight stones total.

Within the hour your uncle will be taken off life support. He will be fifty-eight when he dies. I try to find meaning in the numbers: forty-eight and fifty-eight. I want there to be some correlation, a mathematical coincidence that makes this seem like less than chance. There isn't. There are only the stones we drop into the cups, like the thoughts we are grasping, dropping, and moving around and around.

How to Play: The first player begins by moving stones counter-clockwise from his or her side of the board. This is called sowing; the act of dropping stones, one per cup. Players continue in this fashion until one side of the board is empty.

You make the traditional first move so that on your first turn you land in the biggest cup, your Mancala, and get to sow again. We don't talk. The only sound is the plunk plunk plunk of stones being redistributed. You are redistributing the stones (some are bottle caps and pennies and polished rocks: replacement stones because we have lost so many of the originals) so that the numbers in each cup keep changing, until your turn ends and the stones fall silent.

My move mimics yours. We are playing a game and waiting for the phone call that it, the death of your uncle, is finished, and the machines keeping him alive have hushed. I try to quiet these thoughts of anguished anticipation.

I have the opportunity to capture six stones in your cup, but don't. Did your uncle think he was playing one version of a game, a game he thought he knew all the rules for? As he dropped with a plunk to the ground, did he feel cheated?

I have nothing to offer you. You capture my stones and I relinquish them with a sigh. We approach the game like wordless imposters, our cups overflowing, our mouths filled with stones, heads empty.

The Raconteur's Dreams

When I wake with a jolt, my legs tangled uncomfortably in sweaty sheets, the bad dream lingering like an odor, I rouse the sleeping form next to me. I whisper my husband's name, quietly at first and then louder, shaking his shoulder until he climbs the ladder of consciousness and mumbles *what do you need?*

I had a bad dream, I tell him like a frightened child. He's told me to wake him when my dreams become too unbearable; he knows that I often just need to tell him what happened, as a way of shedding the layers of the nightmare like a snake skin, and leaving it behind. But even at his insistence, I still feel a guilty weight that I am a twenty-seven-year-old woman who has to wake her husband to help still her terrors.

He pulls me in close to his chest, wraps his arms around me. Tell me about your dream, he says, and I do. I know he fades off, back to sleep, halfway through the telling. The important thing for me is to speak the dream away, to feel like I have some sort of control over it. Except that even after I have confessed the dreams to him in the quiet dark of our bedroom, he the silent dozing priest, I know that I will allow the dream, like an incubus, to impregnate the truths of my reality, and give birth to an alternative life that I'm terrified of.

Once while on vacation, I stood on a rocky outcrop and watched my husband snorkel out into the ocean with some of our friends. The wind had picked

up and the waves chopped and crashed against the cove where they swam. I watched him drift farther and farther out, saw him and the others he snorkeled with dip down beneath the surface in search of something. Each time they broke through the surface, I counted the number of heads, tiny flecks on the waterline. One, two, three, four, one, two, three, four, one, two, three, one, two, three. I swayed on the rock, forced myself to see what I knew I couldn't, searched and searched for four, where is four, until the fourth head, his blonde hair like the splattering of yellow on a large watercolor, reappeared and I could breathe again. I had seen his death so often in my nightmares that it was too easy for me to imagine what the newspaper might say, the black ink splattered across the cool page like a bad reading with a psychic: *tourist drifts off to sea—search party ends hunt for body.* My father-in-law picked his way over the sharp rocks to where I stood. He tried to say something but gave me a sheepish grin and edged away. I knew what he was thinking. What everyone who wasn't me was thinking: that I was incapable of living my life without worry. I stalked off to the rental car and waited for someone to drive me back to the condo we were all sharing.

My first nightmare, the one that folds in with all those other hazy memories of early childhood, happens at my grandmother's house. I stand in the Californian heat next to my grandmother's mailbox. In front of me: white siding, green trim, a perfectly manicured lawn. I don't want to go inside the house. There's a strange buzzing. It's the only sound in the whole world and it's sitting in my ear. I am

small and my chest hurts and I take the necessary but reluctant steps to lead me through my grandmother's gate and to her back door. The buzzing intensifies. Then my hand is reaching up to open the glass door and my aunt smiles at me as she shoves pieces of my mother, my father, my grandmother, into her blender, buzz buzzing and the blender shakes and I scream and scream.

The dream didn't stop there. It bled into the morning, and every morning that followed it. I rose and ate breakfast and got dressed and *worriedworriedworried*. My stomach hurts, I complained to my mother, until she took me to see a doctor. Drink this barium, lie still, the technician said, as he clicked radioactive pictures of my belly. Why don't you want to spend the night with your cousin, my mother asked me. I don't like Auntie, I mumbled head down afraid, worried that my dream of her blender wasn't just a nightmare–that it had the capacity to manifest and walk beside me like living flesh. We can't find anything wrong with her, the doctors told my mother.

I hoped that I would outgrow it.

I awake to the sound of cannons. My heart thudthudthuds. I struggle to open my eyes and untangle myself from the warm arms of my husband. There is a painful silence that follows loud noise and then a whoosh that accelerates like the lub-dub of my heart.

He's had this happen to him once before. When he was thirteen, a tree had fallen on his parents' house, against his bedroom. He woke to the sound of the

crack as a large pine splintered and gave way to a weight that could not be sustained anymore. He'd jumped out of bed and ran down the hall, away from his room, while the tree crashed into the side of the house and was held there by its supportive beams.

Maybe that memory comes back to him in a whisper as he moves from sleep to bone crushing reality. Maybe that's why he pushes me off the bed, shoves me hard onto the floor before the tree crashes into our bedroom, the walls not strong enough to slow the massive force, and comes down on the dresser, the bed, my husband, and not me.

I'm dreaming, I'm dreaming. But I open my eyes—I am sleeping, I am—feel the foreign branches poking and prodding, pushing into my scratched and aching body. I'm saved from the main trunk by two larger limbs; they nestle perfectly against my hips, allowing just enough room to wiggle from underneath, to look up and to my left where my bed, and husband, used to be.

The trees are thick this far into the forest. The trails blur into a collage of shadows and dappled light until I have the fleeting feeling that I'm trapped inside a kaleidoscope. My husband rides ahead of me, his orange dirt bike moving deftly over roots and rocks, navigating the trees and brush. I clunk and chug, struggling in and out of first and second gear, up hills and down, trying to maintain a constant speed around trails that wind in and out of tall pines. I imagine coming around a bend and not seeing the wisp of the exhaust his bike is trailing behind him. I can

see it so perfectly in my mind, the search for tire marks that indicates where he fell, looking down a steep bank to see his body lying wedged between a tree and his bike. I can hear my desperate cries to him, the way I scamper down the bank, falling a dozen times, grunting and heaving to lift his bike off him, his eyes open, his pupils fixed and dilated, taking in the whole world but not me.

My arms ache and then go numb from the hum of the engine. I become too tired to worry. Eventually he stops and I pull up behind him, sweat dripping into my eyes, making dirty trails down my neck, my chest. My camel-pack, filled with cold water this morning, is already empty. He offers me some of his. I stand close to him and drink greedily like a child at the breast while he gazes with affection. I drink in hard pulls until I'm satisfied, my stomach pleasantly full and almost painfully sloshy. When he sits down on the hillside of the trail, an area of tall grasses and wildflowers, I sit beside him then nestle my back into the soft bed of the earth, the images of his broken body fading quickly. His body is warm beside me, his hand finds mine. Birds flit overheard, dream-like, ignoring our very presence as if to say *you are just a visitor here*. And because I know that visitors can't stay, I'm quiet. I absorb the colors of the forest, the way the greens fade to blacks, yellow overlays everything, motes drift in and out of my vision. I let my eyes lose focus until I stare at nothing and everything, until all the world is a swirl of watercolors and I think nothing has ever been more beautiful than this.

I won't be home for a few hours I tell him. My husband smiles at me, a big and generous look that seems to transform his whole body into a languid mass of loving flesh.

Here, he says as I'm about to step over the threshold of our house and leave the safe place behind. *You forgot your coffee*. He kisses me softly at first and then earnestly until I'm sure he's going to pull me back into the house, tearing off my jacket, shirt, yanking at denim and metal hooks, until he's reaching inside, knowing me, knowing every piece of what makes me his. But his hands stay at my waist and soon the kiss is over, he's telling me to have a good day volunteering at the hospital, he'll see me for lunch.

I arrive at the hospital, note my spot on level E of the parking garage and make my way up to the fourth floor of the children's unit where I'll receive the list of patients to work with. The hospital seems extra bright today. The hallways on the fourth floor are flooded with an early fall light, the window panes deceitfully cool, a reminder of the cold winter coming, a memory of the summer dripping away.

When I get to the room with the list of patients I'll see, I'm told there was a mistake and my volunteer services aren't needed today. I'm irritable but put a smile on my face and count my blessings; now I can go home early and surprise my husband, maybe finish what our earlier kiss started. I don't allow myself to drive as languidly as I did on the way to the hospital because I'm anxious to get

back to him. I navigate in and out of cars with purpose, speeding just enough so I believe I'm making good time.

My spot in the driveway is taken by the white sedan I recognize as my best friend's. She works just a few miles away from our house and frequently comes to visit me on her lunch breaks, and even though it's too early for lunch she must have thought I'd be home today.

I hear them before I even open the door. I must have left a few windows cracked for some cool air, to trap the smell of autumn in the house. The door squeaks open—I've been meaning to ask my husband to fix that for the last several months, it seems to get louder when it's colder out—but they cannot hear me come in over the guttural noises issuing from their sweaty throats. And I can see them now, match the noises to the movements, watch as they strain into each other, flesh meeting flesh meeting flesh meeting flesh.

The night the police come to tell me that my husband's dead, I'm swollen with his child. It's a familiar dream, one I wake him up for often. I know when the dream is over I will wake him again, nudging him until I'm sure I hear the intake of breath, aching to know my place in the world is next to him, a part of him, willing his arms around me to warm me, and force the dream away. And then I'm opening the door to the cool dark world. The air is fresh and wet and loud red and blue lights cast large shadows across the yard; my car looks like an elongated harbinger of grief ready to slink into my now open door. Someone is talking, the

police, I haven't even looked at them yet and they are talking but I cannot hear them because I'm worried that the shadows are going to get in, that I will become tainted by that indifferent darkness. I cannot hear what the police are saying. I close the door.

After I'd stormed away from the cove, I sat in the rental car, arms tight, hands aching clenching breathing angry hard. *He will come, he will come, he will come*. I let this recitation numb my tongue until the crunch of feet on gravel disrupted me. He opened the car door and sighed. His hair was stiff with saltwater. His eyes ached with anger and sorrow and love. I hated him and loved him and wanted to kiss him hard and hit him until his gut burned the way mine did. *Do you want to talk*, he asked. *No*, I said.

We separated for the evening and I went to dinner with my mother. My husband joined our friends for dinner where I knew they'd judge me for what had happened at the cove. They'd frequently accused me of being controlling and limiting the amount of fun he was allowed to have. My mother and I sat before white bowls of soup and glasses of wine while she talked to me about what had happened.

"You worry because you love him," she said as she broke bread and dipped it in her broth. "I don't think I've ever seen you this happy, and I think you're afraid of losing that. Forgive him."

I wouldn't forgive him then. I did find out that my friends had later joked about my incessant and annoying worrying, and that my husband, standing next to them, had said nothing. My mother's words stay with me. It had never occurred to me to think of love and fear as inseparable twins. The nightmares that bleed into my mornings and infect my day might actually serve like an inoculation to the pain of a possible life without him.

My dreams have transcended the images of my own personal horror. I see the terrors through the lens of my love for him. We're supposed to wake up from dreams with our egos reset and ready to embrace reality. We're supposed to compare the nightmare to the truth and feel relieved. I awake from the dream and dread the day. I become so fixated on the possibility of my dreams taking the shape of reality that I often do not feel I can discern the two. In bed with him now, his arm hot and sweaty across my breast, my most recent nightmare fading in time to the rhythm of his breathing, I know it will be a long time before I fall back asleep.

It is because I love you, because I love you.

VITA

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