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18 DORSET CT.

by

Allison Catherine Campbell

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School
and the Department of English
at The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

18 DORSET CT.

by Allison Catherine Campbell

August 2016

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INTRODUCTION

A green lizard shakes his body toward the sky and releases a quarter-sized, red throat-shield toward the ground. He announces his presence and attempts communion. He cannot know if anyone is watching, or will see, so his self-exposure is both natural and brave. It is his language. This is what I am attempting to do when I write. Let down my throat, get at my most natural language, brave the vulnerability of exposure. All of these actions would not be possible without an underlying belief in a reader. I write to be in conversation with the world by way of this reader.

When Rilke begins his *Duino Elegies*, “Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the angelic / orders?” (5), he is lyrically addressing this same need for communication. And a hundred years later I can answer, “I hear you.” Let’s leave angelic qualities aside and just say I am listening. Yes, I get what you are saying about “how little at home we are / in the interpreted world. That leaves us” (5).

It seems paradoxical to claim that Rilke, like most of the authors I admire, speaks to me because he was unabashedly speaking to himself. But when we say tritely, “It spoke to me” to describe art, we are able to say this only because the author tapped into a conversation.

Poet and critic Mark Ford takes a phrase from John Donne’s “The Extasie” and calls reading “a dialogue of one”(8). The author is not there, but a dialogue still exists between the reader and words. Ford’s analogy can be reversed and applied with equal legitimacy to the writer. The reader is not there, but a dialogue still exists between the writer and words. Behind the words, as they are both written and read, there is the living, absent person. The artist is talking to no one, to one person, and to everyone.

This duality of presence and absence helps explain my three favorite words of poetry: “here I am.” Bulgarian poet Lyubomir Levchev has a poem entitled “And Here I Am”—“And look: here I am waiting again / for the big love to come” (*And Here I Am*, 10). In “Autobiographia Literaria,” Frank O’Hara writes, “And here I am, the / center of all beauty!” (3). I like how Levchev and O’Hara incorporate “and.” The small word serves as subtle acknowledgement of the other, or the everything else: author as an “I” replying to or addressing all the “ands.” In both O’Hara and Levchev, the announcement is brave, as if the most courageous act we can commit (admit) as humans is the proclamation of our presence. Isn’t this, too, what Whitman is doing in *Song of Myself* when he writes, “I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world”? (Verse 52). A little more lyric way of saying, *here I am*, which I believe implies *hear me*.

This form of speech, this *here I am*, *hear me*, is courageous in part because it is a sounding into the would-be void. I say “would-be” because before the sounding you are not sure if the void is a void, or if the space is full, or of what it is filled with. Samuel Coleridge has poems that speak to this questionable space. These poems are marked by solitude and contemplation in conversation with absence. This solitude and absence put the poems in conversation with the speaker’s own mind. “Frost at Midnight” is one example. It begins, “The frost performs its secret ministry, / Unhelped by any wind” (*Samuel Taylor Coleridge, The Complete Poems*, 231). As Coleridge writes, everyone else is asleep in the house. His new infant rests in a cradle beside him, and Coleridge begins his communication. He and the frost are at work, both silently, secretly performing. Inside the poem, there is great emphasis on how solitary he is during the writing, a “strange and extreme silentness.” The poem continues, “This populous village!

Sea, hill, and wood, / With all the numberless goings on of life, / Inaudible as dreams!” (231). Things are so still he has to invent the word “silentness.” The stillness is so still, the silence so silent, that the usually chaotic happenings of life become illusory. The midnight environment seems made for him to contemplate. It is so quiet he can hear and so can speak.

I share this need for solitude; to listen and speak. They are needs so extreme that, as for Coleridge, they manifest themselves as topics in my poetry. After beginning work on my PhD, getting a puppy, and giving birth to a child (a combination that I only recommend if you want to test the limits of your sanity). I found myself writing not only of my ideas but of the circumstances where these ideas germinated. The settings fluctuated between relative quiet or some form of auditory chaos. The poem “Green Street,” quite opposite of Coleridge’s “silentness,” begins, “The cacophony of the instant / overwhelms me.” Another poem, “Letter 14,” begins similarly, “Amelia is down, but yelping.” However, other poems reflect a calm closer to what’s found in “Frost at Midnight.” “Letter 3” starts, “I sit in the almost silence / of refrigerator hum and small / consistent sigh of the computer’s engine.” This scene setting seems necessary to the conversational poetry I wanted to write—a natural way to begin conversation. Listen, then respond. And it is just what Coleridge does in “Frost at Midnight”—even if what he hears is a whole lot of nothing; close to nothing.

Charles Wright, I believe, converses by way of place. As in Coleridge’s conversation poems, Wright begins by describing the physical landscape and then moves from external and physical reality to internal thought, intangible contemplation. In “January II” he begins, “A cold draft blows steadily from a crack in the window jamb”

(*Bye-and-Bye*, 113).

Then quickly turns in the next line: “It’s good for the soul.” Wright can get away with using the abstraction *soul*, even this clichéd phrase “good for the soul,” because he begins with something as small and concrete as the “crack in the window jamb.” In my work, I make similar turns. This is apparent in my short poem “Letter 25.”

The underwear I started wearing
after Amelia’s birth—so large—
catch the air like a parachute
when I throw them into the pile,
so full of themselves
you can imagine a tiny man
being deployed, hanging from them
for dear life.

Here, I begin with the reality of underwear and clothes pile which concretely, and comically, sets up my ability to end with “dear life,” a phrase that in other circumstances could come across as both abstract and cliché.

Wright’s “Buffalo Yoga Coda III” shows a more extended version of his movement between concrete reality and abstraction. It is a poem that occupies itself almost exclusively with nature. Wright follows the movement of wind and ravens, pine squirrels and even beetles. He begins this way:

Late morning on the cusp of the world,
Clouds beginning to burble and build

Across the southern skyline,

Susurrations of waters,

Sunlight settling like a giant bird

Soundlessly over the meadow,

feathery touches at the edges of things.

(Bye-and-Bye, 97)

Similarly, my “Letter 33” finds its footing in the natural world:

Sunday morning, Amelia and Brady at the zoo.

I’m trying to look at how layered things are—

rosemary carrying over into the fence slats,

mint on the other side, and Amelia’s blue swing

swaying behind the hibiscus branches. All versions

of present and past growth overlapping. You’d think

the plants adept at letting their dead parts fall

but I find benefits to pruning even with the often ugly space,

left waiting for something to happen. The mint fills and overflows

only one side of its pot. I ran over the other parking,

and though the plastic’s proved resilient, the plant’s

taking longer.

Both poems begin with temporal location. Wright’s “Late morning,” my “Sunday morning.” And both move from this specificity into the abstract. Wright does this rather instantly with his “on the cusp of the world” directly following the situation of late morning. I take a bit longer and describe more of the physical before turning to “All versions / of the present and past growth overlapping.” These lines are both physical, the

same desire for crossing over from daily life to meditation is present in many of the poems in this dissertation. It is apparent here in the ending to the first stanza of “Letter 33.”

What if we always had to carry our dead,
worn out thoughts—never able to trim, never ready
to let go? Used to be, my only way of getting
around them was forgetfulness—but thoughts, invisible
already, make forgetting different than getting rid of.
They resist slipping into any permanent oblivion.
Unless you cut away.

Here, I am moving from the plants to myself, from the domesticity and concreteness of caring for an herb garden to the inner landscape of mind and feeling—of caring for the self. This gesture is informed by Wright’s movement between two realms: his seemingly double-vision of nature and human nature, inner and outer experience.

This “transubstantiated world” is usually so quiet that it is hard to get at. But speaking with silence is what continually prompts me to write. This is as close as I can come to describing the quiet that has something to say. I want to hear it. I understand the work as a ferreting out. Whether I’m writing poetry, nonfiction, or collaborating with visual art, I produce through addled discovery, in the sense of finding something I wasn’t looking for. I create by listening. It’s daunting to think of each living artist as someone who has not yet heard all they are listening to—that possibly our whole lives can be spent earnestly attempting to hear the conversation—but I believe that the continued imperfect discovery of this ongoing dialogue is exactly what sustains me.

When I write and collaborate, I want the work to be sincere but not self-serious. In a poem from my first collection, “&,” I have a line about ampersands being overweight question marks. This is part joke, with the visual impression of the mark, and part serious provocation to consider what “ands” do for lines of thought and patterns of conversation. This poem is a good example of how I try to use humor to create room for exploration. While I’m interested in getting my reader’s attention, I don’t want to tell anyone how to think, and humor is an easy way to get someone to think about something without instructing them how. Kay Ryan, whose poetry uses subtle humor, describes this quality in her writing as *faux didactic*. I hope this description fits my work as well.

I find it hard to write the words *faux didactic* without thinking of Frank O’Hara—especially his “Personism: A Manifesto.” O’Hara writes, “Personism, a movement which I recently founded and which nobody knows about, interests me a great deal” (*Frank O’Hara, Selected Poems*, 247). The lines are an excellent example of *faux didacticism* in their self-effacing and self-describing simultaneity. The humor here, warm and energetic enough to keep it from tottering into the arena of glib, is similar to what I aim for. When O’Hara writes of the “technical apparatus” of poetry being common sense and likens formal qualities of poetry to buying pants tight enough that people want to sleep with you, I think of the lines about my underwear in “Letter 25.” It’s not just the topic of apparel that encourages me to make this comparison with O’Hara. What’s more important is the approach to the subject at hand. We are both being a little flippant with something we take very seriously—O’Hara, poetry, me, the physical effects of childbirth. I would feel insincere if I treated the topic of childbirth and its accompaniments with complete seriousness—there is too much ridiculousness involved. O’Hara’s writing

showed me a tone I could believe in.

I could believe O'Hara's tone not because he completely eschews seriousness, but because he manages to be light-hearted and serious at the same time. When he uses heartbreak as a metaphor in "Personism," he explains, "But that's not why you fell in love in the first place, just to hang onto life, so you have to take your chances and try to avoid being logical. Pain always produces logic, which is very bad for you" (247). I was so taken with the last line, second sentence, that I wrote it on the glass above the desk where I wrote. Now I think I can add on to it and say pain produces logic, but logic never helps the pain (that's poetry's job!). But maybe this isn't an addition, maybe it is all summed up in O'Hara's "which is very bad for you." The lines allow me to write of childbirth, of hemorrhaging and extreme blood loss alongside comments about "orgasmic birth being the Lochness Monster of natural childbirth," as I do in the essay "Catawampus." I hope that the seriousness and light-heartedness of this writing mix with the same honest intensity as these elements combine inside O'Hara's writing.

In *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, Italo Calvino describes humor as lightness, as "a verbal texture that seems weightless, until the meaning itself takes on the same rarified consistency" (17). Poets like Wislawa Szymborska, Frank O'Hara, Kay Ryan and Ron Padgett have this type of lightness, and in my writing, I try to access the same quality with a balance of humor and awe. In "Letter 36" I use *Amelia Bedelia's* literalisms to get at how I misunderstand people, including myself. The conversation, I hope, is both clichéd and haunting. Clichéd and haunting seem paradoxical, but I think the worn significance of clichés makes them a type of ghost language that's apt for play. Words can get punch-drunk from their own fatigue; just like people, they get giddy—and

in that relaxed state whatever guards there are get dropped, the words become potent. This happens in “Letter 36” when I mix some *Amelia Bedelia* lines in with my own writing, “When answering phones at the doctor’s office / she tells a patient who has caught a bug / to let it go.” I also like to use familiar language because I believe it is both accessible and multifarious. In these lines, you can enjoy the easy joke I’ve stolen from a children’s book, or think about how the “to let it go” resonates with the poem’s main theme, divorce.

My approach to language when writing nonfiction is different. When I write nonfiction, the goal is to let my mind journey out away from itself as far as is possible while still maintaining the ability to make sentences. When I picture the process of writing poetry I am a cow munching in an open pasture—I can see far and wide. When I picture the nonfiction process, I am a cow in the woods frequently having to choose between forks in the path and only finding more forks after each choice is made. Things are constantly unfolding in both processes, I am surprised by both—and hope readers are equally surprised. Surprise is linked to my idea of addled discovery. It’s fascinating how many different ways you can discover the same thing.

Essayist John D’Agata says, “when we’re essay-ing we are in dialogue with the world” and begins his anthology *The Lost Origins of the Essay* with “The Lists of Ziusudra”—short notes where Ziusudra, the lone survivor of the ancient Sumerians, is addressing imagined people of the future (9). “Friends,” writes Ziusudra, “let me share with you the advice that those wise ones tried to offer” (7). When he does so, he is in dialogue with both himself and a number of people he does not, and will never, know. I am engaged in this same activity in the nonfiction piece “Campbell’s Onion Bar.” My

advice is slightly satirical, not as earnest as Ziusudra's lists, but I am up to the same form of communication. In this case, my advice is more crying in public:

I'm starting to think that maybe more crying in public is what everyone needs. Gunter Grass has an amazing scene in his novel *The Tin Drum*. The main characters go to an onion bar. Instead of drinking they all sit in the cellar at café tables and peel onions together. They cry and cry. They do not ask for reasons, and they do not try to comfort each other. This is exactly what we need. This is exactly what we have always needed. I thought so from the first moment I read of the imaginary place and I believe this today.

How many suicidal mass-murderers were crying in public before they flew their plane into a mountain or took their machine guns to the movie theater? I haven't done extensive research on this, but from what I've read, the answer seems to be none.

In this essay, my hope is that I engage readers' capacities for empathy and also get a laugh. Calvino's "lightness" comes, again, to mind. The onion bar Grass created, which I draw from, is conceptually funny and tragic. I want the essay to be the same.

"Campbell's Onion Bar" is distinct from the other two essays included in this dissertation, "What Work Is" and "Catawampus." Unlike "Campbell's Onion Bar" these two essays are more personal narrative than lyric essay. I make this differentiation because the two essays rely heavily on personal history, "What Work is" uses Philip Levine's poem to trace the development of my work ethic through menial jobs, and "Catawampus" tells the story of my daughter's birth, with the help of Robert Burns' poem "To A Mouse."

To write these personal narratives, I needed to create some distance between myself and the “I” which made its way onto the page. Rimbaud’s words, “I is another” come to mind when attempting to describe this without getting lost in a sea of pronouns. Basically, I am not the “I” on the page and the “I” on the page does not need to be perfect in order to exist (thankfully). Vivian Gornick’s book *The Situation and the Story* was of great help in understanding this new “I.” She describes creating a persona to write about a rafting trip saying, “I have created a persona who can find the story riding the tide that I, in my unmediated state, am otherwise going to drown in” (25). It is delicious and salvational to have another I, to be able to create a persona of self on the page that can rise above the muck of its own experience—to make some story from the mess of things. Poet Gregory Orr describes this same phenomenon of persona in lyric poetry saying, “The self invented *by* the poem it speaks, may lead proportion and differential weight and an organizing center to vistas that would otherwise be too raucous or too flat” (39). Orr’s raucousness echoes Gornick’s drowning, and I like his shift toward this invented self being invented “*by* the poem it speaks.” It does seem that the most authentic personas are those that issue forth directly from the material they are trying to explain. Maybe I say this because the level of ego-attachment is somehow lowered when the persona is created by the material rather than the person who wants to write the material. More importantly, I believe this persona allows writers to tell stories with less of the sting of the story still ringing inside them. At least this is true for me—without reading Gornick’s thoughts about persona it would have been much more difficult to write passages like this one:

Although I did not feel it, my body had torn significantly during delivery
and the doctor made arguments weighing the quality of my recovery against the

time spent without stitches while waiting to deliver the placenta. Even though our birth plan said *No application of pressure on the umbilical cord* he convinced me to let him apply “light traction.” I let myself be convinced, really. I didn’t care because my daughter was alive and healthy, outside of me. There was very little thinking.

This is not even the most graphic passage in the essay, but it serves as an example of the places persona allowed me to go in writing nonfiction. Separating the “I” of this narrative about un-medicated childbirth from the “me” putting it out onto the page was a necessary step in transforming the material from personal tragedy to art. This was, and still is, a very necessary *other* “I.”

So here is another paradox of writing—one I think it worth ending this introduction with. In order to get at personal experience, the author needs to invent another “I” to tell the story. This was true of many of the poems and all of the nonfiction collected in his dissertation. And I began this introduction by claiming that I write to be in conversation with the world by way of a reader. Twelve pages later I still believe this—only I must include that I am also that reader. That I am announcing to myself, *here I am!* In this regard, my greatest hope is that my self-conversation is interesting and engaging enough to speak to others.

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POETRY

CAST OF CHARACTERS

In order of appearance:

Greg, 18, of soft-freckles and dead,
self-taught pianist of Charlie Brown
song

Amelia, 1, of dark eyes and dark hair,
thick-cheeked raspberry-blower, my
daughter

Charlie, 2, of hound-mixed Mississippi
mutt, but under-ears like split silk, my
dog

Brady, 30, of fat almond eyes
same as Amelia's, chestnut, my
husband

Jeremy, 30, of white-blond and dead,
poet of wanting to be "in your face
like it's springtime"

Leslie, 36, of skin swollen eyes,
dancer with knitting movements, my
sister

Always appears, never appearing:

Eileen, 32, of fair skin and thin
freckles, underside-of-dark-leaf-green
eyes, sister to Greg, my friend

Me, 32, of bandaged finger and green
or brown eyes, depending, in love
with all characters

LETTER 1

Because I am sad that you are sad,
I write to you, to say I'm sorry,
and tell you that the birds are chirping
insolently today, the sun is shining and
the sky is blue-ing in the lightest, brightest
most irreverent way. I think about *sun
shine and blue skies, please go away, Oh
I wish it would rain* and rain and rain.
Then it would seem okay to feel as bad
as you (or I) do. The house across
the street is too white. But at least leaves
are getting the idea. Changing colors,
drying up, and falling down. They wallow
in their brittleness, no matter how green
the grass they fall in to is, no matter
how unstained the pavement. I wish
the whole earth would apologize.

LETTER 2

This morning in Walmart, a man wore
penny loafers older than Greg. His skin
was red and he talked to Amelia, strapped
to me and looking at the Michigan apples
I won't buy because they're not organic.
Which seems silly to worry about when
I heard on the radio about Michigan's
bumper crop. One woman who traveled to help
them pick has three children who go to
the local school, while she wades
out into the Michigan morning to reach
her hand out and twist, and reach and twist.
Each apple still needs a human, a
human hand. And isn't that lovely, to think about;
when you look at a bag of anonymous apples
that a living person had to touch each one.

LETTER 3

I sit in the almost silence
of refrigerator hum and small
consistent sigh of the computer's engine.
When I search, I can't find a part
of my body that recognizes it is mortal.
It, too, seems to be all humming and sigh.

I know that science proves consciousness
in the gut. Possibly the heart makes decisions,
but I can't help feeling the mind like
a balanced and swaying bobble-head.
Something about living, or how I'm living,
now, makes the body a tripod, all heavy
equipment on top.

If this continues, there's only time until
the topple. Then what will I know?

LETTER 4

The collection of ordinary today. I ate oatmeal, and took Amelia to the library. I ate chicken and she squealed each time she started a rush of movement through the kitchen. I try to put these bits together into meaning, to make the day something important, as it is, since it's been given to me. And that's it, isn't it? We should be grateful for what we don't know how to value. The tedium of still clouds, the dog's bark from an empty house and all the unquantifiable that's working to support us. But next to the garden the compost's full of maggots, fatter and more mobile than I would have imagined. They're moving but don't go anywhere, instead it's a continual toppling over the next guy—too gross and too close to what I fear my mind looks like when I let it go, feed it rot. Bits of small fatty matter moving with no explanation. Better to organize the vegetables and eat, as you did, that November night, even the apple's core.

LETTER 5

It gets worse before it gets worse,
your voice comes like a patch of butterflies
with bullets for abdomens.

I distract you with chatter
and your few words travel to me like the
same butterflies' barely met migration.

I send mail every day but miss
your call and absence wraps coarse thread
around the heart, lungs, tongue.

You say, "Life sucks and then people disappear,"
and the threads loosen into this unpleasant
mess that falls into a pile at our feet.

LETTER 6

Today crackles. To see how much the trees
shake in the fall wind makes being human
seem the more static condition. The air
is cold in a way that moves the flesh,
it is fresh and carrying the dead
at the same time. Nature's paradox
on parade in autumn; that inanimate,
not just dead, vegetation can be so
alive. Heard and seen and rushing, summer's
collected articles pull away from themselves
in a beautiful leave taking. It makes you
think, many things could be organized
worse. There is this unplanned planning
that needs no god outside its own
locomotion. The sheer force of existence
shakes and shakes and shakes. It is no
wonder we all fall down, either in body
or brooding. That we stumble over and
up to life, reaching and shrinking away.

POSSESSED OF ITS NAME

The fork became rather forky today,
the bowl held everything, bountiful.
Anger came when it was called,
Proved up to the task of being.
And did you see how Sara became,
I don't know, much more
Like someone named Sarah. Is it just me,
or are the clouds more cloud-like now?
It's not because it's going to rain. But
if it did, I know the raindrops would
be wetter, drips more loosely falling,
full of themselves. If you say plop, well
you can't do it without making your
jaw drop. I'm telling you, my feet get
that they're at the foot of the bed, like
they belong there. And my fingers,
well, they were confused before,
but you should see them now playing
themselves out upon these very keys.

LETTER 7

November wind marches dried leaves down our street.
It's easy to think about everyone
who is not here.

In a conversation on the impracticality
of higher education, Greg's technical school rakes a line.
He would have been a great electrician. Connecting everything.

The swelling of the trees to either side
is violent, everything seems ripe
for a quick, thorough snap.

Chill wraps itself around empty limbs,
lets itself onto porches. You can almost
see it clinging to the back of pant legs.

Charlie's low-hanging eyes empty all memories
of July out into the backyard and they skitter
to take shelter.

LETTER 8

This morning's rain still clings
to the netting of the screened porch
and it's too cold to sit outside
but I do.

It seems like everyone in our neighborhood
has at least one stray, black cat—
otherwise, it's a different color.

Charlie licks collected rain off the cooler
and noses the metal donkey in
the corner, with its tank body
and buck teeth. The neck is made
from an old spring so the head still
bobs after the dog's gone and now it
looks like the thing is looking at
me, nodding.

We stopped off highway 49 and bought
it as a memento of all the terrible
trips to Jackson and back from Jackson.
So I think of trying to breast feed
before surgery and all the painful
ambiguity of healing. How you can never
know how long it will take.

Someone hands you a hot plate and says,
“Hold this!” There is no time frame,
no sense of hopeful endurance. No,
endurance is not the right word—
you want to put down the hot plate
or rewind to before it came into
your possession. You'd like to stand aside
and decline the responsibility of response,
or at least put oven mitts on, at least
prepare for it all, if it's inevitable.

LETTER 9

Our lives are short,
shorter than the lives of things.

You tell me about the basement,
your Dad's push to rid the place

of over twenty years of stuff,
the porcelain doll he's disappointed

you won't keep. Because we don't
recognize our past selves,

even with physical proof. And
what is the shelf-life of porcelain?

The internet could tell me,
but I'd rather not search.

Safe to say, well-kept porcelain
will keep longer than you or I.

So why throw it out? Why not
protect the stuff that's simple

compared to people,
with no guarantee. You can
wrap things and stack them

in boxes, you can hold on and not
even have to see—to know

each article, each ballerina jewelry box
and Barbie with matted hair,

is safe in its place, not gone
or thrown away. And you

take the boxes from your father,
you are stronger than he is now.

LETTER 10

It actually takes a good
amount of will to feel badly,
to let yourself sink like fruit
that chooses to rot early
on vine or branch and fall
to the earth unfettered
with expectations of consumption.

It's an effort to bring non-joy
to every occasion, outer silence
at the table, instead
of contentment or even rage.

“Get a room,” someone could yell
about you and your emotions.
“Oh, they look so good together.”
“She totally deserves him.”
Describes the couple you make—
yourself and your mood which is
not easy to maintain among the happy
naysayers who don't understand
the stamina it takes.

HIS LOVING AND MY LOVING, HIS ANGER AND MY ANGER, SUFFICIENTLY
OR INSUFFICIENTLY ALIKE

What if every time he said party—I thought
of hats and he the corners of rooms?
If when I said forever—he pictured
this evening and I stretched my body
into tiny particles spread out into complete
stars, stars with their own planets,
peopled with beings who often disagree?

What if when he says fishing—I imagine
the homespun compliment and he tastes
my words like bait, but I don't catch him?
Why buy the cow, when, and all that.
What if when I say delusional—he finds me
standing in another city, while I go rigid,
me turning into the ground?

LETTER 12

This afternoon I received a letter
from my dear friend Mozu,
who weaves and collects nothing
now, she says, but memories.
She wrote nine pages and much
about the death of her only son,
of another mother who turned
away from her when he was dying
in her arms. She needed help.

She and I share belief in people
terrified of their own vulnerability.
Some cannot stand runny noses,
threadbare clothing, or old photos.
Of course, everything will touch
everyone who wishes
to live a long life of the opposites
that make and accompany joy.

I wish I could feel life as sharply
as she does in her grief and still, I know,
I don't want her grief, even as I see it
makes her beautiful beyond physical,
and mark how her mind rises so nicely
above matter. To learn from sadness and
not have to see it, feel it thick on you,
like a school without ceilings or tests—
that is what I'd prefer, thank you.

LETTER 13

We got a Christmas tree,
roots and all. Charlie sniffs
around the wrapped bulb where all
the dirt and underground reaching
are. I thought the roots were supposed
to grow deep and wide as the trunk and
branches, but five foot of pine shoots
out from just a foot of clumped ground.
Maybe everything is more on the surface
than it seems to be, seems to me.
Easy to overlook what is there,
what is growing in the open—
but let's face it, people don't buy Christmas
roots, they buy trees and usually cut
them off at earth level. As if to say,
this is where we stand, the sky is what
we reach for, let's put aside all the mess.
Let's decorate.

LETTER 14

Amelia is down, but yelping
from the crib—a high-pitched
cry free from real lament.

So different than the tear-streaming
screams that came when we let
the flame from her first candle

graze her fingertips. Really it was
the fingertips grazing flame, but
it doesn't matter, what matters

is they met and made her cry—
wales that rose over *happy*
birthday to you. All the voices

and she crying until, and while,
I picked her up, as the room sang,
and finally, *finally* the song ended.

We got out of where everyone
was looking at her, and I,
in expectation of a cute moment

when she'd shove cake in her mouth,
rub frosting on her face.
But no—when she calmed, got

a piece of cake, she touched the icing
delicately, as if to see that its temperature
matched its name.

LETTER 15

In my free time I put a party hat on Charlie, take his picture and send it as a text message—this is what I do with what I have so little of, how I drop minutes as if they are unlimited, like my cellphone with unlimited speaking time. No matter, because I rarely call for a conversation that might mean forgetting there is anything more important than the person I am conversing with long distance. I send the picture and it sends surface to my friend. It is a knick-knack type of life. When the object takes place of substance, of the substantial, meaningful, moving. But what's so bad about Charlie in a yellow party hat? A triangle that sits to the right, because if it were straight up it would look too much like the dunce's crown, shape of the bars of my smartphone turned upside down.

LETTER 16, GREG'S BIRTHDAY

And there's James Leininger, who at toddler-age talked
of himself as a WWII pilot flying from the Natoma
—killed over Iwo Jima. The boy played with planes
until he could talk and then woke nightly from
dreams where his flight was on fire, shot and spiraling,
but consciousness must have kept—
50 years later a boy tells the war stories of one
James Huston, an unknown casualty, one of many
not talked about until the young James' father
spent years researching the information his son
gave between ages two and five, which could be
our most soulful time because it is so easily forgotten.
Then James stopped talking of his nightmares and shipmate.
Still, for some time the consciousness of one James slipped
into another, somewhere between it kept for 50 years—
was it in its own winter? If so, we must misjudge
the stillness of the cold. What life there must be
waiting for the next thaw, the right baby or heart.
And how silly we are, with our thick coats,
sparking tiny match-sized universes into being.

DEARLY UNKNOWN

We are gathered together today,
to fly to Minneapolis.
But what does it really mean to fly?
What is it that lifts us up and keeps us going?
Propulsion jets, you may be thinking,
but it's more than that—yes, it's much more than
mere thermodynamics. Now, I am not a scientist
or priest, but believe me when I say I know
what life can be revealed by flying,
getting your feet out from under you
and feeling as close as you can come
to as small as you actually are.
The land stretched flat and air thin,
up here, in what some like to call
the friendly skies, a person has time
to reflect on all the things they should
try to be and all the things they already are.
These are thoughts that can't come in a car.
Now, I'm not saying there are not many fine cars,
there are many, many fine cars, but can any
of them make your stomach drop away from your flesh?
Can any of them separate you from all the piddling
concerns of everyday life? No, only by flying
can we understand death. Only by flying can
we truly see ourselves and be seen. I'd like
you to take a moment and turn to the person
next to you, to shake hands in peace.
This is how nations are made and unmade,
how worlds are brought to one
and flesh becomes spirit, spirit becomes air
and we are all up it, folks, all together.
We'll be landing in Minneapolis in 15 minutes.
Rest now or forever hold your angst.
The weather in Minneapolis is sunny and a cool 65 degrees.

LETTER 17

Nobody writes poems about schedules
or babies crying like someone is
slowly lowering their hand into boiling water.

Well, maybe some write of the babies, but
what I said about schedules stands,
even though my lists are all I'll be left with
once, or if, Amelia stops crying.

SIMPLE

You breaststroke and freestyle through clothing turned to types of jellyfish, pull through strands of cell phone chargers. You backstroke in car titles and throw pillows. Collected, they are what move you forward, but the only way to keep moving is to push them away. Glide through material reality slowly, and lightly, with less gravity.

LETTER 18

The backyard—all cartoon-butterfly
and sharp-bluebird sunny, all nothing
can go wrong or is wrong in this place—
stares at me while I sit eating venison.
All the light on all the green makes me think
of the deer I eat growing up in the same place
I grew up, us being from the same state and all.

LETTER 19

I need to leave for the shrink
but I also need to write—
how long overdue I am in
sending a letter to you.
A space opens and then all of
life just jumps in and pushes
apart the two sides by existing
between them, and by them
I mean me and you.

GREEN STREET

The cacophony of the instant
overwhelms me. Miles Davis
On Green Dolphin Street
streaming and when the internet
fails the wails of my daughter
replace his wind. I wonder
when, if ever, I will be in one world
again.

Dolphins raise up out of the cement,
they jump and spray
as if to say hello, but the way
they say it says only
ha, ha, ha, ha, ha,
you are not a dolphin.
And I say ha, ha, ha, ha, ha,
you are swimming through cement.
Then they look down to where
I am standing. And I look, too.

My clothes float about me
obeying some other mass.
I feel the cool matter
between my clothes and I. When I
reach up, sleeves stick to me, heavy.
I remember how the Red Cross
taught me to transform pants
into personal floatation device.
Slipping out of them, I wonder
if I have enough breath to blow.

LETTER 20 – “the man of vulgar spirit wallowing in luck”

Gravity repeats itself.
The sky, with all its success
at lightness, doesn't seep into me
and hold up what must be supported.
I go to the shelves for Tranströmer,
he's the only one who can help
now, and he is not there.
Instead, I take Mallarmé,
am brought to the windows,
a man dying against sunned glass.
O Self, who knows vomit and cold
featherless wings – what are you
next to this man? Ungrateful.
Determination dancing pink
in the gutter. Then I remember
Frente! Mallarmé's *Les Fenetres*
combines with my bad French to bring
a video of “Ordinary Angels”
that sings about not wearing
the stupid wings, no matter
for lightness. We are all broken and
at the beginning. Thank you
1990s! Thank you Australian
alternative rock! We danced,
do you remember dancing,
to their album? We sang,
too, “every time I think
of you, I get a shot right through
into a bolt of blue.”
I pretended to feel broken
hearted along with the song,
because that's what was
called for. And I couldn't imagine
anything could make you more sad.

LETTER 21, EIGHTY EIGHT KEYS

after Federico Garcia Lorca

The piano
makes death light.
The laughter of lost
souls
fits snugly in its squared
teeth.
And like the horse
it trots a long path
to tramp the sighs
that would otherwise
float up
to be too heavy
a weight on
its metal-stringed belly.

LETTER 23, SUNDAY MARCH 30TH

On a recording, before he reads “Life of Sundays,” Rodney says he could recognize Sunday from any other day of the week, even if he was on the planet Mars.

At a stoplight, I see miniature crucified Jesus Christs.
They are perched on the exhaust pipes of a motorcycle
that seems otherwise unadorned. I can't believe
my eyes. Are those really Jesus?
What is he doing there, spreading
his tiny silver arms
over the softly spewed fumes?
Oh, yes, he died for this, to be sure.
I inch my car closer, to see
if it really is him. The lights change.
At the next stop, I get nearer.
Yes! They are definitely Jesus Christs,
or some ornate bolts. Jesus or
shinny hardware, and again the go
and stop – my third chance
to confirm or deny. I can't be sure. Maybe I can look this up,
to clarify what I am or am not seeing,
maybe I can search “jesus décor motorcycles” or “exhaust pipe jesus.”
I can't trust myself with this encounter;
clearly, I need the internet
to tell me, “Yes, you are seeing,
have seen, Jesus Christ.”

NEW YOU

The new you came in a box, to your front door. You opened it and a new version of yourself inflated like a blow-up doll, pretend auto-pilot, alligator raft. It looked good. It looked like you, but better. The parts you always suspected were not entirely part of you were missing. The parts you considered unmistakably you were exaggerated. Everything was in its better place.

But as days went the air pressure did too. The new you started looking old, like the same you you were before you got the new one. A couple days more and it looked worse – the plastic sagged heavily in areas where you had only held hair-like wrinkles.

It was work. Getting down on your knees to find the air valve and blowing. But soon it became like brushing your teeth. It wasn't long before you became curious about how the new you had been inflated in the first place. What was its motivation, what animated it?

And you might have had time to answer this question, if you weren't so light-headed with the effort of yourself.

LETTER 24

Everyone has their farm,
don't they? Everyone has their idea
of a farm. Even if it is
in the city and they harvest words,
glean the sweetness of rooftop
honey thick off the photographer's brush.
But goat's milk and chicken eggs fit in
to these farms, too. Everyone in Brooklyn
dreams of making goat cheese. There is space
the mind claims – physical, real, ideal.
Some of these farms become farms –
I believe people work them,
but I have never seen this, it seems
like rumor this way, rumors of farms.

Yet you want to go to one
this summer. A real farm!
Where you will not get paid to get to
work with your hands and learn.
I will not let myself get sentimental
about the pastoral, possibilities endless,
that will accompany this work. A farmer
poet visiting New York with busted up
hands told me about how tiring his life
was, had become, and told me to go
to grad school (He didn't even write
of the land, all his poems were psychological –
and brilliant!). I have accepted townie
as something that describes me. And I,
too, even I who know better (I think)
have a farm. I want chickens!
And not so much planting in rows as
fruit trees and berry gathering.
Though, of course, I will keep with
the seasons. This is all to say,
get your hands dirty. Mess up

your life.

If suddenly everyone up and went
to their farms, the imaginary places
we have enough land to make real,
think how many fewer people would eat
tomatoes designed to turn red
in trucks, tomatoes that taste like stiff water.
If not for yourself – do it for
tomato eaters. Think of them (me).
We all deserve this.

LETTER 25

The underwear I started wearing
after Amelia's birth—so large,
catch the air like a parachute
when I throw them into the pile,
so full of themselves
you can imagine a tiny man
being deployed, hanging from them
for dear life.

LETTER 26

I'm driving to campus
when a cheesy love song
repeating *why*
can't I
forget about you
puts the scars on
Jeremy's chest over
the road, in front
of my eyes, and I see us,
laughing after
I say
"Wait, I have to tell you
something,
I'm a virgin."
And then us laughing again,
at the fact we laugh
in the first place.
This is how he comes back
to me, in snippets, like
personal history is old-
time movie film and
someone got scissor-
happy. The final creation
is brilliant and tragic.
This is all I have?
This is all I have!

TO THE WOMAN IN THE BATHROOM STALL, AS I APPLY MAKEUP AND
ATTEMPT TO FIX MY HAIR

I have once been in your stall.
And what I want to say to you
without saying it, because that
would be awkward, is that this
is fine, go ahead, do your thing.

Me here at the sink, you in there,
quiet. You don't even have to be,
if that's not working out, don't
worry. I remember when, exactly,
I got over location. I had to go
on a moving train with a good-
sized hole in the bathroom's
floor. I squatted over the metal,
seat-less tank, watched the blur
of under-track wash away and be
replaced. I thought, now, I'll be
able to go anywhere.

Since, I've gone, in group,
on a mountainside, and in the
desert while a donkey stared straight
through me. Before her first cry,
my daughter shat on my leg.
It's how we knew her healthy.
After all is said and done, it's
better to go than to not be able
to go. Better to not have to learn
this the hard way.

I know it seems strange, this pep-
talk, but privacy is a little overrated,
don't you think? When I change
my daughter and a stinking mess
is pressed against her, she says,

“Ewe, ewe,” because her cousin
once looked down at her butt
and said as much, but I tell her,
I’m telling you, everybody
does it.

PERSONAL HYGIENE

When I finish brushing my teeth, I've still got a good amount of emotional baggage. So I decide to floss. But when I reach for the floss, I pull the thread and the entire spool jumps out at me, as if it knows. I put it back. Think, guess I'm not the only one with issues. And now my teeth are very clean. I am still not. So I take a bath. Oh, but everything's there with me, it all floats for a bit and then sinks. I think of the phase my daughter went through when she'd shit the bath—night after night. She stopped, eventually, but I don't think it was because she knew the water was dirty, that there was some problem with emptying herself.

LETTER 27

I heard an interview on the radio about walking
and remembered, yes, I like walking, quite a lot.
So I set off wandering avenues, looking into
partially lit houses, and eventually I find myself
beside a vacant lot, a space vegetation has overtaken.
Between the leaves and tree limbs some things flicker.
I think streetlights beyond the tree line, reflectors poking
through the leaves. Then, no, I let myself in on what I know,
they're fireflies, the first. And there is Greg saying,
"Today was a good day, because I saw the first firefly of summer."

LETTER 28

Then very quickly you are there too, telling me Greg's story and I'm thinking of the cloth I brought you from Japan, green with yellow fireflies. Fabric I bought in a country where these bugs are bred in captivity and then released in a certain field. People park, walk, and pay an entry fee to just stand and watch their funny butts. This is not where I bought you the fabric, but it is where getting into Miki's car I thought, "I have made the wrong decision. To leave him and this country is wrong." Somehow I'd gotten everything wrong again. I remember closing the door to his Jeep Grand Cherokee, thinking "maybe I can change my ticket" when I knew I couldn't change anything.

I'm unhappy with some of my choices, with my marriage, specifically. I think it had to happen the way it did – and by "it" I mean my life, but this isn't a very good letter. I suppose all I can do is learn and I'm not that old. It's dark enough out here to not really see what I am writing—I kind of like it that way. I'm not feeling too sorry for myself, just enough, and I actually am hopeful. Can't you tell.

OPEN LETTER

I became happier with
just the thought of anti-depressants.
Knowing a prescription was waiting,
I opened doors for strangers—
not that I wouldn't before,
but now I noticed I did—
and had to restrain myself
from buying the coffee of the man
in front of me. So strange, possibly
unhealthy, but I like it.
Thinking I will feel *better*,
even if it means I may not *feel* better.
Loss or increase of appetite, fewer organisms.
I imagine myself dodging all
side effects. Gaining weight only in
my breasts. Pre-prescription placebo?
Who knows? My thinking is unrealistic,
but the feeling this morning,
before taking anything,
is one-hundred percent here,
buoying me with optimism,
the type of 'it will be okay' that
comes right before the bottle.

LETTER 29

“Surrounded by the living night, the soul
seeks Him who is hidden in darkness.” - Thich Nhat Hanh

The night told me to
write to you. What I see
from the front porch is
a lot of living, black pine
needles splayed against
blue—dropping into
ever lessening light—
that is night. Except in Tokyo,
and I suppose other cities
with terrible pollution.
Everything orange, then green
again in morning. I used to love
that type of never going out—
you didn't know how long
you'd been drinking.

And it was always safe
to walk home, even when
I wouldn't have seen,
being I drank myself
to black out, the darkest night
I found in that city—but
I wouldn't call it living,
if anything a terrible dampness
of soul. How did I make it out
of that place? The closet
apartment where I woke to crows
circling the back alley
for sushi scraps. The surround
sound of their caws made me
feel like prisoner and witch
in one, kept self and captor.
The birds were not my friends.

So different from when you visited
and we stopped in Ueno Park.
A solitary crow perched near
our picnic and I cawed to it.
Do you remember? How it flew
down and landed beside me,
in answer to my speech?
How tame it seemed as I threw
rice into the air and it caught
the white in its dark beak. This—
a crow among crows all a size
bigger than most Tokyoites' dogs
—stayed beside us, listened to me
and responded, still I was terrified
of its communication, the sleekness
of its black feathers, so clearly
controlled because it wanted to be.
This letter is rice in the air,
in response to the night.

LETTER 30

– On Donuts, the Dali Lama, and Other Fears of Abandonment

This morning, a Saturday, we drove to Black Creek Water Park, really a lake. So often the names of parks are misleading. I'm thinking of Devil's Kitchen, the rock formations in Southern Illinois. A few of the rocks do look like a table, yes, but does a table make a kitchen. Then they named Devil's Kitchen Lake and look, might the devil's kitchen have a lake, I don't know. I remember at summer camp we were terrified of Fat Man's Misery and no one got stuck between the rock sides of that narrow cave. Not knowing the name of the passage in the Sewanee, you and I both trusted Ben – him being a Recreation Major and all – that we could fit between the slabs glaciers left to make Devil's Kitchen. We had to turn sideways, I could feel my hip bones rough against the rock wall. I turned round the corned edge where the rocks managed a sharp 90 degrees that our soft bodies had to negotiate, and you couldn't get through. I showed you, grabbed your arm and knew I had to pretend to be fearless or we would both stay frightened with nerves beating uselessly against all the unforgiving stone around and above us. After we managed to keep moving, scooted in the crack we'd chosen, there came a point where we were high enough to reach our hands up out of the rock, and have Ben pull us out. First, I was hoisted up, then it seemed you would still be stuck. We pulled harder and here you came, free. You had been pressed so tight against the rock that it looked like a person will very small hands had felt you up. We all laughed. A few hikers came by and marveled. "We've never seen anyone come out of there!" they said. And we looked at Ben, wondering how he could have assumed we'd be small enough, never trying it himself. So much for Devil's Kitchen. Now, Brady is on the beach with Ami, and I sit finishing a donut and reading Charles Wright—hum of August cicadas in the background. Charlie, the dog not nickname for author, is tied to a nearby tree and clamors at intervals for us to join the other two. I put him off. Think about my donut, how I like donuts even though they are no good. I recently heard an actress say they are worth getting fat for, they are so good, but she wasn't fat so it's hard to really believe her claim. Clearly, my inner need for donuts is standing in for something else, but what? Until I sort that all out I may as well eat up!

I wonder what happens if someone brings the Dahli Lama a donut as a present—I'm sure he laughs, but doesn't eat it. The Dahli Lama's got all his needs figured out, its easy to tell by the way he laughs. His eyebrows are always above his thick glasses, a true sign of good health and a positive outlook, but when he laughs the move up even higher. A real laugh shrinks the forehead and moves the body in bounces. After years of study I've come to the conclusion that fake laughs echo in a tense body while real ones shake all your bits apart with small bounces. Some call this a belly laugh, but it's more complex.

How is it that at one point in our lives we were so bored we were able to force our bodies into just this kind of life. We sat on cold car seats in the attic of my family's garage, with nothing to do, and since we had nothing to do we decided to laugh. Actually said, okay, lets see how long we can laugh, and then tipped back in our bucket seats so our backs were against the floor and legs up in the air. We laughed until we laughed and I can't remember how awkward it was when finally all the fake and real faded, maybe it wasn't awkward at all. Maybe it was like when the Dalai Lama stops laughing and his breathing has been so regular that you don't even notice the transition with an in breath. I've decided to put off really worrying about things until the Dali Lama dies.

I remember my grandfather saying it wasn't really living if you couldn't have a cold beer in the evening—this was sadder than how difficult it was for him to take off and put on his shoes. Why not Velcro? Why does Catholicism have to be so consumed with drink? There is the undeniable scratchiness of Velcro, the undeniable sweetness of wine, but in the end it seems the pros outweigh the cons and vice-versa. Even the Jesuits have a lot of drunks. In Chiapus, on a mission trip, was the only time I got black-out drunk with a priest, a Jesuit named Mayo. Best clergyman I never knew and when I asked him how he did it, how he decided to be a priest, he said he only decided for each day. Yes, he took priesting one day at a time, which is some advice I've applied to various aspects of my life. Today, I decide to write poetry, or whatever this is, today I decide to mother, to love. Today I eat this donut.

Brady and Ami are in the water now and their voices carry over the lake, Charlie intensifies his pleas. I don't want to hold onto anything. That way I won't have to let it go. The donut is gone, the cicadas still sound but someday Ami will move far away—if she's anything like me, she may never come back.

LETTER 31- AUGUST, 24 2015

August morning, the air's still thick.
Charlie under foot, fuzzy and panting.
I've started to believe true things can be said
in three words. Lyubomir Levchev's
"Here I am," Nisargadatta's "I am that," and
Thomas Merton's happiness in "Now. Here. This."
I'll have to wait for my own sparse epiphany.
Eat shit and die comes to mind, but I don't
mean it and there are four words.
You don't own me is four again.
The plants look at me like I'm crazy,
they don't get it, but they're cluttered
with petals and leaves, what do they know
about brevity? Charlie pants in two syllables,
in, out, in, out, in, out.
Be honest sounds good, even though it's two.
Be honest, be honest, be honest—
I'm not sure what it means.
I love you, there's another three-worder,
that seems begotten, not made.
And I like to think I love better
than I practice the in, out present
Charlie masters. But you can't love
what you don't experience.
Animals and small children
force you to them, say "Here I am,"
say, "I love you" and
other simple things.

LETTER 32

September, a new month, another morning.
The hibiscus has dropped a bud before flowering,
Charlie hunts a tailless lizard, makes me think
they have met before. He doesn't eat them, but
I've seen lizards in his mouth, dangling from jowl sides;
green fruit, like the hibiscus bud.

People are strange, too. I'm starting to enjoy
even things I don't like.
The bud again, I'd rather it flower, to this orange-
pink with planet-like anther—the anther are
the stamen tips, which I prefer to the petals because
they seem alien but are all about connection.
Instead of bloom, though, it's bud drop
with all planets locked inside, no orbiting.
Waste is one way to look at it. Yet there is something
moving about its fluorescent green against the dark soil.
The way its slender outer leaves push away from
and curve toward the bud, like they really know.

Last night I read a Little Critter story to Amelia
and was taken quite outside the list of things
Critter can do “All By [Him]self” because in one
picture there's a weathervane and the way
Mercer Mayer draws it the letters line up
to read SEWN.

I've not been able to locate
an image of a real weathervane aligning this way.
It seems Mercer forced a reverse of east and west
to make the word. I think, *right on*, Mercer,
and remember another children's book
that talks about only recognizing the wind
by the branches. There is a lot we can't control.
A lot of wind stitched. “All by myself,
All by myself,” Critter says over and again

on each page, every drawing showing him failing. He can tie his shoes, but they're tied together. He can watch his sister, on a leash.

Oh, now there is a lizard with tail looking at the hibiscus. Now he's climbing up the highest branch. I won't think about whether he is the bud dropper. His little legs look so funny bent against the branch's thin reaching. And now there's a breeze swaying him and the plant.

LETTER 33

Sunday morning, Amelia and Brady at the zoo.
I'm trying to look at how layered things are—
rosemary carrying over into the fence slats,
mint on the other side, and Amelia's blue swing
swaying behind the hibiscus branches. All versions
of present and past growth overlapping. You'd think
the plants adept at letting their dead parts fall
but I find benefits to pruning even with the often ugly space,
left waiting for something to happen. The mint fills and overflows
only one side of its pot. I ran over the other parking,
and though the plastic's proved resilient, the plant's
taking longer. What if we always had to carry our dead,
worn out thoughts—never able to trim, never ready
to let go? Used to be, my only way of getting
around them was forgetfulness—but thoughts, invisible
already, make forgetting different than getting rid of.
They resist slipping into any permanent oblivion.
Unless you cut away. And you know how good
I am at cutting away—you can imagine the rest.

On the radio, I heard a doctor discuss amputees
who voluntarily, no that's not the right word, willfully
cut off limbs. They believe the part doesn't belong to
them, is foreign and feel surgery is the only way
to make themselves whole again. They choose physical
disability over mental discomfort. Listening, I found myself
jealous of their level of commitment, of how much
they can do without. The first judgment is insanity,
right, but the next is an awe over how much
they were able to give up in order to feel better.

Then again, maybe the physical is easier.
They could have given up thinking
their limb did not belong to them. This must
have been a harder idea to swallow than using
crutches for the rest of their lives or ordering

a prosthetic hand, that insurance won't cover
because the handicap was self-induced.

This seems similar to me finding it
kind of simple to quit drinking, but impossible
to stop obsessively thinking. Isn't that how
burning man started? Friends deciding they
needed an effigy to get the man over
his ex-wife. Sure, now it is a lot of drugs
and dust and costumes, but it started
as a way to physicalize something psychological.
I always made fun of my burner roommates
in San Francisco, the bad floral vagina paintings
I had to walk by to get to my room, I thought
Georgia O'Keefe would cry, but now I think
maybe they were on to something in the desert.
Though, I can't imagine the time it would take
to effigize every thought I want to get rid of—
doubt there could be enough fire.

ZOO TRIP

At the zoo, there's all this information
about poaching, which makes you wonder
where they got these animals from, anyway.

My husband tells me they are refugees,
but the plaques describing each group
say only - common name, scientific name,
average weight, and life span.

Nothing about their pre-zoo existence—
how the zebras ended up inside this makeshift
Africa of Hattiesburg, Mississippi, mixing
with ostriches and an alligator made of cement.

Above a plaster cast of a gorilla's hand
the card reads "This hand was taken
from poachers and used to convict them."
Strange how, in killing, poachers steal
something that never belonged to anyone.

The hand looks like mine, only bigger, with
longer nails, and more wrinkles. A palm-reader
might get tripped up, might say—"Your life
cuts short suddenly, it looks like the 2nd half
has been lifted. But you are lucky in love."

Strange, how you give your hand in marriage,
makes me think of my husband as the poacher.

LETTER 34

I am that, which is this

I have decided since we are still in the year of five, fifteen, my marker doesn't mean as much, doesn't have to. The best news came on Monday, your news, and in time for my birthday—a day which I freely give myself to write bad poetry, unabashedly. Charlie sleeps on the couch in front of me, spread like butter, the free loader. Last year I pulled a book from the shelf, a birthday poem, and found \$20 cash. This year, I woke to Amelia's cries at 5 am and couldn't go back to sleep, so I read Rilke—poems on praise, the poet praises. And he is right to praise so beautifully—another day with chance to feel the universe is abundant—not unforgiving or forgiving, not always apparently kind, but abundant none the less. Another year to feel it will give me all I need, even then some.

LETTER 35

On the plane, in the row ahead of me,
two Mormon boys are returning
from two year's mission in El Salvador.
I know this because they are talking,
to the people to each side of them,
the aisle dividing their work. The one
in the row in front of me talks to a young
curly-haired girl— who I imagine to be cute—
about herself, her soul, and whether she's ever asked
if god is there, waited for an answer.

I'm trying to read poetry but think of turning
to the nice Vietnamese woman beside me—
so nice she's traveling to a conference
to talk about caring compassionately for people
at the end of life—I want to turn to her, I know
she'll listen, and say, "Have you ever asked poetry
if it is there? It will answer you, it can speak
if you ask. Poetry reading, it's a knock
and the door will be opened type of deal.
But you must be ready to hear it—
which will happen to different people
at different times. Everyone is unique."

Then he leans over and asks her,
"Has anyone you've known ever died?"
Even though she talks only about distant,
great-relative types—it seems she has never
lost anyone or doesn't want to share—he tells her
what happens to the body, becomes of the soul.

Maybe I should interrupt my neighbor, now reading
the inflight article on Oprah Winfrey's meditation habits
and say, You know the people who pass,
the ones you care for into their death,
they turn into poetry, they all turn into poetry.

LETTER 36

Lately, and by lately I mean
the last two years, my mind occupies
itself by plucking lead petals from the brain,
divorce him, divorce him not.
It's a more figurative take on put-the-pedal-
to-the-metal, or break-check
your thinking. Do you remember the
Amelia Bedelia books? I loved them,
found comfort in her literalism.
When answering phones at a doctor's office
she tells a patient who has caught a bug
to let it go.

I thought her funny, as a child, and her confusion
assuring. Here, too, was a person who got everyone wrong,
who believed words too exactly.
In another story, she clips calendar pages
to make a date cake. I would like
a piece, please, to swallow
the day I'll understand enough
to know what to do. We say the way
to a man's heart is through his stomach
and probably the same is true for the opposite sex.
Where I am is dark, slippery, thick with digesting—
I may be on my way.

LETTER 37 – JANUARY 1, 2016

Brady is putting Ami to bed and
I collect my thoughts about the first day
of this new year. So far all feels the same
except the numbers. I can imagine myself
waking at 60, if I make it, and wondering
where all the numbers went—how they all
continue. No images here, just
a scrolling line of digits that blur into
something indisfigurable, like my spelling,
or personality. I recognize who I meet,
not what I actually feel inside—the
gummy mash-up of what have you. Still
falling all over myself to be myself,
still wondering what that will be. Want
to be free of wondering? Why—why want
to know, instead I should just continue
to let the nice sounds bump into each other.
But sometimes it gets unfun.

LETTER 38 – LEAP YEAR

2000. The year that our computers would melt, our clocks would explode, proved anti-climatic. After midnight on the first, all those doomsdayers did have full pantries, no disadvantage in that, but honestly, how different was their stockpile from our Midwestern parents' second freezers and regularly stocked pantries? I'm not being fair, the storage freezers and plethora of canned goods are as much a rural and suburban thing as a particularly Midwest trait. And why not? There is the space and often you lack proximity to a grocery store. I'm just saying that some Midwestern households could hold their own against someone claiming to be prepared for the apocalypse. Midwesterners are usually prepared. It's comfortable this way. You already know where your next meal is coming from, and the next, and the next, because you've bought it all weeks ago and it's been in the pantry and freezer waiting patiently. This pushes the food dial closer to comfort, further from taste.

One of my favorite things about living in Japan was walking to the market after work to get fresh fish for dinner. This part of my Japanese lifestyle felt more exotic than the surprisingly pregnant fish I had to stomach with my middle school students at lunch. Yes, there was the shock of the fish's insides coming out, eggs all tiny eyes, this was jarring, unappetizing. But the dried, crusty flesh of this fish's exterior seemed very Midwestern. Very preserved. Besides, I didn't like this fish – and the fresh salmon or tuna I would buy after work, so rich in their reds and pinks, was delicious. There's the distinction; if something is foreign and appealing it is exotic, if it's foreign and unappealing it is culture shock. I'm thinking of all the Syrian refugees now. Of their garments and manners, of how they appear to European citizens unused to the sadness and desperation they seem to represent. I can't get the picture of the boy who washed ashore on Turkey out of my mind. And I do nothing. I have thought about sending coats. I have too many coats, especially for someone who lives in Mississippi. I could easily send a coat to a Syrian refugee, if I could get an address to send it. But I've gone weeks with this idea and done nothing except feel like a jerk for not doing anything. These refugees are not prepared for winter. I imagine that many of them had pantries that they had to leave behind, but I don't know, maybe their culture was more like Japan. More freedom to buy food fresh from the market before dinner, or less ability to store perishables in a deep freeze.

This holiday season I was confronted with the refrigerator/freezer facts. At Thanksgiving and Christmas, yours was the only house I visited that did not have at least two refrigerators. When Brady and I moved into our house we discovered our refrigerator had no freezer, and lasted a good four months before getting one. Having a full-sized refrigerator and a full-sized deep freeze, I'm not sure where this puts us on the

refrigerator/freezer spectrum. I suppose we are tied with those who have two, regular, freezer-fridge splits. And I also suppose it doesn't really matter, except that it feels insane to live with two large electric containers of cold food while people are starving and freezing in other places. I don't know how I got here. How I came to breaking down my morality in terms of kitchen appliances. Only I felt a lot better about myself when I lived with one truncated refrigerator, something about three-fourths the size of the regular models (my apartments in Japan and New York). Maybe plenty is not enough for me. Maybe I feel safer with room for want and an open store within walking distance.

But back to 2000. I texted you this morning that 2016 is a leap year. It is a leap year and you are pregnant. This seems a very good sign. Even though you will not give birth until after the extra day, it seems an auspicious omen to have an extra day to be growing something. I also texted a question. What should we do? I ask because we made a pact with Aaron Albrichts to gather every Leap Day in celebration of the addition to our lives. We made this pact in 2000, and I think we were together on Leap Day 2004, but definitely not Leap Day 2008 or 2012. I think we should meet this year. I think we should do something. I don't know what.

On the original day, we wrote Leap Day messages on people's cars in shoe polish. That is how Aaron joined us, right? We were shoe-polishing his car and he came running out of his house after us. Later, I remember mud and sitting on top of a hill. I only remember the mud because of how confused and agitated my mother was when I came home. When I was out doing innocently stupid things, like soberly writing on people's cars with shoe polish, my parents seemed the most confused, worried and suspicious that I was up to something much worse – booze and drugs and night clubs in St. Louis. But when I was actually up to those things, they suspected nothing. That's parenting for you. Anyway, I think it began to rain and we had a mud fight, then tired and sat on top of a hill. Aaron and you and I swore to always meet on Leap Day to celebrate, and harmlessly vandalize people's cars, I suppose. And come to think of it—how hilarious would it be to shoe polish a bunch of cars on Leap Day this year? No one would see this coming. It would involve a decent amount of driving—but if we started out early enough we'd be able to cover a number of our high school classmates. Of course, I'll have to fly to Illinois, you'll have to take a few days off of work, but I really think we should try to make this happen. It's not for old time's sake—which I am now wondering the meaning of. Is time personified in this phrase? There is now time, and new time, and old time. Old time needs a lot of looking after, he seems to be the one whose sake we most often take into account. Doing this only because it has been done before.

Before Christmas this year my sister Andrea talked about how little she liked tradition, how stupid she thought it was that we would do something just because we did

it the year before. I love tradition. I love inventing tradition and then calling it tradition even while doing it the first time. I love then referencing that first time as precedence for repeating the event or occurrence. This way I can say we have a tradition of meeting to celebrate Leap Day every four years, even though it has only happened once. Anyway, Andrea was going on just a bit about how against tradition she is and I couldn't help but mention her participation in, and my distance from, the Catholic Church. How ironic that she, who can't stand repetition for repetition's sake, would be the one regularly attending church and ushering her children through each Catholic rite of passage. My nephew Logan even served as altar boy at Christmas Eve mass this year. He was reluctant but apparently the church was in a jam and Logan filled in, got grateful remarks from the priest and a special blessing from the entire congregation at the end of mass. Oh, they've got him now! When I mentioned this to Andrea, she brushed her involvement aside, said she was only doing it for the kids, that she would stop attending as soon as they moved out and only return when they visited. "To keep up appearances," so she says. But there must be some comfort in the repetitiousness of it, even for someone who doesn't believe. And really, she must believe in something, if she keeps going through the motions. It's like eating the same cereal you hate every day...eventually you'll start to like it, or look forward to it, right? There's that syndrome you can get when kidnapped, where you begin to love your captor. This could happen to my sister with the Catholic Church, who knows. In the meantime, I stay away from the church and miss ceremony, try to create my own meaningful repetitions.

So Leap Year! 2016! I suppose we could not meet, and simply white-shoe-polish the windows of cars in our respective towns. But it doesn't seem like tradition if you do it alone. Alone it just feels crazy or wasteful. I mean, imagine, on your own, getting some bread and saying 'This is the body of Christ' and then eating it solemnly. It just doesn't have the same effect. So it is with shoe polish, and Leap Day, and all the other nothing days I'd like to mark. Marking is the thing. The only Leap Day that I remember between now and the beginning of my life is the one in 2000. I remember snippets. Shoe polish, Aaron running after us, rain. I remember getting muddy and sitting giddy with the uselessness of what we were doing. Wet hands slapping together like we'd just finished, or were going to start, some sports event. The swearing, we'd always meet and celebrate. For some reason, this made the day more remarkable. Our commitment, even though it went unfulfilled, distinguished the day. I need this distinction. My memory is such, my life so ordinarily repetitious, that I need to call myself out from it on occasion, so I can begin to remember it in digestible sizes.

When my grandmother's memory started to really go, I knew because I had always just come back from Japan. Even when I'd moved to San Francisco, and then Mexico, when I came back to visit she would ask me, "How was Japan?" For years I

was returning from Japan. Always returning from Japan. She would ask about Japan and then she would ask about you and your sister Mary Ellen. Those were the parts left of me, for her. I was my time in Japan and I was my friendship with you. Those were my impressions on her, until I stopped to exist in any specific way. When I was no longer her granddaughter, who was I then? What day was I on? She didn't know. She was never angry with me. To this day she has not got the bitterness that Alzheimer's confusion can bring to people. Still, for quite some time I felt I couldn't be around her. Couldn't visit her without her knowing me.

Then I had Amelia. Had the experience of taking care of someone who knows nothing of you, at least in all of the ways you expect someone to know you. To know your name and what you do, what you like to do, who your family is, where you live and where you come from. I realized quickly that my daughter was knowing me without knowing these things. And in doing so she was knowing a more important version of me. Me stripped of all the ideas of Me. She would know my love and caring, my fatigue or irritation, these she would experience fully without naming. So, the first chance I had, when in Illinois with Amelia, driving between your house and Andrea's, I stopped to visit my grandmother, to introduce her to Amelia, to say to her, even though she wouldn't remember. This is your great-granddaughter, she has your name, Mary. Amelia Mary. And my grandmother said she was beautiful. When I asked her if she ever imagined she'd have so many kids (13), she said that she couldn't have imagined it. She was most surprised by how they "all turn out so good looking." She laughed. Maybe she is always seeing us all for the first time now. Maybe it is wonderful and surprising for her. I like to think so.

I also like to think it's possible to treat other people the same way we treat babies and people with Alzheimer's—people that lack narrative memory. What if we did? What if we based every experience on the quality of the emotional exchange, and not the outcome, its place in a linear story, or relationship? You do not love a baby because it feeds anything in your ego, about your person and what you can do, what your tastes are, what you excel or fail at, you love a baby because it is human and demands to be loved. This is just as true with every other person; it's only they usually aren't has manipulatively cute (big-eyed and small-nosed) as most babies. And of course I've seen some ugly babies, their ugliness seems not to matter, it is overshadowed (or over highlighted) by the openness of their vulnerability. So, too, is it with my grandmother. She is completely vulnerable, just as adrift in space and time as a newborn. She is exceptionally easy to love.

Amelia and I visited her on Thanksgiving Day. She was curled on her side, sleeping. When one of the nurses woke her, it was clear she would rather not be roused. But she made the effort to open her eyes and when I asked if I could hold her hand she

said I could. Her eyes have become so light, that's what I noticed as most striking. The blue almost white. Amelia's are so dark, you can barely tell the iris from the pupil. It's a darkness I love for its seeming wildness. If you went inside her eyes, you wouldn't be able to find your way out. There is no door. You would be captured. This description sounds frightening, but it's more that they are commanding. They give me confidence that she will be able to take care of herself and confront fully whatever life brings her to confront. It may seem silly to read so much into her eyes, but it's an important contrast. My grandmother's seem to be washing away. Maybe she has confronted everything anyone needs to confront in one lifetime. I think so. In her eyes is a soft lightness, but it frightens me because looking into her eyes, I feel like she is going away. Alzheimer's is so strange. You have to face the idea you have of yourself disappearing from this person you love. I overcame this, my daughter helped me, but now, feeling my grandmother closer to death, I feel the second and worse type of loss—my grandmother disappearing from herself.

They must come up with different steps for mourning with Alzheimer's. First step, mourn the death of yourself in the other person, then move on to mourning their death, then and finally, mourn the loss of their physical presence. This is the last and terrible thing, when she is really gone. When she cannot, as she did on Thanksgiving, respond to my "I love you," with "I love you, too." This will be the hardest to take, because in November when my grandmother held my hand and looked at me, I don't know what she saw, but when she said she loved me it felt true.

This is a long way from Leap Day. But I'm glad you've read it all. Especially the bit about Mary, her remembering you and Mary Ellen as part of me last of all. I would always tell her how you were and sometimes she would ask more than once a visit. Let's do something on the 29th. Maybe we can sneak into a few select pantries and rearrange things in a disturbing order or host a dinner party where everyone has to come dressed in a pre-chosen color. Anything to make a memory, a sticking point.

LETTER 40

This morning I am thinking of intention and momentum, how they must be in alignment to get anything worthwhile done. Why do I always feel like I'm at the beginning of some truth? Like I was born yesterday. It is always the day after yesterday for me. It's embarrassing to know so little, to always just be figuring something out. There's the feeling that you're on the verge of it – a stuck wave cresting and never crashing. There's excitement but it goes disgustingly unfulfilled, which makes the whole thing seem phony. I feel phony today. All stored up with parts of myself.

I wonder about how you feel, with the person growing inside of you. You are fuller than I, but it's something, someone else that's taking up the space. When Amelia was in me (is it not crazy that this phrase can even be written, that as women we can have another person inside our bodies? Hard-shelled eggs seem almost more natural), but when she was there I remember feeling simultaneously like an alien life-form was occupying me and that I would never again be alone in the sense I had been before motherhood. It's an odd thing, to feel both a part of and apart from someone, to have two consciousnesses occupying you at once. No wonder pregnant women and post-delivery mothers are slightly crazy? That we can just grow another human and then halve it from ourselves like it ain't no thang. It is a thing. It is a really traumatic thing.

But I am depressed today and I've let thinking about growing babies take me away from the self-loathing I wanted to write to you about. A professional rejection, it doesn't matter exactly what type, and the ego is taking me under. I can't write today without questioning what I write as worthless. Or if it is not entirely worthless, it is fundamentally pointless, like doing the best job of arranging a pile of shit. Sturgill Simpson has a great line—"They call me King Turd up here on Shit Mountain but if you want it you can have the crown." I'm not even the king, or queen, today. I'm like an underling on Shit Mountain.

Remember that song from chorus, "One Tin Solider" – The Valley People want treasure the Mountain People have buried beneath a stone and when offered a share of it the Valley People decide to massacre the Mountain People instead, only to find the ironic message of "Peace on Earth" buried as treasure. How heavy was that? How old were we? I love that Mrs. Murphy was up for having us sing anti-war songs in 5th grade music, but the "bloody morning after" is a bit much, no? And why couldn't the Mountain People just dig up the treasure and give it to them straight away? Wouldn't that have saved some lives? After all this time I'm a little sympathetic toward the vicious Valley People. They were confused. I am confused.

LETTER 41

I want to relax into emptiness—
a hot tub without water or sound.
I want to see a connection between
today's feeling and the sun—
this isn't a very good prayer—
I'm not very good at praying,
but listen, I really mean what
I can't say. I feel something very true
that I cannot touch because I cannot know
why I can't touch it. If, touching or knowing,
one were to come, the other would follow
like the sides of a tuxedo jacket or two pieces
of bread, twins of action and information
holding each other through the thick
rain, the hurried storm, the almost
seeing into the dark.

LETTER 42

The problem with hair is that it falls smelly around you, even when the rest of you is clean. You are pregnant and I am happy for you! I think of Leslie, and how there are so many other types of tragedy besides death. Small ones that seem death dealing, though in the end death is not what's regularly dealt.

I suppose I mean we all die small deaths every day. And now I'm thinking of Williams: "It is difficult to get the news from poems yet men die miserably every day for lack of what is found there." But small deaths are life. The me of yesterday murdered by the me of today—I hope! Otherwise what am I going on for? To understand less? To suffer more? No thank you.

I think of Leslie because it's easier to worry about her suffering than make decisions about my own (And, on queue, a text comes in from her. They are separating all the stuff in the spare room—stored dishes, never-used wedding presents—and it was too much for her, she began to drink). This is an ugly, life stealing disease. Best not to think about it more tonight.

LETTER 43

Outside and it's already started to rain. I think about so much before it happens that'd I'd already written you the beginning of a letter about waiting for rain. About how satisfying it is to wait for it as opposed to, I don't know, practically anything else. You can feel it going to happen, only a matter of time while other things—a baby, a pay check, a night's sleep—can seem less determined. I wrote this in my head, of course, and it sounded better there.

Charlie has two full water bowls and walks out to the orange Home Depot bucket that doubles as rain barrel, sticks his head down deep to get water that's been collecting for months. I guess he and I are not that different.

Last night I ran out of *Downton Abbey* episodes on *PBS* and decided to better myself by watching a *NOVA* special about "Life Beyond Earth." I remember the title because the voice-over would repeat it after summarizing each scientific advancement—how this changed our thinking about "Life Beyond Earth." It was cheesy, really, how many times they repeated this. Oh, *NOVA*. They try so hard to make science sexy, which at times can feel insulting to both the subject and its audience. But I like science. I miss the Secret Science Club in Brooklyn, where we got live lectures with specialty cocktails and the questions from the audience made me think everyone must be getting graduate degrees in the scientist's area of study. I never raised my hand.

On *NOVA*, one of the things they explained was how planets formed via collision and how—probably—water came to earth through steam created by the last, biggest asteroid crash; the same impact that made our moon. It really got me thinking of how everything is made by a bumping into. Asteroid into earth, makes moon, makes water. Sperm into body, makes baby, makes person. And then all the people you run into, become friends with, marry. It all seems to come down to a random collision of physical parts. If we weren't material I suppose we'd just miss and never exist. Weird. I'm glad my fingers consist of enough stuff to push against this pen. I'm always glad I met you. How lucky we are to be this collected.

The rain's coming down harder now and spots the table near my paper. But I want to write something about your baby. When I walk across campus, specifically between the library and liberal arts building, I think about you getting bigger and bigger without me being able to see it, you. I get sad and then happy. I want to see you, but it's also fun to image you as gigantically, unrealistically pregnant and extraordinarily healthy.

When my nieces were born I told my sister she had re-created the world twice in one swoop—what over-time, twins. Two new sets of eyes for everything. And we have to see differently before we do differently, right? Maybe that's part of why there's so much hope with kids. It's nice to think of everyone popping out new little versions of the

planet. “Life Beyond Earth” or at least the earth as they will find it. No pressure, little one, it’s just up to you to save the world. Makes parenting seem like a convenient (inconvenient?) way to pass the buck. But if I keep with my *NOVA* philosophy about everything coming from two things colliding then the child’s not so much a savior or scapegoat as it is a transfer of energy—which is closer to what I believe.

While I was making breakfast this morning, Amelia told me that when girls become all grown up their moms’ die. I affirmed this as mostly true and then she started talking about her “old parents.” I can’t tell if she’s tapping into past lives or just daydreaming about another set she’d like to have had, a pair who did things more as she’d choose. She talks about these folks often. They took care of her when she was a baby and always did this or that. “When she was a baby, with her old parents.”

I should go soon because she’ll be waking from her afternoon nap. Leaving her alone this way is something her old parents would never do.

I hope you bump into some lovely things this week—that your planet keeps growing well. A female Cardinal has braved the rain to check the sticks Charlie’s dismantled in the yard. Crazy how their beaks are so much brighter than their feathers. I guess she and I aren’t so different.

BREAKING NEWS

Brussels is “Breaking News”—
WHEN DOES THE NEWS NOT
break? When have the lives
it reports on been anything
other than broken, breaking? The
images other than a bunch
of pieces of reality
scattered by violence, or
as the airport in Brussels,
a fog, smoke of the
suicide bombers broken into
indecipherable atoms
and floating through the
air? So light, because
broken up so small. The news.
Even while people are running
through the airport,
someone sees their scattering
as breaking
news—takes their phone
out for video coverage.
Where is the anti-news,
the putting it back together
report on what is whole
or still holding?
I know a number of people.
Maybe I should record them.

LETTER 45 - Fern Enjoying the Moonlight

Reminds me I have forgotten
how constantly sustaining
light is. How it never goes out.
I'm not good at describing beauty.
But for you, I'll try.
There is a fullness to fern
leaf that's absent in sunny hours—
when you can see the browned
fronds and abandoned stems that lost
all green, that are only bare-boned
reaching. In moonlight you can't
see the ones I try to pull
away, break off
the plant during the day.

None of this exists.
In the moonlight
all wounds are hidden.
The fern looks happy,
I feel the fern looks happy.
I say the fern is enjoying moonlight
when we know it's still the sun—
that I am the one enjoying it.

NONFICTION

WHAT WORK IS

Whenever I think about work, I hear poet Philip Levine’s mixed-metal-like voice, telling me I don’t know what it is—“because you don’t know what work is”¹, says the last line of his poem—because I’ve never mistaken someone in line outside an auto-plant for my brother who sings Wagner when he’s not at the factory. By this definition of the word, I don’t know what work is. Though I do often mistake people for other people, and once spent hours scrubbing stainless steel ladders and handles at an indoor swimming pool. I was twenty, hung-over, and the smell of the chemicals about did me in. Worst part was that after I scrubbed and scrubbed, the steel looked untouched, the white and green residue still imperfectly intact—like I hadn’t tried to clean it. I was getting paid by the hour, so I kept going.

But back to Levine’s steel. I associate his voice with metal for reasons of sound and sense. His tone is unbending, and he’s able to make the simplest of words sound dense. He says, “Forget you” and I believe he means it, but keeps speaking to me anyway. In the recording, it’s as though he threatens us with the poem’s words and offers them as scaffolding. Sense-wise, the metal comes from knowing Levine grew up working in auto-plants. For me, auto-plants equal metal. Many metal machines working metal into other metal machines, with a few soft bodies scattered about and busy.

For a while, Levine was one of those bodies.

¹ There is an excellent recording of Levine reading his poem, “What Work Is” available through the pod-cast “Essential American Poets.” But I also got to hear him read at Housing Works bookstore in New York. The recorded voice doesn’t exaggerate; it is eerily consistent with the real thing—gruff but intense, a bit worn and somehow incredibly hopeful.

In “What Work Is” people are waiting, in the rain, for work. The poem’s title sets you up for explanation, but inside it no one is working. And Levine never comes to a clear conclusion about what work is. In fact, the poem is purposely ambiguous—first he says “You know what work is—if you’re / old enough to read this you know what / work is, although you may not do it.” The concept being that one doesn’t explain what one can only know by already knowing it. A very well-put “If I have to explain you, won’t understand.” You do or you don’t. In the end, he switches to telling you “you don’t know.” The only conclusion to be made is that the speaker comes to no conclusion. Readers have to make up their own minds about work.

When Whitman wrote, “And there is no object so soft but it makes a hub for the wheel’d universe,” I’m sure it was a precognitive nod to Detroit autoworkers.² This is fitting since Levine was dubbed “Whitman of the industrial heartland.” The Whitman moniker stems from Levine’s ability to encompass many worlds inside his poems, but also, I believe, from Levine’s hard brand of optimism. He writes about workers, Midwesterners, blue-collar people, without glorifying them—as Carl Sandburg is wont to do in *Chicago Poems*—or making them too morose—as Edgar Lee Masters does in his 1915 *Spoon River Anthology*, a book that comes to mind as supreme example of literature concerned with depressing Midwesterners.³ Almost all of the characters

² Whitman published the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855. The Ford Highland Park plant Levine writes of opened in 1910, it is now a national historic landmark.

³ Admittedly, all the characters of *Spoon River Anthology* are speaking from the grave, where all that’s left of life is reflection. Still, this reflection could be more balanced.

Masters writes of are extremely self-pitying. Being from the Midwest, and knowing a fair share of depressives, I admit there is some authenticity to the thwarted people he describes. The problem is, it's not the whole truth. Inside his poems, I find myself thinking Oh, come on, it can't be that bad. Surely. Maybe it was, though. Maybe my objections are generational, clouded by the plush version of working-class, middle-class Midwest that I grew up in. I don't know. But in Levine's poems people can behave heroically without being heroes. There are depressing conditions, but people are not continually, or at least inevitably, depressed.

When I think about the times I've felt I was working—in the blue-collar, toiling kind of way, the way my father worked and Levine wrote about—I have always been hung-over and either outside in direct sunlight or some place with no air conditioning in July. Basically, suffering. Maybe this means I've psychologically linked work with suffering—I have, and it's probably because growing up I didn't know many people who liked their jobs. Levine was temporarily engaged in building automobiles; my father spent over thirty years repairing them. In both, there is the presence of parts, and putting them together to make a whole. Building and repairing seem akin to the production and revision processes of any creative art. My father enjoyed being a mechanic, solving engine puzzles and helping people in his way. But he had little, if any, respect for his boss. He didn't trust the dealership owner's intelligence, or decisions, and he didn't pretend otherwise. In return, the owner disliked my father. Still, my father kept this job, working for this man, for over twenty years. He liked his work.

The union is what kept the dealership owner's displeasure with my father from turning into unemployment. It kept him from being too much like the people waiting in

“What Work Is,” those in line with the “knowledge that somewhere ahead / a man is waiting who will say, ‘No, / we’re not hiring today,’ for any / reason he wants.” The boss made decisions my father disagreed with, for any reason he wanted, but taking away the job was one of the few things he could not do. All of this brings up issues of authority. In the poem, there is a man who has the authority to deny people the work they need to live. They can resent this predicament, or put up with it. Levine’s workers endure. The speaker thinks he sees his brother, but it turns out to be “someone else’s brother,” who has “the same sad slouch, the grin / that does not hide the stubbornness, the sad refusal to give in” to the weather or the waiting. This man’s a vulnerable, but not defeated, character. There’s a certain way you are supposed to act towards authority, towards the man at the front of the line or your boss. Elements of kowtowing⁴ exist with any work. My father was not overly skilled at the art of ingratiation. This made his work harder work, or made his work what might be better called a job.

This thinking about my father, and those waiting in Levine’s poem, makes it seem that the problem with work is exclusively blue-collar. But disliking the authority of a boss seems a universal condition. Growing up, even my friends’ fathers who wore suits were grumpy in the evening and guarded about their time on the weekends—as if at any moment someone could come up behind them while they were mowing the lawn or watching the game and yell “get back to work!” It didn’t seem they loved their jobs

⁴ Kowtow comes from Chinese and literally means, “knock, head”. This is funny because in English it’s common to describe talking to a stubborn, unyielding person as “knocking your head against a wall”—the wall of the other person. I always thought of kowtowing as choice, but in the literal translation it is a forced necessity. Your head will rarely get its way against a wall.

either, but maybe—as my father did—they liked their work. I don't know. Seems the trick is to find work you enjoy and a job you can stand.

I started busing tables at Patrick's Steakhouse in seventh-grade, and moved up to waitressing in high school. One can make a lot of money in restaurants, picking up tips and in podunk places getting a bit of tax-free hourly under the table, I didn't like it. Not because the work was especially hard, but because I had to serve people and I wasn't that great at it.⁵ Clearing one table I knocked over a water that splashed onto the shorts of a man at the next. "I have to drive all the way back to _____ in these tonight!" he yelled. I apologized, but later repeated the line to myself as a joke. Didn't he have other pants he could wear? Underwear on? How could this be such a problem? Another time, I handed a blind lady a menu. How was I to know? Treating people equally, as I did. When she told me she was blind, I took the menu back in an awkward silence. Maybe I said I didn't know. I don't remember. But I remember she said, "You're supposed to say you're sorry." I didn't feel sorry and felt indignant about her telling me I should say so.

In fact, almost all memories of my restaurant years involve me feeling indignant about something. My boss asked if he was paying me to read and I asked which tables he could see that needed cleaning. When a customer complimented me on how well-spoken I was, I thanked him but thought, why the hell not? Does being a waitress make this extraordinary? Granted, these were my teenage years. I was indignant about a lot of

⁵ Again, questions of authority. In the restaurant industry, every customer is temporarily your boss.

things, in and outside of work, but what I quickly came to value about my next “profession” was that no one talked to me.

With lifeguarding, you’re usually too far away from people, usually sitting above them. And the posture assumed—a cross between being both alert and aloof (it would be creepy if you looked too interested)—does not encourage conversation. For years, I lifeguarded at my hometown pool and my undergraduate university’s various aquatics facilities. My favorite of these jobs was at a practically abandoned boat dock on the university’s campus. As one of the lifeguards there, I rented paddle-boats and canoes out on the small lake a professor of mine called “duck shit pond.” I liked this job (despite the ducks and the shit, which there were, admittedly, more than enough of). Because up until this point, it was the least-like-work thing I’d ever gotten paid to do.

At the boat docks, we didn’t have raised chairs, but we could avoid talking to people because they rarely visited. Paddle-boat rides were not hugely popular with undergrads, and there were much better lakes, real lakes, in the area for people who were serious about canoing. We did rent things occasionally; a paddle-boat here and there to the random exchange student, group of stoners, or first-date couple. And Ponytail would come to windsurf. On days when there wasn’t even a breeze, he’d come out with his thin, blond tail rubber-banded in increasingly smaller circles. We’d have to pull out the board and pole and sail from storage, then get his help rigging everything up. He’d sail off from the dock and we’d stand watching, hoping (from our worst portions) to see him fall. I’m not sure what annoyed us more, him making us get the equipment out or him never falling, whatever the weather. Seems to have been a competition between our laziness

and schadenfreude, but not exactly. We wanted him to fall because he never fell, but also because he made us do what we did not want to do—work.

I write “we” because when I recall the boat docks I’m always with Bill. When we worked Saturdays together, he was usually drunk from Friday. Sometimes I was, too, probably, but more often I was hung-over and wondering why he had so much energy. The answer was Red Bull and vodka, which he drank like Gatorade. Once, while failing to get the BBQ going, he got frustrated and yelled, “We need more of this!” after which he chucked an empty, plastic liquor jug from one end of the pavilion (where he stood near the grill) to the other (where I stood near the boat dock office). On the usual Saturday this would have been okay, but it was Parents’ Weekend, some of whom were walking up. I threw the bottle away and pretended I didn’t hear him. Don’t mind the belligerent man at the grill, he doesn’t work here.

I could get paid for this. And most of the time it wasn’t that chaotic. In nice weather, Bill and I would lie out on the dock and sun ourselves through long conversations about music (Bill was a DJ.), art (Bill was also a painter), and recreational drugs (Bill had once gone temporarily blind while tripping and touring a Missouri cave). When we were in the sun, talking beautiful bullshit, I’d think this is exactly what I should get paid to do. There I was, making money, not hating it.

I didn’t presume to think this was work, or that one could support himself or herself as a professional lifeguard in the Midwest. But if I could get paid to do this, the thinking went, what else might be out there. What other cakewalk things might someone earn a living at? Sky was the limit! I’d become an English major.

It wasn't only the boat docks that led to this degree; there was also my sister's modern dance with garbage bags. During my senior year of high school, I went to a performance where, in one piece, everyone danced from inside garbage bags. They began on a dark stage, arranged in a circle on the floor. Imagine the face of a clock where the hour points are trash-bagged bodies. I see them starting entirely inside the bags, but they must have had their heads out. The dancers first used the plastic percussively, manipulating it from inside to create raspy patterns. I remember them rolling around inside the bags. Then arms and legs emerged, making each dancer a trash bag turtle. It was fantastic. Absurd and marvelous. Here my sister was studying dance, and someone was getting paid to choreograph this performance where the human body played with trash bags. Compared to this, becoming an English major seemed practical. On par with a nursing degree.

I think about telling my sister this story, explaining the performance's influence. But I'm not sure what it's worth as a compliment. I may sound like the well-meaning, diction-praising customer at the steakhouse. Why should I be surprised that modern dance inspires? But it's not only that. The feeling wasn't purely inspirational. I realized something pointless in the performance. It was the absurdity of Beckett (whom I hadn't read yet)—ostensibly fruitless, yet not futile. You could do something fruitless and just by existing something about its fruitlessness was negated.⁶ It seemed the opposite of work; anti-work.

⁶ I have always read Samuel Beckett's work has having optimistic spirit, even when he's at his bleakest. Once, as a Valentine, I copied a section of one of his short stories where a man happens upon an abandoned cottage and finds, amongst other undesirables, an arrowed heart traced and dried in cow manure. I thought it the most

The performance was play. It meant you could get paid—at least some people did—to play. This was important to see in contrast to another idea my father, who was also at the performance that evening, liked to repeat. His loosely defined category of the real world. It's written here in italics because he would say this in italics. They were vocally italicized words that often popped into the conversation we were having and trumped whatever point I was trying to make. Throughout high school, when he used this phrase I thought he was referring to life outside of high school, outside our small town. "You know, in the real world..." he would say, or "But in the real world..." The way he expressed this made me imagine a place one would be ushered into violently. One day I'd be driving my car, pass through a dense cloud, and coming out the other end everything would be much more real. And real, I thought, meant harder and more of a drag.

Then I went to college and started working at the boat docks. I took literature classes and drank myself into oblivions. Nothing seemed to get any more real. I actively tried to keep it from becoming so. Like the work in Levine's poem, the real world was never fully defined. Yet, somehow both work and the real world manage to be fully present, almost haunting forces. And, to me, the specter of my father's real world implied a place where personal truths were put into confrontation with external conditions (i.e. the importance of making art and necessity of eating) so violently that some reversal or revision of the personal was mandatory. I could catalogue here all the methods of avoidance I have used for the last decade or so—always fearing this real world's approach and finding some graduate school or foreign country, relationship or new city,

potent romantic comedy. The relationship went nowhere.

to keep it at bay. But the time needed for this outweighs its entertainment value or importance. What is important, maybe, is that I'm still unconvinced this real world exists outside my father's imagination. If you asked him today, though, he might concede I'm there now; in my thirties, in a PhD program, with a child and the difficulties of attempting to stay married to someone. I don't know that I'd agree with his concession, because doing so would acknowledge the validity of the distinction.

I do understand that when delineating between the real world and the place my father sensed me dreamily occupying, he was trying to impart some information he thought essential. The differentiation, however artificial, was supposed to instruct, be useful. Levine's poem makes a similar gesture. He's constantly addressing you. Telling you this standing, waiting, "feeling the light rain falling like mist," is work. Get it? This type of living is real, especially in contrast to what you, dear reader, dear daughter, know. But maybe I do know. Know enough to know I don't want to know more. I get tired. I am tired right now. My daughter has puked on me three times today, but do I have to suffer with it? With respect to Levine and my father, isn't it enough for me to experience it? To be up with her at four a.m. and writing now at eight?

In Elizabeth Bishop's poem "Questions of Travel" the speaker asks a similar but opposite question—"Oh, must we dream our dreams / and have them, too?" My version here is, must we have our troubles and suffer with them, too? Is this the only way to be real? What is most real about the brother in Levine's poem: the Cadillac he builds at night? The sleeping he does to recover? Or the Wagner he sings after he rises? Which is his work? Levine doesn't answer. I'm not sure I want to find out. Except, this is a lie. I do want to find out. If I'm honest, I see the small, ugly beast from Stephan Crane's "In the

Desert” sneak out of my chest, squats on my shoulder, and causally snacks on his own heart. “But I like it / Because it is bitter, And because it is my heart.” He tells me, I do want to eat my heart out about my work, to fully know it. The difference lies in the my before work. When you start to identify as some sort of artist, the things you do become a my (your work). You want to get paid for this eventually, but this is second to (and lost in) the doing of the work. Work for a paycheck always comes with some authority, because there is someone doling out the checks. The dream is to do the work you want to do, and then have someone write the check. Working without knowledge of the check is what draws me to Crane’s beast. In some ways, I know I am devouring myself, that writing is a little like cannibalization. But better to eat your own heart, no matter the taste, than offer it up to someone else, right? To some boss or customer? Who doesn’t want to use her own energy for her own aims? The other work, the type you’re doing for someone else, I don’t want to know. This is one of the reasons that as a young person I never wanted to become a teacher. I was never that interested in what I saw then as self-sacrifice.

But sometimes we become things we don’t mean to become. That’s the way it has been with me, at least. After undergrad, I went to graduate school for creative writing. Then, not sold on the idea of more academia, going on to get my PhD, or moving to New York to make a go of it in publishing, I decided to teach in Japan. I wanted to live and write. I wanted to be a writer, without making something else of myself. But I needed to eat. Teaching abroad seemed the perfect stopgap.

I was a floating teacher in a junior high school in Ashikaga City. I went to each English class once a week and assisted with pronunciation exercises. This gig is ideal for

someone who wants to get paid to teach but not become attached to teaching in a way that could distract her from her real work, writing. I didn't know most of the kids' names, I couldn't pronounce many of their names, and I didn't try. I liked them, I talked to them, we played games, sang songs, took quizzes—but that was it. I couldn't understand any of the school speeches, and the kids' English wasn't advanced enough for in-depth conversation. Everything was light, on the surface, and I found it easy to pretend at any emotion necessary for the job (which, in general, was a mixture of profound gratitude and controlled excitement; all the Japanese went in for this. As long as you didn't show any extreme emotions and avoided sickness and injury, you were golden).

But teaching in Japan wasn't all show. What happened in Ashikaga was that one school term ended and the next began. A new batch of kids came from the elementary school, and they looked so damned elementary—collections of miniature parts that could someday be assembled into full people. They seemed too small for the desks and stairwells, they had gooey-watery eyes like the cartoon dogs with oversized heads, and almost all of them were terribly shy. Mostly, they giggled. And there were two with disabilities. The first was almost blind. He had a large magnification device upon and overtaking his desk; this sight, combined with his diligence, was a little too much.⁷ The second, Kioshi, was obsessive compulsive. He had a bald stripe running across the center of his head, about two-finger-widths thick, stretching from forehead to crown. He maintained this patch by pulling hairs from his head during class and eating them. He did

⁷ By “too much” I mean exactly enough to make even an actively distancing person sentimental.

not talk or smile. He was not doughy-eyed. And I was scared of him. He was so small but so stern, so unapproachable. I taught him for months without hearing anything, neither English nor Japanese. Like all the students I taught, I really knew nothing of his interior (his home life, personality, or hopes). The difference with him was that instead of putting up, or even possessing, some veneer for me to work with, he was putting something of the inside out. This kid pretended nothing. And you didn't need to speak a certain language to read the strip across his head.

The Japanese have these clear and long-sided umbrellas that you are more inside than under. You can look through them, but everything is a bit blurry. I was walking home from school in one. There was a light rain and I remember the drops on my umbrella obscuring the landscape. At some point, I became aware that Kioshi was beside me on the road. I didn't hear or see him approach, had never seen him walk this way after school. Between the rice fields and rain, his school uniform and my umbrella, this seemed like the perfect opening scene of some Japanese horror-film. I half-expected to see a pair of school scissors in his hand. For a moment, I thought about returning with him to the junior high and handing him over to some Japanese-speaking teacher, telling myself that it was to make sure he would get home safely.

But the kid interrupted my anxieties by reaching a hand outside his umbrella and saying "rain." Then he smiled at me like he had made the most fantastic joke. A bit Helen-Keller-at-the-water-spigot, but this is what happened. Suddenly, Kioshi was speaking English. It was barely raining now, so we both took down our umbrellas and let the random drops hit us, said "rain" a few more times. We continued walking and he pointed out other objects and colors. Sky, grass, water, blue, bird, road. After each word

he'd look at me, like we were conspirators, like these words were great secrets he was glad to let me in on. And they were—before that walk all the words he knew were his own secrets—possibly even secret to himself. Did he know he knew them before that afternoon? I like to believe that he might not have known, because it makes the discovery more shared. But this most likely romanticizes things. He probably knew what he knew—the smiles definitely hinted at this. Ultimately, there's no way to tell. What I do know is, after we parted, I walked back to my apartment feeling wonderful, feeling like (although I wouldn't name it in this way) something real had happened.

It wasn't until I stopped walking, till I arrived, that the dread set in. The thought, that kid just turned me into a teacher, was chased by, I don't want to be teacher. I quickly decided I still didn't have to be, I could let the encounter go, a nice little event. It didn't need to be life changing. Every experience did not need to be the universe granting me permission to exist, calling me to account for my presence, or instructing me on how to live. But I knew something had changed during the walk. This kid showed me there were a lot of inner workings about which I was clueless. Someone could take something I said and secretly spin it around in whatever dark resources he or she possessed. I would most likely never know the terminus of these processes—and they weren't mine to know.

I wasn't thinking of all of this with Kioshi, I just realized the kid made me like something I did not want to like (teaching), made me care about something I did not want to care about (him). He complicated my idea of working at the junior high. It was supposed to be a job, a job that would give me enough money to live and leave me enough time to write—I wasn't interested in a Mr. Holland's Opus scenario—and at the time I thought this encounter threatened the deal. Now I can see the threat I felt was very

much like my father's real world, a false division of my own making. In the end, everything we do is work and there is only one world. I can drop the pretentious my prefix and get on with it. I am willing to be less of an artist if it helps me live in this one place where we work and dream, boss and yield, daily. A friend once told me he was making his life into a "work of art." At the time, I thought this both grandiose and lazy. He had just married an opera singer and I remember thinking Okay, so now you're done. How did he expect to be so great without making anything but himself? Now I think, yeah, why the hell not? The idea that I may be my own best work makes me a whole lot less afraid of everything I do between here and the hereafter. When, as it is now with Levine, my work is done.⁸

⁸ Philip Levine died on February 14th, 2015 – I began writing this essay the morning of his death, not knowing that he had died until that afternoon. My friend Rodney Jones says it best, "No poet brought such a keen balance of gravitas and levity as Philip Levine. As if, at any instance, he needed to channel John Keats and both Karl and Groucho Marx to be his whole self. And this was true of both his poems and his person. A dear, ferocious, and compassionate man, he gave what we need still and so rarely find. Poetry."

CATAWAMPUS

I. The Plan

A line implies direction. Started, there are two ways to go, two ends, and the feeling that this thing laid down, real upon the page or ground, will lead to something else. Direction, but no plan. So it was that my daughter began with a line. The not entirely straight line of her father's dick and the sperm dancing like electrified jellyfish toward their future. They also had a direction. Life, no plan.

I, too, am a directioner—which I loosely define as someone who knows which way they are facing. This knowing of direction may seem a minor accomplishment, but Lao Tzu says, *if you do not change directions, you will end up where you're headed*. The trick is knowing your direction to begin with—otherwise, there is no point of reference. So I am not a planner, but I do alright with knowing my direction and try not to be afraid of changing it if needed. In fact, I'm sort of addicted to the changing. It lets me know I'm not dead. Jazz music has a similar effect.⁹

My daughter was a change in direction I did not plan. Sometimes I wonder if her existential crisis, when it comes, will be deepened by knowing that her father and I never said, "We want to have a baby, and we want to start having her right now." But Amelia seems too self-possessed for this to cause extra internal drama. She is only three, but it

⁹ I feel sophisticated when I'm listening to jazz. This is one of the reasons I like it. But it's not the only reason. I like how it feels to listen to something that plays so flippantly with my expectations. With jazz, I listen and find patterns only to find those patterns quickly destroyed—if it's good, live jazz—and I like that building and shattering. It reminds me of real life, but sounds better than real life.

feels as if she's always known exactly what she wanted, even from before conception. It could be the natural stubbornness of her age, what some call a three-ager. But she has her own plans, she's always had them and it seems she always will.¹⁰ I find this attribute in my daughter surprising, admirable, and sometimes frightening. The fear comes from her sheer force, a momentum she lives out that is incredibly difficult to interrupt. But I may be conflating desire and planning here, and they are two separate things. You may know exactly what you want, but having a plan for getting it is entirely different.

When I realized my daughter was there – here – the terror (which is not an exaggeration of what I felt after watching Ricky Lake's bathtub birth and another similarly charged documentary about the business of childbirth in the United States¹¹) put me in a birthing option tailspin which ended in daymares about emergency surgeries, birth defects, and death. These Netflix adventures convinced me I needed a plan if I wanted us both to survive. Moving to a Scandinavian country where everyone has a state-funded midwife, as is explored in one of these two documentaries, was not an option.

Instead, I moved seven months pregnant to southern Mississippi to start doctoral study and give birth to my daughter. I studied literary theory alongside *Birthing from Within*. At this point, the fear-induced scheming began.

¹⁰ Before she could talk, Amelia pointed directions on our morning walks. The motion from stroller seat was a slow finger point that seemed pulled from heart, through arm, to index finger articulation.

¹¹ *The Business of Being Born* and *Born in America* are two birth documentaries available for view through Netflix. They discuss the negative results of some medicated childbirths and the tendency for some doctors to push for questionably necessary caesarian deliveries.

In Robert Burns' poem "To a Mouse, On turning her up in her Nest, with the Plough, November 1785" the poet recounts running into and upturning a mouse's nest while ploughing a field. When he hits the nest, he declares, "Wee, skleekit, cowran, tim'rous beastie! / O, what a panic's in they breastie! / Thou need na start awa ase hasty." Burns' mouse is both *sleekit* and *tim'rous*, sly and fearful. At first, I read these words in contrast to each other. I thought it took a great deal of courage to be sly, with its connotations of plotting (planning). The idea was that confident people plan. But with more thought, it does seem that fear, rather than courageous self-determination, might urge you more forcefully toward cleverness. Fear can make a person feel the necessity of becoming knowledgeable in some area or another, or prepared with a plan. Take bomb shelters for example; people don't construct and fill these because they are confident about the future. It's fear that gets the cans in place, that figures how much water will be needed for a certain number of days. A friend who grew up during the Cold War said she always wanted a bomb shelter. She was such a worrier at such a young age that adults took note and tried not to discuss disturbing events in her presence. And a sly fear worked itself out on me. Watching these documentaries and discussing birth options with other women, my tendency toward hypochondria was watered and began to bloom. I felt the need to be rather clever when it came to childbirth. I needed to take control of this out-of-control situation, this pregnancy, this birth. So I did something that I rarely do: I came up with a plan.

My husband and I enrolled in Bradley Method natural childbirth classes, hired a doula, and made a birth plan.¹² We copied the birth plan and discussed it with my obstetrician at multiple appointments. I followed a strict, protein diet and did exercises every morning and night. It's difficult to find statistics about how much time women spend planning their weddings versus planning their births. Some women argue it's ridiculous to compare the two, but the comparison comes up often on birthing sites. The *UK Daily Mail* reports that women spend an average of thirty-six days planning their weddings. This is not the case with childbirth, where many women defer choices to doctors. This is not to say women do not prepare, or that depending on the woman she prepares more for the day her child is born than the day she is married. I am one that falls outside this pattern. My wedding planning consisted of finding a chain-smoking Greek seamstress to make my dress (again, no plan, she said she'd make me a full-length gown and I believed her) and a wedding topper (a ceramic bride and groom with animal heads in place of the human. A rabbit-headed bride and a sideways glancing horse whose twist of neck made him look borderline jackass, for groom). At one point, my husband was so frustrated with planning alone that he said he wouldn't do anymore until I helped. This is not something to brag about; many people (mainly my husband) find this tendency obnoxious and non-committal (I'm sure I would be irritated by this way of living, if it were not my own). I'm only drawing the contrast to highlight how different my normal operating mode is compared to how I approached birth. I made a plan. I very much

¹² Dr. Bradley was a farm boy who grew up to become a doctor who believed women could birth without medical interventions, provided they had the proper diet, exercise, and support.

wanted a plan and took all the steps I could to devise one I felt comfortable with, dare I say believed in. I would labor at home with the doula and my husband and, when the time came, deliver at the hospital with husband, doula, and all the preferences I included in my birth plan being respected by the attending nurses and physician.

I say I believed in this – and I did, for the most part, but I had my doubts. For some reason, probably because of the documentaries, and a genetic predisposition toward pessimism, I believed it likely that I would die in childbirth. I told my husband, “You never know what could happen, even now.” And I meant it, but I wanted to believe I was joking.

The problem is, if you are a true pessimist, it is hard to also be a good planner. Even if you lay something out, there is little belief that the thing will happen, hence, the ambition to plan is stymied. Why plan to fail? Just fail and if in the midst of failing you do not fail, well, then, how nice that will be. If you think about the possibility of dying during childbirth, then it’s a type of protection against actually dying during childbirth. Low-expectations pave the way for surprisingly not terrible living. That’s how I used to see things. This is healthy when it comes to expectations. My friend Alex says, “Expectations are premeditated resentments.” I think she’s right. But in the past I’ve lumped expectation together with planning in a way that is probably unhealthy. Not planning for lack of belief in your plan’s potential for success is different from holding on to expectations like old receipts or unscratched lotto tickets. Both are sad, but for different reasons. There must be a healthy space between planning and expectation I’ve missed out on with my negative logic. I can’t help but think that this innate, what I used to see as protective, pessimism affected my daughter’s birth. When I think about who to

blame for my birth experience—doctor, nurse, husband, doula—I am not absent. My body, with its accompanying fear and pessimism, were also in the room when my umbilical chord was pulled, my uterus inverted, and I hemorrhaged out of consciousness.

II. After Birth

This is the part I like to start with because I like happy endings. In order to get at one, I have to tell this story in reverse. It begins with the doctor's impatience with my afterbirth. Although I did not feel it, my body had torn significantly during delivery and the doctor made arguments weighing the quality of my recovery against the time spent without stitches while waiting to deliver the placenta.¹³ Even though our birth plan said *No application of pressure on the umbilical cord* he convinced me to let him apply "light traction." I let myself be convinced, really. I didn't care because my daughter was alive and healthy, outside of me. There was very little thinking.

Besides, how many birth stories had I heard where the mother labored, the child was delivered safely, and *then* things went terribly wrong? Zero. The birth horrors I knew always happened during labor or delivery. Preparing for child birth is often likened to training for a marathon, never mind that the average marathoner runs, on average, half the time-length as the average first-time mother labors (4 hours, 8 hours, respectively).

¹³ By *torn significantly* I mean third or fourth degree laceration, which is torn vaginal tissue, perineal skin, and perineal muscles extending to the sphincter. In blunt translation, the doctor's argument was over how well I wanted to be able to poop or not poop in the future.

Laboring is athletic and it takes endurance. When Amelia came all the way out, it felt like a finish line.

The doctor pulled on my umbilical chord and I tried to push so that he wouldn't have to pull. Then my placenta delivered. A few moments after, I felt a sharp, alarm-type pain, for the first time that day. A severe pinch and I lost consciousness. Over the next minutes, pain brought me back to and out away from consciousness many times. I felt arms inside of me, felt the inside of my body as a vast hallway with many compartments, all made of soft, sensitive material. It seemed mad people set on destroying me from the inside were running through, bumping into walls, and smashing through doors. The endorphins released during childbirth had worn off or were not strong enough for this new type of pain. I remember saying, "Please, stop. Please, don't." And hearing the head nurse reply, "It's a matter of life and death."

Later, I found out my uterus had inverted. My OB-GYN, the doctor who was supposed to deliver my baby but was not available during my birth, explained it the next morning. "You know when you take off a sock from the top down, and it turns inside out..." she said calmly. And I pictured a sock, gray and black, thick. So innocent and fuzzy, a sock, such an unassuming article of clothing. This didn't seem to fully explain what my body had been through, how part of my body had been turned inside out. How I had hemorrhaged and lost so much blood. How the doctor had to manually re-invert my uterus.

The full title of Burns' poem about the mouse and plough is "To a Mouse, On turning her up in her Nest, with the Plough, November 1785." The abbreviated title is simply, "To a Mouse" but I like the long version because the syntax and roughness of the

words mimics the physical action. When you read the title, it's like your tongue is the nest and Burns' words are turning it with the same violence as his plough does the ground and the mouse. That roughness, that turning over of dirt and turning out of mouse, even the aggression of the plough, seems very like my experience. My body was a nest, my daughter was born from it and then, quickly, all the housing was mangled, man-handled, nearly destroyed.

When one gives birth for the first time, there is no basis of comparison to work with. The doctor insisted that I had had a rough time, that I should rest. I definitely felt exhausted, debilitated, but mostly I was confused. All the events and sensations could not be placed in cohesive narrative. When pressed about why this inversion happened with my birth, the doctor brushed away the subject of cause saying that it sometimes happened. There was no mention of the pressure applied to my umbilical chord, in turn applied to the placenta and the wall of my uterus. Most likely, this is not a conversation my doctor was legally able to have, and I was much too distracted with Amelia and the complications of caring for her and myself in my current condition. It didn't feel good. I felt incredibly compromised and confused about why I felt so compromised.

This was not the plan. I was supposed to feel like the Bradley birth mothers I'd seen in the videos, who drank their orange juice and then got up and walked gracefully out of the delivery room cradling their pink newborns. Although I could not bring myself to watch the actual deliveries – I always turned my head during the close-ups of birth, justifying it to my husband by saying that I wouldn't have to see what was going on during birth, I would feel it, he was the one who would have to watch – I always watched

before and after. In one of the videos, they even catch an orgasmic natural birth. The Bradley videographers were genius to record one. Talk about effective propaganda.

Birth orgasm is the Loch Ness Monster of natural childbirth. Evidence is anecdotal. I first heard of it from a Venezuelan friend I did yoga with. Her sister had given birth at home on a seatless chair, completely unmedicated, without orgasm. Still, Fernanda assured me, this was a real thing, the orgasmic birth did happen. I have never known anyone who either experienced or witnessed this type of birth. But, similar to the monster, the idea is thrilling. Who wouldn't take an orgasm over the rage-filled she-beast we see in film and television? Who wouldn't trade that idea of pain and fight for rolling waves of pleasure? But the truth is birthing mothers rarely operate in either of these two extremes. Most have medicated births where they don't feel as much from the waist down.¹⁴ This is a completely legitimate choice; I just opted for the she-beast. Now we are getting to the middle

III. Labor and Delivery:

I've never been in battle, but the scene at my daughter's birth resembled what I've watched on TV and seen in films. You know the type where the "good guys" are outnumbered by the enemy and the hero is surrounded by a bunch of men or women who are psychologically falling apart before the violence even comes? There are usually a few good men around and helping the hero, but the rest of the troops are yelling about the impossibility of the numbers, the low stock of ammunitions, poor positioning, etc. All

¹⁴ According to a 2008 CDC study, 61% of women use epidural and spinal anesthesia during childbirth.

this while the time and distance between you and what is approaching, the birth of a child, narrows. The main difference, among the many differences, of this battle metaphor and childbirth is that rather than attempting to kill as many people as possible, in birth you are trying to make one little person very alive (although, maybe I am oversimplifying battle, maybe the objective is the same, to keep one little person alive, but the little person is yourself).

I am not saying my daughter was the enemy. She was the event. I had my two solids, my husband and my doula. I squatted; with feet on the floor and one butt cheek resting on the thigh of my husband and doula, my arms around their shoulders. The rest of those involved, the hospital staff, did not know what to make of how this birth was unfolding. The head nurse slapped her hand against the floor and said, “This floor is hard! The baby is going to come out and hit its head against this floor. And it’s hard!” I thought for a moment about the absurdity of her smacking her hand against the linoleum to convince me of the solidity of the floor—as if I had assumed it were made of pillows. Then I thought about how under-qualified she was for her job, if she could not somehow put her hands between the floor and an infant’s head. In short, I thought neither of the floor’s density or the possibility of my child’s brains splattering across its surface. Then a contraction came and I didn’t think of anything.

When that contraction ended, I went forward onto all fours, to rest, and listened to the doctor saying he had never delivered a baby this way, that he did not think he could do it. I didn’t have time to judge his confidence; I could only get out that I was not moving. Then another contraction came. They were very close together now.

During this contraction I yelled over all descent from the hospital staff. Enter the she-beast of TV movies and sitcoms. I have to go back to the battle metaphor again and say there is something very similar to how a general has to give confidence to all the despondent by getting on his horse and yelling and charging in advance of them. My body was charging. I lent my voice to it. What came out was unlike any sound I have ever known myself to make or be capable of making. It was something earthly and unearthly, a sound of me and apart from me. And it was loud.

When I've watched those battle cry scenes in the past, Mel Gibson, with his face painted, galloping or running at a gallop toward some destiny or enemy, I always thought of these types of men making the racket in order to scare whomever they were moving toward. I didn't think too much about it being an attempt to drive out their own fear. The confidence it lends to the one yelling. How a good yell can cancel out self-doubt and contradictions between the internal and external. The movements inside my body were extreme and became matched with an external naming. Additionally, my yells made it so I could no longer hear the complaints and dissensions of the hospital staff around me. Their attitudes and talking became washed away in the sound of me. They were still there, but I could not hear them. And it only took two strong pushes before my daughter was born safely without her head bashed upon the floor.

The birth was beautiful and raw and everything I'd wanted it to be—for myself and my daughter. Because the birth became almost an out of body experience, I didn't feel the tearing. Afterward, when debating about whether or not to get an epidural for the stitches, my doula said it was up to me, "I had got what I wanted." And I had. Now, I decided that, yes, numbing for stitches sounded good. I had felt enough. The doctor went

immediately to cut the chord and we had to argue about this, as well. We'd read about the benefits of delayed chord cutting and wanted to give our daughter every last drop of blood. The doctor waited then cut. Amelia was the healthiest rosiest pink. Later, after thinking of how I lost so much blood and thought so much about giving all that I could to my daughter by delaying clamping and cutting of the umbilical cord, I compared our complexions.¹⁵ More than one nurse commented on how Amelia was the least jaundiced looking newborn they'd ever seen. I glanced in the mirror and saw my yellowness, felt I was the one jaundiced by birth. I was proud of what I'd given my daughter, but couldn't help feeling sorry for myself. The afterbirth had wrecked me—my complexion post-blood-loss was just the surface evidence of how far I'd fallen short of the Bradley Method outcome: healthy baby, healthy mom.

This physical condition contrasted with a growing consciousness that now, now that my daughter was here in the world to be cared for, I needed the health I had built through diet and exercise. I needed it and it was not there. I was laid bare by this experience. "Thou saw the fields laid bare an' waste, / An' weary Winter comin fast, / An' cozie here, beneath the blast, / Thou thought to dwell." I had expected my birth plan and preparation for birth to lead to health for my daughter and myself. With this health, I could face the next stage, but I hadn't planned beyond that. Much in the same way I

¹⁵ The American College of Obstetrician and Gynecologists reports that most umbilical cords are clamped for cutting within 15 to 20 seconds after birth ("The great umbilical cord-cutting debate," Azadeh Ansari, CNN.com). But for the past decade or so, there has been debate about this practice and delayed clamping. For more: *New York Times*, "Study Finds Benefits in Delaying Severing of Umbilical Cord."

imagine the mouse's planning hadn't extended far beyond the building of her nest, I hadn't thought too far beyond my daughter's birth.

IV. Nesting

A pregnant friend of mine delivered so far past her due date that she had time to clean even the heating coils on her stove before she went into labor. To this day, this stands as the most bizarre point of jealousy I've experienced. I was in school and working up to the day my daughter was born. I had little time to clean, or purchase, or stock-pile batches of soup, as I've read and seen other women do. I suppose all of my nesting impulses went into doing birthing exercises and finishing the semester. And I still believe it was the wave of relief I felt after turning in a 20-some page seminar paper that ushered the beginning of labor. The only nest I had built was the birth plan. I had only been able to think that far.

After coming home from the hospital, I collected bits and pieces of the reality of my birth experience. My doula visited with a post-birth meal and filled in some of the details I had not remembered or was not conscious for. My husband added information to the story and little by little I added images, phrases, sounds to my idea of what had happened. First, I remembered how troubled the eyes of an attending nurse looked as she prepared me for stitches. Earlier, before the trouble began she'd told me mine was "the most natural" birth she'd ever witnessed and now I saw her eyes, rimmed by thick eyeliner and mascara, floating beautiful and terrified over her surgical mask. The eyes

were a hint about how horrible the event had been. Remembering them told me things had gone rather badly.

When the doctor and head nurse were stitching, they thought I was unconscious and felt free to talk bluntly amongst themselves, disparaging me and my doula. I wanted to say, “I can hear you.” When the nurse mimicked my doula saying, “Did you hear what she said, ‘well, you’ve got what you wanted,’” I wanted to explain that my doula meant an un-medicated childbirth, that that is what I had wanted for myself and my daughter. But I couldn’t say anything, so they thought they could. Telling this story, explaining I was torn apart by birth, turned inside out by afterbirth and made to listen to degrading comments from the people who were repairing me, as they repaired me, it is easy to play the victim, easy to paint this doctor and nurse as ignorant and, albeit unintentionally, evil. I have spent a long time seeing them this way.

When I learned from a friend that this same doctor had forced the delivery of another woman’s placenta with similar results, I even went to a lawyer to see about whether or not I could sue the doctor or the hospital. In the end, the lawyer – though sympathetic—determined the case would not hold because my birth plan was too unconventional. I didn’t seek a second council, who has the time? I wanted to get better, move on.

I suffered post-traumatic stress for months after my daughter’s birth, though I didn’t know it at the time. And after reparative surgery and psychological therapy, I got around to Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR). No one knows why EMDR works, only that it usually does. And when my counselor first mentioned it to me, I immediately thought of the peeled back eye-lid scene in *Clockwork*

Orange, a type of eye-ball-window-to-the-brain-brainwashing. Still, I was anxiety ridden enough to override these anxieties. I did the prep work and then followed my counselor's finger as it moved left to right and I recounted parts of my daughter's birth, and after, but not in linear order. I moved through the scenes in something like the order of intensity of emotional response, rather than first, next, then. I hated it. It felt stupid, really. Then I felt better. I asked the counselor about doing this with other life episodes. I suddenly felt that really, the vast majority of my life needed to be EMDR'ed. If moving my eyes repeatedly from left to right could rid the experience of my daughter's birth of all the negative emotions that came with the extreme physical pain and near death experience, then just imagine what it could do for all the lesser happenings.

The majority of Burns' poem to the mouse is a lament for his careless human action. He apologizes "I'm truly sorry Man's dominion / Has Broken Nature's social union." He takes stock of the severity of his destruction, "It's silly wa's the win's are strewin! / An' naething, now, to big a new ane." And notes how much effort the mouse made, now for nothing: "Has cost thee monie a weary nibble! / Now thou's turn'd out, for a' thy trouble." When in the first stanza he strikes the mouse and its nest, he tries to explain that the mouse doesn't need to run away, he isn't going to kill it—he's not *that* kind of human. And it seems that way in the next five stanzas, those I just quoted from above. He is trying to further prove that he is not an evil human by imagining the plight the mouse faces as winter approaches and she is without a nest to shelter in.

Ironically, the empathy Burns feels for the mouse—thinking of "the blast" of the wind the mouse will be exposed to and the lack "O' foggage green!" the animal has for rebuilding its nest—is the same material he uses to feel sorry for himself. Because in the

last two stanzas Burns turns away from how bad the mouse has it to how bad *he* has it. The very fact that Burns can imagine the coming winter, while the mouse occupies a present immune to future or past, makes the mouse—while homeless—more blessed. “Still, thou art blest, compar’d wi’ me! / The present only toucheth thee.”

The mouse may leave its nest but, to quote Billy Pilgrim, it never comes unstuck from time. It never has to experience that psychological pain the time-traveling mind brings on humans. The first time I left my house, after returning from the hospital with my daughter, I tried to go on a walk and burst into tears less than a block from our front door. “But Och! I backward cast my e’e, / On prospects drear!” I thought the world was going to end. Every part of reality seemed to point to this inevitability as inevitable, approaching. “An’ forward tho’ I canna see, / I guess an’ fear!” So which am I in this story, the farmer or the mouse? I like to think of myself as the innocent, as the natural animal, as the mouse who builds its nest with instinct for, rather than fear of, winter’s cold. It seems more likely that I am the farmer, fearing winter before it comes and feeling sorry for myself for having to fear it. More and more when I think about this birth story, I think of everyone involved as awesomely human.

In the penultimate stanza, Burns puts himself and the mouse on the same plain – the mouse’s condition, caused by Burns, proves “foresight may be vain: / The best laid schemes o’Mice an’ Men / Gag aft agley, / An’ Lea’e us nought but grief an’ pain, / For promis’d joy!” John Steinbeck gets his title and readers get reminded that our human

schemes are just as susceptible to mishap as work done in the animal kingdom.¹⁶ By its nature, nature is not fair. What's contradictory about these lines, or what I can't figure out, is the "For Promis'd joy!" Who or what *promised*? It can only be the mind capable of this, this mischief of expectation. And the irony is that with Amelia's birth I planned for joy, with diet and exercise and classes, while my mind projected other outcomes. It could be that the only plans capable of success are those that are made in mind and physical reality, that a combination of the ethereal and corporeal must conspire. I failed in this binary health in planning—physical action and mental intention. If anything, I inverted the cliché "plan for the worst, hope for the best," made it "plan for the best, fear the worst." But, okay, I did this, I am human, too. And even if I had had the powerful combination, I do not believe in promises. Even when intention and action are perfectly balanced outcomes remain the stuff of gods, or goddesses, or fate. What I do trust now, and confess to not possessing much of before Amelia's birth, is confident momentum and presence. These two terms extend beyond the *directioner* I discussed at the beginning of this essay. They mean a moving forward with your head in alliance with your body and both of them stuck fast to the moment; a standing still in the rush.

Being in the present is a surprising gift from my childbirth. It's another irony that the event that took me most violently into the past, that brought PTSD to a new degree in my present life, was rooted in the same event that brought me most fully into the present—the laboring and delivering of my daughter. Nothing has ever brought me more

¹⁶ In addition to Steinbeck's title, I can't help but think of Burns' 13 illegitimate children when I read the lines "the best laid schemes o'Mice an' Men." Doesn't seem that he was that excellent of a planner himself.

deeply into my body than another life inside me trying to get out. The pulsing that ran through me allowed access to portions of the body I'd never experienced before.

At home, while I was laboring, I laid on my side and listened to *Shakespeare in Love*. A lovely mix of Joseph Fiennes, Tom Stoppard, and William Shakespeare accompanied each contraction—but at each physical peak nothing outside the sensations within existed. I was most physically, fully inside myself. Multiply this thoughtlessness, world and self forgetting by one hundred and we're close to the situation when delivering. It is other worldly. Even if you don't have the trauma, the near-death-ness I encountered after birth, I suppose there are few things that come as close to death as having another life leave you. There is no forward, no back-looking, in birth moments. Maybe more than learning much more about birth, by giving birth, I got to experience another way to live. And here, I find myself back at the happy part of this story. The part where I am pushing my daughter into the world and nothing else exists, only now I can see how she was also pushing me into the present; physically saying, I am here now.

CAMPBELL'S ONION BAR

Crying is indulgent. Yes. But it is also irrepressible, volcanic. I have never been able, as I have with other things, to say “I don’t have time for this...this sitting around crying, I’ve got too much to do.” I have also never been able to successfully keep my habit—handicap—in the closet. I honestly cannot count the number of airports, restaurants, buses, trains, streets, subway platforms I’ve cried at, in, or on. The theme here seems to be transportation, and a decent amount of this public crying has happened in transit, but I think these are also just the situations where we are forced to be public, independent of whether we are in a condition to be public. This has been an embarrassing handicap, mainly because of the awkwardness it brings. But lately I’ve been thinking about this tendency in a new light. I’m starting to think that maybe more crying in public is what everyone needs. Gunter Grass has an amazing scene in his novel *The Tin Drum*. The main characters go to an onion bar. Instead of drinking they all sit in the cellar at café tables and peel onions together. They cry and cry. They do not ask for reasons, and they do not try to comfort each other. This is exactly what we need. This is exactly what we have always needed. I thought so from the first moment I read of the imaginary place and I believe this today.

How many suicidal mass-murderers were crying in public before they flew their plane into a mountain or took their machine guns to the movie theater? I haven’t done extensive research on this, but from what I’ve read, the answer seems to be none. They all seemed relatively emotionally normal before they took their negative emotion to a place grossly outside of themselves. Still, we fear the person crying in public. As if their

emotion is a form of virus we might catch, a disability we become susceptible to through exposure. I'm telling you. It's the people *not* crying in public we should be worried about.

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There are certain stories we tell about ourselves. Stories that get woven into conversation again and again. Those closest to us hear them more than once. Sometimes these stories connect to the theme being discussed; other times we interject them into a conversation that could continue well without them. If you stop and think about it, you can probably come up with two or three stories like this, the ones you regularly tell about yourself. Think of these stories as articles of clothing. They are stories you dress yourself in. They are stories you decide to let other people see. They are not your underwear stories, they are not even your sock stories, really. They are the stories that sit further away from your skin and closer to the outside world. Depending upon how private a person is, the only stories you get are the thick winter coat variety. They are stories with many layers underneath, but you might only get the rainproof exterior.

I am not waterproof. A story I've told numerous times is about me and Eileen watching the Miss Madison County competition the summer after 5th grade. Here it is: Every summer the county fair came to my hometown and set up in the grounds around the public swimming pool. After the week's stock car race, a stage was built over the dirt tracks for the Miss Madison County pageant.

My best-friend Eileen and I didn't have enough money to get into the pageant and told ourselves we didn't care because it was stupid, anyway. Who *really* wanted to watch it? A bunch of hairspray sticking out of ugly, sequined dresses. Lame questions being

answered with equally lame replies. Teenaged girls wearing shoes with their bathing suits. We were budding feminists and against the whole thing. Of course, all of this attitude was flimsily constructed and emphatically projected. The truth is we wanted to watch, and in the end decided to try to sneak in.

We rode our bikes down Race Track Road and came up along the right side of the bleacher seats facing the beauty pageant stage. The road dead-ended into the tracks and there was a chain-link fence, roughly 10-feet high, which surrounded the area. When we climbed up to the top of the fence, we could see the full pageant stage. We were close enough to hear the questions; our feet were small enough to fit inside the fence's diamond links, and we held on to the top bar of the fence.

I don't remember how long we perched there, watching, but I distinctly remember climbing down. I started to, Eileen started to, and then my foot slipped and I started to slide. I was going to die. Or so I thought, until I felt a sharp pull. The bottom of my t-shirt caught on the top-open prongs of the fence, it was pulled up over my head and my whole body was hanging from it. My upper body was fully exposed. My relief at having not fallen to my hypothetical death was quickly replaced by the mortification of fully exposing my tic-tac-tits to whomever on stage, or in the bleachers, might be looking to their right.

Sometimes, I end the story here. This is if I want to make myself only so vulnerable. This vulnerable. Hanging. Exposed. Sometimes I end it here because, in some ways, this is where the story is funniest. Other times, I continue. I say that, yes, being topless, hanging from your shirt, when you are just starting to get breasts is embarrassing. But what's worse, or what makes it worse, is that I was so frightened by the fall that I

instantly began to piss myself. And the pissing that started when I was falling didn't stop when I realized I was no longer falling. For a few good moments, I was exposed from the waist up and emptying myself with abandon. I was a hanging, peeing body stuck on the top of a fence near a hick beauty contest.

Right about here, maybe whomever I'm telling this to has a similar story they want to tell. Maybe they, too, have pissed themselves; maybe they've been in a dissimilar situation where they felt similarly vulnerable or somehow bodily betrayed. If so, I stop the story here. It's a fine ending. If the person I'm talking to doesn't have anything, or if I just feel like going on, I go on.

Just as Virgil tells Dante that in order to ascend he must first descend, in order to climb down the fence, I first had to climb up. And, no, I don't think it's hyperbolic to pair my pre-teen experiences with the *Inferno*. It felt just as heavy. I climbed up the fence, unhooked my shirt, and slowly, carefully, climbed down. Just after landing, Ben Gallatin and Jeremy McPherson rounded the corner of the road and pedaled up to where we were at the base of the fence. My shorts were wet, my shirt was torn and I was somehow simultaneously excited and mortified to see Ben and Jeremy. I wrapped my shirt into a little knot, spiraling the fabric and covering up the fence-post tear; crossed my legs and tried to lean against the fence with an air of nonchalance. Rather than admit anything about what just happened, I contorted myself into something that seemed presentable.

Of course, when I'm telling this story, I don't go into all these details. It's mostly, I fell from the fence, I got caught on the fence, exposed, pissing, I tried to cover up the whole thing as soon as it happened. But why do I tell this story at all? The simplest reason is that I like funny stories and it's easiest to use this genre on one's self. In stories

about your own embarrassment, everyone is spared but you. Another reason is that it makes me vulnerable. I paint myself as a somewhat idiotic, unimposing, unthreatening person. And I have just trusted you with this story; therefore, I am someone who you can trust. The story seems to open me up before a person, but because this is the story I have chosen to tell, that opening is conniving. By telling a story that presents me as vulnerable in a specific way, I am covering all of the other—possibly more dangerous, serious, or threatening—ways I am vulnerable. We all do this with stories, of course, with what we choose to say or not say—it's just the stories where someone seems to be baring all that are the most overt in their masking.

One story always hides another. In this same year, this same training-bra-time-of-life, my aunt commits suicide. And I really wish we had a better phrase. It is a commitment, I suppose, but death is so quickly over and done with—at least for the dead person—that the word commitment hardly seems fitting. We don't talk about commitment to eating a cheeseburger or shooting heroin, and many studies on suicide reveal the impulsivity of the act. It's why the first method of prevention is to limit accessibility of means. For most, if you have the impulse without any means, the feeling will pass. You will have committed nothing.

At the funeral I hear my uncle say, "This is not the first time, and it probably won't be the last." I become aware that this uncle is an asshole, and make sense of the picture on my grandmother's fridge; the faded image of another uncle, an uncle I never met and only know of as an event on a bridge and a body my grandfather made one of his other children identify. In less than a year, my cousin will follow his mother in method and outcome; the front seat of his car, surrounded by his favorite books. I'll believe my

uncle's statement is responsible, but I don't know this at my aunt's wake. At the reception, I tell my series of "Underwear" jokes, a line of original jokes that all happen to end with the punch line "Under where?" They are not funny. I am the only one who laughs. I do so almost manically. And writing of these jokes now, the play on underwear, the exposure, I see an irony in uncovering to completely cover. I'll talk about underwear, which is usually not seen or discussed, partly because I am eleven, partly because I want to avoid discussion of these deaths, this family epidemic. I use the personal to avoid the personal. The funny personal stories I tell about myself are red herrings that allow me to make sure the other, more disturbing stories, stay away. I tell a story about peeing myself and appear as a comic figure, rather than telling a story about suicide and appearing wounded or tragic. People go in for the funny adventures, and I don't blame them. I prefer these stories, too.

For instance, this short one about San Francisco. I was hung-over and riding the BART to work. I sat next to a blind woman or she sat next to me. I remembering thinking a lot about how difficult her life must be, how hard it had to be for her to get around. I resolved to help her in some way, because of course she needed my help. Then I fell asleep and she woke me at the appropriate stop. This is the funny drunk story, the blind literally leading the figuratively blind. With my hangover and pitying ignorance, I couldn't see my own helplessness. This blind story is more entertaining than telling of how I literally drank myself blind the morning of my 26th birthday. That I tried to shower and couldn't see and did everything to get out of the shower before the possibility of drowning became all too real. See, the first blind story doesn't make you as

uncomfortable as the second. I feel the same way, and you can bet which one I've told more often.

I'm aware that this telling stories to cover other stories, throwing certain stories in the air and saying "Hey, look over there!" is not a special talent. This is not unique to me. Realizing this about myself makes me even more curious about others. In the past, it has been my established rule to distrust people who don't share stories. I view their reluctance as either: one, a lack of trust in me as a listener and friend (a lack of trust I will then reciprocate); two, a fear that they will run out of stories, or give up too many of their stories; in short, a lack of generosity. The first kind can be no friend of mine because there's no trust. The second will be no friend of mine because they are miserly. This has been my stance for quite some time. But when I look at my own selectivity in storytelling, I start to think maybe I should be more leery of those who readily offer their stories—maybe these are the types that are paradoxically the least revealing. People are such strange pools of experience—you never know what's growing inside.

When living in New York, I once saw a woman go from walking, standing upright, moving briskly through the sidewalk crowd to crouching behind a large planter, crying. She was not the first person I saw crying in public, she would not be the last. I didn't say anything to her, I didn't stop or offer a tissue even. It may sound cold, but I'm not sure she'd have even wanted me to. She was trying to hide behind a plant, after all. Later I saw other public breakdowns. There are not enough places to cry in a city. I remember being surprised at this not-stopping-person I'd become.

Years earlier, when I could hear my neighbor crying through our apartment walls, I'd gone over with chocolate and knocked on her door. I didn't know her. I figured it was some breakup. She answered a mess, took the chocolate, and said she'd just found out a friend had committed suicide. I said something inane about the health effects of chocolate and went away. I had no advice about suicide.

And as for the woman in sobs behind the plant, I hope she turned the afternoon into a story she tells. *I was walking down 5th Avenue and I just couldn't hold it in, I crouched behind a plant and let everything out onto the sidewalk. It was really ridiculous but felt good.* I hope she turned it into one she tells, but it's kind of hard to spin it. I have my own version of this, except the city is Tokyo.

Being alone together can be comforting if you are actually together, like in Gunter's Onion Bar. But when you're in a sea-sized crowd of people who you do not know, it can feel as if you are decidedly not together, that all you are is alone. This was the feeling in Tokyo, in the crowds. At times, I could feel so disconnected from life, other forms of life, other humans, that I'd feel myself start to disappear even while people bumped into me, brushed against what was physically present. If I didn't exist to anyone around me, the feeling went, did I even exist at all? What would happen if I fell down right here on the subway platform, and stopped existing altogether? Stopped moving, at least? People would walk around me; the negative space, the space people could not walk through, would be my only marker. "In a field / I am the absence / of field," Mark Strand writes in "Keeping Things Whole," and I didn't want to keep things whole, I wanted to wallow in the space I took up as if it was my only and last right. Since nobody cared about what I was doing or where I was, I stopped caring myself. I felt like shit and

decided that since no one was looking I had no obligation to pretend that I didn't feel like shit. I felt privately public.

So, like the woman behind the plant, I let it all out. It was a rainy day and I walked the streets, without an umbrella, and cried and cried and cried. I let the tears run, the snot run, the rain drip, and all. I didn't care. And it worked just as I thought it might. Not one person looked at me. No one asked if I was okay. The Japanese are big on not showing emotions in public and it really creeps them out when you do. By crying this way, I turned myself into something of a leper. But the tears were also empowering because they felt defiant.

Weeks earlier I had spoken sternly in a post office about some trouble with my bank account. I remember sensing how uncomfortable my tone made people (the workers, the people waiting in line) and adjusting myself so they didn't feel threatened. Now, I wanted to threaten everyone with this emotion. As idiotic as it sounds, I felt like my tears were giving a big F-you to the expectations of how someone should act. I never thought I understood why women stripped themselves naked in instances of protest, but this crying in public made me feel as if, in some ways, I did (even if my protest was only against my own isolation, and in that way selfish and pathetic). When it seems like you are irredeemably low, sometimes the discomfort of your visible despair is the only type of power you have left. And, oddly enough, sometimes this vulnerability is formidable. Somehow, utter defenselessness becomes an offense. Sometimes it is affective. Sometimes it is disarming. Other times, it is only awkward, and I have the most experience with these times.

If the stories we tell about ourselves are consistently disguises for other versions of ourselves, then crying openly and unabashedly may be a type of song—one that plays in a register free of all the trappings and disguises of narrative. There is no story, there is only raw emotion and no one knows what to do with that. Well, I suppose there are paid professionals who know a little about what to do with the raw emotion, but even that is iffy, and the general public seems generally at a loss. Raw emotion is terrifying and complete, there is no sense to be made of it because there is no sense. Herein lies the power of crying in public. A massage therapist friend once told me that crying was actually really good for your body, when it needed to happen and you let it happen that it was your healthiest option. She didn't say anything about whether you should do it in public or private. But I'd like to invite you, if you feel like it, to give the public version a try.

What's the worst that can happen? I'd like to open my own Onion Bar someday, but we all can't wait that long. Drop your story. Drop your face. Let the tears roll. I won't stop and ask you what's wrong; I won't even offer you a tissue. We'll all be uncomfortable. We'll all feel better.