WRITING MENTAL ILLNESS AND INTERROGATING AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL POSITIONALITY

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This dissertation explores the influences of emotional trauma and social attachment on the writing of life narrative. In the first chapter, "An Autography of Mental Illness," I apply standpoint theory, trauma theory, and Jeanne Perreault's "autography" to discuss community influences upon "authentic" expressions of trauma. Through Lauren Berlant's "intimate publics" and "cruel optimism," I indicate that social expectations of trauma and the genre conventions of "honest" narratives constrain expressions of trauma and marginalization. I interrogate my own positionalities in relation to divorce, military service, and mental illness. The next four chapters consist of life writing vignettes thematically focused on aspects of performing "the good parent" for my son. "Writing Pain" explores my experiences of physical pain from military service. "Writing Depression" examines the interplay of writing and mental illness, revealing the difficulty of narrating "a life." "The Daddy War" contrasts perceptions of "a good dad" to my own experiences as a parent. "Divorce" interrogates the sources of my emotions during divorce and custody. The sixth chapter, "Pedagogy and Social Media in Creative Writing," examines how social relationships affect students in creative writing in the era of digital social media.

KEYWORDS: Creative Writing, Life Writing, Standpoint Theory, Trauma Theory, Autography, Mental Illness, Parenting, Military Experience, Divorce

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER I: CRITICAL INTRODUCTION: AN AUTOGRAPHY OF MENTAL ILLNESS

I grew up in an America in which the work of Civil Rights was incomplete. Now, as an army veteran working on a Ph.D. in English Studies, I find myself inhabiting two Americas—one that leaves me yearning, and one that leaves me afraid of what I will tell my son as he grows up. We live in a state where Senate Candidate Tammy Duckworth—a veteran of the Iraq War, a double-amputee, and a Daughter of the American Revolution—saw her entire military heritage dismissed during a televised debate simply because her mother is from Thailand (Perlman). Which narratives will "America" apply to my bilingual child who is half-white and half-Thai? What will I tell him at that inevitable future time when he realizes that all my hours spent at the computer and in the library have simply been part of my lifelong journey to join the hallowed ranks of the "liberal elites"?

Confusing matters further, my recent divorce highlights the fact that I remain torn between two lives. One is the liberal feminist human being who believes in the need for postcolonialist interrogations of political power structures. I want my bilingual, biracial, binational child to see the two cultures of his life as woven into a tapestry. I don't want him to be forced to choose between islands of cultural awareness—neither intersecting, two worlds never to collide. Second is the loving father, the one who feared his future-ex-wife would take his child away to Thailand, perhaps never to return. I am the parent who googled directions to the American Embassy in Bangkok, the one who e-mailed a lawyer for advice, the one who secretly cheers when my child absolutely refuses to speak his mother's mother tongue. And in the closing weeks of this dissertation draft, I have not yet thanked my ex-wife for taking our child to see her family in Thailand, allowing me to shift from the challenges of parenting to the challenges of writing. And as a matter of principle, I will never thank her.

The interrogation of these divides readily falls under the domain of life writing. And in a creative writing dissertation, such questions should provide ample material for creative exploration. But as I approached this work, I found that emotional barriers continually emerged. I kept a journal of the long summer in Thailand—the last time I tried reading it, I blanked. I read words on a page, and the memory of those words faded before I'd reached the following page. Other times, I would begin to write, only to see my own words clouded by a degree of anger and hostility that undermined any attempt at objectivity. Swimming in the inchoate anxieties of a divorce I don't fully remember, I wanted the words to explain my suffering as a father. But I am faced with the reality that much of my personal sense of "having suffered" isn't simply derived from the words or actions of my ex-wife—instead, my own fears of what she *might* do make it difficult to accurately examine my own role in what happened. Over a span of two years, I had serious and valid fears that I would lose my child, whether to international distances or a court's custody decision, and these fears affected my outlook in ways that I may never fully untangle. They are further complicated by my own long-term treatment for clinical depression—as a parent, I saw my legal case for custody diminished by past thoughts of suicidal ideation. It does not matter that I've continued treatment, or that I haven't experienced such thoughts in over eight years—from what my attorney indicated, it is doubtful that I could confidently portray myself as "cured" enough to be considered entirely "safe" as a parent.

The relationship between uncertain recall, questionable articulation, and uncertain social status can be readily theorized. Initially, this dissertation would "simply" address the struggle of expressing trauma through autobiography—in particular, looking at the ways in which trauma affects my own ability to describe those experiences that were the most "difficult" for me. I was going to talk about the social and personal strains of divorce—both on children and on parents. I

wanted to explore how the lasting damage of trauma inflicts two key barriers upon trauma survivors: the ability to accurately perceive reality, and the capability to convey that reality to others. Drawing upon Lauren Berlant's concept of the "intimate publics," I was going to theorize the ways in which my own work of life narrative could be used to challenge conceptions of what "counts" as emotional abuse. For Berlant, autobiography shapes and is shaped by cultural narratives of "acceptable" experience: "intimacy builds worlds; it creates spaces and usurps places meant for other kinds of relation" ("Intimacy" 281).

But as I approached this work, the very effects I'm studying affected my ability to engage in research and discourse. As I undertook the creative work for this dissertation, I became painfully aware that each vignette from my personal life would become inscribed upon my academic identity. The selective choices of life narrative became more difficult than I could have imagined, particularly when "advancing the narrative" or "establishing character" required uncomfortable admissions. I didn't expect it to be so hard. I came to graduate school as a fiction writer—in fiction, advancing the plot might involve the painful excision of lovingly crafted pages, but fiction has rarely left me wondering whether or not I'd be invited home for Christmas. To give an account of what might be unacknowledged emotional abuse is to shape to a world very different from the network of relationships I appear to currently live.

But I am hardly alone in such struggles. During my teaching internship, it became apparent that the degree of "safety" offered by the classroom significantly affected which stories students would share. Even students who felt an urgent need to express past experiences voiced hesitation, especially given the nature of the academic setting. Whether writing about experiences with eating disorders or the dangers of party life, they were unwilling to attach their reputations to stories that weren't "right." As a fiction writer, I imagined I could help my

students better prepare for the publishing world by providing the tools to publicly disseminate their writing online—as an instructor, I found that it was impossible for students to separate their stories from their lives, and that it was misguided for me to expect them to do so. They needed space to experiment without judgment.

The problem, however, is that the written artifact crafts the social identity of the person who is writing. As I worked on this dissertation, I found that my works of life writing were never "ready" or "complete." I could barely finish a vignette about my son before our relationship changed—he might give up trains for dinosaurs, or he would suddenly take my hand and tell me to look both ways before crossing the street. Within days or weeks or months, the story I had written was no longer true, and perhaps never had been. And yet it was written. It would be submitted to the aesthetic and academic demand that a work is eventually "finished." As an experienced fiction writer, I'd thought I had finally come to terms with this requirement of "successful" writing—as a narrator of my own life, I had to face this challenge with new eyes. I became a student of myself. Like the participants in my teaching internship, I became acutely aware that my life actual is not the life that I perform for others, and that my stories could not match the narratives of what my life *should* be. Among my students, this meant hesitation—they waited to share their personal stories in the classroom, holding off until they received the permission of empathy from myself and their classmates. But as a Ph.D. candidate seeking the imprimatur of an academic degree, I cannot safely hesitate long enough to seek such permission.

This relationship between writing and social reception significantly affects what can and cannot be written. In *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant extends her intimate publics to the relationship between fantasy and attachment surrounding "that moral-intimate-economic thing called 'the good life.' Why do people stay attached to conventional good-life fantasies—say, of enduring

reciprocity in couples, families, political systems, institutions, markets, and at work—when the evidence of their instability, fragility, and dear cost abounds?" (2). By writing my own experiences onto the page, I imagined I could address such questions of personal versus public intimacy, but I instead caught myself inscribing my own life to the good-life fantasies I wanted to challenge. I thought I could simply counter the cultural narrative of the "strong male father figure" by illustrating how my own quest to meet that standard led to its unraveling, but the construction of such rhetorical narratives is inherently social. I could not counter the prevailing social narrative without sharing information that would reveal my failure to meet societal expectations. Such an expression challenging the status quo expectations of "the good life" may invite approbation or worse. If my attorney heard I was writing about my divorce, she'd no doubt advise that current custody arrangements remain subject to litigation.

Arthur Frank describes writers who challenge such expectation as "tricksters" who "bring disorder—theft, sexual license, the blurring of boundaries—that liberates gods from the entropy of perfection and mortals from the illusion that they can be like gods" (194). But for him, this comes with a cost. The authenticity required to speak truth requires the writer to step away from the social appropriation of institutions (196)—a difficult challenge for any student, regardless of degree. Against the cruel optimism of academic success, the authenticity Frank describes becomes constrained—narratives of "truth" must align with the expectations of assessment, which are inherently shaped by institutional expectations of "acceptable" narratives. This situation is particularly fraught today—new technologies continually shift the ways in which narratives are shared, further restricting who is allowed to share and in which spaces. Writing life narratives for a dissertation—as opposed to an anonymous blog, or a Kindle e-book self-published under a pseudonym—has undeniable effects on "the truth" I allow myself to write.

Yet in articulating this kind of "marginalized" perspective, I must also acknowledge that I am writing from multiple positions of privilege. Despite the claims of "disrespect" shown to veterans, liberals and conservatives both voice ardent concern for the needs of military personnel past and present. In a nation where even antiwar protestors "support the troops," I sense reduced risk in describing my own struggles with mental illness. As Patricia Roberts-Miller writes, "[n]o community has absolute freedom of expression either in the sense that the discourse is equally open to all points of view nor in the sense that the discourse has equal costs for all participants" (539). I am an American-born veteran, and my ex-wife holds a green card. Whatever disagreements we might face, English is my ex-wife's third language—I find it unlikely that she would initiate legal action within the U.S. court system. And given the current wave of anti-immigrant rhetoric and legal actions, she may feel additional reticence about doing anything that might draw attention to her status. If our roles were reversed, there is almost no chance she would be writing her narrative for a dissertation.

Further, many of the physical and mental issues I face have been affected by military experiences—experiences that now provide resources unavailable to most writers. My veteran benefits have provided the finances and medical care to make graduate school possible. Tuition waivers and teaching stipends alone would not have covered a hospitalization, a divorce, three surgeries, and childcare for a single father with clinical depression who can't always find the energy to cook. My son and I both eat well, but he no doubt imagines Chipotle as a food group—as does my credit card. And all of this is underpinned by the undeniable influence of white privilege. I grew up with two parents and two stepparents—all four graduated from college. My mother has a master's degree. Starting from preschool, I was guided down a path that led to scholarships and graduations, pushed forward within a culture where college wasn't a goal or a

dream, but an expectation. Already, my mother talks about how her four-year-old grandson *will* go to college, and I have no doubt that she would pull funds from her retirement to help cover his tuition.

Despite such socioeconomic advantages, I still struggle to compose narratives that can reveal the challenges of negotiating divorce and parenthood and mental illness. Yet my struggles are hardly unique—many more suffer in silence. And as the political events of the past year unfolded, it became clear that I must consider how my writing fits within the literary ecology of a bifurcated America, a society wherein personal experiences from "the other side of the aisle" are regularly disregarded due to personal animosities born of collective resentments. Repeatedly, I've seen my military experiences entirely discounted on account of my "liberal" views. My training with the M-16 rifle, my deployment to Afghanistan, and my five years of military service often count for nothing simply because I disagree with certain perspectives regarding gun control. Already, one person on Facebook indicated that I'm not a "real" veteran because I voted for Hillary. Through cruel optimism, I sense that my voicing of "liberal" perspectives engenders an existential threat to the conceptions of American held by many individuals who would otherwise value military experience. This rejection is not logical, but rather affective. As Berlant writes, "[o]ur sense of reciprocity with the world as it appears, our sense of *what a person should do and expect*, our sense of who we are as a continuous scene of action, shape what becomes our visceral intuition about how to manage living" (*Cruel Optimism* 52, my emphasis).

Such ingrained and unwavering expectations further deepen our social divides, silencing still more voices. Sarah Allen describes how such a phenomenon affects how her students perceive the purposes and methods of argumentation, causing them to apply the label of "enemy" to anyone supporting the "other sides" of an argument (8). Her students are unable to relinquish

prior social allegiances in order to engage contrary points of view. Allen questions whether scholars and teachers have adequately addressed the role personal feelings play in shaping worldviews among students (10), and she sees life writing as a means to bridge these gaps. As she asks, "couldn't the personal essay repair the schisms that occur between people because of the social categories and rigid beliefs that make up our subject positions?" (10-11).

Initially, I thought that my own works of life writing could follow Allen's intent within Berlant's framework, helping to overcome the "enemy" label while acknowledging my own role in following the cruel optimisms of my own expectations for "the good life." In particular, I wanted to interrogate social expectations in light of my divorce, questioning the ways in which traditional conceptions of fatherhood and "mental fitness" applied to my experiences of "fighting" for custody of my child. But rather than engage in "attacking" another by succumbing to my own raw emotions, I wanted to show how popular notions such as "mental fitness" and "fighting" are oversimplifications of complex social negotiations. Berlant argues that such happenings are not amenable to the conventional trauma theory narratives of "exceptional shock and data loss," but rather "are better described by a notion of systemic crisis or 'crisis of ordinariness'" (*Cruel Optimism* 10).

Describing a "crisis of ordinariness" doesn't easily fit within the conventions of an "engaging" narrative. Berlant indicates that "[o]ften when scholars and activists apprehend the phenomenon of slow death in long-term conditions of privation, they choose to misrepresent the duration and scale of the situation by calling a crisis that which is a fact of life and has been a defining fact of life for a given population that lives that crisis in ordinary time" (*Cruel Optimism* 101). And divorce lends itself to such misrepresentations. Popular culture frequently considers divorce as a single traumatic event, thus eliding the decades of tension that follow. I dated my

ex-wife for six years before we married, and our marriage lasted four years. That included eighteen months of divorce; it will now include fourteen more years of shared custody of our child. But to assume the divorce will "end" when our child turns eighteen is beyond optimistic. My own parents divorced when I was two years old. Thirty-five years later, I must still negotiate which of them will see their one grandchild during Thanksgiving or Christmas—holidays which must also be shared with my ex-wife. Thus, divorce is not simply about the legal "trauma" of assigning custody, but the negotiation of claiming a child's love and attention, of cementing bonds of affect to transcend the decades of competition between parents who no longer trust each other. Here, it's little wonder that Berlant notes the "fragility" of familial relationships.

To address this conception of trauma as ongoing lived experience, I turned to Jeanne Perreault's "feminist autography." Articulating this concept during second-wave feminism, she sees the "I" and "we" of autobiography as "continuously transformed and reenacted as feminists claim the rights of self-definition" (1). Berlant's later articulations of the intimate publics echo Perreault's description of the political power of autobiographical expression:

> As women's senses of self in the world are modified in the process of an evolving feminist consciousness, the context too is understood differently. Self, as a political issue, is the basis from which women have resisted the definitions and designations of various male authorities (religious, psychoanalytic, literary, or political-right or left). And it is the basis from which feminists of color have resisted the assumptions of white feminists who have inappropriately generalized from their own experience to that of all women. (130)

Feminist theories have evolved and deepened a great deal since Perreault's articulation here, but the fundamental issue of using autobiography to establish self-definition applies for all groups that face hegemonic inscription from imposed hierarchies. Feminist standpoint theory goes a step

further, indicating that collective articulations from the margins may also reveal aspects of social reality that cannot be found through status quo hierarchies of knowledge. Kristina Rolin describes this as the "thesis of epistemic advantage," drawing on Sandra Harding's assertion that "unprivileged social positions are likely to generate perspectives that are 'less partial and less distorted' than perspectives generated by other social positions" (218). As Julia Wood writes: "members of privileged groups have a vested interest in not seeing oppression and inequality that accompany and, indeed, makes [sic] possible their privilege; . . . members of marginalized groups are more likely to understand both their locations and the social location of more powerful groups than the converse" (62).

My own view from the margins emerges as I face tenuous position of single parenting while under treatment for clinical depression. I live under the ongoing fear that my mental illness could be portrayed as a danger to my son, and this fear makes me far more alert to actions that would draw undue attention to my parenting. As a teacher, I've been surrounded by mandatory reporters, and there are certain comments about parenting that I will *never* make, even in jest, for fear that someone might send a social worker to my apartment "as a precaution." Unlike many children, my child has two households that are both loving and fully equipped to care for him—one serious mistake on my part, or simply the perception of one, and it wouldn't be difficult for a judge to assign full custody to my ex-wife. At the same time, I am a child of divorce—I have clear memories of performing my role as "the good child" in two very different households, and I have unique perspectives regarding the experiences my son will face. To conceal these perspectives out of fear of retribution would certainly constrain my ties with him.

Through this, I saw potential for my autobiographical writing to establish authority through my identity as a parent with mental illness while also conveying a "less partial and less

distorted" understanding of divorce. But I underestimated the degree to which preexisting cultural narratives can invalidate autobiographical assertions. As Brooke Lenz explains, "The methodology of standpoint theory posits that no truth claims are devoid of political investment; its objective is in part to expose the political investment surrounding otherwise unexamined and generally accepted 'truths'" (101)—and in the context of contemporary politics, all truth claims are subject to evaluation and evisceration based on *political* rather than *evidentiary* grounds. As Berlant explains, personal narratives don't simply express the nebulous "self," but also constrain the community-sanctioned meanings of selfhood—and, subsequently, community determinations of truth. "The autobiographical is not personal," she writes. "[A]ll sorts of narratives are read as autobiographies of collective experience" ("Life Writing" 181). We see this most clearly in the sharp political divide in contemporary America—contrasting autobiographical narratives of the American experience have led to vastly different conceptions of what America "should" be. To indicate my own anxieties about my coursework or the recent presidential elections is to consign myself to the membership of "special snowflakes" (Berry)—likewise, my anxieties about depression can be misconstrued as evidence that I am unfit as a parent.

For anyone who has suffered injuries that lie outside popular conceptions of trauma, public discourses threaten to further marginalization. This limits not only the capacity to be heard, but also the availability of language to describe experience. As Kristina Rolin writes, "relations of power can. . . . suppress relevant evidence by intimidating potential informants, by invoking uncomfortable emotions, or by inflicting what Miranda Fricker calls 'hermeneutical injustice'" (220), which is "the injustice of having one's social experience obscured from collective understanding," such as "when the very term 'sexual harassment' was not readily available to name a particular kind of social experience" (221). Bereft of language to name what

has happened, individuals are left isolated, unable share their collectives experiences, let alone counter the social frameworks that allow and encourage recurring trauma. Dan Stone uses the term "unspeakable" to describe the "crisis in testimony" that emerges when victims lack the tools to express what has happened: "the paradox that the necessity of speaking, of testifying, immediately runs up against the impossibility of doing so. . . . Holocaust witnesses . . . feel obliged to speak but . . . they encounter the dilemma of feeling that their experiences are unspeakable or indescribable" (20).

Life writing can provide some redress in that it opens up a platform for expression to create and share a common language for those who lack it. Such language cannot come from experience of trauma, but rather through the influence of other narratives. Discussing *The Cancer Journals*, Frank indicates that Audre Lorde's awareness of standpoint within identity politics provided narrative resources that were unavailable to other cancer patients at the time. "The oppression/resistance stories that Lorde has been thinking with long before she has cancer provide her with the resources to tell a story in which she is able to recognize how the nurse treats her" (191). By drawing on these experiences and sharing her story, Lorde provides language for others to share their experiences: "Lorde's ability to tell the story depends on narrative resources available to her, and once the story is told, it becomes a narrative resource available to others who seek, and often struggle, to express their experiences" (190).

Lacking such resources places a serious burden on anyone who has experienced the long-term effects of unrecognized trauma. It becomes impossible understand—let alone articulate—the emotional injury that has occurred. As Julie Gregory relates in her memoir *Sickened*, the abuse she suffered throughout her childhood cast an inexplicable shadow across her entire life until a psychology lecture revealed the nature of her upbringing: "The perpetrator, usually a

mother, makes an otherwise healthy child sick in order to seek continued medical care" (195). For Gregory, this description of Munchausen by proxy was both devastating and enlightening: "I have all the missing parts to the real truth" (196). In Gregory's case, documenting and narrating the trauma that has happened becomes a significant step not just in overcoming her past, but averting future tragedy for another child by correcting false narratives her mother continues to weave for others:

> I don't know what shape the process will take, but I have got to stop my mother. . . . I will find the records that showed her Ohio foster care license was revoked; I will find the caseworker that jerked the kids away that day; I will make them run a tracer on my mother's Social Security number. I will save that eleven-year-old girl, that next-generation replica of me. (224)

In a similar vein, I initially envisioned this dissertation as another optimistic salvo at the fundamental structures of injustice in our society. In this, Jeanne Perreault sees the potential for life narrative to overcome the normative framework of dominant cultural narratives in order to assert both personal identity and fluid social categories. For her, autobiography can serve as a uniting influence not only toward establishing collective identity, but toward fostering the continued recognition, diversity, and development of a "community in progress" (4). Her concern "is the voice of she who writes in the body of a woman, when 'I' and 'woman' (the singular of 'women,' not the blank screen of historical specularities and speculations) are embraced as unstable categories, territories to be inhabited, claimed, and reclaimed—not colonized, but worked and revised" (4). But in this, she sees the need to describe a new genre of life writing as a means to differentiate such social inscriptions of identity from our traditional conceptions of autobiography: "autography differs from autobiography is that it is not

necessarily concerned with the process or unfolding of life events, but rather makes the writing itself an aspect of the selfhood the writer experiences and brings into being" (3-4).

Granted, it is possible that Perreault's conception of autography is too focused on the social components of expression. Jana Evans Braziel critiques the concept for eliding the fundamental physicality of life: "*Autography* . . . elides *bios*, life, and emphasizes the self as textually constructed, signed, or autographed" (11, author's emphasis). But I see this as a strength. Autography is inherently rhetorical, centered upon reframing social narratives in order to express previously unheard identities—it is well suited to counter rhetorics of marginalization, including those that appropriate "scientific" narratives of biological determinism. Also, in contrast to Bart Moore-Gilbert's note that "[t]he gendering of terms like 'autogynography' . . . precludes their adaptation to postcolonial life-writing by men" (131), Perreault's explicit use of the phrase *feminist* autography inherently reveals the flexibility of *autography* as a concept and as a genre. As a white male veteran, I could adapt autography to multiple positionalities, aligning my own experiences across the socially constructed boundaries of race, gender, and sexuality to join in the collective articulations of military service.

For this dissertation, I imagined that I could simply write such a work, a piece that would address the construct of veteran status by incorporating the fullness of that experience beyond military service. I imagined that my membership among the community of veterans would provide an anchor for my narratives of upbringing, divorce, and parenthood. Even General H. Norman Schwarzkopf, the "Stormin Normin" who commanded Desert Storm and brought Saddam to his knees, devotes long chapters of his memoir to boarding school, his mother's alcoholism, and the challenges of growing up to meet his father's expectations. Surely, if a

polished war hero could find room to address his childhood, the far less heroic nature of my own service could allow space for a contested divorce.

In this way, narratives of military experience are uniquely positioned to challenge cultural assumptions of "difference." The challenges of service could be described as an independent measure of Berlant's "good life," and the attendant risks and trials could be positioned as fidelity to the cultural "optimism" that is America. In her 1994 memoir *Serving in Silence*, Margarethe Cammermeyer juxtaposes such service against the policy of Don't Ask, Don't Tell:

> "At forty-seven, I had just a few more goals to achieve before a graceful military retirement. I had wanted to be the national Chief Nurse and a general since I first joined the Army in 1961. Now I had the background, the military experience, and the professional education (particularly since my doctorate was almost completed) to compete for that position" (2).

But a cruel optimism emerges when Cammermeyer's integrity as a military officer ends her career. Interviewing for the necessary top secret clearance for the new position, she admits she is lesbian and is subsequently discharged. "This was a top-secret clearance—I was asking to be deemed worthy of trust. . . . Of course, I'd tell the truth" (3).

Like Schwarzkopf, Cammermeyer draws upon experiences with her family, the military, and the challenges of reaching her goals to relate the fullness of her experience. But hers isn't simply a book about someone being discharged from the military due to her homosexuality—it's about the injustice felt by a woman who works hard to overcome social and financial barriers, only to have her qualifications as a soldier and a mother simply disregarded due to her sexual

orientation. As we see throughout her memoir, the artificiality of social norms isn't simply a monovalent issue, but a problem that has affected her entire life:

> Father was a scientist at a major government agency, so we were not poor. Rather, he was very frugal. And my mother's subservient position prevented her from telling him she needed more money to cover our basic needs. Instead, she compensated by going without, by doing our laundry by hand long after other families had washing machines, by making all our clothes, by knitting Norwegian sweaters and selling them to acquaintances. When Father rejected my request for tuition assistance, I was not surprised—but I was humiliated. I determined to make it completely on my own. (31).

Here, life narrative provides a space for ambiguity, for interpolating the realities of warfare with the doubts of the warfighter. A concept like military autography could provide a platform to convey the optimisms that led me into military service, and then shaped my outlook moving forward. Philip Caputo's memoir *A Rumor of War* further reveals the potential to interrogate the inconsistencies between military service and daily living. He shares the paradox of protesting the Vietnam War while simultaneously feeling an intense "nostalgia" for the experience of combat: "I realized a reconciliation was impossible; I would never be able to hate the war with anything like the undiluted passion of my friends in the movement. Because I had fought in it, it was not an abstract issue, but a deeply emotional experience. . . . It held my thoughts, senses, and feeling in an unbreakable embrace" (xvi). And as Caputo doubts his ability to accurately convey his experiences, there is a depth of honesty in his admission and in the future details he provides. Vivian Gornick describes this quality of life writing as "texture," the capacity to reveal "all that was *not* being said; that which could never be said" (5). The

challenge, then, comes not in the mere recitation of facts, and certainly not in the statement of ideological perspective, but rather in the capacity to carry the reader on a journey:

> Here, the writing does not wander about on the page accumulating description for its own sake, or developing images independent of thought, or musing lyrically. The point of view originates in the nervous system and concentrates itself in the person of the narrator who causes the essay to move steadily forward . . . the obligation is to use the narrating self only to shape those associations that will provide drive and lead on to inner resolution. (29-30)

Yet the very nature of military writing may overshadow the texture Gornick describes, undermining the sense of autography as a negotiation of identity. Instead, I sense that many readers wouldn't perceive my story as a sufficiently *military* experience because it lacks the intensity of combat or the insanity of *Full Metal Jacket*. I enlisted after college, I got injured falling off a platform in Georgia, and I got injured again when I slipped on a patch of ice after dinner one night. So what if the injuries were during Airborne School at Fort Benning? Or after a quiet dinner spent at 9,000 feet at FOB Gardez, Afghanistan? I've been to Afghanistan, but it's hard overcoming the public intimacy of "war is hell" when my own war was not.

Thus, it feels wrong to write the narrative of a disabled veteran who's never been shot and never seen anyone die, and this is a stigma I have not yet brought myself to overcome. At the end of my tour in Afghanistan, my buddies dubbed me "Mr. Glass" for my propensity for injury, but theirs was a cheerful ribbing. I felt a deeper shame when the English Department website at my alma mater mistakenly listed me as a notable alum "serving in the Special Forces," and I didn't have the courage to e-mail and correct them. It shouldn't have been hard—the department chair was the same professor who served as my informal advisor for almost two years. She read

my stories, guided me through two semesters of independent study, and provided the encouragement that kept me writing long after I graduated. Still, I couldn't contact her. I volunteered for the U.S. Army and then the Airborne, yet remained afraid to e-mail the one professor I knew best. Years later, I spent weeks in painful deliberation before finding the courage to ask her for a letter of recommendation. How does such a difference in "courage" find its way into a personal narrative without my betraying the feeling that I am an even worse imposter than I thought?

One problem for veterans—and maybe this is a deeper concern for post-9/11 veterans such as myself—is that the narratives of glory have frequently taken precedence in the cultural imagination, seizing public attention in ways that elide the true nature of war. Yes, there are service members who have risked everything in close combat with the enemy, and they are heroes—I can't call myself one of them. For me, it's embarrassing to be "thanked" for my service, but how can I fault the goodwill of others? Worse still was being asked to stand up alongside other veterans of the War on Terror, and then to experience the claps and cheers from veterans of World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. How could my sojourn in the mountains compare to what they've surely gone through? I was never shot, never wounded—my own MEDEVAC consisted of someone rerouting a helicopter so I could get some x-rays of a sprained wrist. The only delay was that a full colonel was scheduled to fly on that bird, and everyone was afraid of delaying him. But what did that matter? When they landed, the colonel came out, personally thanked me for my service, and then patted me on the back for the valorous courage of slipping on a patch of ice after dinner.

Thus, my experience of wartime feels trite when compared to Caputo's portrayal of the political insignificance of combat in Vietnam:

> Beyond adding a few more corpses to the weekly body count, none of these encounters achieved anything. . . . Still, they changed us and taught us, the men who fought in them; in those obscure skirmishes we learned the old lessons about fear, cowardice, courage, suffering, cruelty, and comradeship. Most of all, we learned about death at an age when it is common to think of oneself as immortal. (xv)

This reinforces the very real challenge of reconciling the identity of a former soldier who's been to Afghanistan against the heroic sense of "having been there" seen in movies such as *American Sniper* or *Jarhead.* Although these movies are drawn from autobiographical narratives, and although they emphasize the tragic sense of loss and detachment, they remain blockbusters because the portrayals of *action* and *combat* provide fuel for the imagination that my own experiences lack.

Yet even without the direct violence of *combat*, the experience of the *military* may overshadow the true nature of lived experience. Further in her memoir, Cammermeyer describes her own suicidal ideation and divorce—both of which become complicated by her gradual realization that she is not attracted to men, and certainly not her husband. She describes her verbally abusive husband, and how the strain of the marriage nearly leads her to drive her car into a telephone pole (172). She loses temporary custody of her children after a court-appointed psychiatrist "had determined that it was my decision to return to the academic and career world that brought this upheaval into our marriage" (184)—her husband's viciousness coupled with her own lack of financial resources leads to her to *not* contest the court's decision (186). Instead, she endures being restricted to weekend visits and phone calls with her children, and the added insult of her ex-husband hurling homophobic insults at her, getting the children to join in (183, 188). But she saw no means to challenge her ex-husband's domination over her children. "I feared that

our old friends viewed me the way he did: that I had sought the divorce, left the children without a fight, left a life of fullness and plenty for poverty and emptiness (188-89). And yet the impetus for her book, as the title and cover photo and press releases suggest, is her discharge from the military under DADT. To me, the fear of *legally* losing one's children to an abusive spouse is one of the few experiences that would be categorically worse than having decades of career dreams simply stripped away. It's an experience my own divorce attorney warned me against. "If this goes to trial," she said, "the judge will want stability for the child. One of you will have residential custody—the other will only see him every other weekend." In other words, the same custody arrangement my own parents following their divorce. As a parent, I found the potential loss inconceivable—as a child of divorce, I know it happens regularly.

And yet, as Cammermeyer notes in her Acknowledgments, the book came about because of extensive support from the attorneys who helped contest her military discharge. "Without them, there would have been no story, just another soldier who had served and lost" (vii). It's also worth noting that both Cammermeyer and Schwarzkopf were assisted by coauthors—a luxury rarely extended to those who have survived the "ordinary" traumas of contested households. To me, the most revealing story is that Cammermeyer faced a lifetime of discrimination, highlighted by her military discharge and loss of custody rights. She lost custody of her children because in that courtroom, her status as a working mother was found to be less compelling than the "stability" provided by a working father. Cultural circumstances denied her the resources to contest custody without hurting her children more—those same circumstances would have denied her the opportunity to make this narrative public. It only reaches our attention because of the openly acknowledged injustice of DADT. Here, a lifetime of domestic injustice earns a place in the public story only as Gornick's sense of texture in describing military life.

Thus, in writing about my own relationships with divorce and parenting, I hesitated about placing too much emphasis on my time in the army. As I began writing, I found that my attention naturally drifted away from the military and away from my divorce, and instead centered upon my relationship with my son. And perhaps because my own military service was so banal, I found little reason to change that focus. Unlike Schwarzkopf, Cammermeyer, or Caputo, who can each point to very specific military achievements, my single greatest accomplishment was volunteering to go Airborne, and then accumulating sufficient injuries to ensure my discharge before achieving anything of note. Following Berlant's intimate publics, I sense that my own lack of "glory" limits my capacity to engage in the communal aspect of Perreault's autography. The acceptance of new narratives within a community is constrained by prior autobiographical expressions of collective identity. In the opening of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Kurt Vonnegut illustrates how this affects military narratives and their subsequent cultural uptake. He relates a conversation with Mary, a mother who very much despises the idea that her own children might be sent to war:

> "You were just babies in the war—like the ones upstairs!" [Mary said.]
>
> I nodded that this was true. We *had* been foolish virgins in the war, right at the end of childhood.
>
> "But you're not going to write it that way, are you." This wasn't a question. It was an accusation.
>
> "I—I don't know," I said.
>
> "Well, *I* know," she said. "You'll pretend you were men instead of babies, and you'll be played in the movies by Frank Sinatra and John Wayne or some of those other glamorous,

war-loving, dirty old men. And war will look just wonderful, so we'll have a lot more of them. And they'll be fought by babies like the babies upstairs." (18, author's emphasis)

Ideally, my own story could help dispel such myths. Or I could embrace active engagement across positionalities, using my status as a white, cisgender male to follow Lorde's imperative to not only accept difference, but to actively embrace it as a strength. "For difference must not be merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic" (99). It's no secret that cultural narratives of war typically overlook issues of racism, sexism, and homophobia. Yes, we have films like *Red Tails* and *Men of Honor*, and Cammermeyer's memoir has been adapted to film, but how many popular blockbuster films feature a gay combat veteran? Or simply a female lead? As Gayle Lemmon writes, "watch a war movie, and the roughly 300,000 women who have deployed in America's post-9/11 wars are largely missing in action."

If not for my random browsing through a public library book sale, I would have never learned of Cammermeyer's memoir. And yet I can relate to her experience of living a double life. My first recorded day in the military—the day I showed up with shaggy hair and sneakers to board a bus to the airport—I thought I would "correct" the paperwork of my enlistment. I wanted to mention something that I had withheld from everyone—from my parents, from the army recruiters, and from most of my friends. When the paperwork for my security clearance asked if I had ever been suicidal, I checked the box marked "Yes."

For Cammermeyer, a similar question represented the end of her military career. As a full colonel, with twenty-six years of military experience, she watched her life evaporate after uttering four words during a security clearance interview: "I am a lesbian" (3). And for me, that sense of borrowed time—that sense of wondering how long I could make it through the military

before someone “found out” the truth about my mental health—had plagued me during the months before I shipped out. Having never donned the boots or the uniform, I already feared exposure, having no idea what it would even mean. Why did they even care whether or not I had ever been suicidal? Why was such a question even on the form? If it was important enough to ask, it had to be important enough to tell the truth. Or so I had assumed.

The staff sergeant came up to me, very imposing and professional in the starched shirt, his medals on his chest, his trimmed crewcut revealing the beginnings of silver. “I see you checked this box,” he said. I don’t know if he uttered the word suicide, or if he only gestured to that one particular question on the long page of questions, but his meaning was clear. He then told me that my revised answer would disqualify me from earning a security clearance. I would still enter the army, but not as a linguist. Unspoken was the fact that I would lose all my bonuses, and anything else the recruiters had promised. And these bonuses were not small: $15,000 cash if I completed language school, and another $50,000 in G.I. Bill that I could use for graduate school. Not to mention 63 weeks of intensive language training, all expenses paid—an invaluable experience for any young college graduate with dreams of becoming a writer.

“It’s not just that you checked the box,” he said. “It’s that you didn’t mention it during your initial security screening.”

A heaviness filled the air. I was white, I was male, and I had always done well in school—this was the first time in my life when autobiography could so clearly affect my material existence, when a simple categorization could bar my full participation in a society for which I was otherwise fully qualified. And what could I say? That I’d neglected to mention suicide previously because I was afraid they’d never admit me to military service? Or that I’d left it out because I was certain no one would ever know to check the records of all those visits to the

campus counseling center? Or that, in their earnest desperation to see me join to fill their quotas, the recruiters had not been people I could trust to share my shame?

But then, into the empty void of my heartbeat, came the unexpected.

"Would you like to answer that question again?" the staff sergeant asked.

Did I speak? Did I nod? I can't remember. I felt numb, but I somehow managed an indication of "yes."

The staff sergeant removed that sheet of paper from my packet, disposed of it, and then brought me a fresh one to fill out. I spent the next few minutes answering several questions over again, and then the staff sergeant added the revised page to the completed packet. There would be no scratch-outs, no erasure marks—on that clean sheet of paper, I would start my life in the army with a blank slate.

This should have provided the natural entrée into the work of life writing. I'm not simply a soldier who's been to war—I'm someone who's been suicidal, lied about it, and *then* gone to war. But what is the relevance of that story, really? I did my duty, but I still don't know whether it was worth it. I've never seen a terrorist insurgent, and I've never fired a weapon in combat. Instead, I've watched the double-standard of double-lives play out firsthand. I saw my roommate in language school later kicked out of the army for being gay. He was always the better linguist, and his body survived the rigors of Airborne School while mine began to deteriorate, but I was the one allowed to serve out my contract. There was another buddy, who exhibited all the signs of suicidal ideation while I remained silent: he told jokes about death, isolated himself from us, stopped caring about life. When he botched his own suicide attempt—when everyone wondered whether or not he'd been "serious" or "faking" it—I remained silent. I was the one who called his father to break the news, and I was the one who visited him in the hospital after he woke up

from the overdose. Were the cuts in his wrists deep enough to indicate a serious suicide attempt? His roommate didn't think so, but I didn't comment. Instead, I was the one assigned to help with the discharge paperwork, to ensure the army kicked him out efficiently. Later, as he joined the National Guard and continued fighting the good fight, I abandoned the war, carrying my sad bones to a few months of tending bar, and then graduate school. A year later, we talked on the phone, catching up. He sounded fine, but I couldn't ask if he was "better." And even if he'd said he was, I doubt I would have believed him.

This, for me, is where the concerns of mental illness produce another barrier to expression, particularly in composing the complex life narratives expected of a dissertation. Added to the social shame of admission is the uncertainty that recovery is possible, or even measurable. Mental illness—particularly "minor" cases—can be entirely invisible, or at least hidden. As neurosurgeon Katrina Firlik explains after extracting a woodworking nail from a man's skull: "Even if a faint cognitive deficit *could* be identified with detailed and time-consuming neuropsychological testing, would the patient really care? Would he, or anyone else, even notice the problem? Would his life as a carpenter, husband, or friend be affected? Doubtful" (8, author's emphasis). But the inability for *others* to notice—let alone comprehend—such deficits in others significantly contributes to the cultural silences surrounding mental illness. Those who can hide mental illness frequently do, just as I should have done when faced with a security clearance question about suicide. Those who suffer mental illness frequently must attach themselves to optimistic narratives of being "normal" in order to avoid the stigma—and their silence reinforces the social ignorance that perpetuates stigma. Those who would speak become further dissuaded by the lack of prior modes of expression: the unspeakable silence maintains the hermeneutic injustice. And for those who cannot escape recognition, they must

learn to perform their illness in acceptably "normal" ways. As Frank writes, "[b]eing ill requires learning to figure out, as quickly as possible, what someone else's preferred narrative of that illness is, and then fitting yourself into that narrative if you wish to gain their help or maybe to avoid their hindrance" (188-89).

This is further complicated by the fact that many types of mental illness do actually inhibit the ability to communicate. In *Brain on Fire*, Susannah Cahalan relates how her own experience with mental illness left real questions about her ability to share her story, let alone craft it into an accessible narrative. First, there is the barrier of memory, the question of recall: "Because of the nature of my illness, and its effects on my brain, I remember only flashes of actual events, and brief but vivid hallucinations from the months in which this story took place. Because I am physically incapable of remembering that time, writing this book has been an exercise in my comprehending what was lost" (ix). Second, there remains the question of capacity to convey—an issue that butts up against the fact that memoir rarely reaches all relevant audiences. After being "the 217th person ever to be diagnosed with anti-NMDA-receptor autoimmune encephalitis," Cahalan was hospitalized for months, spent years in recovery, and faced real fears about whether or not she would ever return to her job as a reporter for the *New York Post*. And yet the neurologist who first saw her—and misdiagnosed her—still hadn't heard about the disease, even after all the publicity surrounding Cahalan's own reporting of her illness and recovery. "Sure, when I talked to him, I was shocked that he knew nothing about the disease, but that wasn't the really shocking part; I realize now that my survival, my recovery—my ability to write this book—is the shocking part" (227).

Cahalan's experience is hardly unique—Firlik also describes the inherent blindness of institutional knowledge: "Neurosurgeons don't treat Alzheimer's disease because no one has

ever designed an operation for it. Consider schizophrenia. It affects 1 percent of the population, but, again: no operation for schizophrenia, so no role for neurosurgery. I can tell what I learned in medical school . . . or, better yet, what I read most recently in *The New York Times*" (16). But where Firlik's tone may feel "light" or even condescending, her words reveal the importance of autobiography in exposing these gaps in knowledge, particularly in the nebulous world of mental illness and its effects on individual lives. Extensive medical evidence documents the existence of these effects, but it's difficult to understand the implications of such "doubtful" diagnoses, especially when it comes to neurological trauma that stems from emotional rather than physical causes. The epistemic advantage of standpoint theory arises specifically because of this blindness. Countering critiques of the concept, Rolin emphasizes the "contingent" nature of this advantage, insisting that it is *not* "automatic" (218). Indeed, *no* positionality offers perfect access to knowledge, but Cahalan's experiences reinforce the importance of autography as a means to fill in the gaps identified by Firlik. For Cahalan, this has included reports of caregivers forcing doctors to test for the rare disease they'd never heard of. After his own daughter was successfully treated for anti-NMDA-receptor autoimmune encephalitis, one father credited Cahalan's article as the only reason why his daughter was tested and then treated for this disease: "I'm not kidding, if we didn't have that article to hand to the doctor, she'd be dead" (235).

Although Cahalan's illness was clearly diagnosed and treatable as an autoimmune disorder, her experiences of direct neurological injury can translate to our understanding of emotional injury. These traumas also affect memories of the past, and they influence the nature of future memories. In their study of memory recall among patients with PTSD, Rubin, Dennis, and Beckham write that "autobiographical memory in general and not just memories of the trauma are affected" (2). And these effects aren't simply "imagined." One neuroimaging study

cites four other studies with the phrase "changes in the coupling between the amygdala and medial PFC [pre-frontal cortex] may underlie emotional dysregulation symptoms in PTSD" (St. Jacques et al. 2). But to describe such changes as "damage" is socially suspect. There are some who deny that such trauma even occurs, insisting that "it's all in your head." Others—unwilling to further promote the stigma associated with mental illness—insist that there might be "differences," but to use the term "damage" could promote stereotypes. But I use the term "damage" because emotional trauma inhibits brain function by injuring the inborn capacities to bridge emotion, cognition, and memory.

This injury has been long recognized by scholars in trauma studies—trauma literally overwhelms the capacity for recollection and recitation. As LaCapra reports, "trauma, while at times related to particular events, cannot be localized in terms of a discrete, dated experience. Trauma indicates a shattering break or cesura [sic] in experience which has belated effects" (186). Dori Laub writes that "[m]assive trauma precludes its registration," and an attempt to establish "what happened" through writing "is not simply a factual given that is reproduced and replicated by the testifier, but a genuine advent, an event in its own right" (qtd. in Saunders 47). LaCapra ties "writing trauma" to performativity and artistic practice (186-87), as opposed to "writing about trauma," which focuses on "reconstructing the past as objectively as possible" (186). Through cruel optimism, these conceptions of the genres of articulating trauma can be seen as renegotiations of the social conceptions of what *counts* as trauma.

My own "traumas" don't fit the "break" Laub describes, but my memories remain uncertain. As I have struggled to articulate my "story," I have found my own efforts stymied by something I cannot overcome through theory. Although I understand the model of "damage" I've just described, it provides no new access to the memories of the summer I spent with my wife

and child in Thailand, during those months of anxiety when I did not feel any certainty that my wife would allow me to bring my child home. I can tell you that I would buy packets of peanuts at the convenience store down the street and that I would devour whole packs of Oreos because of the intense physical hunger I felt that entire summer, and I can point out that I still lost ten or fifteen pounds during those two months, but I still cannot explain how exactly I came to know such fear. What was it in my wife's expression that left me mute? How was it that I could not appeal to the kindness of her family members, who bought food and diapers during those days when my wife didn't want us to go out? Was I truly afraid of her? Or, as a white American male combat veteran, was I afraid of *seeming* to be afraid of her? I should also point out that, during these months of my life, the vortex of graduate school, parenting, and jetlag left me with weekly migraines. I spent days in bed, trying to sleep off the nausea and vertigo that came with the feeling that there'd been an ice pick stabbed through my forehead. Is it possible that, in the confusion of physical pain, I entirely misinterpreted not only the situation, but also my wife?

In my case, this is further complicated by the question of whether or not I can even identify myself as "victim." How many Americans, after all, get an all-expense-paid trip to Thailand? How many *working-class* Americans have the luxury of taking a summer off to spend time with family? And besides, there is the entirely contrary view of my wife, who apparently has no conception of what I felt, or why I would call it suffering. "How you think I would stay in Thailand?" she asked, a year later, when I informed her that I had filed for divorce. When I reminded her of what she had said, she didn't deny her words. Instead, she questioned how I heard them. "You should know I do not mean it," she said. "You should know I like it here."

Here, the concurrence of traumas complicates my attempts at narrative, illustrating the importance of Berlant's conceptions of optimism and attachment to describe trauma. For the

traumatized subject, writing *about* trauma may be impossible not only because accurate memories are inaccessible, but also due to the interplay of conflicting attachments. Berlant describes "the ordinary" as "a zone of convergence of many histories, where people manage the incoherence of lives that proceed in the face of threats to the good life they imagine" (*Cruel Optimism* 9). For LaCapra, researched historiography can produce discursive examination of the past (xii), but "a traumatic myth of origins may be foundational even for practices that present themselves as based on reason and evidence" (xiv). In this case, my attempts at autography face conflicting concerns, particularly surrounding my divorce. I perceived the divorce as traumatic—at the time I filed, I felt I was protecting my son. But in the shared attachment to our child, my ex-wife and I hold very different views about what happened.

On multiple occasions, my ex-wife said she would stay in Thailand with our son—the way I interpreted her words, I doubt I will ever have an objective view about her. For me, the collapse of that relationship and the legal contest over custody has hardened many of my views, and it's difficult to responsibly consider that past. I recognize that her words took on different meanings depending on whether I thought she was suffering postpartum depression or whether I thought she was feigning such symptoms to influence my emotions. My feelings about her changed not because the situation changed, but because outside sources changed the way I saw these events. As a corollary to Fricker's hermeneutic injustice, these outside sources provided new frameworks to understand my marriage, some of which led me to believe that I was experiencing emotional abuse—the kind of emotional abuse that I had previously been unable to name, let alone perceive.

This doesn't necessarily mean that I was abused—it simply means that this is the lens that resonated during a very difficult time, and there is the temptation now to apply *only* this lens

in describing my ex-wife. But as Phillip Lopate explains, "[t]he danger of writing about others in relation to oneself is that it is easy to fall into a self-serving model, in which (consciously or unconsciously) one is always asserting one's superiority" (*Portrait* 4). This danger becomes even more acute in a situation like this, where I as the author am theorizing my own narrative. There's the definite risk that I could compose a caricature to support an academic discussion about what life writing "should" do, especially if I adopted the position of a traumatized subject in relation to an abuser.

This would not only allow the institutional blindness described by Firlik, but also enact the biases of privilege identified by standpoint theory. Worse, I have eight years of graduate training: my own skills in research and composition could be used to convey a very convincing yet unjust portrait. With the right marketing, such a work could possibly attract significant public attention, particularly among the anti-feminist groups who eagerly adopt any narrative that casts women in a negative light. I also fear how such a narrative would reflect upon me as person, and how it could be misconstrued as a portrayal of all women, and the subsequent influence on public discourses of divorce. Never mind the fact that a sufficiently biased work would also preclude publication at a respectable press, or at the very least make an academic job search quite awkward.

Thus, even if such a portrayal accurately captured the sense of "trauma" that I felt during my divorce, such writing would directly conflict with my academic career goals, the expectations of my peers and mentors, and my parental role in providing stability for my son. Thus, my own "zone of convergence" features conflicting influences on conceptions of truth. Here, it makes sense to examine autography and cruel optimism in relation to conflicting personal realities. Discussing this, it helps to differentiate between authenticity and sincerity and their influences

upon the work of life writing. In *Sincerity and Authenticity*, Lionel Trilling refuses to define the terms outright not only because they are often used interchangeably, but also because their complex interplay makes it impossible to ever define the "actual" self performed through autobiography. But from his work, we can understand sincerity as a social virtue indicating the alignment between personal and community ideologies, "a congruence between avowal and actual feeling" (2), or "the avoidance of being false to any man through being true to one's self" (5). Authenticity, in contrast, would represent the actual lived experience that transcends language. Describing the character from a Wordsworth poem, Trilling writes "Michael says nothing; he *expresses* nothing. It is not the case with him as it is with Hamlet that he has 'that within which passeth show'. . . . We may not, then, speak of sincerity . . . [;] the word we employ . . . is 'authenticity'" (93, author's emphasis). Sincerity stems from the motivation to speak a *social* truth, while authenticity *should* emerge independently as a factor of lived experience.

Unfortunately, for those who wish to compose honest or "authentic" narratives, a sincere desire to shift social perceptions may lead to fabrications of "authentic" experience, while certain authentic experiences may undermine one's perceived sincerity, and are thus omitted. But many attribute such fabrications to base motives of delusion or deception, ignoring the fact that some narratives can only be provided as social negotiations by narrators who inhabit tenuous positionalities. As Charles Lowney argues, "[t]he ideal of authenticity begins to emerge when it is recognized that a sincere person may be self-deluded and identify himself completely with a socially manufactured self" (Lowney 34). Or as Lopate writes:

> The personal essayist must above all be a reliable narrator; we must trust his or her core of sincerity. We must also feel secure that the essayist has done a fair amount of introspective homework already, is grounded in reality, and is trying to give us the

> maximum understanding and intelligence of which he or she is capable. A dunderhead and a psychotic killer may be sincere, but that would not sufficiently recommend them for the genre. (xxvi)

Missing from Lopate's discussion here is the fact that the notion of a "dunderhead" is very much a social construct. Someone could deem Cahalan an unreliable narrator because she can't remember her own past. Or perhaps Cammermeyer's entire discussion regarding the custody of her children could be read as a "psychotic" assault upon family values. Her career and intellect were disregarded based on homophobic assumptions regarding military fitness—these same assumptions remain a fixture of America's present social divisions.

In composing life narratives, writers must interrogate how the "true" events of the past remain discursive in relation to converging attachments to the present and future, as LaCapra indicates. Berlant's intimate publics arise from the fact that individuals are forced to choose between affective social alignments. As a result, the "truth" of any life narrative is inherently tenuous, as alignments with certain sincere social attachments may force the elision of the so-called "authentic" past as understood from other positionalities. In military writing, Tim O'Brien's differentiation between "story-truth" and "happening-truth" articulates this distinction between historical fidelity and social relevance. When faced with someone who doesn't appreciate or understand a "true war story," the fictionalized character of O'Brien in *The Things They Carried* explains that "[a]ll you can do is tell it one more time, patiently, adding and subtracting, making up a few things to get at the real truth" (91), shaping the story until those uninitiated to the realities of war can be invited to view the reality of how war seems (78). Details, for O'Brien, matter less than the overall honesty, a sincerity to the cause of conveying an accurate sense of war that might be otherwise lost in the details. But his notion that "story-truth

is truer sometimes than happening-truth" (203) points to the inherent problems of autobiography identified by Berlant. As she explains, "the genre of the 'life' is a most destructive conventionalized form of normativity: when norms feel like laws, they constitute a social pedagogy of the rules for belonging and intelligibility whose narrowness threatens people's capacity to invent ways to attach to the world" ("Life Writing" 182).

Overreliance on expressions of *truth that seems* can reinforce biased and damaging social narratives. Already, my writing is constrained by positionalities of privilege that leave me unaware of the deeper suffering that others often face. Was my divorce terrible? Yes. Was it as bad as the divorce I thought I experienced? Probably not.

In composing life narratives, Gornick finds articulations of truth less important than the trust that the narrator is at least aware of these conflicting influences upon the self and, by extension, the writing. "When writers remain ignorant of who they are at the moment of writing—that is, when they are pulled around in the essay by motives they can neither accurately identify nor struggle to resolve—the work, more often than not, will prove either false or severely limited" (30). Yet such self-awareness cannot be simple for those who face a "convergence of many histories," or for individuals who may be driven by optimistic dreams that would be jeopardized if the narrative contradicts the expectations of necessary social relations.

Against this backdrop, the social rigidity of genres may create further problems. Berlant's concerns become more pressing because the perceived "honesty" of autobiographical expressions depends upon socially constructed markers of narrative consistency. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson draw from Hua Hsu's "metrics of authenticity" to describe the success of firsthand testimony in terms of adherence to internal conventions of narrative (593-945). "The narrative of an event or conditions of duress *evolves* into a kind of 'official' story employing a

recognizable template accepted within local, national, or international communities as credible and retroactively binding" (595, my emphasis). For the traumatized subject, such templates may undermine authentic interrogation of trauma's complex effects by encouraging expressions that perform social sincerity through adherence to genre expectations. As LaCapra explains, critical and artistic negotiations of trauma "may also involve the feeling of keeping faith with trauma in a manner that leads to compulsive preoccupation with aporia, an endlessly melancholic, impossible mourning, and a resistance to working through" (23).

Such genre-based performances of sincerity can be conflated with "honesty," further marginalizing tentative voices that might challenge hegemonic narratives. Lopate's conception of honesty betrays such a bias: "the personal essayist often admits that few of us can remain honest for long, since humans are incorrigibly self-deceiving, rationalizing animals. Ironically, it is this skepticism that uniquely equips the personal essayist for the difficult climb into honesty" (xxv). Although Lopate's point here is intended to address and overcome the self-serving biases that may creep into autobiographical writing, the presumption of self-deception can undermine the authority of writers like Cahalan who genuinely lack the memory of past events. The absence of memory can be misconstrued as an absence of candor. And in my own work, I found an almost overwhelming need to hide what I see as the most traumatic elements of my marriage. Overcoming such shame could serve as a key purpose of autography—the open questioning of my own experiences could allow a reevaluation of just what it means to be a scholar and writer. But there remains the danger of too much honesty. For survivors of trauma, the core paradox of life writing lies in the fact that sharing an experience with too much accuracy can disqualify the speaker's right to speak in the eyes of some audiences, particularly if the presence of trauma is also read as a cause or symptom of mental illness.

Viewing autobiography through the intimate publics reveals how the genre conventions of "well-written" life narratives can also be used to reinforce such suppression on the grounds of genre. Any narrator who articulates "unacceptable" experiences can be arbitrarily discredited—the work could be described as "not grounded in reality," or minor faults in the use of "standard" language could be used to question the "understanding and intelligence" of the speaker. Smith and Watson describe how an "ethic of verification" follows such tactics to suppress firsthand accounts of human rights violations:

> These challengers can and do allege that witness narratives are *self-interested*, *self-deluded*, and/or *manipulated* by activists. They raise suspicions about the *reliability* of the story and the *authenticity* of the teller to discredit testimonial acts, deflect attention away from questions of perpetrator culpability, repulse international censure, counter media images, and effectively justify inaction. (599, my emphasis)

This is particularly dangerous when applied to individuals who have medically documented mental illness, such as myself. Anyone who questions my narrative could also point to my treatment for depression as evidence of my unreliability. By sharing a "personal" narrative, the individual speaker is implicitly shaping how the community perceives itself, and, subsequently, how members who wish to assert community membership are able to assert their own life narratives. But the capacity to withhold detrimental personal narratives is a crucial component of establishing and maintaining the public positionality—such as the perception that I am a good person, a good student, and a good scholar. I must perform the acts of someone who is professionally engaged in cogent discourse—a performance that could be questioned if someone decides that my own struggles with mental illness have overcome my capacity to intelligently reflect on my experiences.

As a writer and a student, I frequently find myself crippled by these conflicting senses of academic expectation. I must write a work that is compelling enough to pass a committee and eventually be published, but I also fear the consequences of sharing too much. This is a particular problem because the "traumas" I address in my writing are not *past*. My recent divorce and my relationship with my son don't match my prior optimistic conceptions of marriage and family, but these current attachments are now my "ordinary" reality, as Berlant would describe: not at all ideal, possibly detrimental to my health and well-being, but I'm not about to jeopardize my attachment to my son. Unless, of course, writing this situation might draw sufficient critical attention to get this story published, draw a modicum of fame, and lead to an academic position that provides the income and health insurance to better assure my child's future. In a real sense, I have commodified my experiences, trading the security of a hidden life for the optimistic promise of "success" as a writer and scholar.

By any conventional measure of written genres, this should render my autobiographical works highly suspect. As I articulate a notion of "military autography," a reader may well question if I value the "authentic" description of military service over the sincere concern for my son's financial future, and then wonder whether my personal desire to sell books might outweigh Lopate's conception of "honesty." But I'm also tied to the fact that my case of clinical depression seems unlikely to ever truly fade. I have felt condemned to years of antidepressants, even as the pills only stave off the feelings of empty helplessness. For me, this feeling runs deeper than war, and is perhaps more dangerous. My admission of past suicidal ideation significantly hurt my recent case for custody—my lawyer advised that I settle my divorce out of court rather than risk a judge's disapproval. And how could I argue? The needs of the child must come first—how could I, a loving parent, entrust the sole care of my child to myself, a man

who's once been involuntarily admitted? But how could I, as someone who is already depressed, continue to function without seeing my son?

And so, as I wrote, the words came in fits and starts. Gradually, the writing settled upon this relationship with my son. Through short vignettes, I began to inscribe and reinscribe the ways in which past experiences have shaped my present "optimism" as a parent. As I wrote, the awareness of mental illness became impossible to ignore. The divorce, my upbringing, my military service—these past events have certainly "damaged" me in different ways, but documenting a single past history proved impossible. Instead, the work of articulating the convergence of present histories became illuminating. I cannot honestly share the story of my relationship with my son without admitting the profound effects of mental illness on my actions and outlook. I cannot share my parenting without also admitting the one thing that could allow my ex-wife to bring us back before a judge to litigate my child's home.

CHAPTER II: WRITING PAIN

In the Airborne

People have trouble believing I was ever in the army. I don't fit the type, apparently. I'm too soft-spoken. Or maybe I smile more than I should. Or maybe I'm just too injured. Sometimes I limp. On the days when everything hurts, I barely bend my knees as I lumber out to the car. There's nothing wrong with my knees—I just have trouble moving, on the days when everything hurts. I think it's more psychological than physical. If my neck aches from too many hours of sitting, and my wrist burns from too many hours of typing, then my knees lock up in sympathy. My ankle, always intransigent, gets ignored.

Clearly, I don't play sports. I don't run anymore, or jog. I bought an exercise bike—it collects dust. People can't picture me in body armor, with my carbine, ready to kill things. Just the same, I enlisted. Later, I volunteered for the Airborne. I've stepped out of a C-130 while in flight, tucked my chin to my chest, and called my count to four as the static line pulled open my chute. People sometimes think it was brave, to go Airborne. So I joke and tell them I'm afraid of heights. Except I'm not joking. On my first jump, I blacked out. I didn't even make it to the door. I was number three in that chalk—I was the third paratrooper back from the door. And so I watched as the first jumper stepped out. Then we all stepped forward. The jumper ahead of me handed off his static line, turned, and stepped out the door. Then we all stepped forward. Except there was no we. I stepped forward, handed off my static line, and turned.

My last conscious memory of that jump was hearing the rush of blue beyond the doorway. The sight of that sky silenced all thought. I remember the pale sunshine, and I remember the spinning whir of the turboprops, but that's it. I have no recall of stepping out the

door, no recall of falling, nothing. I blacked out. Four seconds later, the open canopy of the parachute yanked me awake.

Later, I reached the ground. I landed hard. In the Airborne, all landings are hard. Dazed, I unclipped my harness, got up, and pulled in my chute. It took long, painful minutes to get my parachute tucked away in the stuff sack. I'd hurt my neck the week before, and my left arm had been going numb ever since. After that landing, I could barely feel my fingers. They looked normal, but felt swollen. Still, I continued the mission. Helmet cinched down, boots laced tight, I kept going.

Until the jumper number four ran up. He was laughing. "Dude!" he said. "Jumpmaster had to kick you out the fucking *plane*, man!"

People can't imagine me serving in the army because I seem too shy to kill. But the army, I tell them, isn't really about killing. Sure, that's what you train for, but that's not what you do. What you *do* is training. And sitting. And waiting. Punctuated by more training.

For me, pain is the waking memory of that training. On the bad mornings, when my neck feels as though someone has once again planted an ice pick into the soft tissue between my vertebrae and left shoulder, I can trace the pain to that first fall in Airborne School. Afraid of heights, I hopped off a platform when I should have stepped. It was the swing landing trainer—a platform, a harness, and a thick rope looped through a pulley. The purpose of the swing landing trainer is to teach a paratrooper how to fall and how to land. Army parachutes are not kind, and they are not large. If everything goes right, a paratrooper can still hit the ground hard enough to snap a femur. And so the trainer: we were taught to land with feet and knees together. We were taught to take hold of the harness risers, tugging and pulling to orient our bodies to hit the ground

and roll. If you hit the ground with feet planted, the full weight of your body and gear will break one leg or the other.

But we were lucky. For every stage of training, a sergeant airborne was there to provide guidance and direction. They were like drill sergeants, except that they jumped from airplanes. One of them bragged about the time he broke his hip on a jump. Apparently, there'd been high winds that day, and his parachute had carried him over to a concrete runway, where he hit the ground hard, and was then dragged into the wall of a building. But he recovered, and returned to Airborne duty. It was, after all, just a broken hip.

The swing landing trainer was designed to prevent that. I was supposed to swing from the harness, eyes on the horizon, and then roll when dropped from several feet up. In those seconds of swaying, I hung from the ceiling. The full weight of my body went through two straps, a pulley, and a rope. The rope was controlled by the sergeant airborne below. Watchful, attentive, he wrapped the full weight of me around his midriff with a heavy coil of nylon.

I should have leaned forward from the platform as he took up the slack of the rope, and I should have slipped forward into a gentle glide. But I am afraid of heights. I hopped when I should have stepped. And he dropped me.

I fell horizontally from several feet up, hitting my shoulder hard. My head, weighted with the four-pound Kevlar helmet, snapped against the ground. Gravel padded the landing, but nothing padded my spine. Something somewhere popped. I felt a shiv of pain. Like someone stabbed me in the neck with an ice pick.

The sergeant airborne was pissed that I didn't move. "Get up, Airborne!" he screamed. "On your feet, Airborne!"

I got up. I was disoriented. But I climbed the steps back up to the platform. I did it again. And again. And again. Until the sergeant airborne was convinced that I could step from a platform, fall from the air, and land with my feet and knees locked together. I forget how many times I had to swing before he was satisfied. Twenty times? Twenty-five? I am afraid of heights, and it took a long, long time before I could convince my feet and knees to stay together as I fell.

After five or ten minutes, my left arm went numb. And stayed numb. Later, it began to ache. As if the bones were cracking. From the inside.

But this was Airborne School. I couldn't go to sick call. Not for pain.

Friends are surprised that I was ever in the army. They are even more surprised to learn I was in for five years, and that I was a paratrooper. "I could never do that," many tell me. "I'm just not cut out for it."

But I know better. They'd be fine. The army, I tell them, isn't about killing, or about pain, or about following orders. It isn't even about motivation, really. It's just about how long you can keep going. And this, I think, was the main lesson of Airborne School. Unlike Basic Training, you're allowed to quit Airborne School. It's encouraged, in fact. The sergeants airborne, like drill sergeants, will walk through the predawn ranks, making sure everyone is still moving, still straining through the reps of pushups. Unlike drill sergeants, though, they offer you a way out. "Go on, Airborne!" they'll call. "Quit! Just quit! I've got a box of donuts in the truck if you quit!"

Sure, you know there are no donuts, but it's hard to focus on logic after you are no longer able to lift your arms, or lift your legs, or lift your body. And this is done on purpose. Unlike the drill sergeants in Basic Training, the sergeants airborne do try to actually break you. They want

to make sure you won't sprain an ankle, or get a stress fracture, or die of pneumonia. So when they call the morning cadences, they call until no one can move. Thirty pushups, thirty crunches. Thirty pushups, thirty crunches. Fifty pushups, fifty crunches. A hundred. A thousand. It doesn't matter. They just keep going until you no longer can. It's called muscle failure when your limbs are biologically incapable of completing another repetition of the same exercise you've been doing for the past hour. If you are weak enough, tired enough, or injured enough to lie down on the ground and quit, they won't let you jump from an aircraft in flight. They won't strap you to a parachute. It isn't worth the risk. And so they call out more pushups. More situps. A few more miles of running. And then more miles. You run until you cannot hide your sprains, you push until you cannot hide the spasm in your back, and then they wait for you to quit.

Unless, of course, you don't. If you're strong enough to keep up, or if you're tough enough to just keep trying, they'll let you jump. Five jumps, and they'll pin a pair of wings to your chest. For me, it was the closest I've ever come to being a real badass. Even if, by the end of it, I could barely lift my arm, or turn my head.

For many years, I thought this "never quit" mentality was the only way to live. And this isn't always wrong. I used to be suicidal—sometimes, the urge to never quit was the only thing that got me out of bed in the morning. Late and unprepared, I'd stumble my way to class, waiting for the day a professor would ask me to leave school forever. No one ever did, but still I feared it. Sometimes, I hoped someone would say the right combination of words to push me to the point of ending my own life. I wondered if death would be all the mercy I hoped it would be. But I never quit. I had thoughts of walking in front of a bus, but I couldn't quit school.

In some ways, this makes me "tough." Through the pain and aura of a migraine, I'll stand under fluorescent lights to teach my English 101 students. As long as I'm not vomiting, I'll stand through almost anything. I even schedule surgeries around my classes. I got my wisdom teeth pulled over spring break my sophomore year, and then stayed in the dorms to recover. For ankle surgery, I spaced out the doses of Percocet so I could sleep, watch Netflix, sleep, and then crutch my way across wet cobblestones to teach my morning class. One day last semester, I drove to school with two-inch-long plastic stents shoved up my nose. I'd already missed my one day for sinus surgery—I wasn't going to miss another.

There are drawbacks, though. After the sinus surgery, I had blood trickling from my nose through the whole three hours of teaching. I had to dab and dab and dab. I went through two paper towels just to keep my upper lip from turning red with gore. And it had been three days since I'd taken any real pain medication. The "good" meds made me vomit, and popping Tylenol is a bit like taking a lollipop for a migraine. Advil, however, was absolutely off-limits. It thins the blood and slows healing. A dripping nose could have become a catastrophe. And so I held my head high. It was the only way to keep the the plastic tubes from stabbing me inside the face.

One student tried poking fun. He noted the faint trickle of blood just at the edge of my right nostril. He laughed. He said he couldn't focus on class, given the distraction of that trickle of blood from his teacher's nose.

This student had a habit of such comments. It wasn't the first insulting thing he'd ever said, and it wouldn't be the last. But I took it in stride. I mentioned that it's generally not wise to comment on an army veteran's appearance. "You don't have to worry about *me*," I told him, "but I'm not every veteran."

Yes—I walked a fine verbal line. This student laughed—as I knew he would. He thought I was engaging his sense of humor. But the other students seemed nervous. Did I just threaten their classmate? Did I turn on the menace? Maybe.

In retrospect, I should have found a sub. I should have found someone healthy and happy to teach my students that day. Or at least someone who wasn't dripping blood. But I was awake. I was lucid. And I wasn't throwing up.

Once upon a time, I thought the army would help me become a "real" man. The army, I decided, would teach me the assertiveness I've been lacking. It would build me up, physically and mentally. And so I worked at it. I trained hard. I marched, I ran, I climbed walls. I stabbed car tires with a bayonet. I jabbed a guy with an IV, taking three tries to find a vein, and then held out my own arm for his turn. Once I even choked a man until he passed out. Afterward, I waited for him to shudder awake. Then I tried to relax as he looped his own hands under my collar, planting his thumbs against my throat. I don't remember passing out, but I do remember waking up.

I tried hard—so hard—to be that man I thought I would be. I've run when I shouldn't, faked the pushups I couldn't. But here I am, ten years later—a graduate student, a father, someone so shy that people forget I ever shipped out for Basic, let alone served in the Airborne.

Sometimes, I wonder whether the army changed me at all. My voice is the same—soft, almost inaudible. My own child asks me to repeat everything. He honestly cannot hear my words within the quiet confines of our own apartment.

But sometimes, there is something else that bubbles up. I felt it when my parents took me to buy a suit last Christmas. They have long worried that I lack fashion sense, that I don't care enough about how I look. They wanted to know that when I went for a campus interview, I'd

look good enough to land a tenure-track position. And yet, they were surprised by how big I am now. The last time my stepfather helped fit me for a suit was that rented tux for senior prom—and that time, he commented on my scrawny neck.

I've since put on twenty years. I didn't fit the waistline for the pants he picked out, and so my stepfather called me fatty. And he laughed, maybe thinking it's funny, maybe thinking we can now bond over the shared injustice of age. We are both aging, it's true, but I've almost caught up to him. Yes, he was still recovering from knee surgery, but it's been ten years since I could walk without pain.

Still, he called me fatty, for my extra thirty pounds. And sure, I knew he didn't "mean" it. And how bad can a single comment be, if it's every twenty years? I'm a "man," aren't I? What's a jibe over a tux compared to the shame imposed on many women, who are regularly provided impossible images of "thinness"? How can I compare my stepfather's comments to the lifetime of comments that, for some women, will echo through the mind every time they look in the mirror? Besides, how could I complain about the mere cut of a word? My parents were dropping $900 on a new suit and sportcoat and pants and shirts. They were spending money that I didn't have.

Just the same, I wanted to turn, look my stepfather in the eye, and remind him that I've been to Afghanistan. I wanted to don those thirty-four pounds of body armor, clip on the eight extra pounds of ammunition, and ask him to tell me what exactly he means by the term "fatty."

But I can't, and I don't. Instead, I walk myself to class each day. When I can't hide the limp, I explain it away. "I'm just so tall and awkward," I tell people, when they notice me favoring my right ankle. For close friends, I'll admit the truth: "It's better now than it was before the surgery."

But then, I've had practice with this game of pain. Broken wrist? Held together with a titanium plate? Same story:

"Don't worry—they pinned the bones together. It'll heal in a few weeks."

"But don't you drive a stick shift?"

"Yep. I can drive it left-handed."

"Is that even safe?"

"It's not bad. I only let go of the wheel every time I shift gears." And, as an added bonus, the pain kept me awake while I drove. For five straight hours. My wrist in a sling, with a floating shard of bone.

That, I used to think, was the real marker of a man: to be unbreakable. Or at least unstoppable. Even broken, I kept going. Broken to the point of stupid, I kept going.

But that's physical pain. That's the pain people can see and accept. I'm a veteran—people assume I'm in pain, as if service in Afghanistan means I must have been shot or wounded or scarred. Except that, for me, most of Afghanistan was a vacation. It was relaxing. During the hours we sat, I typed my stories. During the hours we drove through the mountains, I perched up top in the turret, basking in the rugged glories of riding a humvee through the sun and sky at 7,000 feet. Armed with guns and bullets and Kevlar and fleece jackets and leather gloves and boxes upon boxes of Meals Ready to Eat, we were tough. *I* was tough. Sometimes, I luxuriated in the feeling of this toughness. I enjoyed the thirty-four pounds of body armor, appreciated the extra eight pounds of ammunition tucked into my chest harness. And did I mention the carbine? It was a beautiful weapon. It was more than peace of mind—it was death, the cartridge already chambered.

With every step, with every bootprint, I felt like a man. Except I could barely turn my head, and sometimes my arms went numb.

Sometimes, though, I wonder—what is pain, really? For man, anyway? My squad leader in Afghanistan was five-foot-two, barely a hundred and ten pounds. I know her weight because it was a regular point of interest every time our unit geared up for an Airborne jump. See, the parachutes are governed by unassailable laws of physics. You step out from the aircraft, and you begin to fall downward as the aircraft continues forward. In videos taken from outside the door, we looked a bit like potatoes just tumbling in the wind.

In the Airborne, the aircraft fly in low—typically 1,000 feet off the ground, give or take. As we exited the bird, we each counted off to four seconds: "one-thousand, two-thousand, three-thousand, four-thousand."

We drilled in this count. At any time during our three weeks of Airborne school, a sergeant airborne could call out a simple command: "Jumpers! Hit it!" And right then, whatever we were in the middle of doing, we each took a step forward and curled into shrimps. We tucked our chins to our chests, we cradled the air before our bellies, and we counted: "one-thousand, two-thousand, three-thousand, four-thousand."

By the time I first stepped from an aircraft, the motion was automatic. I don't remember stepping out from the bird, but I awoke to the sounds of my own voice counting: "four-thousand." I was curled into a shrimp. Chin tucked to chest, I cradled the reserve parachute clipped over my stomach.

During the four-second count, a fifteen-foot static line pulled open the parachute. Sometime between three-thousand and four-thousand, the big green canopy popped open. It snapped my body upward, arrested my fall, and woke me up.

The static line had two ends. One was connected to my parachute—the other was clipped to a braided steel cable inside the aircraft. The cable ran the length of the cabin, from the cockpit to the rear door. I handed off one end of the static line to the jumpmaster, who pulled it further back along the steel cable, keeping the line away from my arms or my neck. As I exited the door, I entered free-fall, but the aircraft continued forward at 150 miles per hour.

Thus, the count. It took maybe one second for the static line to stretch the full fifteen feet, perhaps two more seconds for the parachute canopy to fully open. By the time I reached four thousand, I was floating.

This was when timing mattered. If the main parachute didn't open by the time I reached four-thousand, I needed to immediately open the reserve parachute by pulling the metal loop cradled in my right hand. If I pulled it immediately, the reserve chute would also need approximately two seconds to open. Five thousand, six thousand.

If neither parachute opened, I would have hit the ground at eight-thousand.

For my squad leader, however, this was slightly different. She didn't weigh enough for a normal Airborne jump. This is because Airborne parachutes are surprisingly delicate. They need to open at precisely the right moment—no sooner, and no later. Parachute riggers are military personnel who have been specifically trained in the art of folding parachutes to open at the right time. They carefully affix the static line to the top of the chute, and then systematically fold it into a switchback held together with rubber bands.

To pull open an Airborne parachute while exiting the aircraft, a human being must weigh at least 150 pounds. For my squad leader, this meant carrying extra weight for each jump. She would pack her rucksack with approximately thirty or forty pounds of gear, depending on how she felt that day, and then clip it to her harness under the parachute. The alternative, of course, would be having her parachute not open.

Sometimes, jumpmasters would relate the story of a young female paratrooper who didn't weigh enough on her particular jump. Instead of falling to the ground, she was dragged through the air at 150 miles an hour for several minutes. Her parachute, designed for the weight of an American male, simply didn't open. All around her, the static lines from thirty-one other jumpers whipped around in the thrust from the turboprops.

That girl died. But my squad leader—five-two, 110 pounds—she never missed an Airborne jump. And it's not like she had it easy. He body hurt, too. She once took enough ibuprofen to tear up her stomach to the point of spitting blood. And sometimes, she just didn't pack the extra weight. Sometimes she jumped with parachutes alone. And on those days, she would float the sky for a minute or two, just drifting along while everyone else reached the ground, recovered, and began the slow work of pulling in their chutes. It was a risk, sure, but sometimes it just hurts too much to carry extra weight.

But, as far as I know, she never missed an Airborne jump.

During my last couple years in the army, I hated pain. I hated the way it made me weak. I hated that I could no longer lift and haul and run. I hated that it made me quit when I should have endured.

During my medical discharge, one physician wrote that I was no longer allowed to carry body armor, wear a helmet, fire a weapon, or do pushups. It was betrayal, the way my body failed while so many other soldiers just kept going.

But I never regretted pain—not until after my son was born. It was a slow regret that began in stages. When he was small—so small—I could nestle his head in the crook of my elbow and hold him close as he curled around my ribs for warmth. Back then, I could sit on my futon, and he would sleep. I could carry him the short distance from the couch to the changing table. I could hold his little feet in my hands to raise his bottom to change a diaper.

But then he grew. At first, I could not carry the diaper bag for long walks, because it was too heavy. In time, I could not carry my son out to the car. It hurt to lift his stroller into the trunk. On the days he fought the car seat, I could not hoist him in.

But then he grew more. He started with his trains, and his Legos. Now he asks me to sit with him on the floor. He doesn't know I cannot bend my right ankle the way he bends his. He has no idea what it does to my neck, when I sit stooped for those hours that he would like to play. When I lose sensation in my palms and drop my keys, he wants to know why it's taking so long to unlock the front door. Again.

"Daddy," he wants to know, "why you drop your keys?"

What should I tell him? That I wanted to be a real man, and failed? No—that doesn't seem right, even though it is true. I believed I would make myself strong and assertive and unbreakable. People would look up to me, I decided. People would admire me. Except that I fell short. I fell hard. I got back up and did it again. And again. And again. Until, after a certain point, even the army doctors agreed it was no longer worth the pain to be a man.

"Sometimes my hands go numb," I tell him. "Sometimes I can't feel my fingers."

"But why, Daddy?"

"Because when I was in the army, I got hurt."

Sometimes, this satisfies him. Other times, he echoes back these stories, telling me about the times that he, too, was in the army.

"Daddy, when I was in the army, I eat off the floor."

"Did you now?"

"And I drop my keys."

"Well, that's not good."

"Why it's not good, Daddy?"

"Because if you join the army," I tell him, "I hope you'll be smarter than I was."

"But why, Daddy? Why?"

Because, I want to tell him, *I chose this pain. I chose the life that hurt this way. The way you will choose it, too. For how can I raise you otherwise?*

Migraines

They started with the flashers—what doctors call an aura. But I didn't know it was called an aura—I only knew it flashed with sparkly rainbow colors. Like if you took the rainbow mane from a unicorn and then ran it through a high-gain UHF transmitter. It was rainbow purple static, dancing in circles around my vision. Later, I went blind in some part of my vision. I might lose the top-left quadrant, or a pie-wedge from the right. Things disappeared. It wasn't my eyes, though—I knew that much. Because it was the exact same blind spot in both eyes, the same purple wedge of emptiness. I remember them from school, mostly, from those times when a migraine hit while I was in class. The rainbow waves set in, and then the headache started, and

soon after I made my way to the bathroom. I don't remember ever asking to be excused, and I don't remember the walk to the bathroom, I just remember that there were times I squatted alone on floor in front the toilet in the boys room. The odors of stale pee and maybe disinfectant seeped through me, but I couldn't move because I could feel it inside me, the vomit, the insides of my stomach just waiting for that explosive hurl.

I'd hold it in as long as I could. Hours, it felt like. But I'd only be there for ten minutes, tops. Probably more like three. By the time I got myself to the bathroom, D-Day was rolling up onto the shores of my gut, ready to disgorge. I'd rock back on the balls of my feet, never wanting to touch the floor or the toilet or anything. I'd take off my glasses and place them in my pocket, or on the counter. I was always afraid they'd fall off into the toilet, buried in my own vomit. And so I'd take them off. And then I'd continue the fight against my insides, straining to hold it all in. But then they came—the heaves. Shoving at my stomach, at my throat. I'd hold it, and hold it, and hold it in as long as I could. Because when it came, it came hard: hot, liquid, with chunks of corn flakes or eggs or whatever else lay undigested from breakfast. Hurled out my throat, up into my sinuses, plugging my ears. Three, four, five heaves of puke, and then dry heaves, and then tears until even my eyes felt as if they were bleeding. And heaves until it felt like the walls of my stomach were squeezing hard together, squeezing out every last drop of bile, and squeezing still more until it felt like my stomach was turning inside out.

After it was done, I'd get up. I'd find some tissue. Or paper towels. There'd be lines of snot hanging from my nose. Once, in Germany, I had a migraine so bad that I was blowing scrambled eggs and bits of sausage out of my nose. Sometimes, the chunks were so big they wouldn't come out, and then I'd have to snort them back in, going back and forth with snorting

and blowing until finally I could cough them out into the toilet. Because I'd still be there over the toilet, still mopping that stuff off my face so I could deposit the slick goo into the mess below.

Eventually, I'd put my glasses back on. I'd get up, go to the sink, and swish my mouth out. I'd gargle, trying to get the taste out of the back of my throat, but there is no getting rid of that taste. Not when you can't drink. And I couldn't drink. Because any water I swallowed came right back up. Water, aspirin, anything—it came right back up.

On the plus side, vomiting meant the headache would fade. And then I could go on with my day. Sorta.

In a way, I was lucky. My migraines followed a predictable course. There was the electric rainbow aura, and then the headache, and then the nausea. I had time to reach the toilet. I puked, and the headache would go away. It could take a few hours, but the headache would go away. As long as I puked, the headache would go away.

I have read that some women describe migraines as more painful than childbirth. I have heard migraines described as more painful than broken bones. But I'm not sure how to even compare these pains. Granted, I will never be pregnant, but I have broken bones. In the seventh grade, I broke my arm up high on the humerus, maybe an inch or two down from the shoulder. It was a clean break, all the way through. I was playing touch football in the schoolyard when I tried blocking one of my classmates. I weighed ninety pounds, and he weighed one-eighty. He didn't try to knock me down—he just twisted his body from side-to-side, and I caught his elbow at just the wrong angle. I went down on the concrete of the playground, landing on my elbow. There was a pop, and the world went purple.

This is what happens when I break bones—the world goes purple. I go faint. I've fractured both wrists—each time, I walked a good long ways to find my friends, and then I almost passed out.

With the broken arm, it was different. The world closed in from the edges, going black. I remember that there were two girls who came and half carried me inside to the office. They must have been teachers or eighth graders, but I have no idea. I only remember that they were bigger than me, and that they were hall monitors. Which means pretty much nothing. My feet moved along the playground, arms held me upright from either side, and the empty purple darkness closed in around the edges.

In the office, they had me lie down on a wooden bench in the waiting room. The vice principal made sure I had ice and that I was comfortable and that someone cushioned my head. She seemed flustered. So I reassured her that my parents wouldn't sue the school. "Oh, we aren't worried about that!" she said, though I'm sure she did. She must have. I was twelve, and this was the nineties. But even then, I knew my mom would never sue the school over a broken bone on the playground. And she never did. The topic never even came up.

I bring up the broken arm because it helps with gradations of pain. Until the seventh grade, I'd been proud that I'd never broken a bone. And then I was lying down on the wooden bench in the office. It was a short, short bench built into the wall—hardly big enough for me. I'm sure I had my knees tucked up. And I couldn't move. Literally—my arm was pinned to the fabric of the universe, and the slightest wiggle would pin me down.

As long as I was still, though, I could breathe. I stared at the ceiling. The purple darkness had gone, replaced with the urge to close my eyes and sleep. But I didn't. Instead, I turned in my

raffle tickets. The vice principal couldn't understand the weirdness emerging from my mouth about the raffle, but I had my raffle tickets in the top pocket of my backpack, and I had seventy-six dollars worth to turn in. So I tried edging them out of my bag with my left hand until someone figured out what I was doing, and then they told me it was okay, not to worry about it. But I kept on about those raffle tickets until someone got them out and realized that yes, indeed, I was turning in raffle tickets.

In college, I had a fraternity brother who got migraines. His family was Iranian, but he'd grown up in New Jersey. And one day we were all in the common room talking, and he explained how he got migraines so bad, that he had to take Imitrex. And I just kind of stared at him, having no clue what to say. I'd grown up with migraines. I still got them a few times in college, though not that often. But to see someone who got migraines so bad that he needed medication—I stood in awe. That was a degree of suffering I couldn't fathom.

I'd never been to a doctor for migraines. My mom always treated my migraines at home with Coca-Cola and aspirin. She also had migraines growing up, and she explained that the caffeine in the Coke was a vasodilator. The aspirin worked as an anti-inflammatory. Theoretically, the Coke and the aspirin together were the best treatment for the pain of a migraine. Both splashed in the toilet when I puked.

I hated it. But I couldn't help it. I crouched over the toilet, waiting for it. Breakfast, lunch, and everything. A septic freight train bursting out through my face.

Empty inside, I stared down into the porcelain. Whorled filaments of congealed cola floated there, inches from my nose. Still, I held my head over the water. Lines of mucus hung from my nostrils. I couldn't let them drip to the floor.

I blew my nose into the toilet. Then the smell hit me, and I puked some more.

I do not call in sick for migraines. Nowadays, I don't even go to bed. Instead, I take my sumatriptan—the generic name for Imitrex—and then wash that down with a glass of water and four tablets of ibuprofen. Thanks to the sumatriptan, I don't vomit. Instead, the ibuprofen remains in my stomach, and the pain does abate. Still feels like getting stabbed through the skull with a knitting needle, but it's gentler than the ice pick. And the blindness does go away. Takes about twenty or thirty minutes for the flashing to stop and the pain to begin, but that's a problem only if I need to drive somewhere. As long as I'm not puking or driving, I call it good.

Sometimes, I teach class during a migraine. This is hard, because bright lights still make my stomach churn, and I don't like teaching in darkness. So I walk into class, I squint against the lights that I leave on, and tell my students that I have a migraine. Usually, they insist that I should cancel class. "Just so you feel better!" They laugh and I pretend to laugh. They know and I know that they'd just like an excuse for a canceled class.

"But I don't cancel class for migraines," I tell them. "I'd miss too much." Which is a lie—I've only twice had to teach through a migraine.

"But," I warn my students, "if I start slurring words, or if I forget what we're talking about, don't be alarmed—it's not a stroke, just the migraine."

Teaching with a migraine is one thing. Picking up a four-year-old from daycare, though—that sucks. Especially when he roams the grocery store in search of chicken. The bright lights and chicken smells bring the repressed nausea right back to the *now*.

In the car, Gawyn asks why I can't lift him up.

“I have a real bad headache,” I tell him.

“How bad, Daddy?”

“It’s a migraine.”

He considers this. “I don’t like migraines,” he said.

“Just be glad you’ve never had one.”

“But I get them, too, Daddy!” He then pauses for effect. “When I was in the army, I get migraines.”

If my head weren’t floating in pain, I’d laugh. He echoes my stories with such sincere conviction. I tell myself that he doesn’t yet know the difference between imagination and reality, but I also fear that he will grow up to be an accomplished liar, probably even better at making shit up than I am.

But driving my Kia while drowning in migraine, there’s no room for laughter. “Let’s hope you never get them,” I tell him. But I figure it’s likely he will. My mom gets them, my dad gets them, my grandmother gets them. If there’s a dominant gene for icepick to the forehead, my child has a fifty-fifty chance of hating life. And right then, the thought of walking around the grocery store with my toddler really makes me want to throw up.

“You still want chicken?” I ask him.

“Yes, Daddy.”

“Okay,” I say, “but we’re gonna have to take the long way.” Turning onto the four-lane county road at evening rush hour, I make a right turn. Sure, I should be turning left to get to the grocery store, but I can’t. It’s dark out, and the headlights from the cars are even worse than the lights in the grocery store will be. I can’t look at them without my eyes throbbing. There’s no chance I can look both ways, shift gears, and work the accelerator with four lanes of halogen

bulbs boring into my brain. So I add another half-mile to our trip, turning right instead of left, and then going around the block just so all my left turns will have stop signs and traffic signals.

I give squinting glances over to the busy intersection two blocks away, waiting for the expected lull between green lights, when I know the near lane will be empty. Ignoring the cars racing by in the far lane, I make my gentle turn, get us over to the next intersection, and give thanks for the miracle of sumatriptan. Because without the meds, I'd puke all over the steering wheel.

"Are we going to the grocery store?" Gawyn asks.

"Yes," I tell him. Because, for me, you don't take days off for migraines.

Parenting Pain

Pain is different for each person. When I'm in enough pain, I go faint. But it's only certain types of pain—the kind of pain that comes with fractures, or with cuts. It's the sharp, severing pain of one flap of skin separated from another that does it. A light knick in the thumb from a paring knife, just a simple accident at the cutting board over a salad—that pain leaves me straining to breathe.

As a parent, I find that I worry even more about pain than before. Not my own pain—my child's. You can't be a sympathetic human being and enjoy the sight of your own child's pain. But then, how can you responsibly raise a child who has no concept of it? This is why I let him play with scissors, and the stapler in my desk. Knives are verboten, but the grown-up scissors with the blue handles and the three-inch steel shears? Those are his favorite. Every day, he asks for them. He loves cutting up sheets of paper. Or he'll take those newsprint ads for used automobiles and carefully cut out the pictures of his favorite cars: green pickup trucks, white

sports cars, maybe even a riding mower. Then he'll glue them down to something—usually construction paper, or sometimes his little green wagon. The wagon now is so covered in Elmer's glue and stickers that you could peel away whole strips of collage held together with clear gel.

I've given up supervising my little guy's art projects. He doesn't want my input. He thinks everything I do is too precise, too planned. And I have no sense of color. He's resigned to the fact that his father is a blatant philistine when it comes to art. Especially when it comes to gluing strips of green construction paper to sheets of green construction paper, and then drawing on them with a green marker.

"Maybe we should try another color?" I'll suggest. And it's an honest suggestion—I have a three-inch stack of construction paper in the closet for him, these packets of paper I buy whenever they're on sale. Based on current rates of consumption, this should be enough paper to last until he's graduated from college. And it comes in all colors: red, blue, yellow, purple, brown, black, that hideous shade of pink I can't stand, and orange.

"No, Daddy!" he insists. "I want the green one!"

"But Gawyn, the paper's already green. Don't you want a contrasting color? Or at least a different shade of green? How about his lovely blue?"

"No, Daddy. I want green."

"You're sure?"

"You can go now, Daddy."

And so I let my child play alone with grown-up scissors. Normally, he crouches on the carpet with his scissors and his paper, cutting away at everything until nothing remains except diamonds of green paper pressed down into wrinkled sheets of green paper, everything damp

with glue. *Just don't get it on the carpet,* I tell him, silently, because I've already yelled at him enough times about this carpet that I'm afraid I'll start yelling again. So instead, I stay in the kitchen. I'll load the dishwasher, hoping to finally clean enough dishes to liberate the sink from dirty plates and the ants now residing there. Sometimes, I'll peak over the counter to get a look at him. It's an odd pride, seeing my child so focused and intent upon his works of creative destruction.

Often, he pauses his work. He wants me to take part. "Look, Daddy!" he calls. "Look!"

"What is it?"

"Look! I made a road!"

I'll look. And there, on the sheet, will be the wrinkled newsprint photo of a pickup truck pasted on top of marker lines in the shape of a bullseye. In between the solid lines, he's also drawn in the dashed lines to indicate the lane markers.

"Oh wow!" I tell him. "That's a really nice road!"

This kind of semi-participatory activity is perfect late at night, when his mom calls to talk with him over FaceTime. I'll set my iPhone on the carpet, leaning it up against the remains of a cardboard box, and then I'll retreat back to the kitchen and the unfinished dishes. Gawyn then sits on the carpet with his glue and his scissors, ignoring his mother.

From the phone, though, my ex-wife's voice rises with judgment. "He has scissors," she says.

"He's fine," I tell her. And I mostly believe this. I've taught our child to hold the metal blades when he walks, and to never run with scissors. He's four, but he knows I'll take the shears away if he disobeys. And I sense a kind of somber realization in his eyes whenever I explain the concept of scissors stabbing a person through the gut. "They're sharp," I tell him. "You don't

want these going through your tummy." Except when I imagine scissors stabbing a child, I always imagine that scene from *Band of Brothers*, when one guy shoots himself in the leg with a captured German pistol. It's accidental, but the bullet goes right through the hip and the femoral artery. He bleeds to death in less time than it takes to get his pants off. One stab to the inner thigh, and that could be my child. *Do not run with scissors,* I frequently tell him, putting on my *don't-fuck-with-me-I'm-your-father* voice. *I will take those scissors away and I will put them up high and you will never see them again. Got it?*

But Lek wasn't there for the explanations. She only knows that I'm putting our child at risk. And she isn't worried about an ambulance ride to the ER for a perforated artery—I know that she's really worried about Gawyn cutting his fingers. Because we all know that this is what children do with scissors.

"He might get hurt," she says.

Yes—the very sound of her voice over the phone irritates me. I've never learned to forget, let alone forgive. I want to tell her to shut up and mind her own business. But that wouldn't be polite. And you never know when you might be due for another round of custody negotiations.

"If he cuts himself, he'll learn to be careful," I tell her.

But she's never satisfied with that. Especially since I'm leaving him alone with the three-inch monster scissors, the ones with blades twice as long as his fingers.

"You should put them away," she tells me.

You should fuck off, I want to tell her. *My house, my rules. Or do you want me to go on about how you never call back on the nights when I spend three hours trying to call my child?*

But no—that's irresponsible. And if she's like me, she still has her divorce attorney's number programmed into her phone. One look at my apartment, and a family lawyer might recommend I give up my child to foster care—or at least cede full custody to his mother. Or so I fear. But I tend to exaggerate my fears to the point that reality no longer applies.

So I take in a breath and tell my child to be careful. I really am tempted to put the scissors away. Not because I'm worried he'll get hurt, but just because I don't feel like talking to my ex.

Somehow, my child hears these thoughts unspoken. He grows quiet, pausing his cutting as I ask if he's being careful. But maybe it's because he's there listening, too. He knows exactly what his mommy is saying. He knows that, at her house, he isn't allowed to use scissors by himself. With his mother, he's only allowed contact with scissors when he's sitting in her lap, when she has her fingers looped through the handles to guide his cutting. At least, I assume that's how it is at her place. That's how it was nine months ago, just before she moved out.

I look over at my son. He's staring back at me, with that distant look he dons when he's getting ready for a fight. *No, Daddy!* he'll scream. *I want the scissors, Daddy! Why can't I have scissors?*

Yes—it's a conversation we've had before. And this time, I give in. I force a smile. "That's good," I tell him. "You keep being careful."

"Can I keep cutting?"

"Yes, Gawyn. You can keep cutting."

On the other line, I'm sure my ex-wife fumes. I can't tell if that makes me happy, or sad. I'm just hoping this never turns into a story she tells a lawyer.

An Ankle

Once, my mom described the first time she saw me bleed. This was at the condo on Oakdale, back when she was the head nurse in the emergency room at Columbus Hospital in Chicago. By then, she'd been a nurse for going on a decade. She'd seen people bleeding, and she'd seen people dying. But that day, she says, she scooped me up and ran screaming to the neighbor's door. My mom says she simply freaked at the sight of her own child bleeding. It was the neighbor, apparently, who reminded my mother that she's a nurse, and then noted that it was only blood.

"Kids get cut all the time," the neighbor said. "You should get used to it."

Growing up, when I got hurt, my mother's catchphrase was, "Stop whining, I've seen worse." Her tone was usually something bordering between amusement and concern. Like the time I jumped the neighbor's bike off a makeshift ramp, but then I lost my nerve on the way down. My feet left the pedals, and my right foot got sucked into the concrete as I flipped face-first over the handlebars. I got scraped up, and my ankle swelled up from the sprain, but I didn't go to a doctor. Instead, my mother cleaned up the scrapes and had me lie down in bed with an ice pack. Later, she got me an Ace wrap for my ankle. I wore that for a week or so. It hurt to walk, but she'd seen worse.

A few years later, I tried jumping over a garden hose. But the toes on my right foot curled inward instead of outward—all my weight came down on the outer sole of my shoe. The ankle twisted before my knee buckled.

Again, no doctor. Just an Ace wrap. And then an air splint my mom brought home from work. For several years, the joke was about how I'd been bitten by a garden hose. "Was it a snake?" my mom asked. "Did it jump up and bite you?"

I don't remember how I sprained my ankle the third time. But it was right before school started my sophomore year of high school. It was cross country season, and the girl I had a crush on was the team manager. I'd also been on track the year before, and I thought of myself as a good runner. So I went to practice that week before school, somehow sprained my ankle, and then returned to practice the next day with an Ace wrap and an air splint.

That day, we did something called "slow continuous running." We ran in wide arcs on the cinder track back behind the school. For forty-five minutes. And it hurt running on that ankle, but I had the air splint. I thought that this made me invincible. Well, not invincible—since I had the air splint, I assumed that meant my ankle had been treated. It was immobilized, so I could do no harm. I kept running.

By the next day, my ankle wasn't just swollen, but also purple. So the coach told me to stop running. But since I was a sophomore—and most of the other runners were freshmen—I stayed for practice. I walked the same miles with the other folks who couldn't run that far. I'd grown up walking everywhere—my ankle only hurt a bit. And walking through pain built character.

By the end of the week, the ankle was dark. Purple like eye shadow. I don't know if my coach saw it or not, but I wasn't running. Not for a month. And when I did start running again, I was still wearing that air splint on my ankle. I wore it the whole season—even walking around

school. One of the classic photos from that year was me approaching the finish line at some cross country meet, eyes half shut, face red, arms tensed with fatigue. Clearly out of shape. And there, with all my weight coming down hard on that ankle, was the air splint.

I never saw a doctor that time, either.

Years later, my mom pointed out a study that had been done on sprains. Apparently, ankle sprains heal more quickly if the patient is placed on crutches for about a week. Which was funny, I guess. All those years in grade school and high school, whenever my classmates came in on crutches for a sprain, I had assumed it was because they were weak. Or that their parents were lazy. Or something like that. Because my mother was a nurse. And she had raised me strong enough to walk it off.

By the time my mom pointed out that study, I'd been in the army for a few years. I'd already been through Airborne School, and the gnawing ache in my ankle had become a daily torment. Sometimes, it was simply a dull throb—other times, it would spark up into my shin every time my right foot hit the ground. I never complained, though, because this was ankle pain. This was just the pain that comes with walking. The pain I'd had in my ankle since high school. Just a little bit worse each year. It wasn't broken and it wasn't sprained—it just hurt. And by the time my mom mentioned the study, I knew exactly why it still hurt, and why it had never healed, and why I had never been on crutches all those years before.

She never thought I needed it.

Heartburn

During my exit physical, the doctor was skeptical of my symptoms, particularly when I talked about heartburn. Quite simply, I had marked too many boxes for stuff that hurt. Ankle pain? Check. Wrist pain? Check. Knee pain? Check. Hip pain? Check. Back pain? Surprisingly, no. Neck pain? Yes, definitely.

Naturally, the doctor was required to ask about each box I had checked. And so the questions went on. And on. And on. Obviously, I'd be submitting my forms to the Department of Veterans Affairs—this was a medical discharge. But as far as he could tell, there was so much extra crap on there, he couldn't tell if I was telling the truth about my "real" injuries. *Does your wrist actually hurt?* he wanted to ask. *Or are you suffering from Everything Hurts Because I'm A Malingering Shitbag disease?*

But I was naive. I didn't know he'd have to ask about every little thing that hurt. Dutifully, I had also checked "yes" when the form asked about heartburn—dutifully, the physician inquired regarding additional details.

During the interview, heartburn was the last straw. I heard it in his voice as the doctor asked about it. He didn't sound bored—by then, he was downright irritated. "How often do you get heartburn? Is it more than twice a week?" *Is the pain real or imagined? Did some barracks lawyer tell you to check that box because everyone and their mother gets fucking heartburn?*

"I get heartburn almost every day," I said, "usually at night." I already knew it had something to do with the huge dinners I consumed before bed. It's because in the mornings, I was usually too slow to get a real breakfast, and lunch was always hurried. By the time night fell, I was too exhausted to eat, but too hungry to avoid food. And so I'd procrastinate. I'd get my dinner at the very end of the evening—a microwaved Bubba Burger with side of ramen, or a late-

night drive out to the Carl's Jr. for a Thickburger and a large order of curly fries. I didn't eat dinner—I swallowed bricks of food. And by bedtime, the dissolved bricks burbled up into my esophagus, burning.

But I couldn't say all that. It wasn't relevant. And the doctor was not impressed by my checkbox. Because aside from my word, there was no evidence at all that this pain was any more real than every other box I'd marked for pain.

"Do you take anything for your heartburn?" he asked. "Any antacids? Or Nexium, maybe?"

"I drink extra water until it goes away." Back then, I didn't believe in antacids. I thought all medication was evil. I'd felt what ibuprofen did to my stomach after Afghanistan—I figured a handful of Tums would make things worse. Because calcium carbonate pressed into a mint-flavored caplet of crunchiness is so clearly the same thing as a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory.

"And have you sought treatment?" he asked. *Have any other doctors investigated this imagined pain in your esophagus?*

"No."

"And *why* haven't you sought treatment?" he asked. And by his tone, I knew he was pretty much done with me. This was supposed to have been a pro forma interview—I'd tell him what hurt, he'd prescribe x-rays, and that would be it. Instead, he now had pages of notes of things that required referrals to specialists. Radiology for both wrists, both hips, my right knee, and the entire upper half of my spine; a VA-affiliated ophthalmologist two hours away to check my retinas; five vials of blood from the lab in town; and another evaluation by a physical therapist to evaluate all my hurting-but-not-broken joints for range-of-motion.

But there I was, wasting the doctor's time with heartburn. And he knew damn well that anyone can get heartburn after a particularly bad case of nachos. And let's not forget coffee and beer, the true staples of any military diet. What did I really expect from checking that box on the form? Was I looking for more money from the VA? I was already being evaluated for a medical discharge—the doctor probably wondered what more I wanted. Why, he probably wondered, doesn't this kid just describe the stuff that hurts most, and leave it at that? If this heartburn is really all that bad, why hasn't he bothered going in for sick call?

But I was tired. I'd been working sixty hour weeks on E-5 pay. I'd already been accused of wanting to skip a deployment, and of being "insufficiently motivated" to stay in the army, and of wasting everyone's time by not making up my mind about whether or not I wanted to stay. I had a college degree—I'd studied writing and engineering and enough math to put most of my friends to sleep. I didn't feel like explaining my motives anymore. It hurt to turn my head, and some days my arms went numb. I kept dropping my keys. I'd lose sensation in my left hand, but my right thumb hurt so much I couldn't twist doorknobs. Only two physicians had found anything on my x-rays or MRI—both had been deployed and reassigned before an official diagnosis could be made.

So there I was at my discharge physical, staring at this civilian doctor with a name badge clipped to his polo shirt, and all I really wanted was my Advil and a nap.

What was the real reason I'd never previously reported the heartburn? "I'm already being treated for enough medical stuff," I said. *I'm tired of this shit,* I thought, but somehow held my tongue.

The doctor paused. His expression, once skeptical, now softened to a degree of studied irritation. He took a breath, and then explained—with a look of genuine concern—that it was

important to seek treatment for heartburn. “Untreated,” he said, “recurrent heartburn could lead to esophageal cancer.”

I don't think I rolled my eyes. I'm pretty sure I stared back at him with the universal look of *whatever*. Because, duh—I already knew that. There were days I woke up and couldn't turn my head—as if I really cared about the small chance that heartburn would give me cancer in fifty years. A few good swigs from a water bottle, and the pain under my sternum was easily tamed to a dull roar. I didn’t expect the heartburn to ever go away—with the quantities of ibuprofen I'd been taking since Afghanistan, I comforted myself with the thought that the lining of my gastrointestinal tract would simply peel away like so many layers of cheap rubber.

Apparently, the doctor cared more about this than I did. “I’ll refer you for a barium swallow,” he said. “Make sure it isn’t something serious.”

He then flipped over to a new page of notes. “Okay,” he said, “about this next checkbox.”

A few weeks later, I drove across town to some other clinic. They gave me two paper cups with a thick, frothy liquid that tasted of chalk and artificial lemonade. It turns out the stuff was carbonated, too—though later I found out it was probably baking soda rather than soda fountain. “Try not to burp,” the nurse told me.

Ten or twenty minutes later, they called me back to the x-ray room. Unlike most x-ray machines I'd seen, this thing had a motor to lift and turn the entire table. I got to lie down, plant my bare feet flat on the wide metal lip at the end of the table, and then wait for them to wrap the machine around me. It was a bit like a coffin—or maybe a tanning bed—with my head exposed.

Then the radiologist arrived. He wore a thick lead apron. He told me to breathe in and hold. There was the reassuring hum as he depressed a button and the machine squirted high-

energy photons through my body. Then his assistant—also wearing an apron—pushed another button to turn the table vertical. And then we went flat again. “Turn on your side,” the doctor said. “Breathe in. Hold.” Buzz. “Now on your stomach—hold.”

I don't know how long it continued. Five minutes, maybe ten. They told me not to burp as the burbling mass in my chest pushed out like a well-shaken can of Coke.

Eventually, it was done. I was allowed to dress, and to belch. I drove back home—to Fort Bragg, the barracks, and the free army buffet. Weeks passed—I had other tests for other things. One required me to drive an hour north for an eye exam. Another sent me to the clinic that drew blood. And the x-rays. I wondered how the hip x-ray might affect my sperm—I feared the shoulder x-ray would reveal the long-healed break in my humerus, the one that I had hidden from the MEPS doctors when I first joined the army.

Most of the tests found nothing. My right thumb—soon to be reconstructed by a hand surgeon at UNC-Chapel Hill—looked perfectly normal under x-ray. My retinas, although stretched by severe myopia, were not tearing free of the eye. It would be another six years before an ophthalmologist would need to laser them down. My ankle—the one that ached with every step—still maintained full range of motion. It was “hyperflexible”—it could bend a bit further than the other ankle. In two years, it would need surgery. The tendons had attenuated to the point that they no longer held the joint steady, but nobody could prove that in the days I was leaving the army. And no one really tried.

Heartburn, though—*that* they could evaluate. Judging by the leakage of barium between my stomach and esophagus, they diagnosed a sliding hiatal hernia. Basically, part of my stomach would sometimes slide up into the space between my lungs, pushing against my esophagus. Normally, I wouldn’t really care. It doesn't “hurt,” per se—it just causes heartburn. What’s

supposed to be a tight seal between the stomach and the esophagus becomes an open door for stomach acid. I'd always thought it was just an inconvenience. But to the army, it's a meaningful diagnosis. It gives a disability rating of ten percent. All my other disabilities combined—the neck pain, the ankle pain, the fact that my arms went numb every time I lifted them over my head to change a light bulb—that tacked on another ten percent. Four years later—after three rounds of appeals and a separate application based on my thumb that had been reconstructed—I reached forty percent disability, heartburn included.

Before Surgery

Before the first surgery on my wrist, you could slip the bones in my forearm up and down, visibly sliding the ends of the radius back and forth. None of the ligaments had been torn all the way through, but all of them had been damaged. They didn't really hold the joint stable. But it was over a year before anyone decided to do surgery. And even then, it wasn't for my wrist, exactly—it was for my thumb. It also attaches to that same joint with the radius and the ulna and the carpals. It, too, had ligaments that were falling apart. And I dealt with it. It hurt to write, it hurt to type, it *really* hurt to shake hands. But what could I do? Ligaments don't show up on x-ray. They don't show up on MRI, either, as I later learned. To see the tiny little wrist ligaments through an MRI machine, they first had to put my hand under an x-ray machine. Then, the two radiologists entered the room wearing lead aprons from knees to shoulders. Their eyes going back and forth between x-rays and my wrist, they gently—*gently!*—jabbed a large-gauge needle into a tiny space called the "wrist capsule," which is apparently inside the big tangle of tendons and ligaments that make up the wrist. Once the needle was in, they steadily injected an MRI contrast into the confined space of the wrist capsule. Looking back, I want to say it hurt like

hell, but I'm pretty sure it didn't. In fact, I very much doubt that I felt much. These were professionals, and they used anesthetic. But I still remember the sound of it. The gentle pressure. That tug on the tight knot of tissues in my wrist as a large-gauge needle tore through the meaty fibers of my hand.

Lying there on my side, I imagined them guiding the needle between the petite bird-bones of my hand. They grabbed my hand and twisted it outward to expose the narrow gap between the extensor tendons of my thumb and forefinger, and I was painfully aware of every little bone in there. I could feel the bones grinding against each other, particularly as they pressed everything all the way to the outside of my wrist. I imagined my Uncle Rick, who had once fractured the navicular bone in his hand. As my mom the nurse once explained, the small bones in the hands are too small for decent blood circulation—when they break, they don't heal on their own. Instead, they fuse into malformed shapes. Or they don't fuse at all. The tiny bits of marrow inside, cut off from the limited circulation of oxygen, simply die. And then the bone dies. Necrosis sets in, which is simply the medical term for tissue death. Infection follows. And pain. And more pain. And if you don't get it taken care of, it's possible you might die, or lose your hand to gangrene, or all kinds of other horrible awful things my mom hinted at when describing the plight of my Uncle Rick. "They had to replace his navicular with a plastic implant," Mom explained. "The first one didn't take, so they had to replace it again a year later. But he's had a great outcome since. Twenty years, and he hasn't had any trouble with it."

But that wasn't my experience. No—my case was hardly straightforward. Six months after my fall, x-rays still didn't reveal what the problem was with my wrist. None of the bones showed any signs of a healed fracture. None of the bones had died. I clearly did not have blood poisoning or gangrene or anything. Some of the army doctors had begun to think I was just

faking it. In fact, the only reason I was getting the MRI at all was due to an insurance referral fuckup. Though I guess that's not entirely true. One of the skeptical army docs referred me to a hand surgeon, so I should credit him with trusting me enough to keep this game going. But the army's Tricare insurance somehow booked me for physical therapy instead. So I looked up hand surgeons. I found the best orthopedic surgery center in eastern North Carolina. It was through the teaching hospital, up at UNC-Chapel Hill. A teaching hospital, sure, but the surgeons were *good*. Good enough to be professors.

Then I called Tricare. They referred me to UNC. It was out-of-network, but I don't think they knew what else to do.

Injecting the MRI contrast took maybe fifteen minutes. The next part was placing a sandbag over my arm to keep it from moving, and then placing a curved metal plate over my hand to help magnify the MRI scan. Meanwhile, there was some IV thing still stuck into my upper arm—it could have been contrast, it could have been local anesthetic, it could have even been a full nerve block. But I really don't know. I don't remember. And I'm not about to dig through my trunk of medical records to find out. But I do remember lying there on my side, arm stretched out way over my head, as the MRI machine whirled and bumped through thirty minutes or so of scanning. Somehow, I think the plastic tube feeding stuff into my veins was pressed up against my face, but that seems impossible. The doctors and nurses there were so careful about everything. And so friendly. And so apologetic. Letting me know the needle would cause discomfort, giving fair warning that the anesthetic would hurt like a bee sting and then fade. I took it all in stride. "That's okay," I said. And then repeated. And repeated. Because I wanted them to know I really didn't mind, that I really did trust them, that I really did just want them to

figure out what was wrong with my wrist. I couldn't shake hands or hold a pencil or use a mouse without pain, but the army doctors had trouble believing me. They thought I was hamming it up. They thought I was looking for a quick way out of the army. But they weren't entirely sure. So they gave me all the rounds of referrals for physical therapy, and occupational therapy, and those trips for cervical epidural injections at the pain clinic in town. And finally now, to a hand surgeon. Because whatever treatment they tried, I said it didn't work. So at some point, they'd find something to prove me right, or to prove me a liar.

That was 2006, in the summertime. Immediately following the MRI, I spent the next couple weeks wearing my wrist brace all the time. I wore it so much that the metal splint inside the brace began chipping fingernail-sized pieces of plastic off the gear shift in my car. I wore it so much that you could see the faint dark lines that marked the seepage of summer sweat. I cleaned the thing, sure, but still it stank. It took on the odor of unwashed gym shorts. Still, I wore it. My wrist was swollen from the MRI contrast. And it still hurt from the needle. It wasn't more than a papercut, really, except it went down through the skin and into the ligaments rather than across the surface. If you didn't know, you wouldn't notice it. I've always had small wrists, even for someone tall and male—even swollen, my hand looked almost normal. But for me, it hurt to look at. And it was summer. My family gathers in Iowa every summer, and I had finally reached that stage in my life where I could afford the time and the plane tickets to make the trip. That year, the trip was a blur. I remember pain, and I remember the sunshine through the kitchen windows in my grandmother's house, and I remember sitting out by myself in the backyard. I didn't talk much that year. I didn't feel like talking at all.

That trip, there was talk of my getting medically discharged from the army. Someone wanted to know what my plans were, but I had no idea. Deep down, I wanted to be a writer, but writing seems a poor choice when you can't hold a pencil without pain.

On the second day of that trip, my dad found me alone in my grandma's backyard. I just sat out there, staring out at the grass and the pockmarks of dandelions. Sitting in the sun, I let my thoughts drift. It was the only way I could forget the pain in my wrist. Eventually, the throbbing faded into the background ache of my life.

It was a strange solitude, the kind of loneliness I never seek at reunions. But my wrist hurt so much. I preferred the rusty lawn chairs to the comfort of the couch inside. My wrist was wrapped in the soft foam padding of my favorite blue wrist brace, and I cradled it against my stomach.

And then my dad came outside. He and my uncles were headed off to play a round of golf. He asked if I wanted to join in.

"I don't think I should," I said. I said something about not being able flex my wrist enough with the brace on. I didn't really mention the pain, I don't think. My dad replied with something about just hanging out, and I had this image of me just sitting there in the golf cart while my dad and uncles teed-off. Again I demurred. And my dad seemed disappointed. Not just that I wasn't coming, but that I was the kind of person who would refuse to go.

Maybe I only imagined his judgment. I wasn't, after all, quite myself.

At the follow-up appointment in July, I met with a new surgeon. The first surgeon I'd seen was an orthopedic surgeon, and he'd been happy to prescribe the MRI with contrast. But he wasn't a hand surgeon, and he'd told me up-front that he wasn't the right person to talk to about my wrist.

So he referred me to Doctor B. And Doctor B., I later learned, was the hand surgeon responsible for training future hand surgeons on how to conduct hand surgery. In army parlance, we would have described Doctor B. as a "subject-matter expert," as someone who "knew his shit." And you knew it from the first moment you saw him. Tall, with graying hair and stooped shoulders, you could tell he'd spent decades of his life buried in his work. He stepped into the exam room with long strides, the pockets of his lab coat bulging with stuff. This visit—as with all visits—he had a surgical resident trailing close behind. The resident didn't seem that much older than I was. He seemed somewhat overwhelmed, but not dangerously so. More as if he'd had a few too many cups of coffee. And the way he watched Doctor B., you could tell he idolized the man.

B. had examined my MRI results before even meeting me. And you could tell he was interested in my case. But no more than he was interested in any other case.

"You're lucky and unlucky," he said, bringing up the MRI on the computer screen. He pointed to the glowing white globs of MRI contrast that floated between the pale bricks of my carpal bones. "Here, you can see the places where the MRI contrast leaked out from the wrist capsule." He went on to describe the three major sets of ligaments in the wrist. "You've damaged all of them," he said, "but you did it pretty evenly, so none of them are pulling the bones out of place. That's why none of it showed up on x-ray."

I nodded. It explained the pain. It also explained why my wrist was usually fine if I didn't use it, but it hurt like hell anytime I tried doing anything. It should have helped me feel better, knowing that I hadn't been manufacturing these symptoms. My descriptions of pain and weakness had left the army docs scratching their heads—finally, I had actual medical proof for what I was feeling. Which was good. Because the army docs needed to decide my fate—they needed to determine whether I was still fit to serve, or if I was instead broken enough to leave.

But by then, I was emotionally numb to the future. I had been in pain for so long, I no longer knew what I wanted from life. Mentally, I clung to the army—clung to the reassurance of room and board and my "home away from home." Other days, I just wanted to go someplace far away. I was tired of being the one who stood on the sidelines while everyone else did pushups. I was tired of being the one who stood alone in the pre-dawn hours, leaning against a tree to do my leg-lifts while the rest of the platoon ran a few miles down Ardennes Road. But even that was bearable—at least I got to be outside for an hour as the sky brightened into day. Months later, even that was taken away. Apparently, too many broken soldiers were out "doing their own thing" like me, so the sergeant major had taken to walking along Ardennes in search of lazy shitbag malingerers. To protect me from a sergeant major's wrath, I was told to sit in the ops office alone, working on paperwork while everyone else got to play army.

I didn't fully realize it then, but Doctor B.'s words meant I would be leaving the army. And I don't think I even cared. I was tired of the shame of every morning, when I was the one who couldn't lift and couldn't run. Being in the army is hard—being a useless sack of lungs in a uniform, however, is far worse. So whatever the doctor said, I really just wanted the pain to go away, but I'm not sure which pain it was that hurt more. Was it the ache in my wrist? This ache that would go away if only I held my hand perfectly still in my lap while I sat quietly doing nothing? Or was it the deeper, emotional pain of seeing myself for the worthless, broken glass I had become? At that point, it didn't matter. If Doctor B. could help me pretend to serve again—if he could get me back to the point where I wasn't entirely useless—I suppose I would have been happy.

Anticipation, however, would have to wait. Doctor B. switched from doctor to professor. Turning to his resident, he explained that the next step of the exam was to correlate the MRI

results to the physical symptoms. “We examine both hands to differentiate between sequelae of injury and congenital physiology.”

He asked for my left wrist, the one that wasn’t injured. Shifting my hand up and down, and then twisting it, and then sliding it back and forth, he pointed out all the different ligaments holding my wrist together. He found one loose spot in my left wrist, but it didn’t hurt much. He said that wasn’t abnormal. “Every wrist is different,” he explained to his resident, “so it’s very important you always check both wrists before determining a diagnosis.” He then smiled for my benefit. “It’s just fortunate you have one good wrist for us to compare.”

Then he took hold of my right wrist. And dislocated it.

My breath caught in my throat. “That correlates with this ligament right here,” Doctor B. said, directing his resident’s attention to the MRI on the big screen. Still holding my wrist, he twisted my hand other way, again dislocating it.

“You see some marked attenuation right here,” he said. He reached into one of the bulging lab coat pockets, withdrawing a slim ballpoint pen. Using it as a pointer, he ran the tip of his pen along the bony knob just inside my wrist, highlighting where exactly the ligament damage was to be found. “Here,” he said, holding out my hand for his resident, “you try.”

These weren’t full dislocations, like the kind that would send you to the ER. It was simply a demonstration of the excessive range of motion possible for the damaged joint. But each one hurt. And then the next one hurt more. And then still more. Eventually—the sixth or seventh one, I’m guessing—Doctor B. twisted down and pushed in, attempting to dislocate my wrist from the tip of the ulna. But it didn’t dislocate, so he tried it again. And then again. And then a fourth time. “Now that’s interesting,” he said, mulling over the puzzle of my anatomy. “This ligament here is a lot stronger than you’d expect from the MRI.”

The resident nodded, both interested and impressed. Maybe he asked a question or two. Maybe he was taking notes in his notebook. But I don't know. My wrist hurt so bad I wanted to throw up.

"The bad news," Doctor B. said, "is that you have fairly extensive damage to the three sets of ligaments around your wrist. But you did it pretty evenly, so none of them are pulling the bones out of place. And that's pretty good news—it's harder to detect on x-ray, but it also means that everything is where it's supposed to be."

I'm sure I nodded. I probably said something to reassure the surgeon that I was listening and that I understood. And then I asked him about treatment options. Or maybe he launched right in. You could tell he was thoroughly fascinated by his work, but he was in a hurry, and my wrist was nothing special. He had too much to teach and too many to treat. He'd spent half our appointment time on diagnosis, the other half illustrating all the sources of pain to his resident, and then an extra half going down the hall to confer with his resident regarding some other specifics of my case.

By the time we got to treatment options, I still wanted to vomit. I'm not sure if it was just the pain in my wrist, or the sure knowledge that I would be leaving the army. Or it could simply be that I had skipped breakfast that morning, and the two-hour drive to my appointment had left me queasy.

Doctor B. said the only real approach to take was the conservative one. "Ice and ibuprofen when it flairs up," he said. "Use your wrist brace as needed."

Right. I had long since figured that out. The more pain I could take, the less ibuprofen I would need—that was a calculus I'd been doing for well over a year. Because here's the thing with ibuprofen: it's all fun and games until you wake up one morning and you can't eat.

"Surgery's not really an option at this point," he said. "All we could do is fuse your wrist, and then you'd lose all mobility. It really cuts the pain and you get your strength back, but then you can't use your wrist for anything. So I wouldn't recommend it at this time."

Okay. Not what I'd wanted to hear. So I waited for the next piece of advice. Some treatment we hadn't tried. Some hope that I would get my wrist back. And my life.

Instead, he explained that my wrist would wear out at some point. "This kind of damage, the ligaments will continue to attenuate, and eventually your wrist just won't work anymore. Might take five years, might take twenty, but we'll fuse it then."

Again, not what I wanted to hear. So I waited for the reassuring part. Because this was UNC-Chapel Hill, one of the best teaching hospitals in the country. And I could tell that Doctor B. knew what he was talking about. That he lived and breathed this, that he could do hand surgery in his sleep. And I had the sense that maybe he already had, that maybe he'd already done the kind of all-night surgical rotations where you cut people open and stitch them back together while running on nothing but caffeine fumes.

"Do you have any questions?" he asked.

I stared at him. He hadn't recommended anything. No treatment referrals, no prescriptions, nothing. So I assumed he'd just forgotten the one thing you had to do if you were ever going to get better: physical therapy. Because when you're in the army, that's what you do—pop some ibuprofen, do your exercises, and get better. Or at least well enough to Charlie Mike.

So I asked about it. Asked if there were any exercises I could do to strengthen my wrist in the meantime. But he shook his head.

"I wouldn't bother with physical therapy," he said. "You have ligament damage—that won't heal. Technically it's just a really bad sprain, but ligaments can't repair themselves. Exercises won't help, and they might just make it worse."

I blinked. No physical therapy? No strengthening exercises? No new meds or surgeries or anything? My wrist—my right hand, my writing hand, the hand that now hurt almost as much as my neck pretty much every day—was just going to stay this way? Until it got *worse*?

"Any other questions?" he asked.

Oh yes. I asked about documentation. All that army paperwork. The bureaucratic details of proving to the military doctors that I wasn't a total shitbag. Because if nothing would help my case medically, there had to be way to let the army know. To convince them that I wasn't just making this shit up.

"You'll be able to make a records request right at the front desk," he said. And then as we left the room, he pointed the way back to the lobby, from where I'd come in. "You just talk to Sandy down there on the end," he said. "She'll get you set up."

A year passed. As predicted, things didn't get better. By summer of 2007, the wrist hurt more than I could stand. Things that used to simply hurt had become impossible. Like holding a mouse. I couldn't pull my thumb in far enough without a burning pain taking hold right at that knobby spot where thumb meets wrist. It was the same spot that had always hurt the most, but the pain got worse and worse. At first, I tried to compensate—I found that if I made the mouse a little wider, I could hold it for longer. I wedged in a pack of half-sized Post-its between the

mouse and my thumb, and that helped. Eventually, though, I just gave up and moved the mouse over to the left side. And then I spent the next few weeks re-learning how to get the cursor to line up with the onscreen icons. I tried writing left-handed, but that proved impossible. Even if I agonized over each mark on the page, I couldn't print the letters straight. By the time I finished writing a single word, I forgot the sentence. I saw no hope for writing paragraphs, let alone pages. Not left-handed, anyway. So I tried making my pens and pencils fatter, wrapping rubber bands round the ends. For years, I'd always bought the cheapest Bic pens I could find—they came in boxes of twelve for a dollar, but they had no padding, and knotting rubber bands around the ends proved both ugly and worthless. But I was getting out of the army, and I needed to be a writer. So I bought a pack of padded gel pens, hoping the smooth ink and wider grip would help. It didn't. Five dollars for a pack of four pens, and I still couldn't write more than a page of text without the things making me want to punch a brick wall.

Eventually, I bought this enormous fine-point gel roller at a gas station for $6.95. It was the single most expensive pen I'd bought in my life. The thing was luxurious to the point of disgusting—a silicone rubber grip, a sharp needle-point roller, and fat like a double-stuffed Cuban cigar. So it wasn't a two-hundred-dollar Montblanc—the thing still felt wrong. It was too expensive. Too refined. Never mind that I found it at a gas station, hanging from a rack next to the beef jerky. It was so stubby that it didn't fit in my pocket, and I was always afraid of losing it. I was honestly afraid that someone else in my unit would use it and like it and walk off with it, maybe not realizing (or maybe not caring) that this pen represented seven dollars of hope. So I never took the pen with me anywhere. Instead, I left the thing in my barracks room, right there on my desk, next to my notebooks. I decided to use it only for "real" writing—for my creative writing. If I drove down the road to the Barnes and Noble to sip hot cocoa while writing, it

became a big deal if I brought The Pen. Not that it mattered. The thing helped, but not much. I was still writing less and less and less. Eventually, I did lose the pen. Another couple years passed before I found it right where I had left it: stuffed in the bottom of an army backpack, wrapped and sealed in a Ziploc bag like an archeological artifact bound for the museum.

Eventually, I decided my wrist wasn't working. I went back for a follow-up. I drove two hours north, sat in the exam room, and waited without hope as Doctor B. strode into the room. This time, he had two residents with him—brand new faces, of course. And again, he went through the dislocations. Again, the residents followed. Was it eighteen dislocations this time? Did they again get stuck on that same ligament, the one that should have been weak but wasn't? I don't remember. I just kind of sat there and took it. I already knew what the verdict would be. They'd say my wrist was now weak enough that they'd need to fuse it. I'd lose the ability to bend my wrist, and that would be that. And it's not like I was entirely unaware of how bad it would be. I had another army buddy who'd been in a humvee rollover and had his hand crushed. His wrist they had fused. His wrist they had wrapped in a cast for the weeks and weeks it takes to heel. This was all from before I'd met him, but he still talked about the day the cast came off, about how excited he'd been to finally go to the bathroom again with a functional right hand. Except his excitement had been premature. He explained how his wrist was now pinned flat, like a wooden board. "I can't wipe my own ass," he said. "My wrist won't bend enough for me to wipe my own goddamn ass."

Fully expecting this verdict for myself, I ignored the pain as Doctor B. and the residents went through the motions. And I'd taken special care to ensure I'd feel the full scope of pain. To better report exactly what hurt and why, I skipped my ibuprofen that day. Assuming I was even

still taking any. I don't know anymore. The pain was everyday—I didn't want the meds to be everyday, too.

At the end of it, my wrist throbbed. And Doctor B. was bored. "I'm not exactly sure why you're here," he said. "There's been no real change."

He gave me the universal look I knew from the army and from parents and from everyone: *Why are you even here? Why are you wasting our time?*

At that moment, not even I knew why I was there. Probably because I was weak. Probably because I didn't have the right level of pain tolerance. Probably because the one colonel had been right when he declared that I "wasn't motivated enough" to stay in the army.

Not knowing what else to say, I held out my right hand, palm upward. I tapped on the knobby part on the underside of my wrist, where the thumb meets the radius and the carpals. "It hurts a lot right here," I said. "Whenever I hold a pencil, whenever I use a mouse. Whenever I brush my teeth."

Doctor B. leaned over for a closer look. There was no bruising or swelling or other visible sign of injury—even I knew that. But just the same, he took my hand and gently dislocated my thumb.

"Well, that's interesting," he said, wiggling the joint back and forth until my world darkened. I didn't faint, but it was damn close. It's just good I was already sitting down on the exam table, and that I could plant my left hand back for balance.

Doctor B. showed off the new finding to his residents. He had them go ahead and imitate the maneuver. It took both of them a few tries before they could get it right. One of the residents—a young woman—seemed worried about hurting me, and Doctor B. had to encourage her to push harder. The other resident—a young man—was so focused on doing it right that he

had the angle wrong. “You have to plant your middle and index fingers here, under his thumb,” B. explained, guiding the resident’s grip. “And then depress down with your thumb *here*.”

The resident got the angle right, and then pushed down hard. The base of my thumb popped out of place. I felt my throat tighten. I wanted to puke.

“Good,” the doctor told his resident, “just like that.”

It turns out that I really had seen the wrong surgeon the first time, and he had prescribed the wrong kind of MRI. Or at least an incomplete one. Had Doctor B. seen me before that MRI a year before, he would have done these manipulations earlier. He might have detected the attenuation in the ligaments holding my thumb in place. In my eye, I imagined lying there for an even longer session with the radiologists in their lead aprons, getting even more contrast dye injected into the space between the bird-bones of my hand. But since that hadn’t happened before, I had a sinking feeling that it would happen now.

But I was wrong—my thumb was now so far gone, B. didn’t need a new MRI. After about ten minutes, he gave the verdict: “We’ll need to do a CMC reconstruction.” He told me to go ahead and schedule the surgery at the front desk. He then spent a few minutes telling his residents a bit more about what procedures would be performed. And then told me that they’d go ahead and scope the other ligaments in my wrist, see if there were any other repairs they could take care of while I was under anesthesia.

“This should strengthen the wrist as a whole,” he said, pointing out the area around the inside of my wrist that would be affected. “You should get most of your mobility back, have a bit less pain.”

Was it reassuring that he now seemed interested in my case? I don't know. I was beyond caring. Most of my discharge paperwork had already gone through. I knew I was leaving the army—that was a done deal. But I didn't know exactly when. It was summer, and I'd already missed every possible deadline for graduate school. I had no idea what I'd be doing in my future, but I knew I wouldn't be doing much of anything if I had my wrist in a cast.

I asked Doctor B. how soon I'd need to get the surgery done. As if it mattered. I'd been living with the pain for a good year and a half. What was another few months? Since the fall that hurt my wrist had occurred in Afghanistan, it was considered a combat injury, but the army had already completed and filed my discharge physical. It was too late to update anything about my discharge. Because that much had been made clear to me—the army couldn't discharge me until I was medically "stable." At least in terms of the paperwork. If my diagnosis changed, they'd have to start the whole discharge process over again. And it had already taken a year.

So I asked Doctor B. about holding off on the surgery. "Should I just wait until I get out of the army?"

"You can," he said, "but I wouldn't wait more than six months. That level of attenuation, your thumb will stop working."

Oh, I thought. *Great.*

CHAPTER III: WRITING DEPRESSION

Admission

In 2009, a psychiatrist decided I was too suicidal to be safely left alone. I was involuntarily admitted for a seventy-two hour observation. I spent my hours smiling, telling jokes, and writing death poems. Unaware of the death poems, another psychiatrist let me go after only sixty hours. I seemed to be doing well. I was receptive to treatment. And what, really, is psychological pain? A desire to quit the quit that never ends? I wasn't sure. I just wanted out. Whether I was going to kill myself or not, I wanted to decide myself. And so I smiled. I told the new psychiatrist that I understood the dangers of depression. I cracked jokes with the nurses and fellow patients. I took the prescribed pills and tossed them back with a swallow of water. Whatever it took to pretend the pain was gone.

But people fear psychiatric pain. The day the psychiatrist let me leave observation, I made the mistake of telling my supervisor. Within twenty minutes, he had told the department chair, who then worried about me. He said he didn't want to rush me. He offered to find me a substitute, to give me some breathing space. I said that would be unnecessary. I told him it would be better to get back on schedule. It was a stretch, but I told him that the doctors had recommended I continue with my normal life. That it would be good for my mental well-being and "connectedness." My new psychiatrist had also prescribed forty hours a week of group therapy—I left out that part.

Maybe I shouldn't have lied my way back to work. Maybe I should have taken a few weeks off. But I was terrified. No one batted an eye when I came to school with my wrist in a cast, or when I showed up on crutches a couple months later. My friends asked how I was doing, and a few offered to sub for my classes, but there had been no talk of "replacing" me.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” they asked. “What about your wrist? How are you able to do crutches?”

“It’s okay,” I said. “This is actually making my wrist stronger.”

But people fear psychiatric pain. When the department chair called, I was terrified. So I did what I do best: I hid the pain. I offered to stop by his office, let him know how things are going. “Is now good?” I asked.

They let me leave the hospital on a Wednesday afternoon. Without a shower, still wearing the same clothes I’d been wearing since Monday morning, I walked to school to meet with the chair of the department. And I was teaching again the next day.

All my students ever heard was that I’d been in the hospital a couple days. It could have been food poisoning.

My first experience with depression came in college. That first semester of engineering, as I struggled to make sense of physics and honors calculus, I began to wonder what it would be like to remove myself from the world. Gradually, the feeling grew worse. There were thoughts of stepping in front of a commuter bus. There was the night I walked up to the top floor of a parking garage, and then peered down at the sidewalk far below. By November my sophomore year, I had thoughts of opening my wrist with a kitchen knife. The small paring knife I kept in the drying rack on top of the microwave.

Sometimes, I became so afraid of myself that I sat frozen in fear. The thoughts were so vivid. Though I never picked up the knife—I was afraid to touch it—I still knew the feel of its wooden handle in my grip. I could sense the gentle tug of skin as I traced the knife alongside the

line of my tendons, pushing it into the pulse-beat of artery within. These weren't idle thoughts—I still have clear memories of an act I've never attempted.

In a way, though, I'm lucky. Even depressed, I remain functional. I work, I go to school. And I understand what's happening. I don't have the blind descent into mania, like my Aunt Janet used to. I've never sunk into an abyss so deep that I stop paying rent. As isolated and afraid as I sometimes get, I've never felt entirely alone. Even at my worst, when I've been physically unable to lift the phone to call a friend, I've still had friends I could have called, if only the depression had eased its grip.

I made it ten years without medication or hospitalization. I took a grim pride in my depression, knowing that I could take the pain, knowing that I remained unstoppable. Unbreakable. Sometimes I wanted to die, but I still made it to graduate school. I still went to class. I still did my homework.

But you can't outrun depression any more than you can outrun your reflection. Eventually, the thoughts became too vivid. I became so suicidal that I began dissociating, forgetting who I was and what I was doing. One night, I found myself walking toward a parking garage—I still have no idea where I was or what I was doing in the hours before. Another night, maybe I did pull a kitchen knife from the drawer. Or maybe I didn't—I honestly don't know. I remember the knife in my hand, but I also remember holding myself back, forcing myself to stay away from the drawer. But I thought I was making progress—I thought I was figuring things out. I was still going to therapy, and the therapist sent me to a psychiatrist. But that first meeting with the psychiatrist, she wouldn't let me go home.

“With your dissociation,” she explained, “you might hurt yourself when you’re not yourself.”

I didn’t agree with that. I didn’t think hospitalization would help. And I was a graduate student. I was teaching a class. I had papers to write and papers to grade. Besides that, I was a veteran. I’ve jumped from airplanes. I’ve been to Afghanistan. I’ve seen way worse than a little suicide. And there’s no way I’d ever jump off a parking garage. I’m too afraid of heights.

But the psychiatrist wouldn’t budge. She was very kind, and her voice was soft, but I couldn’t change her mind.

“You’re resisting treatment,” she said. “That indicates that you’ve lost perspective on how serious your situation has become.”

Again, I disagreed. I thought I was a model patient. I thought I was getting better. And I was. In a way. I mean, I still wasn’t eating eating regular meals. And I couldn’t make myself do dishes. And I had memories of cutting open my own wrist, even though I’d never tried it. But I was still doing well in school. And my students liked me. Even if I was too depressed to grade papers.

“I hope you’ll agree to go to the hospital,” the psychiatrist said. “If you don’t, though, I’ll have to call the police.”

In the hospital, no one seemed to care that I was a graduate student, or that I taught an undergraduate course, or that I was a veteran. Instead, they only asked about symptoms. They wanted to chart just how sad I was. They wanted to give me resources and referrals to treat the mental illness. If they asked about my life outside depression, it was only to remind me that I had “something to live for.”

They assigned me a new psychiatrist. He prescribed my first round of medication. And he met with me each day to monitor my progress, to evaluate whether I was a danger to myself or to others.

"And how are you feeling today, Mr. Edel?"

"A little better, I guess? I understand now why I'm here." *It's because of liability. You're afraid I'll kill myself. And then my parents might sue. Or the police will get involved. And you don't want that. So as long as I pretend I'm safe and you sign the right paperwork, we can each go on our merry way.*

He jotted a note in my chart. "So you're accepting treatment, then?"

I nodded. I allowed the hesitation to remain in my voice. It's easier to appear receptive when you still seem shy. It also helps when your memory is working, and you can parrot back the words from another psychiatrist.

"I feel like I'm gaining some perspective," I said. "I guess my situation was more serious than I realized."

No—it wasn't hard pretending I was "better." Or at least "stable." But it was boring. And I wanted to talk to someone—to be honest about my *real* feelings. But I couldn't trust anyone walking the halls of the psychiatric ward. I didn't even trust the other patients. I figured one of them might talk to the nurses, or that my real thoughts of suicide might slip out during a therapy session. And so I improvised. I'm a writer—as long as I have paper and something to write with, I can share my feelings whenever and wherever I want. And so each day, I'd dig a crayon out of the art box in the community room, turn over the lunch menu to expose the empty white back of the page, and write poems about death.

I think it helped.

The day after I was released from the hospital, I began six weeks of group therapy. But compared to the other patients, I thought I was in good shape. And I knew I didn't belong. I was stable, after all. I was a graduate student with a tuition waiver and a teaching assistantship. Thanks to those years in the army, I had paid off my own car. Thanks to G.I. Bill, I could afford my months of Chipotle, when my entire diet consisted of two Chipotle burritos a day, plus the occasional bowl of cereal.

And I was young. At twenty-eight, I was the youngest one in therapy. I was the only one younger than our social worker. At twenty-nine, she didn't seem old enough for her job. But maybe I envied her? Sometimes, I imagined that she and I were living parallel career tracks. She went to graduate school for two years, and then spent five years working with patients. I was going to graduate school for two years, and had previously spent five years in the army. She talked with people about their feelings—I had shot plastic targets with a machine gun.

The others were in their thirties, forties, or fifties. Most of their struggles were on the level of bare survival. Some had been homeless. One stayed in a small room at the YMCA, and he only came on the days he could dig out bus fare. Another was looking forward to her next round of electroconvulsive therapy. She said it was the only thing that helped her depression. She took lithium, too, but that barely took the edge off.

Still, one of the hardest stories came from a single mother. She was doing well, but her teenage daughter had taken over all the cooking and cleaning, while also attending high school and working part time. The mother—who suffered depression, like me—was in tears as she admitted her failure as a human being. "I'm her *mother*," she said. "*I'm* supposed to be taking care of *her*."

The social worker gave reassurance. She explained that the patient was a good mother. "You've raised her to be strong," the social worker said. "And she must really, really care about you. She knows love because of you."

I wanted to laugh. Did our social worker understand love? She seemed too healthy to get it. She arrived each day in her pressed slacks and her cardigans. And her whole life just reeked of *balance*. Even when she talked about pulling an all-night shift in the Emergency Room, you could tell she was rested. Tired, maybe, but *rested*. I figured there was no way she understood what any of us were going through. Besides—I was young. I was in graduate school, and I had a future. Unlike the other patients, I had never been trapped in the downward spiral of housing assistance and Medicaid. My biggest transportation concern came once a year, when I renewed my parking sticker. Those first days of group therapy, it was easy to feel as if I was somehow different from the others. And not just different, but special. And I'm sure the social worker heard this specialness every time I spoke.

During the first one-on-one meeting, as she was putting together my individual treatment plan, she tried to help me understand. But I could tell she was frustrated. She kept giving me the card with the suicide prevention hotline. She wanted me to give them a call, just for practice. So that if I ever was alone and *actually* suicidal, I'd at least call them first. But I kept refusing. I told her I didn't like phones. And that I couldn't bother the hotline operators unless it was really serious. And that, even if I was about to kill myself, I probably wouldn't find it serious enough to call.

The social worker didn't appreciate my excuses.

"Do you know the real difference, between your case and theirs?" she asked.

"That I have something to live for?"

She shook her head. “Tomorrow, I know they’ll be here. They’ll wake up, they’ll pay the bus fare, or they’ll walk. They might show up a few hours late, but they’ll be here. You, on the other hand, might actually die.”

I think I snickered. Or maybe I cracked a joke. That was my thing, back then—I told jokes about dying. I know that’s a symptom of suicidal ideation, but even that was entertaining. Not much else was. Back then, death alone seemed funny.

The social worker didn’t laugh.

“You’re still young,” she said. “Some of the other patients have also been to school. Some had good jobs. Many are pretty smart. It’s possible that you just haven’t reached the bottom yet.”

It’s been eight years. Her words haunt me still.

Child Bearing

“Daddy,” my son asks, “does everybody like yogurt?”

It’s seven in the morning, and he should be getting his shoes on. Instead, we’re eating breakfast. He’ll eat another breakfast at school, but I see much of what they offer as empty sugar: juice, brownie bars, and skim milk. So I like it when he wakes up early and asks for breakfast. I can barely hold my eyes open as I brew my coffee, but at least my son is eating.

Besides, it’s these little moments when I explain the world to him.

“Not everyone likes yogurt,” I tell him. “Some people think it’s too sour. And if you’re lactose intolerant, it’ll really upset your stomach.”

I don't actually know how true this is. Do the bacteria in the yogurt consume the lactose? I'm guessing no. But my brother, who is allergic to milk, can tolerate cheese and yogurt just fine, so the bacteria must do something that matters. I just don't know what.

Today, however, my ignorance is acceptable. Gawyn won't ask about the lactose in his yogurt—instead, he'll fixate on the words. *Daddy,* I'm sure he'll say, *what's lactose intolant?*

This is how our conversations usually go—he'll ask a question, I'll give him the kind of answer I'd give one of my undergrads, and then he'll go on asking questions until either he's bored or I've gone hoarse with dehydration. Sometimes, I curl into a desiccated husk of empty knowledge—kind of like the mother spider who sacrifices her own still-living carcass to the insatiable hunger of her young. Because explaining a term like "lactose intolerance" to a four-year-old is like chewing off your own arm.

But today, Gawyn doesn't even notice the lactose or the intolerance. "Daddy," he asks, "what's a stomach?"

Oh—that's easy. "It's your tummy," I tell him.

"What's an upset stomach?"

"It's like a tummy ache."

"What's that?"

"Like when your tummy hurts."

"When's that?"

"Um."

I know my child has had tummy aches. I've seen him cry because he is constipated and cannot understand why the poop won't come out. But to him, that doesn't register as memory of the word "pain." He understands when his arm hurts, or if he has a cut that hurts, but the idea of

deeper pain? I don't know how he processes that. He puts band-aids on Dino when the dinosaur plushie "got burned" because "his food is too hot," but does that indicate a deeper empathy? Or is it simply a habit Gawyn has picked up from the half-dozen boxes of band-aids I keep in the medicine cabinet just for him? And I have my doubts about the empathy. Because the first thing Gawyn does after bandaging up his dinosaur is to grab Dino's neck, stick Dino's face in his mouth, and bite down hard.

So I'm pretty sure my son doesn't understand pain. And it's not like I can demonstrate. I mean, seriously—how do you "explain" the concept of pain to one who has never known it? How do you explain it to someone you cannot bear to see hurt?

My son does not know I'm depressed. He doesn't know what depression means, or why it is bad, or why my own attorney would question my case for custody. It's hard enough convincing my child that I have physical limitations.

But I am making progress. I have, somehow, convinced him that I am old and worn out. He doesn't know why I drop my keys, or why I lose my grip when I pull out my phone, but he does understand that I can't always lift him up. Though he often forgets. We might be walking to Walgreens, and we'll be at that point of sidewalk only a block away from the apartment, and he'll decide he doesn't want to walk anymore.

"Pick me up!" he says.

"I'm sorry," I tell him, "I can't. Not today. My neck hurts too much." Because once I pick him up, he'll want me to carry him all the way to Walgreens, half a mile away. And I can't do that. I want to tell him that the pain has settled over my vertebrae, leaving my skull to float upon simmering embers. But that's neither true nor relevant. The pain is usually a dull ache, but

sometimes it will travel. Sometimes, the muscles will gradually tighten under the weight of the day, stretching the tendons and ligaments into a taut web. These are the times when, realistically speaking, I can still lift my child. Physically, I am still capable. He's not yet forty pounds—given sufficient leverage, I still maneuver storage bins and that exercise bike all on my own. The bike alone was seventy-five pounds—almost twice the weight of my child. And that was awkward weight—a steel frame encased in a cardboard box nearly six feet long and four feet tall. Because I couldn't lift the thing, someone at Walmart helped me hoist it onto a shopping cart for checkout. But from there, it was all me. Guiding it into the back of my new Kia, sliding it across the upholstery, turning down seats and disconnecting the car seat and anchoring it all with packing straps—all me. Unloading it at home was again just me. Balancing those seventy-five pounds onto the narrow spine of Gawyn's wagon, squeezing it through the doorway of our apartment, managing to lower it down to the carpet a corner at a time without crushing my foot or knocking through a section of drywall—again, all me. And so, it's a lie to say I can't pick up my son—it's that I shouldn't, and usually choose not to.

"Daddy," he asks, "why your back hurt?"

Why? Oh, many reasons. I could give him a list. There's the real reason, I suspect—because in high school, I carried a twenty-five pound pack of books back and forth to school almost every day. And this wasn't a good backpack—not at all. It was the standard schoolbag—narrow shoulder straps, neither framed nor padded, and without the basic protection of a waist strap. Instead of cinching the weight to my pelvis and holding my head high, as I should have done, I shouldered the bag like the tough guy I imagined myself to be. Shoulders stooped, head forward, I was a tortoise with books.

But I was a fast tortoise—damn fast. In the early September mornings, as the maple leaves began to brown and fall, I raced myself to school. Even with the extra twenty-five pounds, I'd run the half mile from our house to the train station. To keep the bag from bouncing hard against my back and shoulders, I had to run with a kind of awkward grace. Bending my knees a few extra degrees, I kept my hips low and my torso steady. There was no bouncing or jumping—instead, each footfall was a graceful leap forward, the heel beginning its forward roll to the toes even before my foot fully touched the ground.

"You're not supposed to run with a backpack," people told me, but run I did. And hard. Because I was always late for school. Always. I couldn't get myself up and moving in the mornings—it just didn't happen. Sometimes I slept through my alarm—other times, I became engrossed in reading the back of the cereal box as I ate my Cheerios. And so I ran—ran until sweat soaked through my clothes, ran until the moisture dripped from the end of my nose like rain. While my normal friends drank coffee or Pepsi or Mountain Dew, my wake-up routine involved a lifetime of chiropractic care.

But I can't tell my son this—he wouldn't understand. Not even my parents understand. "I don't get why you *insisted* on carrying every one of your books home every night," my mom says, even now. It's a conversation we have every year, whenever the topic of neck pain comes up. And because now, at thirty-six, I can barely carry a diaper bag, the topic of neck pain comes up a lot.

"It's because you're a pack rat," my mom says. Or, when she's feeling particularly charitable: "You are your own worst enemy."

By her tone, you'd know my mom means it kindly. Almost as a term of endearment. "This is my other special needs child," she used to say, introducing me to her friends. My brother

is autistic, and he was institutionalized at the age of ten, but I was also special needs. “He never remembers where anything is,” Mom used to say. I also had no sense of color, and no coordination, and no common sense. “What happened to my child?” she used to ask, anytime I’d ask about plates or dishes or anything else that I should have been able to find on my own. From the fifth grade onward, the story was that I had been replaced by aliens, and that this was the reason why I no longer knew how to put away the dishes. During my trips home from college, Mom would be aghast at my perpetual lack of awareness. “You didn’t even notice!” became a common refrain. She’d change the plates in the china cabinet, or they’d repaint the walls in the dining room, or they’d turn my bedroom into a guest room, and I apparently never noticed these things. Except, of course I noticed when the pale gray walls of my old room were supplanted by a light shade of burgundy. My old bed was replaced with a plush fold-out sofa, and the soft white laminate of my old desk was nowhere to be seen. “You probably didn’t even notice,” my mom joked. But of course I did. It was only my sophomore year.

Strangely, they wondered why I never came home for spring break. Or summers. Or any holidays other than Christmas.

But these are not the stories I can tell my son. I can barely tell them here, to the electronic anonymity of a keyboard and a screen. But I have to tell my son something. Because his questions never end.

“Daddy,” he asks, “why you worn out? Why your back hurt?”

“It’s because I’m old,” I tell him. Except that, numerically, I’m not. I’m thirty-six. My Uncle Rick, in his fifties, was still running 5K and 10K races. My uncle Bob, at seventy-two, while dying from his second round of pancreatic cancer, was still unloading seed grain from the back of a truck. According to my mom—his youngest sister—he said she shouldn’t help with the

lifting. “You see that pink dust on the kernels?” He pointed to the chalky pastel rouge coating the hard seeds that would grow into yellow corn. “That’s all pesticides and fertilizer.” And so, at seventy-two—three months before he died—he told my mom that he would unload the corn and chemicals by himself. “It’s too late for me,” he said. “I already have cancer.”

But at thirty-six, I don’t run. I don’t lift bags of seed grain. If I hold my son in my arms for too many minutes, my biceps burn from weakness. Those tendons in my back—the taut strings of tissue that should hold my spine straight—will curl into knots of electric pain. Most of the pain settles into my neck—right where skull meets spine—but sometimes it travels. Sometimes it will take up residence behind one shoulder blade or the other, or at the junction of neck, shoulder, and trapezius. More recently, the pain will sometimes spark through the gap between ribs and sternum, on the left side, just over the heart. It’s always tender when I push in on that spot. If I push hard enough, I can make the pain spark all the way around to my back. It sizzles like a wire strung through my ribs. Like if you had a string of Christmas lights plugged in to your toaster. And then looped through the dried evergreen limbs sprouting from your left ventricle.

I can’t really complain, though. Except for the molten embers of the upper neck, most of the pain is transient. And at its worst, the pain now is better than it was. Even in the mornings, when I’m in the shower, and my right deltoid goes numb as I raise my arms to wash my hair, that is an improvement over the past. And I forgive myself for the slowness of changing light bulbs. I reach up, I unscrew the bulb halfway, and then I take a break. When my palms go numb, I lower my hands to my waist, and I wait for the tingling to recede. I need full sensation in my palms before I reach up, grip the plastic base at the spirals of fluorescent glass, and make the crucial final twist that will drop the weight of the bulb from the socket into my outstretched fingers.

Yes—that's an improvement. Because that's just the transient numbness of constricted blood flow. In the army, the pain came from compressed nerves. It got so bad that it would flow down to my hands, even that one time as I sat alone in my car waiting for the tears to dry. The pain, when it first began, crept down my left arm. I felt it in the long bones of my arm and in my skin, but not the muscles. In the meat of my arms, the waves of pain manifested as an empty burning, like a fire without air. The chilled flames drained down the triceps, hooking a turn past the elbow. They flowed through the ulna, and into the ring and pinkie fingers. But after the pain settled in, it was gradually replaced by numbness. My arms, at their worst, became lengths of stiff putty. I could move them, but I could not feel them. Only as the numbness faded did the pain return. And so I would regress through the bone-deep burning until the tides of fire receded to the point of "normal."

With patience and ibuprofen, it was almost bearable. Even as the pain worsened, I managed. At first, it was only on the left side—it took days before the dull heat swelled through the whole arm, occasionally swallowing the entire limb into the unseen slosh of unfeeling. It was months before the inflammation claimed both arms. Months before I was reduced to sitting alone in my car, both hands on the wheel because it hurt too much to leave them hanging at my sides. That day, there was nowhere safe to go. I was stationed at Fort Bragg, and I was a paratrooper. So I sat alone in the parking lot at the fitness center, still sweating through my army greens, and cried until there were no more tears to cry.

But my son does not understand this. And I don't want him to. I hope he never knows the sensation of back pain that reaches all the way down to your fingers. But I cannot pick him up. I no longer have the stomach for such nausea. I've taken ibuprofen to the point that I couldn't

swallow food, and I've had the days when sparks from my neck set my left eyelid twitching. I now lack the emotional stamina to be so strong.

Though the pain was worse then, it was also easier. Back then—maybe because of the army—I could dry-swallow the pills and tell myself I was well. But I am no longer so young. I am thirty-six. On the days when the pain is bad, I lie down on my bed with a rolled-up towel under my neck, and I stare at the ceiling until the molten lead of pain eases to an ashen charcoal.

Still, I don't want my son to feel an absence of love. I don't want him to feel that I've abandoned him. Especially since before, when he was lighter, I carried him as much as I could. I tucked him into the crook of my arm and carried him around the apartment. During his first week drawing breath, there were mornings he woke up at four, and I took him out to the living room so his mother could sleep. There, I'd sit on the couch, cuddling his warmth to my chest as I streamed Netflix. Those early mornings with him—with the tiny bundle I called my baby peanut—they make my heart ache. With every inch and every pound, my tiny infant son grew further and further beyond my reach, too heavy to hoist. The closest I now come to those moments are at night, as he grows tired. Then, I do pick him up. The walk to his bed is only a few feet, and that is a pain I can manage as he melts into my embrace, pressing his face to my cheek as he longs for rest while fighting sleep.

Parenting the Pain

Half of parenting, I think, is the management of pain. And there are certain types of pain I'm very good with. My toddler dripping blood on the kitchen floor? A small shard of glass stuck in his finger? The entire kitchen floor covered with the remains of a Pyrex serving dish? I can

deal with that. Alcohol, tweezers, bandaids—no sweat. My child screaming into my ear so loud it hurts? I just hug him closer. “I know, little guy. I know it hurts. It’ll be okay. It’ll be okay.”

Then there was the time my wife and I were late for a pediatrician’s appointment. This was at the height of the divorce, during those months when we no longer spoke to each other. There could be no phone calls to discuss dinner plans, no negotiations over parenting time—it got so bad, that whenever we were at home and we started to talk, the little guy would turn to me: “You no talk.” Then he would turn to his mommy: “You no talk.” And then he’d return to eating his dinner.

In the tense silence, feeding our child became the new pastime. I gave him bite-sized slices of pork chop, and Lek served up scoops of rice. Mangoes, green beans, Thai noodles, rigatoni—every night became a competition to see which parent could serve the best food first. We cajoled, we wheedled, we encouraged—anything we could do to convince him to eat more of the *better* parent’s food. Since we couldn’t talk to each other, we redoubled all efforts to engage our child. Lek sat him down in the dining room to offer a spoonful of rice, and then I promised him a plateful of apple wedges in the kitchen. If Gawyn hopped out of his chair for the apples, Lek used the sweet promise of soy sauce to coax him back.

This worked fine for basic needs—Gawyn never left the table hungry. Sometimes, his escape from dinner meant fending us off. Stuffed and impatient, he batted away cups of juice and forkfuls of pasta. Stomping away from the table, he went off to play trains. Then, the question became which parent could do a *better* job of playing trains.

The divorce settled into a routine of animosity. But when it came to actual plans, the enforced silence became a problem. Sure, we could argue and bicker about whether to go to the zoo, but sometimes Gawyn got sick. Sometimes he needed a physical. We had to coordinate

pediatrician appointments around work schedules. And sometimes we ran late. Usually, I ran late. I've spent my entire life running late. Except that, sometimes, I'm early. Like the time we were supposed to meet at the library, and then drive over to Gawyn's appointment. It had been a bad week—a court date, trips to lawyers, who knows what. I just knew Lek wouldn't wait for me—I just *knew* it. One minute late, and she'd be *gone* without me. So I showed up on time. Almost on time. But Lek was nowhere to be seen. She and my child were missing.

I checked both floors of the library, and then I called her. No answer. So I texted—still no reply.

Yeah—I was thrilled. *Not this shit again*. Though I don't know why I was afraid she'd leave without me—she never had before. We'd coordinated pediatrician appointments before. But that day was different. Probably because I tried so hard to be on time, but I was still late. Not that it mattered—my car was parked a couple blocks away. I could've driven myself, no sweat. But I was still pissed. I was tired of the games. Tired of fighting over who would rock the little guy to sleep, tired of fighting over who would feed him dinner, tired of seeing her face every fucking time I walked through the door to our apartment.

So I searched the library again. Then I went outside, determined to find her car in the parking lot, convinced that she had already tucked him into his car seat. Or, if they weren't there, I'd just stand by the car, waiting. She might sneak past me in the library, but I knew they couldn't go anywhere without the car. We were way too broke for cab fare. I knew there was no way she'd work that hard to piss me off, but imagination and reality don't always align.

I didn't see them outside—I heard them. Gawyn was crying. He'd fallen on the sidewalk, cutting open both knees. He was wailing. And Lek was trying to console him. She was knelt there on the sidewalk hugging him, but it wasn't working. The cuts were too deep. He must have

been running fast when he tripped. It's been a whole year, and he still has pale pink circles on both knees from that afternoon. By the time I rounded the corner to find them, he was inconsolable. And there was my soon-to-be-ex-wife, hugging him, cooing to him, reassuring him. But the moment she saw me, her expression changed. Not to fear or to anger, but to accusation. She was waiting for me to explode. I saw it in her eyes. *Go ahead,* she wanted to say. *Try and blame me.* Because when you're in the middle of divorce and your child is bleeding, anything is possible.

I don't know what happened. I was angry—so convinced they would leave without me. Or that we would be late to the pediatrician, and then forced to reschedule. But that anger drained. I felt my heart slow, and then cool. I didn't blame Lek for the cuts. I didn't even feel the need to. Instead, a calm descended. It's a beautiful kind of calm, this quiet certainty of knowing exactly what to do. I only feel it when the absolute shit has hit the proverbial fan. Because in those moments of disastrous clarity, there are no bills to pay. The thousands and thousands of dollars owed to my credit card simply cease to exist. Suddenly, we were no longer late for an appointment with the pediatrician. Instead, there was me, there was my son, and there was this person accompanying us who I was divorcing. She loved him just as much as I did, and I didn't care. For those few moments, we were no longer competing.

I suppose she could have told me to stay back, but she didn't. I walked over, picked up Gawyn from her embrace, and held him close. I whispered into his ear. "It's okay, it's okay," I said. He wailed until my ears rang, but still I held him close. I carried him back inside the library, to the bathroom, where I rinsed his cuts. I told him that those cuts must hurt, and I hugged him more, and I dabbed the foaming hand soap on those cuts to clean them, and I dabbed them with the soap and the rough brown paper towels to clean the cut without hurting him more. Which is

strange, for me. Surreal, almost. I felt outside myself. I wanted to know why I wasn't angry. I wanted to know why I was so calm as I sat my little guy on the sink. I wanted to know how Lek had consented to wait outside the men's room while I rinsed his cuts. But most of all, I wanted to know about the calm. Because when I was a kid, my mom would cleanse my cuts hard. With a dish rag. And soap. And a scrubbing motion. And lots of cold water. And then more scrubbing. With soap. Hard dish soap. To make sure they were clean.

Anxiety

I don't know why exactly I know this kind of calm. I can't tell you why it only descends during real pain, and not during the rest of my life, when the world is pain. I suspect it maybe comes from my father, who never appears anxious. If anything, he is too calm. Unperturbable to the point of lazy. His angers are so rare I barely remember two or three—they never lasted past a few words.

Or maybe this calm comes from my mom, who is always assertive and brilliant, whatever the circumstances. This is what makes her so effective as a nurse—no matter the situation, she is the kind of person who always *knows* what to do. And she has the guts to scrub her kid's bleeds. Which is probably why they were destined to divorce. Given their different personalities, I still don't know how my parents managed to marry in the first place, let alone stay married for ten years, and then have kids. And I'm still afraid to ask.

But let's be real—I've seen my mom flip out. Sometimes I feel as if my entire childhood was an endless reel of my mother and stepfather flipping out, punctuated by moments of confused intimacy. Like the time when I was four or five, and my mom crept into my bed because my stepfather had kicked her out of the bedroom. That night, I curled up into a ball on

the corner of the bed, afraid to take up space, afraid to move. A half-roll to the left, and I would have bumped my mom's feet—a half-roll to the right, and I would have landed on the floor. There was also the New Year's Eve when I was ten or eleven, when my mom fell down the stairs and broke her shoulder. I don't know how it happened—my brother and I were down on the main floor, and I remember my mom and stepdad upstairs yelling at each other. That's always how it was—they'd yell and yell, and their voices carried through the whole house. And back then, they still drank, so I'm sure they drank for New Year's. But I have no idea how drunk they were. Were they just tipsy and angry? Or was David plastered again, like the time he drank so much that he tripped and fell and cut himself on the barbecue tongs hanging from that prized Weber grill?

I tell myself that I should remember these moments better. I tell myself that, if I'm going to write what happened, I should do more to figure out what actually happened. But I wasn't *really* there when my mom fell down the stairs. I was with my brother, on the main floor. I think we were watching TV. Or reading a book. Or cowering in a corner. I don't know. I have zero memory. All I remember is the sound of yelling—all my senses fixated on that yelling, tracking its progress through the house. From downstairs, I mapped the trail of their argument as they moved from their bedroom to the TV room and back. And then I got nervous, as their voices neared the back porch. My shoulders tensed as the door upstairs opened. Because that's what I listened for—to know when they'd come back down the stairs.

Except they didn't. Instead, there was the thud-thud-thud as my mom fell down the stairs.

I have no memory of what came next. Did my mom take a taxi to the ER? Was there an ambulance? Did my brother and I stay home with a babysitter? Or did we sleep in the waiting

room in the ER? Honestly, I don't know. So I assume we must have stayed home. Maybe we were hiding from it all, and then fell asleep.

A few weeks later my mom had her arm in a sling as she hosted my birthday party. For years afterward, she would tell us about how that was a tough time.

"I don't know how I did it," she'd say. "Your birthday that year was a nightmare. I should have just cancelled it."

People don't realize this, but I track everyone around me. On trips home for the holidays, I will lie still in bed as my parents move about the house. Carefully—oh so carefully—I listen for their movements. The clatter of plates on the countertop, the soft swish of water from the kitchen faucet, the gentle sigh of a floorboard as a foot is placed and then removed.

It's more acute when I'm with my parents, but I track everyone. The opening and closing of office doors, the distant ding of an elevator at the far end of the building, the gentle melody of the laughter you'd thought you kept to yourself. If you step past my office, I'll follow the crumple of fibers as shoe meets carpet.

In the mornings at home with my parents, though—that's when I *listen*. There, on the bed, I lie in silence until their departure is certain. I follow the back and forth of their conversation as it saunters out through the storm door—the squeak of the spring, the smack as door meets doorway. Or, if they don't go out, I'll listen for the rustle of newspaper in the dining room. The occasional clink of a ceramic mug, the barely audible swish of coffee from the carafe. And it's then—when they are over in the dining room, just around the corner from the guest room—that I will gently roll from the bed, careful to disturb the covers as little as possible. Sheets make a sound as you slide your feet across them—it's hard to move entirely without

sound. But that's nothing compared to the door. Hinges and doorknobs are the worst. You have to grip the knob firmly, turning it slowly while also holding the door steady. And then, because doors squeak, I open it quickly—fast enough that the high pitch of the squeal escapes the range of human hearing. Or at least is quiet enough that my parents must wonder if they heard it. Was that a door opening? Or simply a draft from the windows?

Not that it matters. I don't need to be silent forever. Just long enough to cross the hallway, slip into the bathroom, and then seal the door shut behind me.

If I do it right, they won't know I'm awake until they hear the toilet flush.

I tell myself that anxiety is a normal thing. Or at least a natural thing. Maybe even forgivable. But that doesn't make it "right." I mean, there's no reason for me to avoid my parents in the early morning. It's not like they're gonna stop me from going to the bathroom. Worst case scenario, they'll offer me a cup of coffee. But in those early morning hours before I'm dressed, I don't want them to see me in my sweatpants and sweatshirt. I've been to Afghanistan, and I've lived in barracks with communal showers, but I feel like I need to be dressed and ready before I say good morning. Socks, cargo pants, some kind of rugged button-down shirt. And shoes. I must wear shoes. I don't know what it is, but I can only feel safe when I'm wearing shoes. Especially in hotel rooms. Or anywhere I haven't been before. Even in my own apartment, it's hard making myself walk around in socks only. But I don't vacuum enough to wear shoes on my carpet. And at least I have socks. Bare feet, though—that's almost unthinkable.

This is why I hate visiting people in their homes. When I arrive at a friend's house, and then see an ocean of freshly vacuumed carpet, I cringe. Instinctively, I look to either side, checking for the mat by the door with the shoes. I know I'll see one. Or, worse yet, they'll have a

closet. With hangers. And places to set things. Even so, I wait for the inevitable welcome. “Hey! Come on in!” they’ll say. “You can set your shoes over there.”

I can’t refuse to remove my shoes—it’s rude. Instead, I wait as long as manners allow, and then carefully unlace them. I wear hiking boots, mostly—anything with a high ankle, the laces double-knotted. I can never just slip them off. Instead, I must carefully remove them, and then set them in a place where I know I’ll find them again. Near the door, of course—but not so close that someone might inadvertently kick my shoes outside. If I have a backpack or a jacket or anything, that must also be placed strategically—preferably near my shoes. Coat hangers are nice because they are stable. I can tolerate a closet for my jacket if coat hangers are involved. Beds, however, are terrible. People always go stacking coats on beds, and I hate it. What if my coat gets lost under the pile? What if someone decides to shove all the coats aside, and then my coat gets wedged against a wall, lost to an abyss that somehow ends in a place called Narnia?

And so I stake out corners. I stalk the furniture. I seek the empty gaps in social consciousness that people dare not disturb—that corner behind the flatscreen during a football game, or the floor beside the couch in the side room where the shades are drawn. Ideally, it should be a place where no one will sit or stand or anything, because I never know if I’ll be brave enough to manage an “excuse me?” And I never know when I’ll need to leave. Will I last an hour? Two hours? Or the whole time? Given the uncertainty, I’ve rehearsed lines for early departure. “Afraid I have to go,” I’ll say. “My pumpkin awaits!” Or “Thanks so much for having me! It was good to see you, too! Yes, yes, definitely—we should do this again sometime. Oh, I know, I just don’t get out enough. Yeah—grad school. That parenting thing.”

It helps that I have such good, valid excuses. It's so much easier to hide anxiety behind a wall of constant endeavor. It's the same trick I use to hide my depression. Like on the phone with my parents, when they call to talk with the grandchild but end up talking with me instead.

"How are you?" Mom asks.

"Tired."

"Why are you so tired all the time?"

"Just been really busy."

"But you're always tired," she says. "Maybe you should try sleeping."

Right. *Maybe you should try shutting the fuck up,* I want to say. *Maybe you should try raising a child, going through a divorce, and completing a Ph.D. program—all at the same goddamn time. While taking antidepressants.*

But no—I'm better than that. Now I am. It's been years since I cussed out my mom over the phone. And besides, how would she sympathize? She raised two children. Going through a divorce. While head nurse of an ER in Chicago. She at least saved a few lives while going through her personal hell.

"I'm in grad school," I explain. Because, duh. Except this is never enough for them. It's never been enough. Because they want some better explanation for why I have spent my entire life exhausted.

This is the point in the conversation where my stepdad chimes in.

"Well, maybe you should go to bed earlier."

And maybe you should go fuck yourself. But no. I don't say that. I don't even think it. It's more of a reflex. Some kind of repressed army-think, from back in the days when that kind of conversation would have been appropriate. Expected, maybe. Because in the army, expletives

dripped from the tongue like honey, almost as an endearment. *Good morning* was replaced with *Hey, motherfuckers.* But then, the army was a place where, if someone told you to *Shut your cockholster*, it meant it was time to *Close your mouth and be silent, you motherfucker.*

But these are my parents—I can't talk to them like this. But I also can't tell them that I'm on antidepressants. And so I have to hold the line. I absolutely cannot say the first real explanation that rises to my throat: *You try raising a child while clinically depressed.*

My son doesn't like it when my parents call. Mostly, he ignores them. They joke about the fact that he always turns his back to the phone. "Will we get to see your face?" Mom asks him. David will chuckle: "Look—another view of Gawyn's big stinky feet!"

When Gawyn gets tired of listening to them, he walks away from the phone—just picks up his toys and walks to another room.

"Oh, wow," Mom will say. "What a lovely view of your floor!"

It's a weekly ritual, my parents calling over FaceTime to talk with their first and only grandchild. They talk about how good it is that they get to see him so regularly. "My mom never got to see you guys this much," my mom says. "It always took you and Sean a day or so to remember who she was." And they repeat it the once or twice a year when they see Gawyn in person, talking about how he always remembers them.

Oh, he remembers you all right, I want to say.

It's been years since I've willingly allowed myself to enter the frame while talking with my parents over FaceTime. I think the last time it happened, I was in Thailand. David's parents had

gone up to North Carolina to visit them, so Gawyn and I woke up for an early-morning talk with parents and grandparents on the far side of the world. It had taken a few days to coordinate that time slot—apparently, there was only a two-hour window on a Saturday that they'd all be available. After dinner on Saturday, but before David's parents went to bed. Would *five work?* my mom texted.

Since it's a twelve-hour time difference, it's easy to calculate the time difference. Five in the evening in North Carolina corresponds to five in the morning in Thailand.

That's a little early for us, I texted back. *Maybe seven?*

Over FaceTime that day, my mom asked the same question as always: "Why do you look so tired?"

Really? This again?

"It's the jetlag," I said. "It's a twelve-hour time difference."

"That's almost as bad as Australia or China," someone said. "That's like a fourteen hour time difference."

Was it my mom? Was it David? I don't remember. But I tried explaining that no, twelve hours is the maximum possible time difference. Once you hit fourteen hours, you start going back to only a ten hour difference.

"But wasn't Afghanistan like a fourteen hour difference?"

I closed my eyes. I had jetlag. I had grad school. I had a nine-month-old child in my arms drinking formula. I wasn't tired—I was ready to curl up and die. And this was the time in my marriage when my wife was threatening to stay in Thailand with our child. But no, I couldn't

mention that over the phone, either. Couldn't breathe a word about it. And so I talked about jet lag. And time zones.

It helped that David's dad was there. He had served in the navy after World War II, and he'd been stationed in Japan—he understood time zones. He said something polite and accurate that shut everyone up. Because really, that's all I wanted—I just wanted everyone to slow down and stop talking and let me go back to sleep. Except, no—that was impossible. Gawyn was awake and hungry, the roosters in the yard next door were calling out to the sun, and my grandparents were getting ready to go to bed.

Not that it mattered. My grandfather asked if Gillette had gone out of business.

Through the haze of exhaustion, it took me a few minutes to figure out what he was talking about. He mimed running a razor over his cheek. He was smiling, though. I had a beard. It had been months since I'd used a bona fide razor. I was like *Okay, I don't feel like this right now, but I'll go with it.* And I would have. Until my mom said something about my t-shirt. Apparently, it was ugly. Or old. "Why do you still even own that?" she asked.

"Seriously," my stepdad added, chuckling. "Burn it."

Perspicacity

It's hard to claim memory loss when you forget words like "perspicacity." It means something like being a genius with words. I tried explaining this to Google, but Google replied with words like "talent" and "brilliance" and "flair."

So I tried synonyms. I had the perfect synonym. But I couldn't remember it. I was trying to say that someone might be a Mozart with words. Except the real word I wanted was

"virtuoso." So I googled "Mozart" and "child" and "music" to find "prodigy." And then I used "prodigy" to help me find "virtuoso." Somehow, I later found "perspicacity."

There is a better word, maybe, but perspicacity is the word I wanted. It's a word I don't believe I've ever used before, but I knew it existed. It is—and has always been—the only one occupying that intersection of cobweb in my brain where a human being can master a sufficiently elevated linguistic capacity for discourse to imply Mensa-level Pentium intellect with a doctoral degree. And I needed to convey this exact concept in a sentence I was writing for my dissertation. I wanted to say that smart people use smart words to reassure smart readers that they do indeed write with the smartness befitting a person of real smarts, but I needed to say it in a smarter way. For this single crucial sentence, perspicacious was the right word. I just couldn't remember the letters. Except that it started with a "p." And that it had like four or five syllables. And an "s" sound. Somewhere.

"Daddy," my son asks, "why you use the wrong word?"

It wasn't the first time he's asked. We sat at our table in the dining room, eating dinner, and I said I'd get him more chicken. But then I corrected myself. "More salmon, I mean." Because we weren't eating chicken that night. Our protein that evening was a batch of frozen, wild-caught Pacific salmon. Sometimes, Gawyn will help me prepare it—he likes sprinkling on the pepper and the salt, and sometimes he lets me add basil, too. I have a metal folding chair set up for him in the kitchen, and he stands on it so he can loom over the counter, even reaching across the stove. This is how I train him to help with pancakes and chicken and mashed sweet potatoes—I set up a chair for him to stand on, and then I ask him to hold his hand over the pan to let me know if it's warm enough to cook with, and then I let him twist the pepper grinder as

much as he'd like. It's my hope that, as he gets older, he'll learn to plan and prepare entire meals on his own.

But that night, I cooked by myself while Gawyn played with his trains. "Daddy!" he'd call from the living room. "Look! Thomas hits Dino!"

And I, the dutiful father, took breaks from arranging the frozen salmon fillets in a circle on a plate for the microwave. "Omigosh, Gawyn! Why is Thomas hitting Dino again?"

This continued. Thomas the Tank Engine inflicted atrocity after atrocity upon poor Dino, and I took additional breaks from cooking to admire the imagined carnage. I thawed the fillets in the microwave, arranged them on Pyrex platter for the oven, and then sprinkled them with salt and pepper and basil. Because if Gawyn won't help, I season them however I want.

There is an art to preparing the salmon. I don't preheat my oven—instead, I start the process cold, allowing the electric heating elements to warm the bottom of the platter before the oven air reaches the dry intensity of a jet turbine in August. Then I use a timer to know when to pull them out. The package recommends between ten and fourteen minutes for thawed fillets, so I set my iPhone for twelve.

Meanwhile, Thomas the Tank Engine drove his green Dodge Viper with the black racing stripes. The pasta waited as I took a break to see.

"Daddy," Gawyn asked, "where is Dino's car?"

"Which one?" I asked, picturing the blue Hummer. The Hummer, like the Viper, is a six-dollar pull-back racer. These cars are small enough to fit in the palm of my hand—in my son's hand, they are enormous, and he grips them with steely reverence. Except that Dino does not

drive the blue Hummer. Dino has never driven the blue Hummer. The Hummer is the car Snake drives, and I knew it.

Still, I gave Gawyn the blue Hummer, picturing the four-foot-long python plushie from the Shedd Aquarium in Chicago. But I couldn't remember the python plushie's name. In my mind, his name was Dino.

Gawyn handed back the blue Hummer. "Daddy," he asked, "why you give me the wrong one?"

"I don't know." In the back of my mind, I knew exactly what happened, but the only words that my tongue could operate were "I don't know." Still, I wanted to explain the unfortunate series of neurological mishap inside my skull. Mentally, I pictured threads of spider silk. Each thread represented a neural connection—at the intersections where the threads meet, there were words and concepts. Dino the brontosaurus plushie occupied an intersection. Snake, somehow, now occupied the same intersection. But Snake wasn't supposed to be in this part of the web. I don't know how he got there, or from which part of the web his schlange plushie had fallen. And "schlange" is German for "snake." I don't know why "schlange" was the only adjective I could imagine to describe Snake. It is neither an adjective nor a word in English. But in my brain, it was the only possible word to encompass the leonine, serpentine plush that has the length of a slinky, the coloring of a frog, but none of the scales of a reptile.

So Snake occupied the wrong intersection of my thoughts. And I pictured him on the spider silk because I wanted to explain this concept to my son, the idea that neurons can misfire, the concept of how we may sometimes assign a familiar name to a familiar face, but it might the wrong name and the wrong face. But as I stood by my son, with the salmon in the oven, the timer about to go off, and the blue Hummer being the wrong vehicle for the moment, the words and

images didn't connect. There was another intersection linked to the Snake/Dino. Following a filament of silk to this new intersection led to the actual name "Snake." But where I should have seen the word "Snake," I saw nothing. There was a haze over the web. "It's the leonine schlange serpent thing," I wanted to say. But I still couldn't remember Snake's name. And there were no words to describe the web, or the misfire of neurons, or the interconnections between the hippocampus and the cerebral cortex of that disease I'm thinking of where you'll sometimes have these physical "gaps" in your brain. On an MRI, they look like cracks or fissures. I've read about it. I know it sometimes happens to people who get migraines, as I do. I have a friend who has a variant of this disease, but it only affects her hippocampus. Just a month ago, she told me that this illness has destroyed her short-term memory and concentration. She has memories of childhood, and she remembers things that she reads and watches, but only when she's directly reminded of these things. Otherwise, it's like her days are an emptiness punctuated by the memory of whatever is currently in front of her face.

She was one of my favorite students. I wrote her a recommendation for MFA programs. We're friends on Facebook, and we just talked about a month ago. I still can't remember her name.

I didn't remembered the name of this disease until the following day. It's called multiple sclerosis—the "sclerae" of sclerosis are the scars (or fissures) that build up in the brain as the long synapses of your neurons delaminate. I mean, the myelin sheath gets destroyed, probably due to an autoimmune dysfunction. The "multiple" comes because there's more than one.

This illness carries a familiar name—perhaps you've heard of it?

Meanwhile, I had to coax my child to the table to eat his dinner. Because the pasta was delayed and the vegetables were still frozen, I offered him chicken. And by chicken I meant salmon.

Which would have been fine. Except that I wasn't thinking about my dissertation. And I wasn't thinking about Snake or Dino or the blue Hummer. Instead, I was sitting at the table, next to my son. We were eating. The vegetables were now warm and steaming in their bowl between us. Gawyn had already finished his second helping of pasta. But he still had salmon on his plate. And I wanted him to eat his carrots. And by carrots, I meant the bowl of broccoli sitting between us.

But all Gawyn cared about was his pasta. "Can I have more pasta please?"

"After you eat your chicken," I said, "I'll get you more pasta." And I pointed there, at his plate, at the cut up pieces of protein called chicken. Except this chicken had fish skin on it. And it came from a sleek, silvery animal that lives in the water. And I couldn't figure out why this silvery fish animal was called chicken.

"I mean salmon," I said, finally working through all the memories of animals until I remembered that pigs and chickens are the ones that inhabit farms, whereas salmon is the one that lives in the ocean. I remembered that salmon are the ones that get caught in trawler nets, hauled up into massive ships the size of meat processing facilities, and then filleted on ice for transport back to the mainland. And yes, these were the memories I had to work through before I finally remembered that the chicken-meat-word was called *salmon*.

Gawyn took another bite of his salmon. He chewed it quickly, very intent on getting more pasta. But his thoughts were troubled. He stared at me. And he was worried.

"Daddy," he asked, "why you use the wrong word?"

I fumbled for an answer. “Sometimes I get tired, and I forget words,” I told him. And this is true. Though, given how many words I now forget, I’m no longer sure just how true that is.

Gawyn didn’t buy it, either. He’s almost four, and he notices things. Like the fact that this was the third time in a week I’d used the wrong word for something.

“But Daddy,” he asked, “why you use the wrong word *again*.”

Back in high school, I had what I called a “semi-photographic” memory. No, I couldn’t remember all the words on a page, but I could remember all the pictures. And I could remember which topics appeared on which sections of each page, in relation to the pictures.

I first discovered this in European History my freshman year. Our assigned readings came from this thick beast of a textbook—it was a full-on college textbook, the kind that would run you $120 used at a campus bookstore. It was a good five-hundred pages, and weighed several pounds. But it was also a beautiful book, in its own way. Every page was graced with full-color illustrations from five centuries of European history—a painting of Descartes, another of the *Mona Lisa*, even that original ink-press sketch of the Leviathan envisioned by Hobbes. And I still remember that the painting of Descartes showed him in a red cap in the middle of the right-hand page. The Leviathan was in the lower-left of the left-hand page. And the *Mona Lisa* is probably something I only imagine remembering because I don’t recall where it was on the page.

It’s been twenty years since I read that book. Flipping through it, I’m sure I could still find Cardinal Richelieu in his scarlet robes, and Napoleon with his hand tucked into the buttons of his uniform, and the sad visage of Admiral Nelson taking the ball of lead that claimed his life.

But those are old memories. I think of them as set memories. Anchor points, maybe. Because in high school, my life was school, and my dreams were writing. I imagined that one

day, I would write the epic science fiction space opera destined to take the throne alongside *Star Wars*. I envisioned myself churning out my books annually—a new book each year to keep my fans enthralled. To keep them happy. To keep the money rolling in. So I could keep writing. And so history became the pageant of the imagination. The machinations of a jealous cardinal, the ambitions of the brilliant soldier, and the drama of a noble admiral's death in victory: I thought I would cast the timbre of such stories into the glittering future of tomorrow.

Sometimes, I mapped out the stories. In my head, mostly. But always epic. *Epic*. A trilogy of trilogies epic. I mapped out books one, two, and three for my first series. And then the follow-up. And then the follow-up to the follow-up. The way I dreamt it, I was going to be the J.R.R. Tolkien of Asimov's Milky Way.

But that was a long time ago, and that galaxy is far away. Lately, I've narrowed my focus. The dissertation, mostly. Sometimes, I will sit at the computer, write for a few hours, and feel pleased. Sometimes, write for a few hours, and feel pleased. Sometimes, I will jot down a few notes, feel very excited about the new idea, sit down at the computer, write for a few hours, and feel pleased. And sometimes, when I go back through my files, I will discover that I have written something. Something good. Something interesting. Only a week or two before. And I won't remember starting it, let alone writing it.

As far as I can tell, I have a few hundred files like this on Google Drive. And I've only been using Google Drive for four years. From before then, I have hundreds more files—more likely thousands. Most of these are simple snippets—a page or two of some character doing something. But some of these things are connected into chapters. Once, while poking around my computer, I found a folder with a title I couldn't recall. I opened the folder to find half of a novel

that had been written, stopped, and then forgotten. It wasn't just that I'd forgotten to keep going—I'd forgotten that I ever started.

For a while, I thought I would move my life into the paperless economy. This is why I have so many files on my computer—when I write, I type. I sit, and I *go*. And I keep all my files organized into folders. I have so many stories, I've begun letter-coding them, and then numbering the letter codes. "TDL 01" brings up Chapter One from a project called *The Dark Lord*. "BH 50" is a discarded middle chapter from the project titled *Blood Harvest*. "DM" brings up the files for "Dissertation Memories." This section here is titled "DM—Memory Loss—Perspicacity." It's because I told myself I needed to write a chapter about memory loss, but I'll only remember *this* chapter about memory loss if I see the keyword Perspicacity. And I'll only look in the right place if *this* chapter shows up onscreen alongside the other "DM" chapters—like the one titled "DM—p16—Gawyn doesn't know I'm depressed." Because I already know that I've tried writing about memory loss before. At least, I think I did. I recall reading a few paragraphs describing the process I use to track down words I don't remember. It's the same process I just described with the word perspicacity. Except in those other paragraphs, it was a different word—one from a few months ago. I think of those few paragraphs as representing the first time I thought about how best to describe the fact I cannot remember words. Except that, until reading over those paragraphs a few weeks ago, I had no idea I'd ever written them.

When I was young, I had decades ahead of me. And for those decades, I had mapped out my opus: a twelve-volume science fiction masterpiece that would cement my fame in the hearts of millions of fans. And I'm still working on it. I can't not. I've been working on this story since I

was fifteen years old—over twenty years ago. The main characters in my story all grew up in a small town I made up, and they all fought each other in a war I made up. They feel too *real* for me to give them up. But at the rate I am writing them—at the rate I am forgetting what I have written about them—I have little confidence in ever pulling the pieces together.

But maybe that's okay. I've been told, after all, that science fiction will not help me find a teaching position. I mean the kind that comes with health insurance. And science fiction very nearly kept me from getting into graduate school. Sometimes, I wonder if I have somehow made the wrong choice, if maybe I should have instead "pushed through" to finish the space opera opus. But I know that the market for genre fiction is hard. It isn't enough to write clean prose, or to write compelling stories, or to churn out books every year—if you want to make a living writing science fiction, you must write clean, compelling novels every year. And as much as I'd like to do that, I have a small child. He asks me why I sometimes say the wrong word. He does not yet know that sometimes, when I am at the computer, I will say an entire chapter of wrong words. And that, without the actual visual display of chicken-meat to remind me that salmon is a thing, I have no reminder to tell me what I have written and what I have discarded. Instead, I have a folder on my computer labeled "Writing." Every year, the number folders inside the folder grows. And every year, I remember fewer and fewer of the words within.

For a time, I thought I would write bestsellers. Then, I thought I would be more true to my art, that I would craft words so beautifully that I could express the abject sorrow of middle-class time travelers with their phaser pistols. Occasionally, I do manage to capture the sorrow part. All these years of writing have at least trained me to craft the beautiful words. But I do not know which ones I've already written, let alone the order in which they should go.

Fiction carries such a high standard. Memoir carries its own high standard, but it's different. Fiction must be coherent, and memoir must be honest—as long as I am honest about my incoherence, readers may forgive me my chaos. Or so I hope

I'm still looking for fame. I'm still hoping for renown. Not just for rent money and health insurance, and not just for my son, but for me. Because I want to think the world knows me. Because I want to think I'm important. Because, somehow, when my son worries that I say the wrong word, his love alone never seems enough. Because I bought a one-way ticket to the stars. And then I went for a road trip. By the time I returned, my bus to the spaceport had already left.

And so I return to the kitchen. I open the refrigerator door, pull out the platter with my chilled heart, and remove the plastic wrap. I slice off a piece of cardiac tissue to share. It is more palatable and less pungent than the used motor oil of starships, and you might imagine it somewhat more fresh than the breaded liver cutlets of my fiction.

Schrödinger's Knife

Was the knife in the drawer? Or was it in my hand? I remember sliding the tip along the faint strum of my pulse, but I also remember sitting, frozen in fear, resisting the urge to stand and walk across the kitchen to pull the knife from the drawer.

The memory of blood dripping on the floor is manufactured. I have no suicide scars on my wrist. I have never cut myself open. I have never overcome that fear of pain and bleeding. Still, the "memory" is there. I "remember" the cutting pain of metal entering an artery. It is like that pain when the phlebotomist inserts a needle into a vein to draw blood, except this pain continues upward and deeper, pulling up from the knobby bones on the underside of the wrist

toward the flashy muscles of the forearm. And because it is an artery, the blood does not stop on its own.

My mistake—the same mistake I always make—was honesty. I told the psychiatrist that I couldn't remember the hours when I was suicidal. I couldn't tell whether or not the knife stayed in the drawer. I couldn't remember why I began walking toward the parking garage. I didn't know what was going on in the moments before and I do not know for certain why I woke up. But there I was, walking down the south side of the quad, going from one place behind me in time, en route to the four-story parking deck. So it was with the knife. I believe it remained in the drawer, but I awoke at the kitchen table with memories of opening my wrist. With memories of my arm hanging limp at my side, the blood pooling on the linoleum at my feet.

Understandably, the psychiatrist was concerned.

A Journey into Hunger

It's an e-mail that pulls me from the daze. It's seven at night, and I see that I missed the poetry reading scheduled for six. The one I thought I would go to. The one I normally take my son to. Except that today is Sunday—today is my wife's day.

I could go home to see my son before he sleeps. Instead I remain in the office, typing.

I type this in the cold fugue of hunger. I haven't eaten in over eight hours. That doesn't seem very long, but it can be. When all your meals are small because you're still afraid to eat, four hours is enough to start your stomach grumbling. Add caffeine, then four more hours—my stomach aches with hollow emptiness. It tugs at the back of my throat, beckoning for food. There is trail mix on the shelves behind me, and a box of granola bars in the crate by the floor. I could

turn and eat, find sustenance, find calories. I could go home, too, to see my son. He may already be asleep, or he may yet be awake, asking for daddy, asking why daddy is not home.

Instead, I type.

I don't know when exactly my journey into mental illness began—I know now it will never end. Medication holds back the desire to die—eating regular meals and sleeping regular hours can keep the anxiety at bay. But here I am—I've skipped dinner. I spent six hours on social media trying to find a date with a stranger. And my son will go to sleep without me there to tuck him in.

But it's Sunday. It's my wife's day. And I'm supposed to be working.

I first sought treatment as a freshman in college. I had thoughts of ending my life. The thoughts weren't overwhelming, but they were there. I had the image of opening my wrist to watch the blood drip onto the floor. Drip, drip, drop. Just a few drops. Idle fascination. A knick in the artery to see the dripping drip.

I never did cut myself. But I knew I was suicidal. And suicidal people are supposed to ask for help. So I did.

Doc H. was gay. Not that it matters, but it was obvious. At least I think it was. He might have been straight and married with kids—I don't know, and I won't check. But I thought he was gay. And this made me nervous. Not that he would do anything—clearly, he wasn't like that. Not at all. He listened, he cared, and he asked the questions to see if I would be all right. But I was worried he would care too much. Not that he would hurt me, but that I might hurt him. That, if I

killed myself, he might feel the pain at a level more deep than simply therapist-to-patient. In the same way that, if a beautiful young girl was to kill herself, a part of me would die with her.

My sophomore year, a classmate of mine from a summer camp did die. I don't know whether or not I remember her. She has a name and a face, but I can't place a voice to her photo. Through e-mails and news articles, I know that she played violin, that she loved life, and that she died in a dorm fire. Except that she didn't die in the fire. Some combination of sprinkler systems and fire fighters and EMT care brought her to a hospital. Her family notified us, letting us know that Sarah had been badly burned. There wasn't quite enough of her left for skin grafts. There was concern because the violin had been one of Sarah's passions, one of the things that kept her going, and it was pretty clear that she would never play again. I took this to mean that her hands had been damaged, that her fingers had been burned away. But then, I do not know. I did not ask.

Three days later, Sarah passed away. There was sadness. Someone mentioned that it was for the best, that Sarah's life wouldn't have been the same without the violin. The damage and pain were so great that she would have lost all love for life. At least, this is the message I remember. I do not know if it was ever said in so many words.

About a week or two later, we learned that Sarah had set the fire herself. That she had locked herself inside her dorm room. And that she did not try to escape.

Sophomore year was the year I wrote my "if I should die" note. I typed it up in Microsoft Word and then printed two copies. One copy I gave to Doctor H., and the other copy I left on my keyboard. It was also saved there on the computer, posted right on the desktop where it would be easy enough to find. It was four pages long, and it designated who should get what. I figured the

computer should go to my girlfriend Christie, and that maybe she should get my writing, too. That's what worried me most, then—who would get my writing. Pages and pages of writing. A couple boxes worth of composition books and loose leaf, plus everything I'd ever typed on that computer. It was a Dell desktop—one I didn't even own yet, seeing as my parents bought it on a four-year installment loan from the university bookstore—but it was my lifeline to the imagination. My stories about Mars, about the robots, about the wars with the aliens—I'd been typing it all on that grubby white keyboard, just feeding letters to the glow of the monitor. And I desperately wanted to be sure that my parents would never, ever have a say over what happened with my stories. Ever. In the letter, I described my cookware and my Legos and what little money I had in the checking account at National City. And then, six or seven times I repeated the one message that needed to be clear: my parents were to have no say regarding what happened with my writing. Because, somehow, I thought that maybe someone would find a way to get my story published, to at least get it out there. Because I felt my work needed to be read. It needed to be shared. It needed to be revised and rewritten and all these other things I'd never be able to do if I died. But I really wanted to make sure someone might take up that task. And so, in my letter describing who should get the monetary entrails of my existence, I transferred all the rights to my writing to my girlfriend. She wasn't a writer, and she didn't like science fiction, but she was my girlfriend.

Yeah—it didn't seem so crazy at the time.

My freshman year, a few weeks after I'd first become suicidal, there was a death on campus. It was October, I think. Cold, but not winter. One of the freshmen had gone to a fraternity party. He

drank to the point of maybe blacking out. But the alcohol didn't kill him. Slipping in the bathroom while drunk and then fracturing his skull on the sink, though—that killed him.

Stu Evans was another college student who loved life. Everyone said as much. It was in the campus paper, and it was in the news release I read online. An official e-mail from the university president shared the link.

According to his friends, Stu made friends easily. And because he had died and because I'd been thinking about killing myself, I went to the memorial service. They held it at the old church there on campus. It was a tall, Gothic monument of stone and stained glass—it had once been an actual church, and maybe still was. But in the invitation from the president, it was emphasized that all were welcome. This wasn't the funeral, after all—that would be a family affair, to be held in Stu's hometown. I heard that his closest friends drove there to be with Stu's family and to say goodbye one last time, but I didn't know any of them personally. I'd never met Stu, or his friends, or anyone, really. Except for Doctor H., no one at school knew I was suicidal. No one.

During the memorial service, there was one girl from Stu's dorm who talked about how he would meet her after class, and how they would go for these walks, and how they would talk about everything, and how he was a beacon of optimism in the otherwise terrifying world of college. "He was the one who stopped by my room and asked me to go for a walk," she said. And her voice was breaking as she spoke. And you could tell, from the story, that she had loved him. Not as a lover, but as a friend. Because he had been her lifeline. He had been the one who stopped by her room and smiled during those early weeks of freshman year, when she had felt so tired and alone.

But then he died.

I never met Stu. The photos of his face brought no recognition. Our school had a freshman class of eight hundred, and I didn't even know everyone on my floor. But, knowing he had died, there was an emptiness inside me. Because, somehow, I knew that I had almost died. I had never cut myself and I had never stepped in front of the bus, but the desire had been there. I could have done it. And in an alternate reality I dreamt up, I already had. And in this alternate reality, my own death brought a kind of pall over the campus community—the kind of pall that stopped frat parties, that slowed the drinking, that made everyone more careful. More thoughtful. More pained. And in this alternate reality, Stu Evans never drank himself to a stupor, never wandered off alone, and never had the fall in the bathroom that fractured his skull.

Somehow, I decided that we needed a candlelight vigil for this classmate I had never met. I don't know exactly where I heard about candlelight vigils, but I knew they were a thing. I knew they happened on other campuses where deaths had occurred. And so I went to Mel, my RA. I told her how I thought we needed to have a candlelight vigil. I said it seemed like the right thing to do. And Mel—being a junior and caring and an RA—she was impressed that I'd thought of this. She helped me fill out some paperwork to get reimbursed for the cost of candles. Someone—maybe Mel—told me that I needed congregational tapers, the kind of inexpensive white candle you'd find in a church. They came in a boxes of fifty—I bought two.

It was windy on the night of the vigil. And cold. We gathered on the round of grass in front of the library. Having the idea and the candles, I was somehow in charge. And so I said something

about forming a circle, and someone else showed us how to insert the tapers through the circles of paper so the wax wouldn't drip on our hands as we gathered.

Around forty of us stood out there in the deep night. We finished less than a full box of candles. In the circle, all the tapers were somehow lit. I don't know if I brought a lighter, or if someone else did. But it was hard keeping the flame going. A candle would wink out every few minutes from the wind. The first few times it happened, there was an awkwardness. Were there giggles? Was there a hush? I don't know. I was nervous. I looked out at everyone there, and they looked back at me, the organizer who had brought the boxes of candles.

Every few minutes, a candle would wink out from the wind. And each time, someone nearby would reach over to share their flame with one that was lost. And this was metaphorical, sure. A comforting image of death and remembrance and the collective sorrow that restores all flame.

Except I never met Stu Evans, and never would.

The two boxes of tapers sat on a shelf in my dorm room for the rest of the year. I don't know what happened to them. I might have donated them to the campus religious center. Or I might have thrown them away. But for that year, they sat on the high shelf, reminding me, almost every day, that I had never met Stuart Evans. But that, had I died first, I might have saved him. Or at least made him think twice about drinking to the point that he died.

That was 1998. I was eighteen. I was suicidal, but not dangerously so. There was no talk of meds or hospital admissions or anything like that. I was a freshman in college. I was suffering, and I

had sought help—that's what responsible people did. I bought two boxes of congregational tapers to memorialize the death of someone I'd never met—it's what responsible people did.

It wasn't until 2009, when I was twenty-nine, that anyone convinced me that my sense of reality was probably somewhat skewed.

In the years between, I managed to graduate college, enlist in the army, learn two foreign languages, qualify as a paratrooper, deploy to Afghanistan, serve drinks as a bartender, and sneak my way into grad school. At Johns Hopkins. The second-ranked MFA program in the country after Iowa.

By the time they admitted me to the psyche ward for my 72-hour observation, I was down to eating one meal a day and some snacks. I was writing two short stories a week. And I had thoughts of walking off the top of a parking garage. Again.

I haven't eaten in ten hours. It matters because this is how I become productive. It was a trick I first learned in Fall of 2008. It was my first semester in the grad program, and I wanted to write stories. But I also wanted to save money on food. A lot of money. So I went to the grocery store. And I broke out the pots and pans. And I cooked. Some days, I cooked.

But then I couldn't wash dishes. I'd eat my dinner, rinse off my plate, and place it in the sink. At breakfast, I'd do the same with my cereal bowl. And again, at lunch. If I ate lunch. I don't remember ever eating lunch, but I must have. At least for a time.

One day, I woke up in the morning and decided to write. This wasn't strange—I was in a creative writing program. Half my job was teaching, the other half was writing. My thesis advisor had

given the advice that we should write whatever we were thinking, that we should take risks. “I’d rather you write a spectacular failure than a boring success,” she told us in those first days, during orientation.

And so one day, I had an idea. It didn’t come from a dream or anything—it was just this idea. About a girl in college who wants to die. Her mother carts her from class to class, ever concerned about her daughter’s health, about how frail the poor girl is, about how the poor girl was wasting away for lack of food. I don’t know the exact sequence, but somehow I stopped eating as the girl stopped eating. I think it’s because I started the story right after waking up, even before I’d had my cereal. I didn’t drink coffee back then, so it was just me and the keyboard and an empty stomach. And I remember how magical it felt, getting those words on the page. It was a new story, a brilliant story. Every so often, I’d get up and go to the kitchen to pour my cereal, but then the next scene would come to me. So I’d stop, turn, go back to the keyboard, and type. And type. And type. Until later—around dinner time, or even later, well after the sun had set—I was done.

This became a routine. I’d wake up on a Saturday or a Sunday, and I would write. Later, I added Thursdays. I would write, and I would write, and I would write. Write until I couldn’t think of what words should come next. And then I would get up. I would stretch. I would pad over to the kitchen in my bare feet, thinking about what I had written. I might pull down a plate, or I might just get the fridge door open, but the food wouldn’t reach the plate. Instead, I stopped. I went back to the keyboard. And I wrote.

The first character I wrote was named Marie. Her parents were overprotective. Her sister was somehow out of the picture. And she was dying on the inside. Refusing to eat. Refusing, almost, to breathe.

It was the first story I wrote for the MFA workshop. Our professor commented on just how impressed she was by my use of another voice. "Because it's clearly not you in this story," she said, addressing Ryan Edel, the six-foot-two former paratrooper.

Meanwhile, in the long nights and weekends of my writing, Marie and I starved ourselves together.

I never had anorexia. I never starved myself to lose weight. And I've certainly never purged. I couldn't. Throwing up, to me, is pain. Because I've done it a lot. In sixth grade and seventh and eighth, I got migraines. Lots of migraines. And migraines made me puke. So no, I could never have a purge-based eating disorder. And why would I? It wasn't physical weight I needed to shed.

Spiders

Living with myself is like having a roommate who is both depressed and paranoid. *There are ants crawling along the sink,* I tell myself. *We should probably do something about that.*

Yes, the paranoid self agrees, *we probably should.*

The reasonable thing to do would be to wash the dishes. Especially when it becomes apparent that the ants are becoming more numerous. It's okay to see one ant, or maybe two—when you start seeing them in squads of five or six, just crawling back and forth across your counter, then you know it's bad. Especially if it's reached the point where they've given up

looking for food, and are instead considering how best to scoop up all the spilled crumbs to make room for a conference center. *Hey,* the ants might say, *could you wash up some of these dishes? Just leave us the big stainless steel Pasta Bowl. We're gonna host our halftime show in there.*

But ants I can deal with. They're just ants. Sometimes, they crawl into the water filter, and that bothers me. I have to check the Brita every morning to make sure there are no ants. Ironically, it got worse after I put out traps. Apparently, the taste of borax and sugar makes ants very thirsty. Every morning that week, I woke up to find five or six dead ants huddled there inside the water filter. It's gotten so bad, I now keep the Brita over by the toaster. The sink has ants scattered across the slime of my counter, but the space in front of the toaster has only crumbs.

Ants? No biggie. Spiders, though—spiders, I can't stand. Especially wolf spiders. The big ones crawling across my carpet three and four times a week. And you know it's bad when there are so many spiders that you've trained your toddler to keep an eye on the little bastards. It takes precious minutes to locate an appropriate means of spider disposal. Empty coffee cans work best, but a clear jar will do in a pinch. But that takes time—time for those eight-legged monstrosities to get away. So I tell Gawyn to watch the bastards while I go fetch the big guns.

"Gawyn! Is the spider still there?"

"He's by the door, Daddy!"

"Okay, good! I'm getting a bowl!" *Or a jar. Or a bottle. No—the water bottle won't work. No way I'll coax a spider into that tiny opening. Where's that jar we had? Damnit, why are there Lego's everywhere? Crap, crap, crap—that spider's gonna get away!*

Gawyn shrieks with glee. "Daddy! Daddy! Look!"

"What is it, Gawyn?"

"Look, Daddy, look!"

"What is it?"

"A spider! On the shower!"

"I thought you said he was by the door?"

"Another spider, Daddy!"

Fuck.

Would it help to mention that I'm afraid of spiders? As in terrified. When I was in high school, I was so afraid of them that I if I saw a tiny little spider in the corner of the bathroom, I'd spray it with disinfectant until it died. Yes, it was cruel and painful and emotionally scarring, but my suffering was nothing compared to what the spider went through. I usually managed to steady myself, get back to my feet, and stumble back out into the hallway and fresh air. The spiders never did.

It's different with my son, though. I want him to have an appreciation for nature and animals and the cycle of life. I want him to understand that spiders are our friends, and that they eat all the nasty vermin bugs like ants and mosquitoes. But then, I also believe the entire planet will soon die in a hellish *Mad Max* of global warming, so my concern for individual spiders is perhaps misplaced. Just the same, I can't bear to let my son kill them. So I pretend that I'm teaching him empathy while I dig out a coffee can from the recycling bin.

"Here you go, Gawyn," I tell him. "Do you want to scoop up this one?"

"No, Daddy—you can do it."

Figures. But whatever. I'm tough. I'm brave. I tell myself that I'm a role model for my son. Even though the reality is that I get a sick feeling in my stomach whenever we hurt the

spiders. Like, if you step on one, and you only break of a few of his legs, I feel it as if you've broken three or four of my fingers.

Gawyn, though, does not share my empathy. Or my patience. He's more like the spiders, in this way. They know that life is action, and that the only way to live is to pounce.

When I corner the spider with the jar, it invariably darts off. And no, I'm not gonna block the thing with my hand. Instead I'll chase the little bastard across our carpet with a coffee can and a roll of newspaper, herding the little fucker around the rodeo ring.

Gawyn, of course, finds this hilarious. He, too, chases the spider. Except he's no longer trying to herd the poor creature. He's trying to kill it.

"I will step on him!" he calls. And if Gawyn was bigger—and more coordinated—that spider would be a wad of mashed goo in the carpet fibers. But my toddler is too slow. He telescopes his attacks, raising his foot high in the air before bringing it down again. The spider sees this, and then dodges left. Spiders are tricky this way. That's why we call them spiders—because anything called "spider" is lithe, hateful, and vermin. I mean, except for the part about them eating all the other bugs living in our carpet.

Yes, I tell my paranoid self, *we really, really need to vacuum. Under the bed, especially. And in the bathroom. There are bug carcasses scattered across the linoleum. Like, over a dozen of them. Just curled up dead. We should probably vacuum those up.*

My paranoid self, however, is puzzled by my concern. *Isn't there a spider running across the carpet right now? I mean, that thing's as big around as a silver dollar.*

And how do you think it got that big, Mr. Paranoid?

Why have you been looking at the bathroom floor, Mr. Responsible? I thought we agreed that we should never, under any circumstances, look at the bathroom. You know how painful it is to see how filthy we are.

Right. I add "cleaning the bathroom" to my list of things to do. It's right up there with "run the dishwasher," "write my dissertation," and "stop talking to myself in the third person."

Gawyn, though, is about to kill the poor spider. So I grab his arm. "No!" I tell him. "We *don't* kill the spiders." Though, really, what I should be telling him is *You don't get to kill the spiders. Because if it was just me and this was twenty years ago, that eight-legged abomination would be dissolving in a puddle of Scrubbing Bubbles. But I'm your father, and I've grown pathetic with time. So stop trying to step on my fingers. I mean, the spider. No stepping on spiders.*

"But Daddy, I want to!"

"No! No stepping on spiders! Do you understand?"

"But Daddy—look!"

I look. The spider has rounded the corner, disappearing into the bathroom. Quickly, I push open the door and flip on the light. I search the floor. All I see are bug carcasses. And a pile of laundry. And under the laundry, there will be more bug carcasses. And eight hideous legs.

Gawyn wants to stomp on the laundry. And this, I know, would be the responsible thing to do. We don't need fanged death to go running around our apartment. But I can't bear to do it. I don't want a spider carcass mashed into my clothes, even if they are already dirty. Instead, I want to save the spider. I want to dig him out of the laundry, scoop him into the jar, and take him outside, like we normally do. But there's no way I'm touching those clothes. Not with that fucking spider crawling through there.

I try making a decision. I mean, this is going to set the timbre for the evening, I know. Will I stand strong, taking a principled stand against the infestation? Or will I crumble with weakness, like most nights?

Gawyn takes matters into his own hands. “I think he’s a house spider,” he says. He waves to the pile of laundry. “Bye, bye, spider!” he says. And then he walks away. A few minutes later, he asks me what I’m doing. “Daddy!” he calls from the living room. “Time to play trains!”

This, I suppose, is why I waited until my child was out-of-town with his mother before I poisoned all the ants with borax. I don’t want him to know that, secretly, I don’t believe all that crap about saving the bugs. I’m just weak on the inside. Step on a spider, and I feel it in my fingers—wipe out hordes of ants, and I’ll stare at them in fascination as they crowd around their baits, thirsting for poison. I’m a bit macabre that way. Because I think it’s fun, killing the ants in my kitchen. More fun than doing dishes, anyway.

Oh—and I don’t want my child drinking the filtered water with the dead ants floating on the top.

Shopping for Food

I have reached the stage of depression where the only clean forks in my apartment are disposable and plastic. The two T-fal non-stick pans—the pride of my kitchen—sit on the stove. Because the non-stick surfaces are so delicate and special, I dare not stack anything on top of these pans—instead, I have the two skillets perched on top of my pasta pots. Tomorrow—or whenever it is I cook next—I will lift up the T-fal pans so as to wedge additional dirty dishes under that shadow of Teflon. For however delicate and precious these pans might be, they are

still dirty. The larger one glistens with globs of used oil. The smaller one—the one used for scrambled omelets—is ringed with flaking yellow ribbons of crisped egg yolk.

I don't remember the last time my kitchen was truly "clean"—as in, all the dishes were washed and put away. Not that it matters. Recently, my son picked out plates to take the place of our Corelle and our ceramics—at the grocery store, he fell in love with a bulk-rate pack with three hundred paper plates. Originally, he tried bringing home a set of party plates made from waxed cardstock—the kind of leak proof things you'd have on hand for a barbecue with ribs. But I vetoed those plates. At three dollars for a week's worth of dinner plates, I couldn't justify the expense. Those paper plates, though—that's a month's worth of plate for three bucks. "Good job finding plates for us," I told him. "Now let's go find some juice."

Fastened into their shopping carts, staring down at my child from the high perch of the safety seat, the other children cannot tell if my child offers them a salvation from boredom, or if instead he represents an obscene rebellion against all human decency. Their wide-eyed expressions say it all: *What is he doing, pushing a grown-up cart? Where's his daddy? Wait, wait! He shouldn't be taking that box of cereal off the shelf! Wait, wait!! He's picking it up! He's putting it in the cart!! Mommy, Daddy—he shouldn't be doing that!*

My little guy doesn't mind the attention. He doesn't even look back as the adults in the store stare at him in awkward wonder. *Did I just see an unattended child pushing a cart through the produce section?* And oh yes, I see their looks of horror. They stare at my child, and then they look up, searching for me. *There must be a parent watching this, right?*

Meanwhile, Gawyn goes on, looking for his green juice. He knows exactly where to find it, but sometimes he forgets until we've made it all the way to the meat department. "Daddy," he tells me, "I want green juice."

"Okay," I tell him. "You can go get it. But come right back here, okay?"

"Okay, Daddy!"

Right—as if I'd just leave a four-year-old to wander the grocery store alone with a full-sized grocery cart. So usually I stalk him. I watch as he rolls on down the aisle. By the time he reaches the intersection and turns, I'm an ocean of linoleum away from the squeaking wheels of his cart. Still, I don't follow him. Instead, I step over to the adjacent aisle, and then I wait for him to push the cart around a distant island of potato chips. And sometimes, he doesn't appear right away. Sometimes, he stops to scope out the chips. Sometimes he'll put a big bag of them in the cart. Which is okay, if they're plain. Original Ruffles or unflavored Doritos are fine—I'll eat those when he's with his mommy and I'm too lazy to cook for myself. Flaming Hot Doritos or Cheetos, though—those we have to leave behind. And so I have to keep a mental list of what all is in that cart. Which items will we have to put back? What must I barter to convince him that no, we do not need three boxes of generic mint-flavored gelatin? Is it really the end of the world if I purchase that Styrofoam cup of instant mashed potatoes with the bacon bits and artificial butter flavoring?

Still, he does get to the juice. It's his green juice—an organic smoothie blend of green apple and kiwi that tastes like fresh vinegar on a stale saltine cracker. I can't stand the stuff—he drinks it by the ounce. It takes a few weeks for him to drink a one-quart bottle all the way to the bottom. Naturally, every grocery trip, he wants to purchase another half gallon. Most trips, it's "No, Gawyn—we already have three bottles at home," followed by "No, Daddy—we don't!"

"Yes, Gawyn, we do." And yes, Gawyn, I know—I've been counting the same three bottles of this stuff since you bought them on clearance four weeks ago. You drink an average of three ounces per night on the three-point-five evenings a week that I have custody. If you drink them any slower, I'm gonna have to pour a whole bottle of the stuff down the drain before it ferments. Then again, the sour apples are so overpowering that I wouldn't even know it's fermented. And I *hate* green apples.

Just the same, I feel good letting him buy the green juice—I feel even better when he drinks it. It's thick, it's organic, and it appears to have nutritional value—on the nights when he won't eat his vegetables, I count on that six-ounce glass of mold-flavored piss to provide my child with all the essential minerals and nutrients a growing body might need. Oh, and vitamins. Because he refuses to drink milk, I also give him calcium and vitamin D in the form of sugar-coated gummy bears. Because too much calcium can lead to iron depletion, I also give him an iron-enriched multivitamin in the form of sugar and silicates that have been molded into the playful shapes of farm animals. And because I'm broke, I sometimes lie awake for hours each night, recalling the devastation that potato chips and vitamin gummies will have on my credit score.

But that's okay. His love for green juice allows for the easy instruction of valuable life lessons. Such as how to successfully navigate a grocery store on his own. And then how to hoist a four-point-three pound bottle of juice up over the edge of the cart while standing on his tiptoes, and then how to bend his arms to lower that juice into the depths of the basket while crushing only some of the items in the bottom. And not mention to the accumulated firsthand experience of how many bags of chips will fall on the floor when he clips a display board with the edge of his cart. (Hint: more than five, but sometimes fewer than all of them.)

Meanwhile, people glance over to see the cart that rolls down the aisle on its own. Because Gawyn is still a quarter-inch shorter than the handle of the cart, most people don't notice him back there until his cart has pulled up alongside their own. In the low displays of the produce aisle, all that's visible are the two sets of tiny fingers gripping the handle.

Oh, how cute! the other shoppers think. *The little one is helping with the shopping!*

They smile, they look up, then plan out the friendly greetings for the proud parent. Except the proud parent is nowhere to be seen. Instead, I'm all the way in the meat department, watching my son from fifty feet away. If you didn't know better, you'd think that I, too, am trying to figure who's supervising that lone child with the shopping cart of terror.

Among these other shoppers, the looks of *Oh, how cute!* slowly give way to dismay, and then to worry. Some will linger long enough to begin that transition to outright agitation. But Gawyn handles their expressions with perfect aplomb. Ignoring their looks, he reaches into the case with the green juice, hugs a bottle with both arms, and carefully hefts it over the lip of the cart. And then reaches down for another. And another. Usually, he'll only get two or three bottles in the cart before I show up.

"Gawyn!" I'll say, pretending that I haven't been staring at him the whole time, "how many bottles of green juice do we need?"

"Five, Daddy!"

"No, Gawyn, no." Please, no. It's six dollars a jug. And drinking your leftovers makes me want to throw up in the sink.

And so, the negotiation begins. On the good days, I wear him down until he accedes to purchasing only a single bottle of the green bile. In exchange, we split a bottle of blueberry goodness, and I get a bottle of strawberry banana for myself.

The other adults, meanwhile, saunter away, certain that words should have been said about the absentee father who left his child to wander unattended through the garden of horrors.

CHAPTER IV: THE DADDY WAR

Sleep

You never want your child to know pain. Or so I used to tell myself. I've since learned better. A child who can't bear the soft ache of loneliness can never learn to sleep in his own bed. I reminded myself of this during the long nights of sleep training, when my son was small, and I helped him cry himself to sleep. Sometimes, it took an hour before he would sleep. I know because I used to time him, in ten minute increments. In Thailand, in the home of my wife's family, I would sit on the steps outside the bedroom door and wait through Gawyn's cries. And every ten minutes, I would go in to check on him—to reassure him that he wasn't alone, to make sure he wasn't thirsty, and then to bear his renewed shrieks as I backed out of the room. But when I checked on him, I didn't dare stand too close. If I came near, he would take hold of my hand, and then clutch my whole arm to his little body. If I tried pulling my arm from the crib, the weight of his body would cling tight. And so I learned distance. I learned speed. I learned to stand just out of reach as I leaned forward, offered him water, and told him everything would be okay.

He was already nine months old—much older than he should have been. As some experts noted, it's hard training a child to bear separation when he is already nine months old.

Still, it worked. He learned to accept the long minutes alone. He learned to fall asleep on his own. It only took a week. Maybe two.

After the divorce, one of my first purchases was a sturdy pine bed for my son. In negotiating the divorce settlement, I had my futon, so Lek got the crib and our bed. So I took Gawyn to the furniture store, I picked out a sturdy pine bed, and I convinced him that he would have fun

climbing into it for sleep. And it is a beautiful bed—solid wood, with a decent mattress. It might last him through high school, and I told him so. Though he had no such concept of time—he was only three years old. But he enjoyed that afternoon we spent assembling the new bed. While I anchored down the mattress planks with wood screws and a cordless drill, he went to work on the bed rails. With a screwdriver, he twisted the extra screws until the bits of metal wormed their way out from the wood, and then he twisted them back the other way. Later, he directed the placement of the mattress.

"Here, Daddy! Put it here!"

"No, Gawyn—the mattress goes on the bed."

"No, Daddy—I want to sleep here."

"No, Gawyn, I'm not leaving the mattress in the middle of the hallway. I'll trip on you."

"But I want to sleep *here,* Daddy!"

Still, the bed was a great success. Exactly the kind of place I wanted for my son to sleep. The mattress is soft, and it's high up off the floor, so I wouldn't hurt my spine trying to lift him. I stacked my army footlockers next to it for him to climb up on his own. My mom supplied the sheets and blankets—dinosaur sheets, and a special green comforter, just for Gawyn. Because we want him comfortable and warm as he learns to bear the lonely minutes before slumber.

Naturally, Gawyn now sleeps on the futon with me. "Hug-hug sleep," he calls it, when he nestles into the crook of my arm, rests his head on my shoulder, and sleeps.

On the nights when Gawyn is with his mother, I avoid sleep. I stay up late, pretending to work. When I do finally bring myself to lie down, I remain awake in the darkness, missing the hug-hug embrace of my little one. He's four, now, and we are behind schedule. How will he ever reach

manhood, I wonder, if his own father cannot bear the soft ache of loneliness, and learn to sleep on his own?

Dino, The Favored Sibling

Ten minutes ago, I woke from my nap and apologized to a brontosaurus plushie. "Oh, Dino," I said, letting him know that I hadn't wanted to knock him off the couch, but that I'd forgotten he was there. Dino spends so much of his life as the butt-end of jokes and my toddler's gentle rages. He's small, and soft, and so light—he stands little chance against my toddler. We dress him in hand-me-downs from when Gawyn was too small to walk. For a long time, Dino wore only a Cubs shirt—it said, "I may be small, but I'm the world's BIGGEST Cubs fan." Later, I upgraded him to a onesie with the clipart silhouette of a dinosaur and the words "Lil Stomper."

Sometimes, dressing him up like this, I imagine him as Dobie from Harry Potter, as if I'm offering clothes to my son's personal house elf. Because of the way my son treats him, poor Dino is almost always referred to as poor Dino. When my son won't eat his chicken, I tell him that Dino can eat it instead. "NO!" Gawyn insists. "But your poor Dino is *so hungry*," I say. "If you do not want your chicken, Dino can eat it instead." It rarely works, but I think of it as the "little brother effect." Since my son is an only child, I've had to manufacture a little brother for him, someone to bite at his ankles and nibble at his food until my son does whatever emotionally progressive thing I'm manipulating him to do. Eating his green beans, cleaning up his toys—I mean, if he doesn't clean up his toys, Dino might play with his trucks, and you can guess how that goes.

Sometimes I'm more proactive. I call in the big guns of baby brother Dino before the food's even served. I call Gawyn to the table, but of course he won't sit down—he's three, and dinner takes him away from his trains. So I call out "Dino! Snake! Time for dinner!" Gathering up the two most favorite animals in our house, I bring them to the table and seat them on my son's chair. But in this game, Snake is the beloved sibling. Snake is a four-foot-long python plushie from the Shedd Aquarium in Chicago, and Snake can do no wrong. When Snake is hungry, my son brings him to the table, and then holds Snake's head to the plate of food going "yum, yum, yum!" When Snake is thirsty, the his forked felt tongue goes "sip, sip, sip!"

Dino is not so lucky. Dino was a ten-dollar clearance item from Schnuck's grocery, just up the road. When Dino is hungry and sitting at the table and getting ready to eat some green beans, my son throws him across the room. "NO DINO!" he shouts. Gawyn then goes over to the other room, drags Snake over, and begins feeding the hateful vegetables to his preferred sibling. "No Dino—only Snake!" Sometimes—especially in the mornings, when Gawyn's bladder must be full to bursting—I tell him that Dino wants to go potty, too. "No want to pee!" Gawyn informs me. Because we've already played this game, he knows I'm only trying to manipulate him into sitting on the potty himself. Just the same, I wait until Gawyn runs back to the living room, and then I grab Dino. I take the brontosaurus plushie and gingerly set him on the plastic training potty, placing his four soft feet upon the seat so his tail won't dip down into the bowl. I mean, the potty seat gets cleaned with every use, but just the same—I don't want Dino getting germs on his tail. I sometimes worry he might get MRSA or something.

"Gawyn!" I call, "Dino's sitting on your potty!"

That brings my son running. "NO DINO!" he shouts, knocking his dinosaur to the floor. "Only Snake." And then he goes to fetch Snake. He holds Snake's head up high in the air over

the potty so that Snake's tail can float in the air just above the bowl. And this is no mean feat—Snake's body is longer than my son is tall. So Gawyn stretches his arm up as high as it will go to make sure Snake has enough room to pee without the tip of his tail dipping into the plastic bowl of the potty. And then he makes peeing sounds with his tongue against his front teeth to show that Snake is indeed using the potty. Snake has such an immense bladder, it takes several long minutes of peeing before he's finally done. And when Snake is fully relieved, my son will hug him, take him back to the dining room, and go back to eating cereal.

Through all this, I wait just off to the side, biding my time until it is once again safe to place Dino back on the potty. And then I go back to the dining room, making peeing sounds with my tongue against the back of my teeth, to inform Gawyn that Dino is once again using his potty.

I bought Dino last year as a joke for Valentine's Day. Back then, my son only loved trains and trucks and more trucks. But my love of dinosaurs is legendary. One year, I posted so many dinosaur posters on the walls of around the English Department that my classmates decided dinosaurs were no longer funny. When a group of us tried starting a social group—a kind of "grad school sucks, let's party and drink together before falling asleep in our own drool" kind of thing—I promised that I would design the bestest, most awesomest velociraptor poster ever. It would have announced our good intentions to the entire world of our department, a poster so big and so amazing and so dripping with dinosaur that no one could enter the fourth-floor elevator without first basking the extinct glory of serpentine wonder. The very thought of it made my classmates nauseous. "We can't do that," someone said. "Any time we see something with a velociraptor on it, we know it's work-related."

My son, though, is not so lucky. For him, dinosaurs aren't work related—half the clothes in his drawers have dinosaurs on them. He even has a shirt with a T-Rex named T-Rock who played Rock, that's how bad it is. But I can't help it. Friends and family, well aware of my love for all things dinosaur, keep sending us the most adorable dinosaurs they can find. And I keep dressing my son in them. To the point that he no longer likes them. To him, dinosaurs are just these strange things that aren't trucks. But his teachers at school assume he loves them. "So is he really into dinosaurs?" they ask. Or they offer him dinosaur stickers to stick on the dinosaur shirt with the matching dinosaur socks. And I have to explain that no, my son really likes trucks. And only trucks. And sometimes trains.

Sometimes, I worry that he loves his vehicles just a little too much. Mostly because we don't have any pets, and he has no siblings, and it was a whole year before my wife would let me sign him up for daycare. I want to buy him a pet, but I'm allergic to anything that has fur and breathes. Which is hard, because I miss my cat, the one I had growing up. She lived to be nineteen—the last six years of her life, she wasn't allowed in my room. By then I was so allergic that I couldn't breathe at night. My nose plugged up with snot, and I couldn't sleep. On my trips home from college, my cat waited for me, and she hurried to the door to see me. At night she tried creeping into my room to sleep beside me, like she always had. Except I didn't let her. And I couldn't. Every time I touched her, I had to go wash my hands to keep the cat dander from getting into my eyes when I rubbed them. Any time she licked me or started rubbing her face against my arms too hard, my skin itched, sometimes swelling with hives. But I never found a way to tell her how much I missed her. Instead, I hoisted her up off my bed and carried her out of my room with outstretched arms. I couldn't hug her for fear the allergens and her fur would

cover my clothes. So instead I marched her out like some kind of diseased vermin. And then closed the door. And tried to sleep. Without my cat.

I wanted my son to have that experience. Except the part about loss and abandonment and telling your loved ones that you can't love them anymore. But that will come later, when he's older. So in a conversation with Lek, I mentioned the idea of getting a dog. Maybe a small dog. The kind that would feel at home in our apartment. Except we'd get two of them, so they'd never be lonely. And since my wife and I were already divorcing, I figured she would move out pretty soon anyway, so why not? It's not like we'd be having any more kids together. It kinda hurt, seeing my son and knowing that he would never have any full siblings, but at the same time, I knew sometimes that you have to close the door on loved ones and never let them back in. Except that sometimes you miss them, and sometimes you wish they would just leave already.

My wife, though, didn't move out. Not for another year. And the custody negotiations were going nowhere. At one point, she asked about adding a stipulation to our custody agreement that, in the event I did ever get my son any pets, the pets would be required to stay at my residence. And I said okay, we could do that, I'd be fine with that. I didn't really trust her with our son, so I'm not sure how she thought I'd trust her with an animal that can't talk and/or open its own cans of food. If I didn't have a history of suicidal depression, I probably would have spent the forty-grand to fight for full custody. But as my lawyer said, "no judge is going to want to award full custody to someone with a history of suicide and depression. So unless you can prove your wife is dangerously unstable, I'd recommend you settle. Now then: are you afraid your wife will cause harm to your son?"

I wanted to ask then if psychological harm would count. But that's not what my lawyer asked. I told her again about the kinds of things my wife would do and say—the times she

threatened to take my son away, the times I came home from school and she locked herself in the back bedroom. Her mother would be in the living room trying to comfort our crying infant, no dinner in sight. On the cold nights when my wife got really pissed, she pulled on a coat and wrapped our son in a blanket and took him outside for a walk. Probably because she'd been locked inside all day with her mother and a screaming infant. As far as I could tell, she barely ate. She was either feeding our little one, or she was curled up on a corner of the couch with her iPad, spending hours and hours with her Thai movies. I didn't understand it, though. Her mother was there helping us. My G.I. Bill meant she didn't have to work. And so she stayed home. With an infant. And her mother. Maybe that corner of the couch was the furthest escape she allowed herself.

I tried to help. After night classes, I sometimes I brought home Chipotle for everyone—other nights, I decided we would go out for pizza. I took my shifts at 3 a.m., waking with the little guy to mix his formula and rock him back to sleep. Weekends, I insisted we go out into the sunshine, swaddling Gawyn in blankets and tucking him into his stroller for short walks in the brisk cold. But nothing I did helped. And it was winter. Our child was barely three months old. There was snow on the ground. And some days, Lek refused to speak. She didn't answer any of the questions I would ask. She wouldn't make eye contact. I couldn't tell if she was sad, angry, depressed, or something else. But some nights, after I came home from school, she pulled on her coat, wrapped our child in a blanket, and plunged out into the frigid darkness of Illinois in January.

"But was your son ever in any danger?" my attorney later asked. "Did she threaten to harm him? Has she ever hit him? Have you ever been afraid she would?"

I shook my head. “No,” I said. “I think she was just faking it.” And I still do. But how can I know? Lek and I never talked about her feelings. Whenever I asked, she looked away. But then, English is her third language, and I never took the time to learn Thai.

Did my wife threaten my child? I thought so. Through looks, glances, words unsaid—I thought she might hurt him. Except she never did.

My lawyer gave the best advice she could. “I can take your money, but for the sake of your son, I think you folks would be a lot better off settling. Neither of you have much in the way of assets to start with.”

So in the middle of a divorce, without pets or siblings on the horizon, I bought my son a dinosaur. It was an impulse buy. A painful one. Every ten dollars that year hurt. It felt like I was hemorrhaging cash. I paid my lawyer $4,000 for the retainer, and then burned through that in legal fees. I had student fees, but my G.I. Bill had run out. Tax returns weren’t enough to pay off my credit card. My wife began working full time—she still didn’t help with rent. And I’d spent the past the two summers unemployed. The first was so my wife could take our child to Thailand to stay with her family there. The second was in the vain thought that “quality time” with family and “a break” to work on my dissertation might be a good idea.

So I was broke. And I had my addictions to think about. Chipotle, mostly. Sometimes thick slices of Rosati’s pizza from the campus bookstore. Or hamburgers. Sandwiches. Anything with French fries. Because there would be no time in the mornings for cereal, and the kitchen at home didn’t work. Plates piled in the sink, unwashed. The stove had dirty pans, the table had unopened mail, and the counter was a place of honor for the hot water samovar that my wife once purchased for mixing baby formula. At night, in the middle of the divorce, I’d take my wife

and son out for dinner because I just couldn't do it anymore, "it" being the intransitive verb "to cook."

Yes—people still ask me why I don't drink. I never know what exactly to tell them. Because I'm afraid I'd never stop? Because my parents were alcoholics, and I can't bear the risk? Because the combination of antihistamines, antidepressants, and hard liquor would be a bad idea? I wish that was it. Then I might feel somewhat noble. But really, it's the price. I see a five dollar drink on a menu, and I'm like, "Fuck, that's half a burrito." And I already know I'm gonna need a few burritos from Chipotle this week. I'm still too lazy to clean my kitchen. Which I should do. Because I have a son. And I'm broke. And how is my son gonna make it through college if his daddy spends the tuition money on burritos?

So, yeah—I manage my empty existence by limiting the addictions to fast food. And snacks. I go to Schuck's, and I'm having to choose between a six-pack and a brontosaurus plushie. So the dinosaur goes in the cart. Along with a box of Cheez-Its. And eight cans of tuna, and six more pounds of pasta. Because pasta's cheap, and tuna's always on sale. And boiling water is one of the three kinds of cooking I can still manage, psychologically-speaking. The other kind is opening cans of tuna. The third kind involves milk, cereal, and a bowl. But only if the bowl is already clean.

Meanwhile, my attorney's words linger: "A judge is gonna have a real hard time awarding sole custody to a parent with a history of suicide and depression." And then, turning open her notes to a fresh page, she asked me to list the meds I was on. "And have you ever actually attempted suicide?" she asked.

I shook my head. "No," I said, "I've never attempted." As if it mattered. The point was already made.

Bottled Water

One of my biggest fears as a parent is that one day, I won't be there for my child. I see my little Gawyn playing with his trains in the living room, and I'm struck by a story I once read. Apparently, there was a father taking care of his infant daughter and toddler son. Then he died of a heart attack while cradling his daughter. His daughter got wedged between the corpse and the heating vent for the two days before anyone in the outside world realized something was wrong. She was badly burned and dangerously dehydrated, but she lived. The toddler son was described as "okay," but I know better than that. My own little guy flips out when he can't find me because I'm in the bathroom. If I'm cooking, and he wants me to play trains, he becomes very, very insistent. "Daddy! *Come here!*" And he knows about pain. He knows about emotional suffering. Whenever there is another child crying, my little guy gets very quiet. "Daddy," he asks, "why is he crying?"

If I died in my apartment alone with my son, I already know what would happen. Gawyn would come over to me, in his happy voice, and mimic what I tell him on the mornings when he is tired: "Daddy! Time to wake up!"

Except I wouldn't. Because the dead don't move. Like endless sleepers, they lie still. And so my son would become more insistent. "Daddy! Time for trains!" Then he'd take hold of my hand, and pull my arm toward the living room. "Daddy! Time for trains!"

No, it's not healthy imagining my own death, or imagining my son being the one to find me. But I can't help it. This is a rehearsal I've already run through, mentally. I've also run through how to get my son out of the apartment in case of a fire, or how to convince him to hide and keep quiet in case of a home invasion, or how to get him to the hospital in case he did actually trip while running with scissors. I've rehearsed hostage situations, in case a mugger

somehow took hold of my son and demanded I hand over my wallet. And zombie attacks—I keep a mental checklist of how to survive the zombie apocalypse. I update it with every shopping trip. Do we have enough tuna? Do we have frozen vegetables? We'd eat the peas first, because those need to be cooked, and power for the microwave would be one of the first things lost in an apocalypse. But the corn could be saved for later because it tastes fine simply thawed.

Yes—I have a standard zombie survival plan. I've considered covering the glass patio door with all the cardboard in our apartment, and then setting up a secondary barricade in the guest bathroom. Because we live on the first floor, and there would be no defense against an onslaught, our survival strategy would depend upon concealment. On silence. On hiding in the back rooms away from notice.

In the evenings, at bedtime, I'd sit in the tub with my son. We'd read books about Thomas the Tank Engine by candlelight. Because of the possibility that the undead might somehow breach the patio door in the night, we'd sleep there in the tub, on a stack of towels and pillows, tucked behind the hollow safety of the bathroom door. In the mornings, we'd sally forth to the dim twilight of the kitchen for tuna and pasta. I'd sneak in my camp stove from the storage closet, and we'd try not to die from the fumes while boiling water.

Don't worry—I'm not entirely paranoid. I know it's not safe to run a camp stove indoors without a chimney. So I've rehearsed ways to cut a hole in the outer wall. From there, I'd fashion an exhaust pipe out of aluminum foil and coat hangers. We'd be careful not to bump it too hard while roasting the last of our food at the end of the apocalypse.

Maybe the one time I watched Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* was one too many times. Maybe I've read too much about the Holocaust. Maybe I shouldn't have picked up the diary by that little

girl in Yugoslavia—the one who stayed home with her parents while a civil war closed the schools, cut off the water, and killed her best friend. She and her parents survived to become refugees in France. It sounds like they weren't just lucky, but smart. They had sandbags piled up outside their living room—it offered a little protection against shrapnel. But it wasn't safe to visit their bedrooms or—god forbid—the second floor of their own home. Just the same, I've added sandbags to the list of unnecessary things I'm gonna need if the world ends.

On the plus side, it would be a great teambuilding activity with my son. He'd love the part about me pulling the car up onto the grass and driving around to the back of the apartment complex, where no one can see. I can picture the wonder in his eyes as we start carting bags of sand into our living room.

"Daddy," Gawyn would ask, "can we make a sandbox on the carpet?"

The true answer would be *No, Gawyn.* But if I was smart, I wouldn't tell him that. Instead, I'd say *Maybe,* or I'd fend him off with that dreaded *If you're good*. Then I'd give him a packet of empty sandbags from the trunk. "Here you go—you can take these inside."

He'd shriek with delight. "I will take all of them inside, Daddy!"

"Okay," I'd say, wiping the sweat from my brow, hoping no one would start shelling our apartment, "you do that."

Somewhere in there, I'd ask myself if I had enough ibuprofen and antidepressants on hand to survive carting sand through an entire war.

I tell myself that I'm raising my child to be independent. If the unthinkable becomes reality, I'd like to think he could survive without me. Or, more realistically, I am raising him to survive college, the job market, and life. Maybe grad school. This is why, even though he's only four, I

let him help cook. Sometimes he stirs the pasta. Other nights, I tell him we can have pumpkin pie if he'll mix the ingredients.

"But I want pie, Daddy!"

"We can have pie," I reassure him, "but it's late. We have to start mixing the ingredients now so it's ready before your bedtime."

"Why can't we have the pie now?"

"Because we haven't started making it."

"Will it be done soon?"

"In two hours."

"In two minutes?"

"No, Gawyn. Two *hours*. But if you don't start mixing the ingredients now, we won't have time to make it."

"But Daddy!" he insists, "I want pie!"

Right. I got that.

But he's four. He suffers from an acute case of selective causality. I want him to understand that cooking takes time, that it isn't enough to simply *want* good food. Hence, the trips to the store. Our stockpiles of tuna, pasta, and other non-perishables. In the event of a blizzard, tornado, or civil war, we have enough food here that we could starve to death slowly. We have bottled water, too—one or two cases. And I keep a couple gallons of tap water stockpiled in old vinegar jugs. I once thought the acidic residue would keep this water fresh, but it doesn't. Instead, the water degrades quickly, smelling of mold and stink from the vinegar. I keep it anyway. If we ever lose the tap, we'll still have water to boil for pasta.

But Gawyn has no conception of my concerns. We live in Illinois. Our apartment is heated in the winter, and cooled in the summer. The grocery stores are fully stocked. In the spring and summer, we walk there with his red wagon because it's better exercise than driving. He pushes his shopping cart, buys the foods he wants to eat, and then complains because I only buy him half the toys he wants. But we rarely eat half the food we buy. Our cupboard is full to overflowing with canned foods, boxed foods, bags of sugar, and jugs of Welch's grape juice. About the only thing we ever run out of is coffee.

I can't blame him for his comfort. Sometimes, even I forget how good we have it.

The rest of the time, I'm just paranoid.

The other night, I yelled at Gawyn because he was crying. He was thirsty, and he wanted a bottle of water. He pointed at the case stashed under the table. He said he couldn't pull the bottle out through the hole in the plastic, but I knew better. I'd put that hole in the plastic myself. I'd pulled bottles out of that case already. There were plenty of bottles in there just waiting to be pulled out.

But it was nine at night, and Gawyn was tired. Nevertheless, he was strong enough to get his own water. I knew he was strong enough—he needed to try harder. But instead he stamped his feet on the floor and wailed.

"I want water!" he screamed.

"You can get it yourself," I told him. "Here, look—I'll show you." And I did. I got up, went around the table, yanked out a bottle of water, and then put it back again. Kind of like pulling the sword from the stone, and then placing it back for someone else to find.

But Gawyn was shrieking. He was insistent. "No, Daddy!" he cried. "You do it! You do it!"

"No!" I said, raising my voice. "You can get it yourself." And physically speaking, he could have. But physically speaking, I could do the dishes, too. Or cook a three-course chicken dinner. Or walk to school for the sake of my personal fitness. They aren't physical limits that stop me.

Still, my toddler and I yelled at each other—him pleading, me demanding. It took five long minutes before I realized, through the haze, that no, the world would not end if my son decided he did not want to get the water himself.

I got up again, went back to the case of water, and opened a bottle for my child. I handed it to him, and he took hold of it in both hands. He stepped back from me to drink. He eyed me with suspicion as I wondered at the monster inside me. Because I want to think that only a monster would deny water for my son. That only a monster would refuse to give Gawyn food when he is hungry. That only my ex-wife, who refuses to feed him at bedtime, is a monster. That only my mother, who is proud that I "never ate outside the kitchen," is a monster. That only my stepfather, who called me and my brother "vultures" for eating too many peanuts before dinner, could be a monster.

Gawyn sat on the kitchen floor drinking his water as the tears dried to his cheeks. "Daddy," he asked, "why you say no? Why you don't give me water?"

I sat in my chair at the table. Inside, I was empty. Spent. *I don't know*, I wanted to tell him. *I don't know why I said no*. But then, I did know the answer: *It's because I'm broken on the inside,* I wanted to say. *It's because I'm weak and sad and broken*.

But I didn't tell him that. Because I'm not weak. And I'm not broken. I'm just afraid. I don't want him to be thirsty in a place where no one will give him water. And I thought I should let him know my fears, let him understand just how strong I wanted him to be. "Sometimes," I

told him, “people don’t give you food or water when you want it, and you have to be strong enough to take it for yourself.”

He still sniffled with tears. He clutched his water close. “But why, Daddy?” he asked. “Why you don’t give me water?”

I opened my mouth again, but I didn’t know what to say. So I repeated those words of wisdom again. The hollow words. “Sometimes,” I said, “people don’t give you what you need. Sometimes, you have to take it for yourself.” But I knew the real message. *Forget sharing*, I told him. *People are assholes. They don’t give you water just because you’re thirsty. You have to take it for yourself.*

Later that night, I rocked my son to sleep in my arms. In principle, I believe in children learning to sleep on their own, but I’d already put him through enough. I’d already introduced him to the monster inside me. For the third time that week.

Firepower

In Afghanistan, my standard combat load was 210 rounds of five-five-six NATO. That’s seven clips of ammunition, thirty-rounds each. It’s the same 5.56 millimeter round you can purchase for your AR-15 assault rifle, carried in the same high-capacity magazines used for Newtown, Orlando, and San Bernardino. And yes, I know some people insist “it’s not an assault rifle,” but you don’t use the thing for deer hunting. No—if you want to bring down a deer, you need a shotgun. If you want to bring down a duck or a pheasant, you use a shotgun loaded with birdshot. If you want to defend your home against invasion, you use a forty-five caliber pistol. Preferably one that’s going to be strapped to your hip every hour of every day. Because seriously, if you thought there’s time to dig a rifle out of your closet, you’re already dead.

Yes, I know the stories. There was the pregnant single mother living in a trailer home who shot and killed a man who tried to enter her home with a knife—she used a shotgun. There was the ten-year-old boy who protected himself and his younger sister using a AR-15 loaded with five-five-six. It's not that these weapons are *never* useful—it's that they usually aren't, but people still like to pretend a gun will keep you safe. They forget about the two-year-old who reached into his mommy's purse in the Walmart parking lot, pulled her revolver from the handy little gun pocket, and shot her in the head. According to his father, the little boy was still asking "Where's Mommy?" I'm sure he continued asking all the way up to the funeral, and after. And then there's the six-year-old who found a gun, and then shot his friend with it. Except, I don't know which time that was—I've lost count. But for one of them, the sheriff's deputy was unforgiving. When a reporter asked if the death would be treated as a homicide or as an accidental discharge, the deputy just shook his head. "Ain't no such thing as an accidental discharge," he said. "It's called a *negligent* discharge. If a child finds a loaded weapon, that's negligence."

That's not to say I hate guns—I actually miss mine. It was a lovely M-4—I carried it through ten months in Afghanistan. It had a red-dot sight, an extra grip, and seven of those thirty-round clips with five-five-six.

If I could, I would have kept that weapon as my own. I would hang it on a hook from the wall, next to the cupboard with our pasta and our tuna. I would feed it with crates of ammunition—an extra crate with every trip to the store. Like my child, that weapon would have too much food to ever finish.

My first week at Fort Bragg, I was assigned the M-249 SAW, also known as the Squad Automatic Weapon. They call it a "light" machine gun now, even though it weighs 24 pounds. This is because it fires a very small bullet—the same five-five-six round you'd buy at Walmart for your AR-15.

But this was before they realized how bad my neck was—before I'd ever gone to sick call to get it looked at. For me, the two-four-nine was too heavy. My body had already begun the slow betrayal that would end in a medical discharge. My arms went numb at random times, and the pain wouldn't stop. Physical therapy helped, and ibuprofen was the best drug ever. I still deployed, but for Afghanistan they issued me the smaller and lighter M-4 carbine. Not that it really mattered. I only got shot at once, and I never saw who it was. There was no one for me to shoot and kill, and so I never learned whether or not I ever had what it takes to fight. But I can tell you about the machine gun. About how it works, about how you aim, about how to kill a man from three football fields away. At that range, you don't even have to watch him die.

On the firing range, I learned that the machine gun is far more accurate than the assault rifle. It's a matter of weight, really—the two-four-nine is bigger and longer. It's also far better braced against the ground. Lying prone on your belly, with the weapon's bipod extended and then shoved forward into the dirt, you can steady the weapon carefully enough to walk your tracers into a target. You're supposed to use short, controlled bursts—you hold down the trigger for a bit less than a second, and three or four rounds will spit out the front. And you can squeeze off those three or four or five rounds without the weapon bucking off target. You can watch the puffs of dust rise up from amidst the clumps of foliage, and walk your rounds into the target. And every third round is a tracer. So you squeeze off a burst, and you watch that glowing red tracer arc off

toward the horizon. If it's too high, you aim lower, until you see that point far in the distance where the 5.56 millimeter rounds impact the dirt, kicking up that dust. And then you slowly edge the barrel to the left or to the right, shifting your body weight until the puffs of dust in the distance line up with the spots of people standing and walking and moving out at the edge of where the eye can see. Or, if you are on a firing range, you wait until the green plastic silhouette disappears, indicating either that you have hit it, or that you have run out of time.

When it comes to rifles and machine guns, I'm a shitty marksman. It's my eyes, mostly—the thickness of my glasses, the fact that the perfectly rounded reticule of the rear sight aperture looks more like an oval by the time I press my face up to the stock. But I qualified on the M-16, and then later on the M-249, and later still on the M-4. In Basic, I hit only 26 of the 40 targets. That's the absolute minimum to qualify, but that number is somewhat deceptive. Nearly all the targets were fifty yards away or more. A few were out at three hundred yards. With the 249, there was a target out at four hundred yards. It was a timed range, and we were only given a limited supply of ammunition to meet the standard. "If you are having trouble hitting the targets," the range sergeants told us, "save your rounds. Don't shoot at the 300-yard target. You don't need that to qualify. Spend some extra rounds on the 200. You need to hit some of those."

But this was on a controlled range, lining up a narrow metal line within the pinhole dot of iron sights. We were given only forty rounds of ammunition to hit the forty pop-up targets. Given a bit more ammo, most of us could have killed all of them. Some of us would have died before we hit anything, but at least we knew how to aim.

When I think about owning a firearm, I don't think about hunting, or home defense, or anything like that. Instead, I think about taking my son to the range. I think about starting him out on a BB-gun, getting him trained on the basics of lining up the front and rear sites, controlling his breathing, landing a tight shot group. "It's about consistency," I'd tell him. "It's about hitting center mass." I'd leave out the other things, like the part about one shot, one kill. The mantra of "forty rounds." According to the story I heard, this mantra dates back to Vietnam, back when a "high capacity" magazine carried only twenty rounds. With two magazines—forty rounds—the goal was that you could bring down forty people. And where did I hear this mantra? It was the slogan used by one of our sister units in Basic. They called it out in unison any time their company commander called them to attention. If a drill sergeant asked one of them a question, "Forty Rounds, Drill Sergeant!" would be an acceptable response synonymous with "Yes!"

When I think about training my child to use a firearm, it's not just about learning to shoot—it's about learning to handle a weapon. And there's a difference. Anyone can take potshots at beer bottles. Hell—you can train a child to fire a forty-five. But the real place for a weapon isn't on the training range—the range is just a part of it. The range is where you practice. It's the rehearsals before curtain call, the months and months of memorizing the lines and choreography until which point you can execute the flawless synchronicity of thought and gesture before a live studio audience. Except that, this live audience will shoot back, and a mistaken rehearsal can put a bullet through a child. And, in the real world, there is no scheduled time for curtain call. None.

This is the scary thing—I'm a liberal. I'm not supposed to like guns. I'm not supposed to be the one who sees the third-floor balconies in our apartment complex as potential sniper positions. But sometimes, I rehearse a war in my mind—raising my white flag pillowcase,

waving to the police, hoping they'll take me in as I haul my toddler across the front lines of Normal, Illinois. It would kill my neck and back, but we would haul ass.

Other times, I imagine a more defensive war, a devastation where even the police have been forced to retreat. In this war, we would turn our apartment into an island of solitude. I've already picked out where I would stack the sandbags, how I would choose which rooms to defend in the event of a civil war. We have enough pasta and tuna to last a couple weeks—if the war gets worse than that, I don't know what I'd do. Would we have guns? I'm not sure. I don't generally trust paranoid army veterans with firearms, and I think I am one. But we have a bathtub. And kitchen knives. And duct tape. I know how to fix a bayonet. I can figure out diversions. And tactics. I can lock my screaming child in one bathroom as bait, and then crouch in the shadow of my bookshelves as armed men come to do us harm. Or at night, if the distant popcorn crackle of small-arms fire reminds me of Afghanistan, I can lay blankets and a yoga mat in our bathtub, and then cradle my son on my chest as I lie awake. Waiting. Ready.

One problem: I don't know what I'd do about my ex-wife. No way she'd let me keep our child without her. I doubt she'd listen to anything I say. But whatever. If I had to put up with her to protect my son from war, then I'd make her put up with me, too.

This is the problem with anger, and paranoia, and sadness. At some point, your thoughts warp beyond the pale of reason. As I type this, I sit in a Panera. I'm on my third cup of coffee, and I might buy more bagels soon. The chatter of conversation is almost cheerful. Sometimes, I hear it. Like this moment, as I step back from the preceding paragraphs. But there was a time there—maybe it was twenty minutes, maybe it was an hour—when I did not hear the people at all. I didn't see them, either. Instead there was only the bathtub, and the yoga mat, and the thought of

that eight-inch chef's knife duct-taped to the piece of scrap lumber my child is currently using to support the bridge for his Thomas the Train set. Imagination blurs to reality when you worry about the safety of your own child.

I already know the questions he would ask. "Daddy, I'm cold. Can we have the space heater?"

"No, Gawyn. The power's out."

"Daddy, can we read *Curious George*?"

"No, Gawyn—we don't have any candles."

"Why we don't have candles?"

"Because the lease said no candles, and I didn't think there'd be an actual civil war. Not really. Not enough to prepare for it."

"But why, Daddy?"

"Because I'm not psychic, Gawyn. I just have PTSD."

"But Daddy, why you no take your medicine?"

"Because I ran out, Gawyn. I ran out."

In my mind, I've spent the past twenty years fighting wars that never happened. I've been fighting these wars since high school. Maybe since grade school, back during that day on the playground when I idly wondered if I would know how to set a brick building on fire. With a bucket of gasoline, I decided. I would have been twelve, or maybe thirteen. I knew I shouldn't have been thinking those thoughts, but I couldn't help it. There they were, and there I was.

My psychiatrist is great, and the social worker from the Vet Center knows the sights and smells of Kuwait, but seriously—I feel as if I was born to the wrong life.

I've been to Afghanistan—it sucked. Not for me, though. We had coffee, most days, and sometimes I'd munch on the raw grounds of instant Taster's Choice from the MRE's. I kinda liked rolling through the mountains in winter. I got to sit up in the turret, and the view was pristine, almost majestic. The sun glittering on fresh snow, the crags of mountains rising into a sky so blue it hurt—I imagined it would have been perfect for ski slopes, if not for the war. Sometimes, I imagined what it would be like to start my own resort there, a kind of "adventure sport traveling." I'd hire out the locals to serve as guides, and I'd charge people money for the privilege of hunting Taliban. "It's kinda like a safari," I'd tell my guests, "but zebras don't carry Kalashnikovs."

That was a pleasant dream, nothing more. Our humvees trudged through those mountains, the engines struggling to haul our gear and our bodies and the armor plate up higher into the thin mountain air. On roads that barely deserved the name, we ground the snow into mud, lumbering forward through the abyss of rocks and winter. Sometimes, the trucks didn't make it. Some needed a jump start each morning. Some needed to be towed. One of them snagged the rear differential on a mound of dirt that was actually a boulder. Our assigned truck—the one with the thirty-foot radio mast for intercepting enemy communications—was worse still. We often left that one behind. It was too old and too slow—even on paved highways, our truck fell behind at the first hint of an incline. It was the new armor they installed—the original engine didn't have the horsepower to keep up. We waited months and months before the mechanics could install a new one. I don't know that I minded. That truck didn't have a turret mount. It didn't have an opening on the roof for the gunner to sit, wrapped in his layers of fleece and Kevlar and polypropylene and more fleece. It didn't have a place for me to admire the passage of

mountains, and time, and the hours of my own life, the buttstock of an M-249 waiting at my elbow for something—anything—to happen.

Sure, it sucked being there, but it was worse for the guys who got hit, or the ones who watched buddies get turned into meat. Before I got there, my unit had a guy in Iraq who got burned alive in his humvee. I never knew him, but he'd been classmates with some of my buddies. The mention of his name summoned an emptiness to the room—an emptiness I could not feel. I'd never met him. But my buddies knew him—had known him. His absence haunted their eyes.

Just the same, I was army. I joked that wherever I walked, America was the ground beneath my boots. And after ten months, I went home. We all made it home—ours was a quiet tour, and everyone in our company returned home alive and relatively intact. Another year, and I would say goodbye as my buddies rotated for another turn in Iraq, and I would be discharged, no longer medically fit to fight. I'd find my way to graduate school. I'd get married, have a child, get divorced.

The people living there, though? The ones labeled with terms like "haji" or "sand nigger" or—for the women in burqas—the "blue ghosts"? Their lives *really* sucked. It was a civil war that never ended. First they had Soviets, then they had warlords, then they had Taliban, then they had the U.S.—and that's just the generations alive now. Look carefully enough, and you'll see evidence of all the past invasions, from Alexander to the Mongols to the British. We like to imagine we will change them—I assume they will outlive us.

In the past, I never joked about being a snowflake. The word held no meaning. So what if some family members were conservative, and others liberal? We all gathered for Thanksgiving. We all agreed the winter roads sucked, and that the schools sucked, and that America was going

to hell, but we could still disagree over turkey and green bean casserole. Until this year, when my uncle posted funny little flyers saying *No Politics Allowed*.

I was in the army. I've been to Afghanistan. I've spent years pretending that Thanksgiving is normal, that grocery stores are normal. But I know better. I've rolled through small towns in desert mountains, the silt so dry that your boots would sink into the dust. It was dirt, but the particles were so fine and so bereft of water that they sloshed over your feet like slush. The dust is still in my eyelids, apparently. "It seeps into your pores," the army ophthalmologist said, a few months after we all returned. "Warm compresses help. But the dryness is pretty typical. Doesn't really go away. Sometimes it'll scratch up your corneas real bad."

Like the dust, the memory of Afghanistan lingers. You can't forget the mud hovels, or the outdoor pits where people would squat to shit because there's no water for plumbing. And you wonder, how do these people survive? How do they cling to life in this land? A land where, every so often, you can drive past the carcass of a Soviet tank? Cooperation, right? Working together, right?

No.

"They burned the school," an interpreter once told us. He was translating the words of the local Afghan National Army commander, a man who'd been fighting since long before the U.S. joined in. He was described to us as a great leader, someone truly respected, but I never listened for his name. I don't know if he was a general, or just some guy who had managed not to die. But the Afghanis around him, they stood quietly as he spoke, and that meant something.

Our interpreter passed on his words to us. “It is a small town,” he said. “The Taliban, they come through, they burn the school and they kill the teacher and they shoot the girls. And they have no money to build a new school, and no more daughters to send to the school.”

Snowflake

I am accustomed to the stares of wonder I get from my younger colleagues, those grad students who live alone, staying up late amid the panicked struggle to “keep up” with papers and research and the vicious grip of expectation. “How do you do it?” they ask me. “How do you raise a child while in grad school?”

LOL! I think. *You imagine parenting is hard? Try divorce. And custody.*

But I’m older. I pretend I’m more wise to the ways of the world. So I try reassuring them. “Oh, I was way more stressed out during my MFA,” I tell them. “You get better at this stuff. You learn to cope.” Though, really, I only reassert the idea that my friends are somehow inadequate as people, that they have somehow not yet developed these epic capacities for “coping” and “time management” that I must surely possess. Because I usually leave out the part that really matters: *I was suicidal my first year of grad school—before the Ph.D., before marriage, before my son was born. Before the antidepressants. Before the divorce.*

“But how do you keep up with all the reading?” they ask.

It’s been years since I ever did all the reading, I could tell them. *I never did all the reading. Not even in college. Why do you really think I joined the army? It’s not because I was good at school. It’s because I was too depressed to apply for a “real” job. Fighting Al Qaeda sounded better than sitting through interviews. I mean, I’d be afraid for my life either way—at least the army gives you a rifle*.

If my ligaments hadn't betrayed me, I'd probably still be in the army. Every so often, one of my army buddies will post to Facebook about his upcoming retirement, and I'll know a twinge of regret. I served five years, but I never did the things I wanted to do. I've never fired a weapon in combat, never stalked an enemy an open ground to kill him, and never seen a friend die. Why I would have wanted to experience these things makes no real sense, but there was a time in my life when I wanted to be strong—stronger than I had ever been. By the time I made it through college, I was afraid to write my own resume. I had two years of engineering credits, and I had finished a double-degree in English and German, but the thought of translating my life to paper seemed inconceivable. I spent four years as a tour guide, two years as a Resident Assistant, and four years in a fraternity. I had spent one summer working in a cockroach lab, I had spent a month in Germany, and I had skimmed enough of *Madame Bovary* to write an essay on it.

Still, I felt dead. I didn't sleep—not really. At night, I'd put my head down when I could no longer function, and in the mornings I'd drag myself to the dining hall for a bagel when the alarm said I was gonna be late for class. During the hours between, I had a busy four years. I wrote stories, read sci fi, lost an epee match against a leftie from Notre Dame, almost failed Thermodynamics, almost failed Circuits, got a B in Modern Physics. I told prospective students about the time that Case Western professors used an interferometer to prove that the speed of light was constant in all directions. I timed cockroaches with a stopwatch as they raced from one end of a glass box to the other. I contemplated opening my wrists with a kitchen knife. By the time I reached senior year—the big year, when the skies would open with opportunity—all I wanted was someplace deserted where I could wander for days, collapse into a bed, and sleep until I was no longer of this world.

One time, I was so suicidal that my therapist at student counseling services coached me on what to say to the psychiatrist. “After what you wrote last time,” he said, “I had to refer you for evaluation. There’s a chance she’ll want you hospitalized, but I don’t think that would help you right now. So here are the things you shouldn’t say.”

Fortunately, I listened. He was a psychologist with a doctoral degree and decades of experience—he knew what would happen if I were hospitalized. He had probably seen it before. For some, it can be a good experience. You get medicated, you get help, and your family comes in to offer aid and succor until you are able to stand alone again. But for others—like me—there is no family you trust to provide such aid. And for me, it’s possible the hospitalization would have been a death sentence. Not the kind where the heart stops beating, but the kind where your wings catch fire under the sun’s scrutiny, and you know a time of free fall as the ocean comes to greet your dreams in the cold embrace that never lets go. And I think Doctor H. knew that. I think he sensed that, as hard as college could be, it was better than the prison of the mind to which I would return if they pulled me out of class. Either way, he knew the consequences if he were wrong. He had read my letter—the one where I consigned all my physical possessions to other people with the words “In case something happens to me.” He had talked with me for the hours upon hours. He knew that, when I crossed Euclid Avenue each day en route to the quad, the sight of a Transit Authority bus barreling down the avenue left me with a longing to step out in front, fully knowing that my head would be at the level of the windshield, and that my feet would be sucked into the asphalt under the front bumper. Just the same, I think he was right—pulling me away from that pain would have led me to something deeper still.

Yes, there were still these times when life was okay. I passed most of my classes. I learned German. I learned to write. I accumulated jobs and experience for that resume I would

never write. Even in the grip of wanting to die, I dragged myself to class each week, forcing myself through finals and summer jobs and fraternity formals. I clung to my scholarship, knowing that grades were the only thing keeping me alive in a place that was not home.

Does it matter, now, that I spent two years as a Student Ambassador Coordinator for a good-sized private university? Does it matter that the campus tour guide coordinator once called me a "student leader"? Or that I was part of not one, but two honor societies? Probably not. For I was a fragile snowflake. We didn't have the words for it then, but I was a molten snowman in the world that is real. When I got myself to the library to study, I would put my head down on the table and sleep. I gauged my productivity not by the number of books checked out, but by the puddle of drool under my face. I could write twenty pages on the publication practices surrounding Shakespeare's manuscripts, but I couldn't bear the pain of going home. One year, I stayed in the dorms for Thanksgiving, unready for my mom's judgment about my choice of major. I bought myself some chicken breasts at the food co-op, turned on the stove in the dorm, and watched in horrid fascination as the ants nesting under the burners burbled out in a wave of desperate escape. As I fried my holiday meal, they blackened the enamel range top in a pool of the dead, filling the dorm kitchen with the stink of crispy insects.

Maybe that should have been the last straw. Maybe that should have been the day I ended it all. It was Thanksgiving, and I was alone in the dorms. It would have been a long weekend before anyone found me. And my passing could have been excused as the stress of a long semester, or as the isolation that comes with the holidays, or as the painful realization that I simply wouldn't survive another year of engineering. This was, after all, the first semester of my sophomore year. That was the month I had written the letter that summoned a psychiatrist. That was the month I walked out into the snow, lay down in the cold grass, and watched as the stars

mixed with snowflakes. I wasn't even wearing my winter coat—I hadn't found the energy to pull it on. Instead, I just sat back, feeling the dull chill of winter through the crunch of frozen grass. There, I wondered which would claim me first: common sense, or hypothermia.

Somehow, I didn't die. I didn't walk in front of a bus, or open my wrist, or walk off the top of the parking garage. Instead, I changed majors. I dragged myself to class. And I graduated. Two and a half years later.

I liked the army. I still miss it. Compared to college, it's easier finding your life worthwhile when you wake up each morning, pull on your camouflage, and know you're a badass. I had my sergeant's stripes. I had my Combat Action Badge, and my Airborne wings. I even had an 82nd Airborne combat patch on my shoulder. The same shoulder with the American flag. Even after the doctors decided I was no longer fit to carry body armor, and even after they agreed that I was no longer able to fire a weapon, I was a badass. I had jumped from high-performance aircraft in flight. I had gone to Afghanistan. I had faced enemy fire. And I still knew how to kill a man with my bare hands, in case the need ever arose.

Yes—the army made me tough. The army made me a man. But in case that wasn't enough, the tiny-ass Volkswagen I drove was a stick shift. Because fuck yeah.

But I'm no longer in the army. Now I'm in grad school. I still drive a stick shift, but my new car's another import. It was cheap. And relatively fuel efficient. With room in the back for a car seat. And a five-star safety rating. Because child. And because the loyal little Volkswagen was totaled in a left turn. My left turn, when I was tired, and in a hurry. With my little guy in the back seat.

My son often asks why I bought a black Kia Soul.

"Why not green, Daddy?"

"Because green was too expensive."

"But why not green, Daddy?"

"Because the only two colors with a stick shift were red and black. And the red one was used. And three years old." Low mileage, but still. I wanted the ten-year warranty. Was that worth an extra three grand? I don't know. In the last years before my Volkswagen died, I was spending two grand a year in repairs. Timing belt, water pump, oxygen sensors—hell, I had to replace the goddamned catalytic converter for $960. And three months later, I made a left turn in front of a Honda Civic, and my car was totaled.

"But why not green, Daddy?"

"Because they only had a single car in the base model with a manual transmission and zero upgrades. It was black."

"But why not green, Daddy?"

Today, the cheap black Kia with the tiny-ass trunk holds recycling bins. They've filled the trunk and the entire left half of the backseat for going on two weeks now. The only reason we stopped to empty them is because my son asked why I drove past the recycling drop-off.

"Daddy, can you turn again?"

"Turn again? Turn where?"

"Why you drive past it?"

"Past what?"

"The recycle place."

"What? You mean you want to drop off the recycling? Now?" I mean, why bother? It was cold. It was below freezing. And all the cans and bottles and paper had been sitting frozen in my car for over a week. If I were still in the army, that would have been a no-go. The MP's would have run my plates and given me a call and told me to clear all the shit out of my backseat. Not just because someone might break into my car, but also to make sure I hadn't parked my car with a bomb. Because if you think a suspicious package at the airport is bad, try a suspicious car bomb near Ardennes Road on Fort Bragg.

But I'm not in the army. I don't have anyone to tell me to scrape the layer of congealed bacon fat off the Pyrex baking pan that's been sitting on my stove since Christmas. I don't have anyone forcing me to sweep up the roly poly carcasses decorating the corners of my bathrooms. I still don't know how I found the motivation to kill all the ants in my kitchen. Some days, I can't get myself to move away from my bed—somehow, I managed to order ant baits off Amazon, cut the plastic open, and gift the insectoid hordes their very own sugar-fueled orgy of Borax and death.

But this is life, when you are a fragile snowflake who takes antidepressants. Sadly—or perhaps fortunately—my son does not understand this. He's four, and he only knows that Daddy takes pills every night, and that sometimes Daddy gets really, really pissed when something spills on the carpet. Still, when I pull up to the daycare, I find him sitting by the glass door that faces the parking lot. He watches for me, and he waits for me. If the sun sets before I arrive, he asks why I come so late. And in Illinois in the winter, the sun sets early. So when I pack up my computer and get the last refill on my sweet tea, I keep an eye on the horizon. How soon before the sun dips down below the Shell station across the road? How soon before the pale gray fades to the twilight dusk of sunset? How quickly must I leave the Moe's or the Starbucks or the

Dunkin Donuts to reach my child before the toddler's universal timepiece informs him that I am late?

Sometimes, I wonder how I will tell my child about what it means to be a real man—the kind who is brave, the kind who volunteers to jump from an aircraft, the kind who continues his antidepressants every night, all the way through the divorce and beyond. But he's too young, now, to know what it means to hide in plain sight.

The Power Drill

When I first began drafting the creative portion of my dissertation, I assumed I knew what I would write. And when I first started this dissertation, I assumed I would be describing how to be "more honest" in writing the difficult memoir. As if memoir is ever "easy."

I wanted to describe the process of going through a divorce, interrogate the long shadow of my own childhood, and then challenge cultural notions of what counts as "abuse." But I find that it is nearly impossible to peel back my own well-practiced layers of avoidance. The false smile, the "dad jokes," my constant game of playing "normal"—my entire life has been a performance. This shouldn't have been surprising—it should have been obvious. The study of reality as a rhetorical phenomenon pays my rent. But theory becomes painful when you sit at the keyboard and realize you can't write about anything relevant to what you thought you wanted to say.

In writing about my past, it wasn't simply that performance, fear, and blindness became recurring themes—it's that fear undermined the entire writing process. I have centered my life around appearing "reliable"—at first, to protect myself from being judged, and later to protect

my relationship with my son in the eyes of a judge. This dissertation—and all the "life's work" people assume I must be engaged in—has been overshadowed by these fears of losing my child. And the harder I tried to show how "good" I am as a father, or how much I had "overcome," the more it fell flat. My best moments as a father are usually the worst—like the time I said "sure!" when my four-year-old asked about using my cordless drill to anchor poster putty to a piece of plywood. On carpet. To mention the story—and the subsequent clean-up—is to invite gasps of horror and judgment. Sure, it seems noble to explain that I'm raising him to be assertive and creative—until I reflect upon how many times I've yelled at my little guy about that same carpet. Or how, earlier that same day, my stepfather's rage poured out through my own lips. It had something to do with the twenty minutes of carpet cleaner and Crayola. And torn Post-it notes. And this dissertation.

As I tried to write this past, the nagging doubts have slowed my fingers. Why *was* my mother always so angry? Why is she *still* so insistent that I follow her advice? And why do I still refuse her offers of financial help? And, perhaps more importantly, can I say I'm attempting "fairness" in my work when I can't even find the courage to ask my parents about this shared past, let alone admit that I'm writing about them?

But then there are these moments of clarity, there on the carpet on my hands and knees, feeling as if I should be angry that my son has just braided the carpet fibers with poster putty using the Phillips bit on a twelve-volt cordless drill. But who could I be angry at? Who could I blame? I had trusted a four-year-old with a power tool. I had laughed at his antics as he balled up the wads of poster putty, placed them onto the wood, and then carefully lined up the drill with his prey. "Don't push too hard," I warned him. "You'll drive that stuff right into the carpet if you push too hard." And he did. And I, proud of the freedom and guidance I provided my child,

remained entirely blind as the Phillips head bit into the carpet fibers, twining them around the spindle, yanking them into knots. Not until after the drill was safely hidden away did I notice the jagged patch of carpet, and then bend down for a closer look. It was almost beautiful, the way the coils of poster putty had twirled into such perfect spirals within the braids of the carpet. The power of the drill hadn't just driven the silly putty deeper into the carpet—it had wrapped the putty in the fibers and then compressed it, extruding the putty through the fibers the way you might push pasta dough through a spaghetti press—if the holes in the press were no bigger than the gaps in the weave of a threadbare t-shirt.

If not for rent, and the security deposit, and everything else, I might have celebrated the happy accident of chemistry, physics, and aesthetics. Instead, I googled how to remove poster putty from carpet. I told my son he shouldn't have pushed so hard, but my voice faltered. What, really, had he done wrong? I was the one who thought it would teach him a lesson to see that drills have no effect on gelatinized rubber. I was the one, all-knowing, who had imagined this as a kind of "learning experience." I had clicked the drill down to the lowest power settings, certain of my rightness. I wasn't just giving in to his random request to use a drill on poster putty—I was helping him on his journey to manhood. "Here you go," I told him. "Just know that it won't do any good."

"I will make it stick, Daddy!"

"You'll make it spin around in circles is what you'll do."

Just the same, he tried it. And he loved it. "Look, Daddy! It's sticking!"

Right, I thought, looking at the donut of putty now stuck to the drill bit. Hardly any remained for the wood. *You go on telling yourself how great this is, little guy.*

Yes—I patted myself on the back, proud that I had foreseen everything. The putty spun in circles, none of it stuck to the wood, and I was confident in my ability to peel loose rubber from the carbon steel of a drill bit. I was so busy fluffing my ego that I didn't even watch the carpet.

This is the point in the story where I should talk about my childhood. I should explain just how precious my stepfather found his own tools. He built himself a workshop in our basement—each year, it grew a bit larger, a bit more impressive, a bit closer to the three-room suite of drills and saws and clamps and wrenches in his own father's basement. Yes—I think I only set foot into Grandpa Pat's workshop once—the rest of the time, it was hidden behind a door that had been paneled and finished to blend in perfectly with the wall. But that room, I remember it—entire walls of pegboard, every square inch dotted with hammers, screws, screwdrivers, bits for the screwdrivers, wrenches. But then, of course he had such a workshop—he was an electrician. That was his life. Whenever he and Grandma Marilyn came to visit, the joke was that Mom and David were always working on some remodeling project, and Grandpa Pat always got roped in. Not that you could have kept him away. Once, I watched him as he climbed up a ladder, coiled together bare copper wires with his bare fingers, and then re-attached a ceiling fan. Climbing down from the ladder, he was rubbing his fingers together. He'd been retired a few years, and he was getting old. "Used to twist wires like that every day," he said. "Damn calluses are wearing off."

I don't remember Grandpa Pat's workshop. But I do remember David's. The home I grew up in was torn down years ago, but I remember exactly where to find the metric socket set, the spray can with bicycle oil, and the crescent wrench. There was the table saw, occupying the position of pride in the center of the parquet tile—in the corner sat the band saw inherited from

my mother's father, by virtue of the fact that David was the only one in the family who would likely use it. And he did. Beside it, piled in coils that would later remind me of concertina wire, were the spare blades. "Don't fall on those," he once warned. "That'd be a quick trip to the ER."

At first, the workshop occupied only a single room. Then two rooms. And the attached entryway. For a time, it was separated from the rest of the basement by sheets of industrial plastic suspended from the ceiling. Later, he installed a set of lightweight French doors. "Do *not* lean on those," he told me. "You'll fall right through them."

This is the time where I should talk about all the pain my stepfather suffered, on account of those tools. The months he went to a chiropractor because of all those hours painting the front of our house—he hoisted a paintbrush so many times that his shoulders went out of alignment. Or the time he accidentally drilled through the side of his thigh.

Looking back, I don't know how bad his shoulders were. But I remember the dinners, where I had to sit still and quiet, because the pain from his shoulders was something you didn't fuck with. I don't know how it was explained to me or in what words, but Mom conveyed that David's temper stemmed from the dislocation in his shoulders from all the painting. Except she's a nurse—there's no chance she would have used the term "dislocation" to describe misaligned shoulders. I was too young, then, to understand the phrase "don't fuck with me," but that is the way I remember it.

Likewise, I know little about the injury with the drill. I wasn't there when it happened—I only got home later that day. David was building a deck for our backyard—my mom and I took turns assisting. That was the year David taught me about marking a grid with string, digging the post holes, and then pouring concrete to fill the molds. But one morning, something slipped, and

I came home to see him strutting across the backyard, enraged with pain, pissed that my mother hadn't come downstairs when he was hurt.

At least, that's what I remember. Like I said—my mom was a nurse. During her divorce from my father—when my brother and I were both under two—she was the head nurse for an ER in Chicago. So whatever David had done to his leg, my mother had certainly seen worse. And I don't know the true extent of the injury—whether the drill bit went deep enough into flesh to hit muscle, or if instead it glanced off, carving its way through skin alone. I don't remember whether or not he went to a doctor, or got stitches, or updated his tetanus shot. But I remember all those things being *talked* about, even though I have no certainty about whether or not medical care was ever invoked. And so I wonder, looking back, just what exactly I remember, and how much of that memory is true.

David had two drills—a cordless drill, for fixing things around the house, and a corded drill, for the real work of renovations. Later, he got a third drill. And then a cordless screwdriver. But then, David's the kind of man who builds his own workbenches. He doesn't just install shelves and cupboards—he builds them. From scratch. From sheets of hardwood that he measures and cuts himself. For some years, I stood on the other end of the table saw, my sole job being to hold the floating end of the board, and then to support it so it wouldn't fall.

And yet I've never used a table saw. Not once. It was too dangerous when I was young, and I suppose it was unimportant when I was older, and in college. I also never drove, except for that one trip to Iowa, when someone decided it was safe for David to ride with me as I gained practice for my learner's permit. That was also my first time driving on a highway. And my first time nearly plowing into the end of the road, as my eyes widened in sudden terror as the sight of

a giant orange sign with a black arrow to mark the upcoming lane change. That was my first—and last—day behind the wheel of my parents' car. But I don't remember them being afraid, or even terrified. I think I remember David laughing. "Get over!" he said, that half-joking tone he uses whenever a non-fatal catastrophe must be averted. He seemed so oddly at ease that trip. Buoyant, maybe? I don't know. Because all those trips to Iowa, as David drove, we weren't allowed to make noise in the car. Even now, I flinch whenever riding in the car with my stepfather, and he snaps "Stop it!" He never says that to me anymore—it's always to my mom, whenever he catches sight of her picking her nails. But when I was young, it could be anything that set him off. If I rubbed my feet on the floor mats, if my knees bumped the back of his seat, if I breathed too much in the winter and the back windows fogged up.

It was the pain, though, that did this to him. His uneven shoulders, his wrist in brace from carpal tunnel, too many hours sitting in a single position in the car on a drive that went on too long. I don't remember how, precisely, my mom communicated this to me, or when. Was it during the arguments, as they drove? Or was it after we arrived? Or was it before even getting in the car? As a kind of warning to keep us quiet lest we make things worse?

I don't know. And I cannot bring myself to ask.

Time Outs

My attorney leafed through the sheets of paper one-by-one. She was not amused.

"I don't understand why you are making this so complicated," she said. She pointed to the section about the visitation schedule for Easter. It was a thick block of text specifying the division of times down to the hour. "I don't even understand what this part is saying," she said. Later, she reached the section on time-outs. I'd written most of that part myself. I'd even

factored in the mathematical equation I'd read online about the length of time that's "healthy" for a child to be excluded from all activities. And the part about how the child should be in a well-lit room. And that the parent should never be out of earshot. My wife and I both agreed that the door to the room should not be closed.

But my lawyer found the language too abstruse. "No judge is gonna want to hear the two of you trying to tell each other how to parent," she said. "If you two can't come to an agreement, the judge will decide one for you—and let me tell you, they're not going to care about whether you put your child in time-out for one minute or two."

I nodded. Of course I nodded. At $240 an hour, there was nothing my lawyer could say that I'd disagree with. Though I did want to point out to her that she'd probably never been locked out on an unheated back porch for a "time out." I couldn't imagine her standing there in bare feet, the hard floor cold as snow, waiting on a microwave timer's beep. And it was worse for my brother. He's autistic. He has a documented behavioral disorder. Sometimes he got out of control. Long after I'd outgrown the time out, I had to listen to his wails of apology as they locked him out, set the timer for three minutes, and made him wait.

Then again, my lawyer started her career as a social worker. From what I understand, she's seen children locked in closets without the promise of a timer's beep of reprieve. And worse. So to her, reasonable people spending a child's future college tuition on legal fees over the minutes on a microwave must be nauseating.

Besides, could I know the childhood my lawyer had? None of my friends know about the back porch, or the cold floor, or the three minutes on the microwave. I never even told my wife.

During my childhood, timeouts represented the first and most important element of a system I think of as "removal parenting." In this parenting style, the ultimate goal is to quickly and thoroughly enculturate children to appropriate norms of decorum by withdrawing rewards and freedoms and affections that a well-behaved child might reasonably expect. Typically, this first involves the removal of items. Your son won't clean up his toys? Take them away. Tell him that if he doesn't clean up that pigsty called his room, you'll bring in a Hefty bag and start shoveling everything in. Sometimes, you need to be a bit more assertive. Like if your stepson leaves his shoes in the middle of the floor by the back door, then you should probably pick up one of them and throw it so hard through the next room that it hits the radiator on the far side of the room. The five, ten, or twenty minutes it takes him to figure out where that shoe went will teach him to stop leaving his shit lying around in the middle of the goddamn floor.

My mom's preferred maneuver was known as the "I will take you right out of there." I still remember the time she dragged me home from Sunny's, the small pub just down the street from the apartment on Racine. I don't remember what I did or why my mom was so angry, but I do remember crying. I remember her yanking me along the sidewalk all the way home, her fingers clamped around my forearm. I remember that I had trouble keeping up, she was walking so fast.

Later, dinner came to us in a to-go box, as my stepfather followed after. Though I don't remember it clearly, he arrived with my brother and the remains of our plates, and my mother and I finished our meal at the table at home.

I remember another time, too, when we were about to have a barbecue at that same apartment on Racine, and for some reason I had taken to spitting on the floor. I don't know how many times I was spitting—or even why—but I do recall the diamond glitter of my saliva on that

faux brick linoleum. And maybe that was the driving force of my malfeasance—the fluid glitter of my art. And the whole night was full of possibility. It was a barbecue night, which meant going out in the backyard, eating outside, and taking in the glorious smells of charcoal smoke. Outside, I would play in the dirt, run my cars through the dirt, and shriek with delight at the feel of dirt. The anticipation was palpable.

One problem: my mother is a nurse, and she has zero tolerance for spitting. And punishment was swift: "You're not going outside."

I begged. I pleaded. I shrieked. But my mother, like the police, refuses to negotiate with agents of terror.

So while my mom and brother and stepdad went outside to barbecue, Mom made me stay inside. I screamed and I cried and I screamed some more about wanting to go out because of the barbecue. But no. I'd been spitting on the floor in the kitchen—my punishment was to stay inside. Later—after dinner, I think—I was still so despondent that my mom asked what was wrong. "I just wanted to go outside," I said. "Okay," she said, "you can go outside now." And so I did. I went out into the backyard with a juice box, and I paced from one side of the empty yard to the other. The red Weber grill sat there at the edge of yard, over on the sidewalk, somehow faded. I was sad because no one was there and there was nothing to do. I had missed the barbecue. I had missed the charcoal and the lighter fluid and the stoking of the grill. All that remained now was the empty yard and the cooling Weber. It was late. The sun had not yet set, but it was well below the horizon of the neighborhood. The yard now cooled in the long shade of the house. My parents only rented the first floor, but it was a three-story house. And that night, it blocked the sun.

So in the gray haze of that empty yard, I sucked in my tears and the orange juice. Maybe the juice box helped, but not much.

Removal Parenting

There are two fundamental components to removal parenting, as my mother has proudly explained. The first is respect to the public. No one wants to hear a crying child. You don't pay for a nice dinner at a restaurant only to have your meal interrupted by shrieks.

The second is education. This is how you teach a child to behave. "You knew how to behave in a restaurant," my mom has told me. And in a way, this is perhaps the greatest strength of my mother's parenting style—without ever spanking me, she and my stepfather have left me with a lifelong disgust for such crimes as acting up in a restaurant, chewing with your mouth open, throwing things in the house, and running indoors.

My mother still takes pride in how well behaved my brother and I were in restaurants. "It's because you knew I'd take you out of there," she said.

Yes, we did know.

First Funeral

Sadly, removal parenting does nothing for funerals. At times, my son is allergic to decorum. Once, at a seafood restaurant the night before my grandfather's funeral, he began running laps—he'd dash down the wheelchair ramp, make a hard turn around the big flower pot at the end of the row, and then make his way up the stairs on the other side of the railing. If this had been outside the restaurant, no one would have cared, but this was inside, just by the cash

register. So I took up my station by the door, and I redirected the little guy left or right or in reverse as groups of customers made their way past. And this was the Quad Cities, that group of towns where western Illinois meets eastern Iowa, everything stitched together with those mile-long bridges across the Mississippi. Half the customers were aging retirees whose children had doubtless left the Midwest for bigger and better lives elsewhere. Hell, my grandparents didn't even live there anymore—they'd long since sold their house and moved down to Florida. The only reason any of us were back was that Grandpa Pat had been born in the Quad Cities, had lived his best years there, and wanted to be buried there.

Returning to the Quad Cities for the funeral, for me, was a like a return to the retirement home. Never mind that the average age in the restaurant was probably in the low thirties, or that I saw some women there I would have gladly asked out on a date—my attention was on the elderly. On the grandmother in a walker, on the World War II vet riding in a wheelchair. Because the night before the funeral, my toddler raced back and forth, up and down, side to side. The restaurant, for him, was a playground. And I had this nightmare thought of him knocking someone over, breaking a hip or worse. But I figured that was unlikely. So I let him run. And run. And run. It got so bad that my mom had to take a shift by the door so I could sit down and eat. At some point she coaxed Gawyn into her lap so he could eat a bit, too. And he did enjoy the french fries. And a few pieces of raw broccoli. And sixty more trips up and down the wheelchair ramp.

Later that night, my Grandma Marilyn—who had spent the past month or so planning the arrangements to bury her husband of sixty-plus years—told me that Gawyn would need to behave at the funeral. "We've put a lot of time and planning into this—I don't need him to go ruining it for everyone."

I don't remember what I said. But inside, I was like *Really? You think I can make this little one sit still?* But I couldn't say that. All I managed was some kind of affirmative. I think I mentioned what my plan had been all along: I wouldn't have Gawyn sit through the service at all. I'd already seen that disaster at my Aunt Janet's funeral, when Aunt Gayle insisted that I sit right up front, right by the pastor and the flowers, with Gawyn in my lap. "He needs to see the service," she said. And my mom didn't disagree. She thought it was a great idea, me sitting next to her, the squirming two-year-old on my lap. Because she is quite proud of Gawyn, after all. He is her only grandchild, after all. (And he's smart, too!) So for Grandpa Pat's funeral, I didn't even try. I brought Gawyn out to the cemetery, got close enough to the service for attendance credit, and then let Gawyn wander through the garden of stones.

In classical removal parenting, as my mom taught it, the primary goal is to let the child know that they've done wrong, and to send a message that they are *never* to do that again. It's kind of like Pavlovian conditioning, but in reverse—you hear the bell, and your salivary glands clamp up in terror. Your throat goes dry as you realize the bell tolls for you, and that you will be taken out of this restaurant if you don't pull your act together *right now.*

In classical removal parenting, the script for my Aunt Janet's funeral should have gone something like this:

> Pastor: [Says nice things about my departed Aunt Janet, who was bipolar and addicted to cigarettes. She died of lung cancer. In her last year of life, she apparently burned off her right ear by lighting up a cigarette next to her oxygen mask. At least according to my mom. But I never saw pics, so it maybe didn't happen.]
>
> Gawyn: [Squirms.]

Me: “Gawyn, sit still.”

Gawyn: [Squirms more.]

Me: “Gawyn, if you don’t sit still, we are going right back to the car.”

Gawyn: “Why, Daddy?”

Me: “Gawyn, I’m warning you.”

Gawyn: [Starts singing his ABC’s.]

Pastor: [Ignores small child. Says more nice things. Cues chorus of volunteers from local church. The two volunteers begin singing.]

My mother: “Give Gawyn his Hot Wheel.”

Aunt Gayle: [whispering in my ear] “Do you think you can keep him quieter so the rest of us can hear the service?”

Me: “Gawyn, we’re going to the car now.”

Gawyn: [Realizes he has ruined the entire funeral for everyone. Shrieks in pain. Expresses abject remorse for his unforgivable misbehavior. Begs me to bring him back to that front row seat so he can better appreciate the tragic loveliness that is death.]

Yeah—I suck at classical removal parenting. It’s because I’m a total pushover. And because Gawyn loves singing, and I was afraid he might have started a rendition of “A Ring Around the Rosie” right as the pastor got to that part about ashes and dust. So I didn’t say anything as he squirmed. I rocked him a bit, gave a gentle “Shh!” at some point, and then got up with Gawyn and the stroller so he could go wander the cemetery. We walked over to the road, and then back toward the service, and then over to the shiny display of red, white, and blue pinwheels affixed to the grave of some poor veteran who was about to have his memory desecrated by a curious two-year-old. The pastor and the two singing volunteers put on their

ceremony, some people said some things, and I coaxed a pinwheel out of my toddler's impossibly strong grip.

Later, we all went out for Mexican.

Second Funeral

For my grandpa's funeral, I went with what I'll call "progressive" removal parenting. "The best behaved child is the one who isn't there," I quipped, but my grandma didn't catch my meaning. "I just hope you can keep him in his seat during the services," she said. "We've put a lot of effort into planning this, and I won't have him ruin it."

Yeah—hearing that, I was just like *Really? Do you really think a three-year-old understands? Do you really think the little guy gives a shit about the funeral for a great-grandparent he never even met? As if he even knows the meaning of the word "funeral?"*

But I couldn't say that. You never can. Besides, I know what funerals are about. You don't just show up because someone died—you show up because that's how you show that you're a good human being, how you show that you care about life and living and the memory of those who have passed. The bell tolls, and you go.

So when family die, you pay your respects. Your life has been diminished—sometimes to a greater degree, sometimes to a lesser. A son might stand at the altar to explain how proud he was of the hard times his father passed on, or there might be so many grandchildren present that they don't all know each other's names, but there is pain. There is this absence. There is supposed to be sadness, too, but I don't know sadness anymore. My feelings oscillate between satisfaction, dissatisfaction, rage, and emptiness. And warmth. When I hold my son, I know

warmth. Long ago, holding his mother in the days when I thought I knew love, I also knew warmth. But I feel no sadness from its loss, only emptiness.

But in life, you don't get participation points for expressing emptiness. You're supposed to express sadness. Or pain. Or some form of pride in memory. For my Uncle Bob's funeral, they put together a CD with pictures. For my Uncle Rick's funeral, my dad called to let me know. When my Grandpa Roger died, Dad e-mailed information about bereavement fares on the airlines. Later, he gave me a check for three hundred dollars, and there was pride in his eyes as he thanked me for flying all the way from Baltimore to Iowa to pay my respects. I guess he hadn't expected me to attend. I guess no one did.

But that's my dad's side of the family. Grandpa Pat was my stepdad's father, so it was a different kind of loss. As they placed Grandpa Pat in the ground, as I lost touch forever with the man who would give me his *Analog* magazines to read, the one who gifted me a subscription that I read and read and read for years. And it is odd, in retrospect, to realize that he was the source of stories I built my dreams around. Teaching English 101, I introduce myself to my students as a science fiction writer who snuck my way into grad school. Even now, in my eighth year of graduate work, I pine away into the dark hours after my son sleeps, trying to keep my eyes open as my fingers trace their way across the keyboard, casting a paragraph or two of time travel upon the midnight screen. I have stacks of science fiction paperbacks hidden on a shelf at school. I picked them up used at the English Honors Society book sale—five dollars for a printer box full of books. They are carefully placed so that the creased and crumbling spines lie flat and undisturbed. I have them concealed behind a second layer of new and shiny spines that are not at all science fiction—books about memoir, books about literature, books with titles better befitting the import of doctoral studies. Sure, I have outgrown the pulp tales from between the covers of

Analog, but I still read them. Even those stories I know are trite, I read them to the end, hating the stories and myself all the way to the last lines of the last page. "Research," I call it.

In a sense, I gave up science and engineering so I could write science fiction. Part of why I joined the army was so I could write more realistic portrayals of interstellar war. Much of who I am as a person stems from those gifts of books from Grandpa Pat. It's possible that I became a writer in those hours sitting on the floor at my grandparents house, nose buried in magazines I wouldn't dare mention in the comfortable spaces of a graduate writing course. Yes, it is true that so many of those stories were sexist and absurd and poorly conceived, but they opened worlds to me. They gave me dreams of the future—the kinds of futures where a brave little boy might change the turn of history. So in the dark times when I thought of opening my own wrists, I turned to science fiction. I read it, I wrote it, I breathed it. Sometimes I still do. And in those impressionable years before high school—in the days when my mom was buying me copies of *The Once and Future King* and *The Hobbit*—Grandpa Pat was loaning me his old copies of *Analog Science Fiction and Fact*.

We never talked about the stories—there were no dinner table conversations about whether warp drives or time travel might be even remotely possible. But still, there were the stories. The idea that a dragon might show up just outside Prussia, only to be fought off with bayonets and cannon while Frederick the Great asked his musicians to play a dirge for a dying past—that was the kind of story I could imagine living. Not just reading, but living. Because there can be no sword in the stone because there are no more knights. I cannot march my way across Rohan all the way to the very gates of Mordor because no such place exists. Chivalry might not be dead, but modernity has killed the Arthurian times just as surely as the Gatling machine gun killed the samurai and the Apache. So as the first inklings of inner pain began to

close the curtain over my dreams, I turned from writing the next *Lord of the Rings* to writing about a darkness I could see and feel. I wrote stories about robots from the future invading Wisconsin, about a lone man walking all the way to St. Louis to deliver a nuclear bomb, about a young girl raised from birth to infiltrate and destroy whole nations through her merciless charm.

I told myself I was writing about war. I told myself I that I was expressing the inherent injustice of mortality, as if death alone could be called a moral. But really, I was writing to destroy. I was writing to escape. I was writing to create a world where homework and taxes lost all meaning, where the only measure of a man that mattered was his ability to kill and not die.

I don't know if Grandpa Pat ever felt that way reading those stories, and now I'll never know. But does it matter? I read the stories, I shifted priorities, and I changed my life. So what if I didn't see him in the last seven years before he died? So what if my parents never invited me to visit at the same times Grandma and Grandpa P. visited? It's not like we were close. We never talked about the things we'd read, or why he even liked those tales about space and time travel. It's not an interest he passed on to my stepfather. It's not something my grandmother understood. He never kept a journal, never went to any conventions, never wrote any stories of his own—at least, not that I've ever heard or seen. But still he read those stories. Read them for decades. Even read them when his vision was failing from glaucoma. He made it through two rounds of brain cancer and radiation, and still he would read. My mom would go on and on about how Grandma Marilyn didn't get it, that Grandpa Pat really did need the words on his Nook to be super-huge so he could read them, but no one ever questioned that Pat was going to read. Everyone knew he loved reading. Everyone acceded to the fact that, in his own way, Pat needed those stories. But no one ever talked about why. I doubt anyone ever really asked. And now that he's gone, it's a mystery that will remain out of reach, forever.

Unless, of course, you do believe in time travel or cryostasis or resurrection. Which I don't. I've written enough about these technologies—and read enough about them—to know that my grandfather is never coming back.

Dying

I'm pretty sure I'll die before my time. There's no rational reason to believe this, but I do anyway. It's probably the darkness that makes me think this—it's the irrational despondency of depression, the pessimism that accompanies the depletion of serotonin. That unexplained pain in my side? I've imagined it as early pancreatic cancer, or as kidney failure, or as a ruptured spleen. Rereading "The Death of Ivan Illych," I was like, *shit! That's me! Dying from unexplained flank pain! And the world just goes on without me!*

Yes—I'm a bit dark. My imagination edges easily to the absurd. Every time I drive, I picture getting t-boned by a truck. Or I imagine that I'll hit a child darting across the street in a poor neighborhood, and that angry residents will drag me from my car and beat me while Gawyn looks on from his car seat, crying and screaming in confusion as the angry people consider their broken child, and then turn their futile rage toward mine.

This, then, is the paradox of depression: when loved ones die, I feel empty. When an imaginary mob springs up on a road I am not driving, my grip on the wheel tightens. My little guy, sitting in his car seat eating french fries, said he wanted music. Through the haze of imagined pain, I asked him what he wanted to hear. "Yana Del Way!" he shouted. And so—reminding myself that we were going seventy down the interstate, that there were no small children and no mobs and no intersections for a truck to drive a t-bone—I reached up to my phone on the dash, held down the home button, and called out for Siri to open Amazon music.

Checking the road, checking the phone, checking the road, I slid the playlists across the screen until Lana Del Rey appeared. I hit play, and "Summertime Sadness" came on. And my three-year-old rocked out with his crayons to the lyrics of a young woman courting suicide.

In the music video—which my son has not seen, and which I will not show him—Del Rey steps off the side of a high bridge. And then vanishes into the abyss.

At three-and-a-half, Gawyn has no idea why I spend so many hours listening to that song. Or why, on that one night a year ago when things were just too dark to handle, I talked up that song so that he would dance around the living room to it while I drowned in the lyrics. I wonder what will happen the day he figures out what the words mean, and then comes to ask. Or maybe, like me, he will grow up so afraid of his parents that he never does ask. Or maybe—again like me—he will feel so much of the darkness on his own, that it is impossible to ask. The answer can offer nothing but that tightness in the chest as the heart calcifies around the abyss of its own.

With the phone set and the music playing, I shifted my focus back to the interstate. I gradually upped our speed to seventy-five, maybe eighty. Not just driving, but *driving*. I got going fast enough to keep up with the left-lane traffic. Even passed a semi or two. Gripping the wheel tight, imagining how the pressure differential of wind at high speeds might suck our hatchback under the low ceiling of a flatbed trailer, I edged our way through the single most dangerous experience we face on a regular basis.

Trucks behind us, I pulled back into the right lane. I slowed down a little, just so we wouldn't need to pass anything again soon. And then I asked Gawyn if he liked the music. "Yes," he said. "I like this music."

Five more hours to Iowa, I told myself. *Only five more hours to the Quad Cities. And a funeral.*

CHAPTER V: DIVORCE

Work

An aunt of mine recently wished me a happy new year by saying she wanted to see more of what I write, but that I should stop posting my political views on Facebook. "Don't open your mind so much that your brain falls out," she told me.

Yes, I live in central Illinois, and I bear the same arctic cold of the occasional vortex that everyone sees here, but I've heard it said that I don't "work" for a living. Instead, I read. Typically for several hours a day. Sometimes I write. Sometimes I'll park my butt in the Dunkin Donuts for four or five hours and just *write*. On the weekends—Sundays, mostly, when I'm still alone in the silence that descends after my ex-wife picks up our son—I sometimes spend two or three or ten hours on Facebook. I read the news stories, post my dismay, and watch as fewer and fewer of my friends and family "like" the political nature of my disappointment. I haven't had the heart to tell them that this "crusade" of mine has turned into dissertation research, and that half the posts I share are ones I might reference in a longer paper about the nature of American politics. Not that it matters. Most people don't think of this as work. It can't be work if you can do it while drinking coffee you didn't brew yourself, eating a donut someone else baked, sitting in a chair someone else built.

I think this is part of why, ultimately, I divorced. My ex-wife didn't see my work as "work." Yes, I paid for all the food and rent after she moved in, and I continued as she settled into pregnancy, birth, and childcare. I had income from the VA and from my teaching stipend, but she didn't believe I *worked.* Instead, I sat at the computer all day. Or I walked down to the local Denny's, claimed a booth, and abused both the Wi-Fi and the bottomless coffee. Besides, my future-ex-wife paid for the health insurance herself. And then the bills from the hospital. And

after Gawyn was born, her family gave her money, and she used this to pay for diapers and formula on the days she went to the grocery store without me. We were married, and she wasn't working, so I covered everything I could. We had a joint credit card, but she began paying for it from her own checking account. So for a long time, I transferred money to her account each month, and I felt guilty on the months I barely had enough to cover her needs, rent, utilities, and my credit card bill. Especially since I was only in school nine months a year—and only teaching nine months a year. In the summertime, I applied for grant money, but I got turned down for insufficient financial need. Some summers I worked, but most I didn't. Instead I stayed home to drive Lek to her prenatal appointments. Then I took online courses to keep on-schedule with my dissertation. The next year, we went to Thailand—partly so Gawyn could spend the whole summer with his mom's family, partly so his mom could spend the summer with her family, and partly because Lek's mom couldn't fly home by herself. She couldn't speak any English, and she was frail—placing her alone on a twenty-hour-plus flight would have been a cruelty. But her visa was running out, and she needed to return home. So we turned it into a family trip. I hoped it would be a break for my wife, that she'd feel better after spending some time back home, where everyone spoke her language. And it couldn't be that bad, skipping a summer of paid employment. I'd have time to catch up on my research, and time to get started on my comprehensive exams. I'd be able to hurry up the dissertation, I figured. While spending days and hours getting to know my infant son. Giving my wife time to forgive her absentee husband.

And maybe that's why I was transferring $500 a month to her account? As a kind of penance? For being gone so much, for working so many hours, for striving so hard for the kind of economic freedom I thought a Ph.D. would bring.

I don't think it worked. "He is not your baby," she once told me. "I pay everything."

When Feminists Ask About Your Divorce

When I finally told friends and colleagues about my divorce, they immediately worried about Gawyn. I mean, everyone at school knew my child. He was the little nugget of energy I took everywhere. Even now, he has an easy laugh—as soon as he could crawl and walk, he wanted to go everywhere. Occasionally I brought him to class while I taught. Sometimes, I brought him to my office, under the misguided belief that he might nap while I worked at my desk. I took him to the Welcome Back! party at the start of each semester, and to the Christmas party at the end of the year. Stroller, diaper bag, infant—it was forty-five pounds of child and gear I could barely lift, but still I brought him to meet everyone. What else could I do? Some days, when my wife descended into those silent glares, I didn't dare leave him home with her. I couldn't say what she would do because she'd never done anything. She'd never hit or starved him or anything, but her silences were so *deep*. I'd ask what she wanted for breakfast, and she'd remain motionless on the couch, glaring at the wall. I'd ask if she'd like some juice, and the glare would continue. Whatever it was I'd done, her anger could not be overcome through bribes of food and sustenance.

Other days, things were great. Lek's mother stayed with us for six months to help out. They took Gawyn out for walks, or to visit the museum. During my hours at school, he never wanted for someone to hold him. Two nights a week, I sat in class until 8:30 at night, and then I waited in my car until 9:00 for the parking attendant to leave so I could get away with a whole day of free parking. But however late I got home, there was always someone there to rock my little guy to sleep. If I was lucky, I'd get home in time to rock him through those last throes of fighting sleep. Or he'd wake up again later—at one or two in the morning—and I'd stumble with him to the kitchen to mix a bottle of formula. It got to where I could measure out the water,

dollop in the two scoops of Enfamil, and screw on the nipple using only one hand. While cooing to the little guy. “Shh . . . shh . . . it’s okay, little guy . . . it’s okay . . . I’m getting it . . . I’m getting it.”

It was the kind of skill people admired. Sometimes, at school, someone stared at me with an odd sense of wonder as I cradled my child in my arms, pulled the canister of Enfamil out from under the stroller, and carried on a conversation about the genre conventions of creative writing while mixing a bottle of formula for my child. One time, I brought Gawyn and his stroller to meet with one of my advisors. She was celebrating the move to her new office, and I was celebrating a whole day with my little guy. I was so glad her new office had a couch, and a coffee table—I don’t think we could have talked if she’d still been in that cramped office she’d kept through the first ten years of tenure. Her old office had been a row of bookshelves, a chair, and a long desk—with a narrow aisle only wide enough for the chair. But in the new office, my little guy could crawl around a bit, admiring the colorful rows of books that had been carefully relocated from the old office two floors up. I could take my eyes off the little guy for whole minutes at a time. It was almost relaxing. Except that I worried. I waited for him to pull down a book, open the cover, and start tearing out the pages.

Still, my professor and I talked about my studies into the uses of autobiography on social media, sketched out a schedule for me to complete a comprehensive exams, and then wrapped up with pleasantries. Meanwhile, Gawyn crawled around her office. He pawed the long lines of books. Two of which she loaned me, since they applied to what I was doing.

She gave some words of encouragement. She hoped things were going well. And that I was keeping up with everything. And somehow getting enough sleep, even though we both knew I couldn’t be.

I don't remember how much I told her about my life. I think I left out the parts about my wife glaring at the wall in her long silences, or about all the nights a week I would call home and suggest we all go out for dinner. Because it was rare I'd come home to find dinner waiting, and I didn't want to be the kind of asshole husband who expected that. But how could I cook those dinners myself? I was afraid of the food in my own fridge, and my wife didn't like anything I prepared. So I brought home Chipotle. Or packed us into the car for yet another round of pizza. Sometimes, we splurged, heading to the one semi-authentic Chinese restaurant nearby. It was still a drive, and still expensive, but a lot closer than the Thai restaurant on the far side of town.

Did I mention the part about my wife threatening suicide? Or about my visit to an attorney to ask about divorce? Or what about the time I drove my wife to her obstetrician's office, and then she left without me? Her silences had grown so deep—I thought she needed counseling. I thought she needed help. But she disagreed. And so I scheduled her an appointment with the one doctor she tolerated: the obstetrician who delivered our child. I picked a day without class so I could drive her there myself. I parked her car in the lot, and then got out to pull our son out of his car seat. But then Lek, tired of this game, came around the front of the car, hopped in the driver's seat, and drove off. But I wasn't surprised. I was just glad she'd left the diaper bag. And our son.

But I never shared these stories. I omitted them. Instead, my advisor mentioned something about her own depression, and about her own anti-depressants, and about how hard it was telling people about stuff like that. It directly tied into the research I was doing, about how autobiography—and the things we're willing to share with each other—changes what people think about the world. But I didn't have the heart to tell my professor about my own antidepressants. No way I told her that my wife had refused the ones prescribed to her. How

could I? What could I say? That the more crazy my wife got, the easier I thought the divorce would go?

But then, it's possible I shared all these things that day. I was so tired, I don't remember what I said. Things were so bad, there's no telling what I babbled in those few minutes of being treated with the kindness of a place to sit while my son pawed someone else's books.

"Will you still get to see your son?" people asked me. "Will your wife head back to Thailand?" others asked.

They couldn't know how angry they made me, every time they asked about what my wife would do with my son. They just assumed my wife would get custody. But how could I blame them? My own parents are divorced—I grew up with my mom. And how often do you hear about a divorce where the father wants custody, let alone gets it?

"It'll probably be joint custody," I told everyone. That was the safest answer—it was what my attorney said would likely happen. And that's exactly what did happen. But still, people didn't understand.

"So you'll at least get to see him on weekends, then?" some would ask. One or two assumed we would go by the academic year: "So I take it you'll have Gawyn over the summers, then?"

The worst was getting that question from postcolonial scholars, and from feminist scholars—professors who talked so much about the difficulties of establishing equality between the genders, or equality for anyone who wasn't white. It didn't seem to matter that they'd met my child at Christmas parties because I'd been the one lugging the stroller up the back steps to that mansion they rented out so the entire department could gather to celebrate another year well

spent. It didn't seem to matter how many times I had rolled my child down the hallways to my office, or how he gradually learned to differentiate between my "old" office, my "other old" office, and my "newer new office." It didn't seem to matter that, while I studied for my teaching internship and my comprehensive exams and the big kahuna of the dissertation, my son learned to walk and to talk and to push his own stroller from the elevator to my newest new office. Because every other year, I got to celebrate my own new office, shuffled from one end of the floor to the other as my grad student status shifted from "first year" to "writing program" to "post-writing program" to "you're not eligible to teach this year because you've spent too long writing your dissertation, but we'll still let you have an office if we have an extra one open. It's too bad you don't have any student loans. If you had a $100,000 in student loans like your officemate, you'd probably qualify for a summer stipend, too. But she's working three jobs to make ends meet, and you haven't had to do that. So . . . at least we have an open office for you?"

But I don't think I can complain. One of my professors was 42 years old before she paid off her student loans. Another professor—my professor who was so excited to finally have an office with a couch for her students—once mentioned the challenges of getting a mortgage to buy a house when you still owe your entire net worth in student loans. So it's not simply that I feel abandoned and alone—it's that I feel abandoned and alone, yet I'm still better off than most of my colleagues. At the rate I'm going, my "student loans" will be a few grand in credit card debt and a $15,000 car loan. And unlike the financial hell my classmates face, my loans came with a new car and many, many trips to Chipotle. And the car cost less than my divorce.

I did pay extra for the car seat, however.

I don't know why I got so angry when people asked about how my son would fare through the divorce. Maybe it's because it was a long semester? Or because the divorce dragged on for eighteen months? Or because, deep down, I was worried that my wife would win, and I would only see my child for weekends and holidays, as happened to my dad?

I shouldn't have been angry. And I'm glad I hid what I was feeling. I managed to put on the smile. "I'm so sorry to hear about your divorce," people said. "Oh, it's okay," I told them. "The divorce is going so much better than my marriage."

Did that draw laughter? No. Did it draw understanding? Only from those who'd already been through a divorce. But for most of my friends and professors—folks who spent their lives knowing that they would rather spend $100,000 in student loans than face a lifetime of childcare—the thought of my custody battle could only involve tragedy.

"Will your wife take Gawyn to Thailand?" one asked. And she was genuinely concerned. I could see it in her eyes. Her research examined the loss of women's voices in our male-dominated culture, and she had seen firsthand the ways that native tribes could be erased from the historical memory. But in that conversation, her only worry was that a father might never see his own son again.

I don't know what exactly I told that professor. I remember the questions and who asked them, but I can't remember what I told to whom. Instead, I remember that I gave the same answer to everyone who asked, but the answer slowly changed with time. At first, I was caught off-guard by the way someone assumed my future-ex-wife would earn automatic full custody. Later, I grew steadily more irritated as more and more people assumed the same thing. *You're professors,* I wanted to tell them. *Aren't you supposed to be more socially aware? What makes you think I would give up my own child?* Or, on the days I was really pissy, I'd turn on my own

friends. *You're a fucking graduate student,* I'd think. *Weren't you just telling me about how we need to stop stereotyping everyone? About how you're sick of your students treating you like a child just because you're young and female?*

It wasn't until later—much later—that I realized the question I heard had never been the question they asked. They wanted to know if I'd get to spend time with my child. They wanted to know if I would still bring the little guy to school. If would still bring him to the museum on weekends. If I'd be allowed to see Gawyn more than once a week. But I heard some unspoken accusation that I was divorcing as a way to "escape" my child, as if I was about to place life and career ahead of my child. And I'm not sure why I heard it that way. Maybe it's because of the way my mom always described my dad. He and my mom divorced when I was two—from a very young age, I only saw him on weekends and some holidays. My mom always asked if he called on special occasions, or if he offered to see my science fair, or if he ever asked about my life. The answer was always no.

"Of course he didn't," Mom would say. And this would be followed by a long pause. Or perhaps a description of all the times he hadn't been there for us. Or how it was probably better that they had divorced. "At least he pays the child support on time," Mom said. "It would be nice if he cared enough to pick you up on time, too. Or to at least call when he's late."

When I broke news of the divorce to my parents, I told them that Gawyn wouldn't be leaving the state of Illinois. "That's why I filed for divorce," I said. "Lek was threatening to keep him in Thailand—I just couldn't take it anymore." And in Illinois, divorce casts a magical net across the custody of one's child. Regardless of who "wins" the divorce, the child stays here. And so, a

year after returning from Thailand, and ten months after my wife threatened to drive her car into a tree, I filed for divorce.

At school, I said the same thing. I only left out the part about Lek's threats to keep Gawyn in Thailand. And the part about her threat to crash her car into a tree. And all the other parts that mattered. Instead, I focused on the positives. "Things aren't working out," I said. "But at least I know Gawyn's staying in Illinois."

I got so many nods of sympathy. "Grad school can be so hard," people said. "Writing a dissertation, raising a family—it takes a toll."

I always agreed with them. I'd done the math—attempting grad school while raising a child was hellish. And it got worse, the more I ran into people who talked about all the sacrifices their partners had made. "When I was writing my dissertation, my wife barely saw me," was one. "Oh, thank God my husband cooks for us!" another friend said. "I don't know what I'd do without him." And then, from the friend who had five children, and then adopted a foster child—"My wife does so much."

Yeah—I got so sick of those stories. I got so sick of people talking about how hard it must have been for my wife. Moving away from all her friends, raising a child, supporting all my work as a grad student—everyone imagined that she was suffering in the same way I was. Even my mom talked about the "big adjustment" Lek went through. All I had to offer in exchange was marriage, an apartment, and a green card. Because that had been the choice—we had to marry, or her visa would expire. We could marry, or she could return to Thailand. So we went the courthouse in Raleigh. Her roommate came with us—we borrowed our second witness from the ceremony right before. The judge stepped around his bench to take a photo with us.

A month later, Lek was pregnant.

It would have been better if I could sympathize. But I couldn't. I've been to Afghanistan. I've been suicidal. I live with pain that never goes away. My coping mechanisms involve piles of dirty dishes and heaps of laundry. So when people worried about Lek's loneliness, or when they worried about her adjustment, or when they worried about how hard it must have been to go from being single and working to being a stay-at-home mom whose every minute is marked by the hungry needs of an infant, I couldn't sympathize. Not really. When you imagine life as pain, it's hard to see the pain of others.

And so I did what I always do when I cannot manage emotions: I managed things. Money, schedules, food. When Lek missed her second period, I found her an obstetrician. I went through the names I found online, asked what she thought, and then booked her an appointment. I drove her to the ultrasounds and the blood tests and weekly check-ins. Months later, I drove her to maternity. I stayed by her side through the birth, and then the three days in the hospital after. I placed my hand on her head, careful to avoid the IV lines taped to her arm. I held her shoulders as the anesthesiologist pierced her back for the epidural.

But I wasn't the one in the bed. I wasn't the one breathing and pushing. And even as I sat beside her, she did not share her pain. Her thoughts, her fears, her longings—what I knew of them, I knew only from her eyes. From her glances, from the neutral expression as she looked away, from the silences of words unsaid. Because, however much I thought I loved her, I never learned her language. I never paused long enough to learn Thai. Three trips to Thailand, and I never learned enough to order food. I learned "hello" and "thank you" and "you talk too much you smelly monkey!" Yet I never learned the simple words of intimacy. "How are you?" remains a mystery—"I love you," impossible. Instead, she and I spoke only English. It was her third language, after French.

In the maternity ward, I didn't have the words for any language she would feel. Still, I tried reassurance. I attempted support. But really, she gave birth alone. In a crowded room.

Yeah—it was hard listening to notes of concern for my wife. As the divorce continued, it colored everything. Honestly, I can't imagine what it was like for my wife, leaving all her friends behind, going to a city where no one spoke Thai, and then depending upon the goodwill of strangers while trying to raise a child. All I had were my own stories. Lek had to live with her spouse from a strange land, and I with her. I thought less and less about her. I looked forward to the imagined life without her. I waited to be free of her. Friends worried about her, but I did not. Instead, my thoughts circled around the trips to Thailand and the fights at home. In Thailand, she had said she might not come back, that she might not let me bring our child home. At home, she complained that I knew nothing of parenting, that she was the one who came the U.S. as an au pair, that she was the one who'd gone through the training and certification to be caregiver. We fought over our child, each one yearning to be the one who would hold him and rock him and tuck him in to sleep. Sometimes, if she did not want me to pick him up, she would take hold of my wrist, clamping down with all the strength of seven years in food service. But she did not know her strength, and she did not know my weakness. Sometimes she grabbed my wrist so hard that I recalled the ache of past surgeries through the outline of her palm. Inside me, the joint where thumb meets wrist is crossed by a five-inch scar: the ligaments have been reconstructed, the bone pinned back together with three screws and a plate. It doesn't take much to make it hurt.

Those were stories I couldn't share. I couldn't mention how life was at home, let alone explain it. Instead, I tried to imagine how "normal" people divorce. I wanted to share the economics of it. Every conversation, I thought about all the hours my wife wouldn't let us use

daycare, all the nights she wouldn't let me near as she rocked our child to sleep, and all the nights she simply wasn't there because she worked restaurant hours. Most days, I showed up to school to teach, and then I went home to be near my child. Sometimes, I'd pull a nine-to-five in the library or at Denny's just so I could get some writing done. The rest of the time, I worked maybe four hours a day. The rest of my day was childcare. Or Netflix. Or Facebook. Wishing my life would dissolve away to something better. In the late night hours, as my child slept in his crib two rooms away, I couldn't bring myself to read. I couldn't force myself to grade. Instead, I watched movies. I chatted online. With every hour I spent on Netflix or Facebook, I lost another hour that could be spent on work. I lost still more of the attention I could focus on my child. On those nights when it was just me and him, I was so tired that I could barely keep up. Most nights, all he wanted to do was run from one end of the apartment to the other. But sometimes I couldn't do it. I just wanted to lie down and sleep. But he needed me to run with him. "Time to play trains, Daddy!" he'd say, taking my hand, dragging me from the front door to the back bedroom, and then back again.

Sure, I could call out the chugga-chugga-CHOO-CHOO! of a Thomas engine, but I wasn't the active, enthusiastic parent I'd always wanted to be. The best I could say was that I always managed dinner. I'd cook him pasta, and then microwave some vegetables, and then try enticing him to eat some chicken. Sometimes he ate, sometimes he didn't. Sometimes he got sick, and I would wrap him in a blanket and rock him back and forth in the glider. He slept in my arms—I dug out my iPhone and some earbuds. I flipped back to Netflix. Sometimes I made it through an hour or two of shows before my arm went numb. Sometimes, I barely got through fifteen minutes before Lek got back from work, wanting to know why I hadn't put Gawyn in his crib. So she'd come over, take him from me, and wake him with her worry.

At school, I couldn't admit to the hours of Netflix, or to the whole nights lost to the internet. I couldn't tell people how much time I wasted on self-loathing and despair. I mean, who could I have told? I didn't exactly "talk" to people. I didn't go out with friends on weekends, since those were the times I could stay with my son all day. I didn't go out in the evenings, either, because I was afraid what a divorce judge might think. *So, you want custody of your son. But you leave your wife home alone to watch him. Fascinating.*

When people asked about the divorce, grad school became the best excuse. Whatever anyone said about the tension or the heartache or the loneliness, I'd just agree with them. It was so much easier than trying to tell the truth. As if I even knew the truth. By then, I was so tired of it all, I was secretly hoping my wife would do something stupid. I wanted her to push me into one of the closet doors in our son's room—the mirrored ones, coated in glass. I secretly hoped she would actually attempt suicide. Most nights, I hoped she wouldn't come home. I didn't really care if she ran off or died in a car crash or what—I just wanted her to leave and stay gone. But no—every night, she came home from work, and every night, I had to share our child. And eventually, when she didn't die, I found an attorney.

"The stress was just too much," I told my friends. "That's why I filed for divorce."

This drew puzzlement and surprise. "Oh...you're the one who filed?"

Again, the irritation returned. *What? Did you think my lifestyle of reading student papers and writing all these class papers and walking past the liquor aisle without buying anything was taking a toll on my wife's life? She won't let me take our son to daycare on the days I'm not physically in a classroom. How the fuck am I supposed to go to the goddamned library? How the fuck am I supposed to pretend I'm doing all the reading I assign my students? You thought I was stressing out my wife? She doesn't even work full time, for chrissakes.*

I'd remind myself that I was the one who stayed up late watching Netflix. I'd remind myself that it was my own damn fault the computer screen kept me awake so late. But it didn't help. Not really.

Sometimes, people at school got me so angry that I could no longer talk to them. Sure, sometimes my anger had reason, but you're supposed to look past that. You're supposed to work with others, be a team player, figure out how to get along. But I couldn't. When I grimaced, people no doubt assumed that I had some memories of arguments I'd rather not share. But really, the memories I had were of my son, on those nights when my wife and I started raising our voices. We never got far.

Again, Gawyn would look at me: "Daddy, you no talk." Then he'd turn to Lek: "Mommy, you no talk." And then, if we tried to keep going, he took each of us by the hand and informed us, with all the solemnity possible for a two-year-old, that it was time for trains.

"Awkward" is that moment you find yourself calling out the chugga-chugga-CHOO-CHOO! of a Thomas engine while running from one end of the apartment to the other with your toddler and soon-to-be-ex-wife.

But people didn't understand my divorce, and I couldn't tell them. I only shared the bits I could. That part about "Time to play trains!" always drew a laugh. "Divorce is hard on kids," some would say, or "Children are a lot stronger than we give them credit for. I'm sure he'll be fine."

So it wasn't the questions about divorce that bothered me much—they were irritating, but expected. And sometimes cathartic. It felt reassuring, hearing that my child would be strong. Even if that meant my two-year-old had taken on the role of UN Peacekeeper.

How could I stay angry at people who remained so earnest in their concern? I couldn't blame their ignorance any more than I could condemn my own anger. So I swallowed my feelings. I told myself I would be strong. I told myself I would persevere, and that I would make it through, and that I would be stronger for it.

If not for my own chronic depression, that might have almost been true.

Losing Emma

I don't know how bad the memory loss is. How could I? Instead, I hate myself. I hate myself for all the books I collect, for all the PDF's I download and never read, for all the research I should be doing but never get to. Sometimes, I hate myself enough to pull open a tablet, scroll over to my app of choice, and read. Just read.

The worst is when I see a book I downloaded months ago, swearing I would read it. Some I get from the library, some I steal from online, and others I cut from the binding to run them through a scanner. It's supposed to be part of my "process," digitizing everything so I can carry my library everywhere I go. Except that there are never enough hours in the day to read it all. I carry gigabytes of books, all of them backed up to the cloud, most of them synced to two computers and a tablet, with easy access on my phone, if I so desire. This should make the reading easier, you would think. I could read my books while waiting in line at the store, or while sitting at the table for breakfast. I could download a screen reader, and then listen to all these thousands of pages while I clean my kitchen or cook my dinner. I could be a productive human being, perhaps. Instead, I watch YouTube. I share links on Facebook. I remind myself just how much I hate myself for being a hateful waste of oxygen.

Eventually, I get to the books. I know what's in them. I've skimmed most of them, leafing through the chapters in search of the ineffable *something*. Which is helpful. Because most days, I can't remember the names of the authors. I can't remember the titles. I slide my finger down the screen, scrolling through the files on my tablet. I'll have a folder labeled "Creative Writing"—it'll have eight articles about creative writing, none of which I've read. So I'll open one. Inside the PDF, there will be highlights. They follow a simple pattern—purple is for the key points, blue is for outside sources, yellow and green indicate the examples. Pages and pages will be highlighted this way. I can skim through, following the road map of digital highlighter. I'll see a sentence about teaching writing—further down, a few lines about authority in the classroom. In the margins, a note. In my hand, of course. The chicken scrawl of a rubber-tipped stylus on a glass screen. Because all the highlights are mine, from a year ago. Or a few months ago. A lifetime ago. I read through them, fascinated by the orderliness. I've highlighted the main points in a paragraph I can't remember having ever read. Sometimes—depending on the book and how many times I've already used it in my research—I will recognize certain pages by color. Orange highlights are particularly special, mostly because they are rare. Orange is the color I use for definitions, for drawing attention to specific words and concepts I wanted to remember. *Oh,* I will think, *this is the page with the four blocks of orange. I should review these terms.* Or *Here's the page with the enormous square of purple. This is important. This paragraph summarizes the entire point of this book. Maybe the third time, I'll actually remember what it says*. I still don't remember what it says, but I do remember that the square of purple is important. I remember that the square of purple marks the words I need to know. And I think, sometimes, that I have read these words before. They almost seem familiar. Almost.

In the months after our son was born—during that awkward, intimate year before I realized I would file for divorce—my wife said I should get tested for Alzheimer's. "You have goldfish memory," she said. She'd been saying this for years, but it got even worse after Gawyn was born. Apparently, I began forgetting conversations. Or so she told me. I'm not entirely sure I believed her. But that, I know, is also a symptom of memory loss—frustrated with their own shortcomings, dementia patients often experience intense denial about what they've forgotten. At least, this is what the doctors tell us is the case. In reality, I think it's more that we're more likely to diagnose the ones who deny having a problem. None of my friends would say I have a problem with memory, or with dementia, or with anything. I'm too cheerful about it. I make jokes about my poor memory. I tell them to remind me if I've missed something. I remind them about the time last year, when I was running a graduate conference, and I somehow assigned the same task three different times on three different weeks to three different people, each time forgetting that I had already assigned the task to someone else. I mean, I took notes each time, and people complained each time, and some of my classmates looked ready to brain me with a telephone, but I still don't remember what exactly it was. What was so important that it needed to be assigned every week, for three weeks, to a different person each time? What was so important that I couldn't remember that it was already done?

Back then, I blamed my poor memory on having a small child at home. I blamed it on lack of sleep. I blamed it on the stress of graduate school. Just the same, Lek thought I should see a doctor.

"And what would the doctor tell me?" I asked her. "They'd be like 'well, Mr. Edel, your memory can't be that bad—you're still surviving graduate school. And even if it is bad, it's

nothing that can't be explained by the fact that you never sleep. Now, if you'll take this scrip for Ambien over to the pharmacy . . . '"

I do the same thing now. When memory falters, I tell people it's because I don't sleep. I tell people it's because I have a small child with me half the week, and that I only have half the week to work on my dissertation. But this is only half true. In reality, I feel like I'm only half of who I was. The other half is out there, somewhere—scattered amongst the words and pages of all those books on my shelves, drifting through the ether amongst all the friends whose names I can't recall, whose voices I've lost to the tyranny of time.

But I hide it well. My phone helps. It chimes every day with the reminders for all my appointments. I have an alarm set for five p.m., which is when I must leave school to pick up my son from daycare. I have another alarm set for 10:15, to remind me that it is morning, and that I should be started on something productive. For a long time, I had an alarm set for seven p.m.—a silent alarm that only I would see. "Rx," it said, telling me it was time for meds. *Time for pills, time for sanity, time to take a break to beat the heat*. Because you drink water with pills. And in Basic Training, when a drill sergeant told you to drink water, you were supposed to take a knee and call back, *Beat the heat, drill sergeant! Beat the heat!*

I am so concerned with time, however, that the phone doesn't change anything. I am always late, just the same. With appointments, the problem isn't forgetting—the problem is departing. I never forget to pick up my child—I strain to finish everything in those last moments of freedom. *Just one more e-mail! One more page of writing! One more glance at Facebook!*

No—the real problem comes with people. With names. With remembering what we have done together, and why they smile, and what memories we share.

Let me give an example. I have a friend, Emma. She's married now, and lives far away, but for a few months before my own marriage, she and I were close friends. Her boyfriend (future husband) lived far away, and my girlfriend (future ex-wife) lived far away, and we both felt safe hanging out without dating. One Halloween, we sat on her couch pretending to study just so we could hand out candy to trick-or-treaters. Other days, we went biking. Many nights, we'd text back and forth, sharing jokes, sharing hilarity.

I don't know why she felt so safe around me. Maybe because I never asked if she wanted to go on a date. Maybe because, as she talked about her boyfriend—as she talked about the times they'd spent together, and all the good times they had planned, and how she was going to make him wait before she'd let him marry her—I realized that it didn't really matter what I felt about her. She knew a connection I couldn't understand, but couldn't question. And I was afraid to break the spell. Because when she talked and she laughed and she joked, I felt something like it. I felt safe. I felt comfortable. I could say anything—as long as it didn't threaten love—and she'd find it hilarious.

Then came Christmas. I went home. I asked my girlfriend to marry me. To save time for immigration paperwork, we eloped. It was thrilling and exciting and "right." I didn't mention it to Emma until after break, when I got back to school. She gave me a strange look. Not disappointment, not surprise, but puzzlement. And I looked at her—this girl who, for months, I'd been secretly hoping would break up with her boyfriend so I could ask her out on a date—and I wondered what had happened to her. Over Christmas Break, where had she gone? Why had I not thought about her? Why hadn't I texted her to let her know I had just proposed to my girlfriend? Why hadn't I told her about the ring, or the civil ceremony? Or about how my wife and I borrowed a witness from the ceremony right before ours?

But I hadn't. It hadn't occurred to me. During those two weeks with my girlfriend-then-wife, Emma didn't exist. The memories didn't exist. Emma became a name and a face without context. Kind of how I imagine it is for new babies, who are still too young to realize that objects have permanence. When you place a toy under a blanket, a newborn won't realize that the toy hidden under the blanket is still a toy, that the treasured memory of something beloved is more than mere memory.

But Emma and I were never "together." We were friends. It was convenient, in a way, forgetting how close we'd never really been. I didn't think much of it. I thought it was a sign that my wife and I really were meant to be together. I loved my wife so much, in fact, that I forgot about the other girls—or so I told myself. But now, I'm not sure. Maybe it's that I loved my wife so much because I couldn't remember anyone else I knew.

Years later—after Emma had married and moved, well after I had sent their wedding gift and my best wishes—I forgot her name. I blanked on it, the way you might forget the name of a student, or how you might forget the name of your senator. But I knew it would come to me. I decided it *must* come to me. So I refused to look it up. Instead, I backtracked. I thought about her husband. I thought about that night I went with the two of them for burritos at this nice little place in Chicago. They showed me the tazer app for an Android phone, and it scared the shit out of me. A buzzing phone, a flickered light, and my whole body tensed in terror. No lie—it was hilarious.

Except I couldn't remember his name, either.

So I backtracked more. I reminded myself that the two of them lived out in Colorado, and that she was working at a bookstore, and that her husband had gone back to school for another

certification, and that she'd been supportive when I broke the news on Facebook about my divorce.

Still nothing. No name. I could barely remember her face. All I could remember was her laugh.

A day passed. Another day. A week. I'd remind myself that there was something I'd forgotten. What was I forgetting? And who? The memory of her laugh would return. The memory of that Halloween—sitting across from her on that low couch, all those books on her coffee table, the big bowl of candy by the door. Still, her name was gone. I remembered her hair, and her bicycle, and that specific shape of her glasses. Still, no name. No face. Just the laugh. A laugh I missed.

If I make jokes about memory, it's because I remember the fact of having forgotten. I've trained myself, over the years, to recall life from the edges, to work my way inward from the small, visual details that I *do* remember. And I track—as best I can—just how long it takes to recall the thing I had just lost.

And it only took two weeks to remember Emma's name.

Depression

Sometimes, I ask myself why I really filed for divorce. Was it truly for my son? And I realize, deep down, that it wasn't. It was for me. I wanted my son for myself. And I wanted my freedom to find someone else. Because I wanted more children, but not with her. Later I surrendered, without a court battle, to joint custody.

That could be a story, all on its own. It would feature expectation, and transformation, and resignation to the fact that I have never been the father I have always wanted to be. But it is not a story I can tell. It is said that stories should start at the beginning, but the "beginnings" I remember are all fragmented. I don't truly know what counts as "the beginning." Would it be the night my then-wife began throwing pomegranates at the laundry room door, spattering the floor and the fridge with pink seeds and purple juice? Was it years earlier, when I first drove out to meet the girl I had "met" online? When I gave up a whole year of weekends to drive those two hours north to spend time with a girl who barely ever spoke? From the earliest days I knew her, I imagined she would become the stabilizing force in my life, that she would be the sane, normal one—that she would be the one to help steer my life toward happiness and family.

Years later—mere months before our son's second birthday—I filed for divorce. At the time, I thought I would win full custody of my son. Everything seemed so terrible at home, I couldn't imagine losing. I clung to my fantasies that she would push me through the glass mirror closet door. I wanted her to push me—even just a little bit—so I could crash shoulder-first through the brittle pane. Glass in my arm was the kind of pain I could take—physical pain was the pain I could manage. But I didn't know how many more days and weeks I could deal with her threats to take our son from me. And somehow, in the confusion of weeks that went on for years, I imagined that physical injury would offer the solace of sole custody.

Then, too, there is the complication of my own mental illness—the clouds of depression that linger yet on the horizon. For many years, I faced the desire to kill myself. In those years past, I swam in suicide. It filled my lungs, submerging the lesser worries of writing and homework and loneliness until my whole heart drowned. It clouded my memories, erasing whole

sections from the tape of my life. I'd been hospitalized for it, but the hospital could not restore what had been lost.

With treatment, the desire to die has faded to numbness. It's not that I am no longer suicidal—it's that the feelings have been muted to the point that I no longer hear their whisper, though I know they remain. The suicidal thoughts sit with me, occupying the cluttered disaster of my apartment, reading the labels on the pill bottles as I measure out the nightly dose that maybe keeps me alive. I could skip the Citalopram. I could skip the Lamotrigine. I could open the door once more, inviting in the manic days and languid nights. Maybe if I did, memory would return. Maybe I would finally feel all the feels. Maybe there would be energy enough to write this story as it should be written. Then again, maybe it would simply animate my depression to the point that I could crawl to the top of a parking garage just to roll myself off a lip of concrete into the abyss.

In the midst of my divorce, the depression returned. But medication slowed it, thickening the fluid ache until it only dripped into my consciousness, a viscous pooling of darkness that drained as fast as it could fill. The dark clouds still dropped their rain, but it fell on distant mountains, leaving the low roil of thunder as lonely witness to years past.

There have been times in my life when the front bumper of a city bus beckoned. There was once a night where I did walk up to the top deck of a parking garage, and then rest my arms on the low wall separating my skin from empty air. And yet, during the divorce, the thoughts of suicide were missing. Through the bleakest two years of my life, the desire to die never returned. I thought about that, puzzled that so much pain and so much anger didn't burble into the desire to end it all. College, the army, those first years of grad school—I knew what it meant to want to die. And yet there I was in the midst of divorce and custody and a Ph.D. program that would not

kindly stop for me, and death's carriage was strangely absent. Sometimes, I thought I heard the hoof beats of the horses, as if echoing through the streets of another village, but the desire to die didn't return.

But still I was depressed. I could not wash dishes, or clean my kitchen, or grade papers. The thoughts of such acts left me paralyzed with fear. What if I didn't make the dishes clean enough? How could I clean the pans with the sink piled so full of plates? What if, with the wrong word, I sent one of my students tumbling into the void I feared most?

Before I filed for divorce, I thought I knew all I needed to know about depression. And each night, I have the pills to remind me. The antidepressant must be cut in half, because the dose I take is only half the dose available at the VA. The mood stabilizer comes in doses of twenty-five milligrams, so I take four of those each night. It's a medication developed for epilepsy, but most people I talk to about this are like, "Oh, yeah, off-label use for mood stabilization is common." I don't know how true this really is. I could look it up, but why bother? It only took the hospital psychiatrist a couple weeks to decide I needed it. Eight years later, and I'm still taking it.

If I wanted to be efficient, I would spend ten minutes of each week divvying out my pills for the remaining days. Instead, I've turned the pills into a nightly ritual. It starts with the Citalopram. Half the nights, I extract one of the round tablets from the white pill bottle. It fits snugly into the triangle of rubber at the base of the pill cutter, but it's almost impossible lining up the scored line across the surface to the hard line of the razor blade. The pills are barely a quarter-inch across, but each one holds forty milligrams of psychological stability. It takes two or three tries before I get them wedged in just so. But they never cut straight down. I'm left with unequal halves and a dusting of fine power. Every couple years, one of the pills will crumble into

thirds. It's due to manufacturing defects, I'm sure. I mean, it's hard pressing together exactly forty milligrams of pharmaceutical grade medication with just enough silica and glue for patients to have something to pinch together between their fingertips.

Fortunately, I only cut pills in half on the off-days. The other nights, I find a half-moon of white sitting there in the square cup of the pill cutter. It sits patiently in a corner, only a few errant particles of silica dust to remind me of its missing half, long since digested.

The Lamotrigine is easier, but more dangerous. The pills are tiny, for one thing. They come in twenty-five milligram tablets that are barely half the empty void left by a hole-punch. Each one would fit on the tip of a pencil eraser with room to spare. And I take four of them. Each night, it's a slow process of tipping and shaking the pill bottle until just the right number are balanced on the lip of the opening that I can reach in with my fingertip to slide them out. Sometimes, I drop one, and it takes forever to find it. It doesn't help that my carpet is always covered in mess. Sometimes, the tiny circle of white will vanish into a bookcase—other times, it bounces off the plastic wrapper into a case of water bottles, landing in a pile of Legos. If I'm lucky, I know which pile. If I'm *really* lucky, it's only one pill that drops.

But that's not the worst part. The worst part is that the pills are dangerous. Especially for children. Like my little guy. If not for him, I'd probably give up the search for lost pills after five or ten minutes. But I can't afford the risk. It isn't like ibuprofen or Tylenol, where the slight overdose from a single pill would probably just tease his little body with an upset stomach and an odd feeling of pain relief. Lamotrigine's designated use is for epilepsy, so the main side effects hit the brain. Lethargy, clouded thinking, a lack of focus—basic stuff. But for my child? I don't trust that. So what if it's an anti-seizure medication—I just assume it must also have the power to *cause* seizures, or the reverse of whatever it is that a seizure might be. Can it quiet the

brain into a coma? I doubt it, but that's the kind of thing I imagine when I think about keeping my son safe. It's paranoia, I know, but I already know the feel of his cold, dead body in my arms. I imagine it a couple times a year. I can't help it. The thoughts, they come unbidden. We could be walking down the sidewalk, and he tugs his way toward the curb because he wants to play "balance beam" at the edge of the road, and I'll imagine him mashed into paste by an oncoming semi, or maybe just his skull cracked by the grazing tap of a side mirror. He doesn't understand why I'm so quick to pull him back. He doesn't understand why, every time we cross the street, I ask him to look both ways, or why I flip out when he doesn't. The worst, for me, is when he goes into full toddler mode. Closing both eyes tight, he whips his head first one way, and then the other, pretending to look. "No cars, Daddy! No cars, Daddy!"

"No!" I tell him. "*Look*."

"But I did, Daddy!"

"No, you didn't. Now *look.*"

Again, the same stunt. Except maybe his eyes are open. Or maybe his head turns a little slower. It doesn't matter. Because by then, we've delayed at the corner so long that an actual car pulls up. And my toddler, convinced that he's already checked more than enough, doesn't even notice.

Thankfully, he isn't like this all the time. Only a couple times a week, tops. And it's not every time I imagine his tiny ribs crushed under a car tire.

But I looked, Daddy! I imagine him saying, tears of confusion and pain mixing with the blood. Repeating it, again, as his last words, as I try to hug him, to resuscitate him, to call 911, to will him back to life.

Dead Bugs

I've lost count of how many times I've imagined my child's death. Sometimes, I wonder if sharing this fear with him would help him understand the danger posed by cars. But I have no words he would truly understand. He's four, now, and the furthest I've gotten is convincing him that death is the opposite of life. I've told him that when you are dead, you cannot eat, you cannot breathe, and you cannot go for walks in the park. But I try not to depress him. Not that I could—it's hard to depress a child who has no concept of either permanence or death. The closest he's ever come to death is funerals: one of my aunts, two of my grandparents. He didn't know any of them by name.

But I'm fine with that. I don't want him to *actually* understand death—certainly not the way I do. Instead, I look for innocuous examples. Just enough to teach, but not enough to inspire fear. Dead bugs are a favorite. Like those dried-up roly poly carcasses decorating that corner of the bathroom.

"Look!" Gawyn now shouts. "They're dead, Daddy."

"Yes, Gawyn—they're dead."

But I've been suicidal. I know the danger of talking about death. I know the warning signs of suicide, and I am careful that I don't somehow give him the wrong impression. So on the days when he asks if I, too, am dead, I tell him I prefer being alive. "I like eating," I tell him. "And drinking coffee."

"But why you drink coffee, Daddy?" he asks.

"So I don't die."

Is it sad that he giggles? I don't know. It's what I get for making up this joke about how coffee is the only thing keeping me alive. And for rehearsing this joke with him, so he could help

me perform it for my friends. “Gawyn,” I ask him, “why do I drink coffee?” “So you no die, Daddy.” (Cue gasps from the audience.)

Still, my heart slows on those long weekend mornings, when he tells me I shouldn’t drink my coffee.

“I want you die,” he tells me, giggling, thinking this is funny.

I haven’t told him to stop with the joke, though I know I should. A joke like that told in preschool might give his teachers the wrong idea. And I’m sure it leaves him with this false impression about death. I don’t want him to feel the full finality of death, but I don’t want him ignorant, either. I don’t want death to catch him full in the chest unawares, knocking him cold.

Sometimes, I want to tell him that dying means never really getting to say goodbye. That the death of someone you love will leave an empty absence in the fabric of all you know. And because I don’t believe in an afterlife, I don’t believe I’ll get to see my little guy again if he dies on my watch, if he dies in my arms. And sometimes, I wish he understood that. Just by the street, at least. So he’d know to fear the cars. So he’d stop at the corner, every time, and *look*.

But he’s four, and I can’t convince him of the danger. And so, from time to time, I think about taking his dinosaur plushie—our Dino—and making Gawyn watch while I run over the dinosaur with my car. Just so he could see what the unyielding weight of a car can do to half a pound of polyester stuffing wrapped in green felt.

So he’d finally know what it means to be afraid.

I don’t like thinking I have PTSD. Because if I have it, when did I get it? And where? Not in the army, I don’t think. The closest I’ve ever been to “trauma” was potshots taken on our convoy. And jumping from airplanes in airborne school, where slight missteps could totally ruin your

day. And then those times we all sat together under the concrete bunkers in Afghanistan while the alarm shrieked the warning of incoming artillery. Sure, our base got hit—just not the year I was there.

No one in my convoy got hit. No one in my chalk got destroyed by stepping out the door of the bird. Though I heard the alarm and though it counted as "combat action," none of the rounds landed on base. So, in a sense, the closest I've been to trauma—as opposed to the mere threat of it—is stories. One of my buddies reenlisted, and he got shot in Iraq—he said the bullet just missed his femoral artery. We talked for ten or fifteen minutes on the phone one day because he needed to renew his security clearance, and would I vouch for him? "Sure thing," I said. He was in the army, kicking some ass, and I was in graduate school for creative writing. While we talked, I stood in my apartment in Baltimore—the same one where I had thoughts about opening my wrist with a kitchen knife, at the same table where I read all of *Twilight* in a twelve-hour binge.

"You're sure it's not too much trouble?" he asked. "They said the interview would take like twenty minutes."

Dude—you're in the fucking army. What the fuck am I doing with my life?

That's what I should have said, but didn't. Instead, I tried to be polite. To be reassuring. I made up something about it being no problem at all, something about how I wasn't too busy that week. Not because that's what grad students do, but because I could hear the creeping doubts in Jared's voice. I thought I needed to convince him it wasn't a problem. I thought I needed to be rational and logical and dependable. But really, how dependable is that?

He says he'll do it, he had to be thinking, *but how do I know he won't flake?*

Dude! I should have said. *You're in the motherfucking* army*, fer chrissakes. We were in fucking Afghanistan together. I mean, shit, that look on your face from my promotion still haunts me, and I've never been able to look you in the eye, the way you grinned while you stabbed the sergeant stripes into my collar bone, but I'm gonna fucking vouch for you.*

And when the security investigator called, I did.

Sometimes, I want to give up the meds. I don't like the rows of bottles on my shelf. I should be afraid of what a single swallowed pill could do to my child—and I am—but I'm more afraid of what the rows of pills will tell him about his father. Because I can't hide the pills from him. The big bottles of Advil and Tylenol, the bottles of Claritin and Benadryl, the prescription bottles for the Lamotrigine and the Citalopram. Added to this are the vitamins: Magnesium, B-Vitamins, whatever else I think might hold off migraines even though nothing ever does. Not when you drink as much coffee as I do. And so I have a couple boxes of sumatriptan, too. I only need one per migraine, but I count those pills. A packet of nine pills might last a month, or might last a year, but I can never know. Because you know it's been a shitty week when I take more than one of those bad boys.

The pills and vitamins take up an entire shelf in my dining room. There are too many for the medicine cabinet—they wouldn't fit. There are too many, in fact, for the lockbox I once bought from Walgreens, back when a doctor said I should lock up my meds. "If your wife really is suicidal," he told me, "you don't want her getting ahold of your medications." Except that the box is now too small, and so I save it for the really nasty stuff. Two mostly-full bottles of Percocet, left over from past surgeries. A bottle of antibiotics I never started because I didn't trust the doctor who prescribed them. The extra sumatriptan, in case I run out. A pressurized

steroid nasal inhaler that, I am certain, would quickly become a favorite toy of any curious child. A bottle of Ambien, only one pill missing. Another half-full bottle of Flexeril, a muscle relaxant.

But the pills in the lockbox are also the "safe" ones. Those are all the ones I could show my parents. They know about the surgeries and the allergies and the fact that an army doctor once prescribed Ambien to help me sleep through neck pain. The antidepressants, though? Those I have to hide. Whenever my parents are in town, I dump them into a box that gets stashed on a high shelf. I also toss in the vitamins and the big bottles of Advil and Tylenol because I'd rather they not know just how much I really go through. Not that it would bother them. Quite the contrary. They take even more vitamins and pain relievers than I do. And they've hired a personal trainer. And my mom the nurse frequently talks about the health benefits of anti-inflammatories. "They don't just make you *feel* better," she's told me. "They reduce swelling so you can heal." Which is true. Trust me—I know from experience. But I'd rather not let my parents see that. I don't want them to know I'm on psychiatric meds, and I don't want them to know just how much like them I really am.

Sometimes, I want to give up all the meds. I tell myself I could, that if I ate right and exercised and cut the stress, I'd be happier and healthier. But I know better. If I run, my neck starts to flare up, so I have to stop and take more ibuprofen and rest. If I rest inside the house too long, the allergies kick in, so it's back to the Benadryl. But then I'm so tired and sluggish that depression will settle heavy over my shoulders. And never mind the migraines. They are creatures all of their own, striking hardest when I need them least.

But still, it would be nice to give up the psychiatric meds. I don't need ibuprofen every day. It's okay if I miss a dose of Benadryl—it's not like I'll just "forget" I have allergies. But the antidepressants? They're a daily burden I cannot afford to miss. It would be better, I think, if I

could move on without them. This is what I tell my psychiatrist, anyway. “But I figure now’s probably not a good time,” I tell him. The first time I told him this, my wife had recently been hospitalized for being suicidal. Later, I was getting divorced. And then working on my dissertation. And a single father with shared custody.

He’s the head of the psychiatry department at the local VA, and I see him two or three times a year. “I mean, I know how bad divorce is,” I told him. “Probably don’t want to give up the meds until things are more settled.”

He always nods, very supportive. “Yeah, I wouldn’t change things now,” he says. “But if you like, maybe we could up the dosage a bit? Maybe help you feel better?”

Right.

Thailand

Still, the questions. Friends, colleagues, random strangers in the hall—everyone who heard about my divorce offered sympathy. And questions.

Of course I’m the one who filed for divorce, I wanted to tell them. *Do you know how many fucking times I had to google the American Embassy in Bangkok just to reassure myself that I could smuggle my own child home? Did I leave out the part about losing fifteen pounds while staying with my wife’s family in their home with the marble floors and the eight-foot-walls to the outside?*

But I never mentioned those things. Instead, I told them about the good things. Getting to see the sights, meeting more of my wife’s family, that overnight trip to Laos. “My wife’s sister just takes care of everyone,” I said. *Like the time she bought diapers for us, and then Lek blamed her for buying the wrong size.* “Her mother cares so much about her grandchild.” *Like the time*

she hugged him while she was sick, and then insisted we come with her to the hospital for something else, and then Lek blamed me for letting our child start coughing. "The medical care is so affordable. Seriously—$26 for a trip to the ER, antibiotics, and a pediatric consult at an international hospital." *Did I leave out the part about how Gawyn had been coughing for over a month? And that his fever had gone up to over 104? Or about how he was so sick that he no longer had the energy to cry? Or about how my wife wouldn't let us take him to the hospital because it was nighttime on a Saturday? Or about how I called my parents for help, since my mom's a nurse? She took one look at him over webcam, and said her grandchild needed a doctor. But that didn't work—my wife wouldn't budge. She was arguing with her mother about it. Apparently her mother also said no, but I don't know. How could I know? Her mother knows hardly any English, and I know zero Thai.*

Finally, I dug out a baby carrier. Then I grabbed my army backpack—the one I'd brought because it had nice straps and a huge pouch that could fit almost an entire diaper bag. "If you aren't going to drive us," I said, "I'll carry him there myself. It's only a mile, and I remember the way."

I never breathed those stories to anyone, not even the divorce lawyer I e-mailed soon after. Because, really, it wasn't my son's health that worried me most. That he might die from stupid parents still seemed impossible to me. After that hospital we'd been to? With the sparkling granite counters? And that immaculate waiting room? With ferns?

Our child couldn't die. Not there. But every day, I grew more and more afraid that I wouldn't get to bring him home. I'd ask about the flight back, and my wife would shrug. We were supposed to return home in August, about a week before I returned to school. And I couldn't stay in Thailand—I had to go back to teach. My entire graduate career depended on that

teaching assistantship—if I didn't teach, who would pay tuition? Where would I get the money for rent? How would I cover the balance on my credit cards?

My wife didn't seem to care. "Maybe I come back in December," she'd say. "Or you come see him at Christmas."

I didn't know what to say. I didn't know who to say it to. And so I trusted in Google. I looked up the cab companies. I mapped the route to the embassy. I weighed out just how much stuff I could leave behind. Would I leave my computer and my tablet to make room for extra diapers and formula? *Maybe?* Would I take the stroller? Would I find a way to sneak it out the door while no one was looking? While cradling a cranky child in the baby carrier on my chest? And lugging an army-issue assault pack stuffed with diapers and clothes and all the bottles and formula I could carry? *It's a no-go on the stroller,* I told myself. *How am I still thinking the computer is gonna fit in that pack, too?*

Eventually, I realized that my plans had reached the edge of impossible. I don't speak Thai, and I don't know the universal hand sign for *Take me to the embassy!* And it's kidnapping, if you remove a child from Thailand without the other parent's permission—same as in the U.S. So I went back to Google. I found a divorce attorney in Illinois with an online form for questions. I tried it. *What do I do if my wife really does choose to keep my child in Thailand?* I asked. *Is it safe for me to take him to the embassy?* I didn't have a way to call him internationally. Not during business hours, anyway, when my wife's entire family would be home, either eating dinner or watching sitcoms or talking late into the night.

It took a day for his reply. *Obviously, I can't give free legal advice over e-mail,* he said, *but you should do anything you can to get your child back to the U.S. Though I would strongly advise against doing anything that might violate Thai law.*

I wrote him back to thank him for the advice. But my real response? The one I felt inside?

Fuck.

Admission

The semester of my teaching internship, there was nothing in the IRB guidelines about what to do when your spouse is in the hospital. Or what to do after you've sat with her in the ER until 8pm the night before, bouncing a one-year-old on your knee for most of that time because I was afraid to let her hold him. Or what you do the next morning, when you're scheduled to teach, and you have one-on-one meetings with your students, and no daycare.

No one talks about the etiquette of taking your toddler when you teach. Or about gathering research data while rocking the little one in your arms. Or what to do when, during a one-on-one meeting, you turn your back just long enough to get another cup of coffee. Or how you treat a student as a "research subject" after she saves your child from an electrical socket.

"Omigod, I'm so sorry!" she said. "I didn't mean to grab your son like that!"

I should have panicked, but I had no more energy for panic. "Oh, no worries!" I said. "You're 18, right? I trust your judgment way more than I trust the little guy."

I suppose I should have been surprised by how easily the words slipped off my tongue—the reassurance, the warmth, the enthusiasm. I mean, the little guy wasn't in any real danger, I don't think—he didn't have a fork or anything metal in his hands. But this is what I'm known for—I reassure people. Usually because they have no idea what's really going on. *Please! Don't worry!* I should have told my student. *My wife threatened suicide yesterday, the cops got*

involved, and I haven't slept. Oh, and I'm supposed to ask you about your goals as a writer. But I haven't slept. Have I mentioned that I still don't know your name?

The afternoon my wife threatened suicide, I stayed with her at the hospital until 8 p.m. I left once in the evening for formula and more diapers, and again at eight because the little guy needed sleep. My dinner was a tray of food ordered from the cafeteria in the last ten minutes before the kitchen closed.

I'm sure I had thoughts of grading papers, or maybe rereading the book I was supposed to teach the next day. Instead I stayed at the hospital, waiting for the verdict. It took time for the psychiatrist to show up to do his evaluations, and then more time as he evaluated another patient first, and then more time as he walked me and Gawyn over to an empty conference room to talk with us separately from my wife.

In the hours of waiting, I stayed in the room with my wife. The first few hours, I didn't let her hold our son. I had thoughts that she might snap his neck. But these thoughts were irrational—I knew they were more a product of my brain than hers. Still, I hesitated. Did I want to punish her? Was I afraid? Or did I really just want the comfort of my son in my arms?

For his part, the little guy wanted to crawl around the floor. He wanted to go touch all the plugs and tubes and wires coiled in a wad behind the bed. He didn't like that I kept picking him up and putting him back in the chair. He wanted to go out in the hallway. And if he could walk, I probably would have let him. I probably would have taken him for a walk around the ER, giving him a tour of the rooms, and then taking him over to the vending machines for animal crackers or something. I mean, isn't that what you're supposed to do in the hospital, to pass the long hours of waiting? Isn't that what the movies show? That's how it was during the two weeks it took my

grandmother to die. Except that I was twelve, then, and the nurses trusted me to go down the hallway by myself to take little cups of ice cream from the mini-fridge.

By the time my wife was in the ER, I was too old to carry the little guy on a tour of the hospital. He weighed too much, and my body was too worn. And besides, my wife couldn't leave the room except for the occasional trip to the bathroom. And for that, someone had to escort her. Usually the private security guard, the one who stood just outside the door. He'd walk with her down the hall to the bathroom, and then stand a polite distance back from the door. I think a female nurse was always involved, too, but I'm not sure. Did they sit with her in the bathroom while she peed? No—that much I know. Because I, too, walked with her. And stood outside that door, leaning back against the wall to keep the full weight of my child off my shoulders. I'd been holding him all day, and I didn't know how many more hours I could hold him. But there was my wife in the bathroom by herself, double-wrapped in hospital gowns because you aren't allowed clothes or keys or a wallet during an ER suicide watch. Still, I imagined she could kill herself, if she really tried. If she wanted too badly enough. And so we listened there, outside the door, for the subtle sounds of life: the trickle of urine, the flushing of a toilet, the running of the tap.

Eventually, my neck and my shoulders couldn't take the strain of holding a one-year-old off the floor for so many hours at a time. So when my wife didn't actually kill herself after her third trip to the bathroom, I relented, letting her hold our child so I could get a break.

They made the decision late afternoon to keep her hospitalized, but there was no space. They had to wait for a bed to open up elsewhere. The psychiatric wards in central Illinois were popular, apparently—by the time they placed her, they had to call medical transport to drive her to

another hospital an hour away. That, I think, was 4 a.m., but I wasn't awake for the call. I was at home in our bed, dead to the world.

Still, I didn't leave the ER until 8 p.m. I let her hug Gawyn one last time before I carried him out to the car, and she gripped him with that manic intensity I feared. If the little guy hadn't needed sleep, I would have stayed longer. I figure that's what you do. Because I wanted her to feel safe. I wanted her to feel loved. I wanted her to know I would never take our child from her. Even if, earlier that day, she had threatened to drive her car into a tree, as Gawyn and I rode in the back seat.

I could talk about the four hours I spent on Facebook that night. I could talk about how the word of my wife's hospitalization never leaked out. No posts, no status updates—just hours and hours of reading what my friends were doing, posting replies, drowning in the distraction of the glowing screen. My wife had just threatened to drive the car into something while I sat in the backseat with our infant. He wasn't old enough to walk yet, but she'd been driving fast circles around the parking lot before I could buckle him into his car seat. Later—when she stopped in the Motel 6 parking lot—she told me to get out. She told me she was going to pick up our child, and I said no. She and I had a minor tug-of-war over the car seat. She said that if I didn't let go, she would kill herself in front of our son so he could "watch his mommy die."

It sounds terrifying. And it was. But nothing bad actually happened. I took my son out of his car seat. I hooked my elbow through a strap to the diaper bag. And I made a beeline for the reassuring brick walls of the Motel 6. The side door was locked, but at least there was a wall. And a wall can stop a car. Not that it mattered. My wife drove away. Over the phone, the nurse at her OB-GYN office told me to call 911. And the 911 dispatcher was surprisingly reassuring. She stayed on the line with me until the police cruiser pulled up.

I thought I was lucky, in a way. I'd once been hospitalized for being suicidal. I'd spent my own time in a seventy-two-hour observation. I knew the drill. When the first police officer pulled up in his cruiser, I knew what to say. I understood the script. And I felt safe. Especially when a second cruiser pulled up, and a second officer got out to talk with my wife. I didn't need to worry about my wife driving the car into my legs while I clutched our little guy to my chest. I didn't need to run for that low hill by the car wash. Not when there's a professional there with a gun. Not when I was confident that he could shoot through the windshield of my wife's car. I mean, I was still worried the cop might shoot me if I made any sudden moves, but he seemed oddly at ease. He was like any number of guys I'd known in the army—he stood there nonchalant, notepad open, pen in hand. The sun was bright, and he wore wraparound Oakley's—the kind of shades I'd once been issued for Afghanistan. After the paramedics took Lek in the ambulance, I got behind the wheel of her car, and the officer followed us all the way to ER in his cruiser. He walked with us into the ER, and then sat with me and my son for a time. It took time for the hospital staff to evaluate my wife and assign security. But we weren't in any danger. The ER was busy. Nurses and orderlies walked past every few minutes. The officer gave up an hour of his beat just to talk.

He tried to be reassuring. He didn't realize how much he reminded me of my army buddies. He had no idea that I'd once been admitted to a psychiatric ward myself. I didn't want him to know these things. I didn't want to share any more intimacy with this man than was necessary. In return, he treated me not as a veteran of Afghanistan and hospitals, but as the confused husband and father I really was. Because my wife had just threatened to commit suicide in front of our child, and I didn't know what to do.

"As long as your wife's honest with the doctors," he said, "they'll get her the help she needs."

It's a familiar myth, this thought that true honesty is possible, or even helpful. But I find that it is nearly impossible to peel back my own well-practiced layers of avoidance. The false smile, the "dad jokes," my constant game of playing "normal"—my entire life has been a performance. Shakespeare tells us that life's a stage—and when is Shakespeare ever wrong?

But this is not a game I've played alone. My ex-wife was afraid, too, though I will never know exactly how much, or exactly why. From the moment the officer said my wife should be "honest," I knew she would lie. And she did. She told the doctors that she wasn't suicidal. That she wasn't dangerous. That yes, she said those things, but that I was exaggerating the danger. And how could I blame her? I did the same thing years before, when I was hospitalized. I kept it up until the psychiatry intern finally lost her patience. "Since you won't agree to be treated," she told me, "we're going to do an involuntary admission."

It's a Catch-22—if you admit you need help, they'll admit you. But if you deny there's a problem, then the denial is counted as a symptom of mental illness. It indicates that you've lost perspective, that your thought processes are so skewed that you no longer realize just how skewed they've become.

Not that this is wrong—it's just frustrating. Especially when people are saying they're there to help you, but "help" involves being locked in on a secure floor that's never, ever called the "psych ward." Instead, they always refer to these wings by the floor number. "This one's going up to Six West," they tell the orderly, and he rolls you to the elevator in a wheelchair as security follows. When I was hospitalized, I thought it was funny and somewhat touching that

they didn't refer to Six West as "Psychiatric" or "The Psych Ward." Hell—they didn't even have derogatory terms for it. No "loony bin" or "the nuthouse" or anything like that—it was Six West, and you knew from the pause in the conversation that every goddamned person working there knew *exactly* what it meant and where to find it.

Still, when I first heard the term, I didn't realize the danger. It didn't quite sink in that they really would lock me up and make me spend the night. And the next night. And almost the night after that. And so, when they asked if I was sick, I said *No, not really. I'm not really depressed—I just want to die. Seriously—you don't need to keep me here. And I don't want to stay.*

It was, in retrospect, the wrong answer. Or maybe the right one, I'm not sure. Maybe it's good they hospitalized me. If nothing else, it scared me enough to keep me on the meds. It wasn't the part about me being suicidal that really scared me—it was the fact that they could lock me up for it, that they could tell me I wasn't going home that night, and there was literally nothing I could do about that. Instead, I spent half that night lying in the hospital bed, staring at the ceiling, thinking how it wasn't right that they could lock up a fucking *veteran*, for chrissakes.

I had thoughts of running, and thoughts of locking myself in my apartment, and thoughts of hopping in my car and driving around Baltimore until they finally gave up looking for me. But I knew that's not how it works. Once they decide you're a danger, there is no running. You can't outrun the police—not when you have to teach in the same classroom at the same time two days a week, not when the university has your address on file, not when they can simply call your parents to figure out whether they might know where you are.

That was what scared me most—the idea that my mom might intervene. I had visions of of her swooping in to "save me" from myself, to take me "home" to "take a break" from all the stress of grad school. And there was no way in hell I was moving back home. None.

So I tried talking my way out of the emergency room. I told them my symptoms, but said I was probably safe. "I don't *think* I'll commit suicide." I mean, I hadn't committed it yet, and I'd already been suicidal for years—what was everyone worried about? So what if sometimes I woke up from a daze to find myself walking toward a parking garage with no memory of where I'd been, but still having the urgent thought that I'd finally found the courage to take that step off the top? I mean, I'm pretty sure the wind in my face and my innate fear of heights would have stopped me from jumping. It had before, back in college, on that night when I did climb the stairs to the roof of a parking garage. I made it as far as peeking over the edge of the wall to see the sidewalk four stories down. I couldn't bring myself to climb up on it, or to sit with my feet dangling off, or anything like that. I wasn't *really* suicidal—I didn't *actually* want to kill myself. I just didn't want to keep living. And the thought of going through with it? It left me dizzy.

But the refusal to acknowledge the danger? That's dangerous. Or so I've been told. Usually during treatment, when I'm trying to convince well-dressed professionals that I'm not as crazy as I sound. Like on the first morning during my hospitalization, when they directed me to a small conference room for my first "group meeting." It was supposed to be supportive and evaluative—teach some "coping skills," determine whether or not we were "ready" for discharge, that sort of thing. "I'm not *actually* depressed," I told them. "I just have this desire to kill myself. But other than that, I'm mostly okay." I mean, I was still going to class, I was still teaching, and I was still writing. I just couldn't convince myself to eat the food from my own

refrigerator. Oh, and sometimes my legs stopped working. Probably because I was only getting half as many calories a day as I needed.

But whatever—that was my first day in the hospital, and I was still pretty annoyed that they wouldn't let me go home. Or use my cell phone. Or god forbid a computer. Hell, my girlfriend—my future wife—didn't even know where I was, and I couldn't call her because I only had her number on my phone, which was locked up in a closet to which I didn't have access.

So, yeah—I was a little snarky that day. *It's not like I'm gonna just die,* I wanted to say. *I'd have to work for it, you know?*

Yeah—the social worker didn't know what to make of me. The other patients, though—they understood. I could see from their expressions that they *got it*. As well they should have. The four of us had all been assigned to the same group because we'd all had thoughts of self-harm.

The social worker wasn't just worried—she was skeptical. She wasn't sure that I realized the real danger I faced. "There's a reason you're here," she told me. "We can't let you go until we see some sign that you'll continue treatment."

Did I nod? Did I accept my fate? Nope. Instead, the wheels turned. I began, somehow, to understand the rules of this game. No—I couldn't convince them I was "cured." And this pissed me off. There was no way I'd ever convince them I was "safe"—I'd already admitted too much for that. But they weren't looking for that. They only needed to know that I was *safe enough*. That if they let me go home, they could be reasonably certain that I would call them again before doing something that would end my life.

That was a lie I could pull off.

"Oh, I know," I said. I think I did one of those Jedi mind waves—the kind where you wave your hand in the manipulative reassurance that you totally agree with everything your conversation partner has just said, even though you're convinced they don't know a damn thing about your life. And this, I think, is when I turned on the sugar words—the gentle "admission" of how I was "really" feeling.

"I mean, this is a lot harder than I thought it would be," I said. "This is forcing me to reevaluate things. I definitely haven't been taking good enough care of myself."

This drew a nod. Did the social worker think I was lying? I couldn't tell. So I kept going. I tried figuring out what a "good" patient would say. They wouldn't believe me if I said I was cured. So I admitted ignorance. I said I hoped things would get better. I expressed doubts and fears and all those things that someone should feel when they've just been admitted to a hospital for being suicidal. *I'm in grad school for creative writing,* I thought. *I can go all day.*

I played a game I'm good at: pretending to be a good student. I asked about the homework—what numbers I should call if I'm depressed, what effects the meds might have, that sort of thing. And I kept going until even the social worker began to thaw.

Seriously, though, I decided, *the minute you people let me out of here, I am* not *coming back.*

It's been eight years. So far, I've kept my vow.

Sometimes, I wonder what it must have been like when the police came to take Lek to the emergency room. I still remember my own hospitalization very clearly—I doubt she's forgotten hers.

It was hard, the day the psychiatrist wouldn't let me go home. It's been eight years, but I remember when they took my clothes and my keys and my phone. I remember all the questionnaires I had to fill out before they returned my shoes and my jeans and my t-shirt—they still kept my belt and my shoelaces. I still remember the exact clothes I wore because they were the clothes I would wear for the next three days. There was no washing machine.

But I've been in the army. I endured all the appointments necessary for a medical discharge. I am accustomed to uniformed personnel with firearms, and I know how doctors talk. I know what these people with holsters and white coats and cardigans and pressed slacks will expect to hear, and I know how to answer. And as a graduate student in creative writing, I could weave stories all day.

I do not know what it was like for Lek the day the police and paramedics came to take her away. I do not know what she thought, or how she felt. She could not confide in me during her pregnancy—she did not confide in me after I called 911.

When Lek was hospitalized, I stayed with her in the emergency room until our child had to sleep. It took the nursing staff another eight hours to find a bed in psychiatric ward—they woke her at four in the morning to drive her an hour away. But this was before she had filled out the intake paperwork—this was before they returned her jeans or her t-shirt or her bra. Instead, an orderly loaded her belongings into the medical transport van. But he forgot to grab Lek's sandals, and I wasn't there to claim them. They were never found.

The next day, I drove an hour to visit her. I brought her two changes of clothes and our son. Knowing the lonely hours from my own stay on the psych ward, I also brought one of her books in Thai. And a toothbrush.

The nursing staff opened the door for five minutes so Lek could see her child, and so I could give them the bag of clothes to inspect. After that, Gawyn and I were asked to leave. Gawyn was one year old—children under twelve weren't allowed inside.

Later that night, I took Gawyn out for dinner. We ate at a Middle Eastern restaurant down the road from the hospital. Then we stopped for gas, and I changed his diaper in the ladies room. He fell asleep in the car on the drive home.

Lek spent the next three days eating hospital food. And no one there spoke Thai. So I doubt she understood everything they said in the counseling sessions. Instead, she likely wondered when—or if—they would let her see Gawyn again. She likely wondered when—or if—I would let her hold him again. At least, that's the question I asked myself. That's why, the day I picked her up to drive her home, I left Gawyn at daycare. The new daycare. One he had never been to before. And the day after that, when I had my night class, I hired a babysitter to stay with him. A new babysitter—a friend of mine from school. To stay with my wife. And I paid the babysitter extra, just in case. Since she'd be watching not just an infant, but the mother, too.

Custody

As a father, I've spent most of the past three years fearing that my ex-wife would "win" our child in a custody fight. And so I tried to do everything "right." I didn't want to be dad-of-the-year—I aimed for dad of the century. I would be the best, funniest, most patient father *of all time*. While writing a dissertation. And teaching classes. And chairing a graduate conference. And taking on an international conference. And smiling. Every day smiling. Because I was going to be the best goddamned human being in the history of human beings.

Naturally, I hired a good attorney. The best attorney I could find. She saw right through me.

"And do you have any mental health issues yourself?" she asked.

"Yes." And then, because I was going to be the best, most honest divorce plaintiff in the history of ever, I read off the list: my medications, my own hospitalization, the fact that it had been involuntary.

My attorney took notes. She asked more questions. She leveled with me.

"You have this history of mental illness. A judge wouldn't be comfortable assigning sole custody to someone with a history of suicide."

"But what about my wife?" I asked.

"Was she actually suicidal?"

I had to think about that for a long time. My wife had lied, I was certain, but which time? Had she lied to the ER doctors about being suicidal? Or had the threat of suicide been the lie?

I tried explaining this difference to my lawyer. I tried explaining my uncertainty. It should have been a yes-no question, but all I had was a *theory*. Maybe my wife never was suicidal. Maybe she'd only been acting the part. Maybe she'd been trying to hold our marriage together in the best way she knew how.

My attorney regarded me with the same dubious expression I get from my teachers, my parents, and my students when they decide I'm weaving a web of bullshit before their very eyes.

She was polite, though. "We'd have to see what the judge would say," she said. "But if I were you, I wouldn't take this to trial. There's no telling what a judge would decide."

And that became her refrain. Every time I met with her, my attorney would ask about our finances. Sometimes, she'd ask me to reminder of the names of the meds I was taking. Three or

four times, she noted the dates of my hospitalization. She was so busy—and so worn out from her real cases, the ones involving actual abuse—that she barely remembered mine. But she knew divorce. She knew judges. “Now, I’m happy to take your money,” she said, “but you have your little one to think about. I bet you folks would rather spend that money on him.”

In time, I learned to shut my mouth. I learned to swallow my pride and accept a divorce settlement that a “mentally healthy” person might have had a chance of fighting. And it’s tempting, in describing this, to say that my fears and the social stigmas surrounding mental illness somehow led to an injustice, but I can’t say that. My ex-wife and I saved tens of thousands of dollars and years of acrimony by avoiding a trial—who am I to say that “fighting for what’s right” would have been the right thing to do?

Filing for Divorce

Standing just short of the TSA checkpoint at O’Hare, I knew I would file for divorce. Watching my wife and her mother wheel the stroller through the lines, I knew I would have to. Later that day, sitting at a McDonald’s, drinking a mango smoothie, I would write these thoughts, starting the first of a series of journal entries describing the need for divorce. *She wouldn’t even let me hug my own child,* I’m sure I wrote. *She wanted to wheel him through security without letting me say goodbye.*

But it took time to come to terms with myself. Longer still to find courage. First, there would come the summer in Thailand, after I took my own international flight to join them. And another six months would pass before my wife was admitted to the hospital for threatening to commit suicide. A whole year and a half would pass before I filed for divorce. And in that time, I

tried to document everything. I wrote down everything that happened. I kept a journal. Eventually, the marriage and divorce got so bad that I had no time to write about what was going on. My moments of solitude came while driving. Those one-hour trips to the VA in Peoria, or those six-hour drives out to Iowa, during thetimes when my little guy slept in his car seat in the back—those were times I kept my journal. I pulled out my iPhone, flipped on the Voice Recorder, and just talked. I wanted to be honest—I wanted to be authentic. I wanted to "build a case." I talked about my depression. I talked about having been suicidal. I talked about all the treatments I knew my wife should have been receiving. I explained that she had never been honest about her mental health. I talked about how it was honesty that had helped me overcome my own shadow of suicide. I talked about my conviction that Lek had never actually been suicidal to begin with. Weighing my antidepressants against her apparent postpartum, I thought I could win custody.

During the discovery phase of our divorce, my wife's attorney filed a request for any and all journal entries I may have written. Like a dutiful plaintiff, I turned over my evidence: a CD with the recorded mp3's of my feelings.

Over a year passed. The custody negotiations went badly. My wife and I argued over holidays and residency. We argued about how many weeks she should be allowed to visit Thailand with our child. We argued over who would hold the passports between trips. Mostly, we argued about which parent was the better one. We each wanted the one proof that mattered: primary custody.

Mediation dragged on. Proposals were met with counter-proposals. Changes were approved and denied. But the longer we went without a final agreement, the more it seemed likely that our divorce would go to trial.

But then my attorney called me one day. She asked me to stop by her office. When I arrived, she offered me a seat across from her. From an envelope, she pulled out a CD. I recognized it—it was the one I had submitted during discovery. She placed it on her desk between us. My wife's lawyer had reviewed it, and then sent it back. Apparently, he liked what he had heard. He, too, saw it as evidence.

My attorney listened to my journal over the course of a weekend, this audio journal I'd been dictating on car trips. It was eight hours of my thoughts. She could have charged $240 an hour just to listen—the bill from her office says she didn't.

"I'll be honest with you," she said, "a judge wouldn't like this." And then she talked about the things I well remembered. The fact that I've been suicidal. The fact that I was once hospitalized. The fact that I was so frustrated with my marriage that I no longer knew what to do.

"Now that you and your wife both have these mental health issues," my attorney said, "it's a real toss-up what the judge would say. Now, you can take this trial, but it's real unlikely a judge is going to award sole custody to someone with a history of suicide." *Not if it haunts him enough to talk about it,* she could have added.

Yeah—my throat went dry. My head filled with all the things I wanted to say. *But I voluntarily went to treatment,* I wanted to say. *I stayed on my meds. I've followed up with therapy. I've kept myself stable. And I wasn't faking it. I wasn't the one making shit up just to get back at my spouse. And I've never threatened to kill myself in front of my son.*

But I didn't say anything. Instead I sat there, and I followed my attorney's advice about a joint settlement agreement. We would split the time with our son fifty-fifty—I would have half the week, my soon-to-be-ex-wife would get the other half. We'd alternate weekends. We'd make

joint decisions on medical, education, and everything. And at some point, when he goes to college, we'll renegotiate the future with our child.

For the rest of that month, I hated myself for giving up my son. For giving up those journal entries. For giving up the fight against the one woman on Earth I truly despised.

Later—after my wife moved out, and the dishes piled high in my sink—I began to understand what my attorney had asked.

"Was your wife actually suicidal?" she wanted to know.

"I'm not sure," I said. *I mean, I don't think she's depressed. She'll never have cobwebs and dead bugs sprouting from the corners of her bathroom, as I will. Her laundry doesn't pile into separate baskets, as mine does. I'm afraid to fold my clothes after I pull them from the dryer, so I just pile them in baskets. Every morning is an excavation for socks. I might not be suicidal, but I've given up pretending I'm well.*

I'm pretty certain she lied to me about her depression, I'd tell my attorney, *but I lied to myself about mine.*

CHAPTER VI: PEDAGOGY AND SOCIAL MEDIA IN CREATIVE WRITING

In Fall 2013, I set up a study to examine how undergraduate students use autobiographical positioning to distribute their creative writing online. For this study, I modified a section of the Intermediate Fiction Workshop to incorporate a social media component within the readings and assignments of a standard creative writing workshop.[1] Of the eighteen students who registered for the course, twelve consented to participate in the study of their writing and social media habits.[2]

When I began this study, the primary goal was to first understand how students use social media in their personal lives, and then guide them to more thoughtfully employ their skills as "digital natives" in order to identify receptive audiences beyond the classroom. The impetus for this work stems from the increasingly digital nature of writing and publishing. Like many teachers, I see an obligation to follow what Elizabeth Clark describes as the "digital imperative," which is perhaps particularly important in creative writing because the ability to promote oneself online can empower writers who might otherwise find their works ignored by an established press. Following Clark, the goal was to provide students with the insights to understand and challenge such hierarchies. "Although students may be immersed in the culture of Web 2.0, they are not immersed in a way that fully engages the complexities of our new techno-order" (33). Even students who are highly proficient in the use of Facebook, Twitter, or other social media platforms may be unaware of how these online interactions affect their perceptions of and engagement with social communities. As Andrew Piper notes, many worry that "[w]e are becoming the tools of our machines and not the other way around" (Prologue).

[1] Links to the complete syllabus and schedule for the course can be found in the Works Cited.
[2] To protect the identities of these students, all names have been changed, and no identifying information has been provided.

Despite the many concerns surrounding digital social media, "digital natives" of the "Millennial" generation already employ social media in highly sophisticated ways. Relles and Tierney have tied the student appropriation of "found media" to "the function of evidence citation in college composition," hence indicating a direct correlation between online literacy practices and crucial skills of academic scholarship (492). Bronwyn Williams describes a "culture of collage" in which texts are no longer "autonomous written products," but rather "flexible and impermanent collages that are only one link in a larger network" (24-25). Ridolfo and DeVoss use "rhetorical velocity" to describe how authors enter into this kind of collaborative environment, composing their texts "with inventive considerations conscious of third-party recomposing" (intro). The "remixing" they describe certainly occurs not only at the received level of visual texts, but also during the pre-textual drafting process.

Yet many students don't see their uses of social media as providing skills for the classroom. Williams indicates that this may be due to a learned separation between the genres of school and the complex literacy practices of the internet (183). And if we consider the cultural conceptions of social media usage—particularly in classroom spaces—the reason for this separation becomes obvious. Students are regularly given the message that social media engagement is an aberration from "proper" writing, and the idea of writing beyond the classroom is frequently excluded from course curricula. Clark describes one student who "thought of writing as a performance for the teacher, but not as something that had a significant role in her own life" (30).

Part of the problem, of course, is that traditional classrooms don't value the types of interactions that students tend to experience in their free time. Yoni Van Den Eede describes how the collection and sharing of digital artifacts can establish individual identities within community

spaces, but his primary examples exclude the kinds of collections that a teacher might assign. Among the "several classes of online activities" he includes online music, e-mail, virtual worlds, and online shopping (108-110)—but no mention of students sharing their algebra problems, or recent realizations regarding the nature of world history, or favorite works of the literary canon. Instead, Van Den Eede and others describe these collection practices as the means of writing one's own life into a social space (109). This habit of collection continues not only in physical or digital objects, but also in narratives. Arthur Frank draws on Levi-Strauss's concept of the *bricoleur* to indicate the ways in which outside narratives shape internal identity. "We human storytellers wander along the beaches and byways of our lives, picking up bits of narratives that appear and appeal to us. . . . Sometimes we piece together a story to render sensible something that in itself does not make sense" (186).

This is a significant contrast to most classrooms, wherein students read and study works from established scholars in order to become enculturated to the epistemic standards of an academic discipline. As Katherine Hayles explains, the in-depth exploration of texts valued by teachers is not necessarily the kind of reading students learn in digital spaces. "Learning to read complex texts (i.e., 'close reading') has long been seen as the special province of the humanities. . . . With the advent of digital media, other modes of reading are claiming an increasing share of what counts as 'literacy,' including hyper reading and analysis through machine algorithms ('machine reading')" (11). In the classroom, the highly curated canon of assigned readings can seem irrelevant to students who have instant access to Google. Both teachers and students grow frustrated with the apparent disconnect in perceptions of "relevant" reading materials. Howard Gardner and Katie Davis relate the example of a college student "brandishing a smartphone" who asks "[i]n the future, why will we need school? . . . [T]he answer to all questions are—or

soon will be—contained in this smartphone." Gardner's response, though pithy, probably didn't change the student's mind: "Yes, the answers to all questions . . . except the important ones" (9).

This exchange reveals the deep ambivalence surrounding the internet, but the disconnection doesn't stem from conflicting values of the importance of knowledge. Instead, digital natives generally exhibit habits of reading and collection that center upon individually curated and freely-shared expressions of personal knowledge, whereas academia reserves the sharing of such expressions for longer texts produced by individuals who have established their credentials within a discipline. In many ways, creative writing classrooms follow the typical academic model: established literary figures provide the bulk of assigned readings. But the typical workshop can also approximate Van Den Eede's digital collection practices: students compose creative works of personal import, share them with classmates, and receive feedback.

As students come to be known for certain themes and styles in their work, this iterative process naturally constructs authorial identities—the kinds of identities that can replicate the same fears we see surrounding social media. The core fear is that self-expression—whether shared online or in classroom assignments—inherently leads students to promote stereotypes rather than engage in critical thinking. As Helga Lénárt-Cheng and Darija Walker point out, "there looms the danger of reducing individual lifestories to basic representative functions; such lifestories or collections may in fact contribute to perpetuating our preconceived notions of the Other's identity" (145). Or as Allen writes, many writing teachers "worry that [the genre of life writing] not only perpetuates an overly simplistic concept of the subject but that, in so doing, the genre also risks encouraging the consumer-mentality and narcissism" (20).

There is a danger that unchecked self-expression can reinforce stereotypes. For Lauren Berlant, autobiographical narratives perform a "normative" function in society, establishing

which experiences "count" as "authentic" or "acceptable." "The autobiographical is not personal," she writes. "[A]ll sorts of narratives are read as autobiographies of collective experience" ("Life Writing" 181). In the creative writing classroom, this is complicated by the fact that the creative works themselves are not simply examples of identity formation, but rather serve as exhibitions of writing proficiency. As Nancy Kuhl writes, "[b]ecause I promote writing as a matter of craft and skill with language and because I challenge the idea that writing is primarily a means of exploring one's psyche, I find myself in conflict with popular images and with the vast marketplace of goods that support that very idea" (4).

Unfortunately, this concept of the workshop as a meritocracy is not necessarily reflective of the realities of audience reception, and the emphasis on language can overshadow considerations of social context. Stuart Glover indicates that creative writing studies has not sufficiently considered how writing and authorship are influenced by the forces beyond the classroom: "it is not the production of a manuscript alone that constitutes an act of writing or authorship; instead, it is the ability to create a manuscript that is then produced or reproduced in the public sphere" (297). And within the confines of a classroom in which creative works are closely critiqued, the social definition of what "counts" as an acceptable narrative can become significantly restricted, perhaps invalidating the kinds of student work that would otherwise find significant audiences outside the classroom. Or, as Julie Thompson Keane asks, "To what degree are students, even in an informal environment, able to express themselves freely?" (184). And as Brent Royster points out, the traditional workshop can cause instructors "to lose sight of what should be the real goal of workshops . . . our aim is to foster more dedicated writers" (27). The focus on product can lead students to personally disconnect from their work, commodifying written *texts* rather than promoting writing *habits*.

This is particularly relevant for academic writers, as publication success doesn't automatically follow critical acceptance. Kathleen Fitzpatrick describes how a publisher denied the publication of a book that had passed peer review, yet failed to meet perceived standards of economic viability (2). For marginalized writers, this effect can be even more pronounced. Poet Daljit Nagra declares that "too often editors use a euphemism such as 'taste' as an excuse for rejecting black authors because they actually mean 'I am not interested in minority writing'. . . . [U]noriginal and cliched [sic] white poetry finds publishers with dreadful ease whilst unconventional black writing does not" (Flood). Thus, the combined influence of economic priorities and "taste" serve to reinforce hierarchies of social power.

In this environment, I see the internet as a means to overcome such social barriers by directly reaching out to potential audiences. Some agree with this, but others see digital communities as primarily a tool that reinforces hegemonic culture. Such hopes and hesitations are frequently magnified to the point of insistent panic. As dana boyd writes, "[a]mid a stream of scare stories, techno-utopians are touting the amazing benefits of online life while cyber-dystopians are describing how our brains are disintegrating because of our connection to machines" (Introduction). For the creative writing workshop, the question becomes whether digital tools can help students become "better" writers able to more productively distribute their work, or if, instead, digital media only serves to distract our students from the "real" work of more literary genres.

Several academic scholars have conducted in-depth studies that seem to justify hesitation over hope. Sherry Turkle fears that social media is isolating students, leaving them unable to develop genuine social connections—the kinds of connections we'd naturally value as creative writers. She describes high school students caught in lives during which "[t]he years of identity

construction are recast in terms of profile production" (182). Sarah Allen indicates that such social disconnection appears to affect how students think and use reason. She writes that many of her "sharpest and advanced undergraduate writing students" see research into opposing views as a process of "knowing who 'the enemy' is and how to bolster one's own thesis in the face of that enemy" (8). Some argue that digital media influences not only social connections and worldviews, but mental ability. Nicholas Carr draws on psychology and neuroscience to argue that the distracting pace of the internet negatively affects human attention span at the neurological level. Naomi Baron argues that digital reading significantly affects the capacity to engage with complex texts, perhaps even influencing the widespread cultural devaluation of the humanities (155).

Despite the many sources indicating that digital media may be "hurting" the intellectual capacities of our students and society at large, I've slowly come to realize that social media isn't wrong—it's simply different. Tom Standage dates the social practices of "liking" and "sharing" back to (at least) the Romans. And as Hayles indicates, print and digital traditions are not separate traditions, but rather points on the continuum of modalities for the ongoing traditions of cultural literacy: "Digital networks influence print books, and print traditions inform the ways in which the materiality of digital objects is understood and theorized" (32). As Andrew Piper notes, "we have said all this before. Four hundred years ago in Spain people read too many romances (Don Quixote). . . . Everything that has been said about life in an online world has already been said about books" ("Prologue").

More importantly, much of the distrust of social media stems from a fundamental failure to understand the ways in which younger generations have adapted it to their lives. Turkle describes her subjects as dependent upon social media, as if social media has taken away from

their in-person relationships. In contrast, dana boyd's interviews indicate that teens use digital tools to overcome increasing cultural constraints, thus cultivating interpersonal relationships despite the growing influence of curfews, after-school activities, and parental fears of crime. But a crucial difference between Turkle and boyd arises in their personal relationships with social media. We see this best when boyd describes her own teenage years in terms of the internet. For her, "going online—or 'jacking in'—was an escape mechanism, and I desperately wanted to escape" ("Introduction").

Several years ago, I would have read boyd's description as an admission of guilt rather than the account of an awakening. Although she and I are contemporaries, I didn't grow up with the internet. I didn't have an e-mail account until a month before arriving at college. Four years later, I reached graduation with an ingrained distaste for courses that posted materials online. For many years, I would have absolutely resisted boyd's points about social media—the same way I resisted Facebook until 2010, and then I resisted Twitter even longer. But my own comical failures in "marketing" myself online revealed the ignorance of my "principled stance." Months of search engine optimization landed my website on Google, but it brought no readers. A year of dedicated blogging yielded the same result. But then a couple weeks of Facebook ads landed me 18,000 fans from the Philippines (12Writing). After nine years of teaching, I still have no idea how to connect with these fans of creative writing. And yet, it was the repeated attempts to "accomplish something" online that led me to my actual "successes" there—personal reconnections with friends on Facebook, the lifelong friendships that emerged through a three-day conference and Twitter. In the year leading up to my divorce, anonymous social media provided the solace and reassurance that I didn't dare seek from friends or family. It was there I discovered boyd's sense of "escape." Late at night, sitting alone in my life, my iPhone offered

the only place I could "go" to be myself among others. And in retrospect, my years of self-imposed isolation from Facebook were largely hypocritical. Ten years earlier, I had spent an entire summer alone in the dorms, chatting over AOL Instant Messenger with friends I'd never met in person. Some of my most cherished e-mails while deployed came from a pen pal in Japan whom I met online. I later met my future wife through a dating website. Despite these experiences, I still saw Facebook as a fad—up until I finally joined, and then reconnected with army buddies I hadn't heard from in years.

On the one hand, it's simple to say that the negative attitudes surrounding digital media constrain student writers by limiting their venues for literate exchange. Unlike Baron, Fitzpatrick argues that the apparent "obsolescence" and "marginalization" of the humanities stems from an unwillingness to adapt to the networking implications of digital technologies (13). For her, the advent of digital technologies both enable and necessitate reconsiderations of originality and individuality—following her lead, we could view Williams's "culture of collage" as a way for academia to overcome the economic limitations enforced by commercial presses. At a deeper level, though, I feel that widespread negative attitudes about online social interactions can significantly undermine how students value not just their writing, but themselves. Students don't just see a disconnect between writing online and writing for school—they feel guilty for an "addiction" to their friends and families.

In setting up my study, I wanted my students to see their tweets and status updates not as aberrations from academic writing, but rather as another component in the continuum of social communication. I imagined that they would use social media to establish a public presence, and then use that presence to reach out to audiences beyond the classroom. I assumed that past social media experiences would have provided them with an unseen preparation for the creative writing

classroom, and I wanted them to then reframe these experiences as productive practice in the work of becoming writers rather than simply an insignificant distraction. I wanted them to transfer innate skills in establishing *personal* identities to the explicit work of establishing *authorial* identities.

First, I needed to investigate how my students used social media. To gather initial data, I prepared three surveys: one to evaluate their thoughts about writing, one about prior technology usage, and a third to evaluate attitudes about sharing their work online. However, surveys can only provide very limited information. To allow for more in-depth conversations, I scheduled three sets of one-on-one meetings with my students. To facilitate in-class observation, I structured the daily lessons around brief introductions to the lesson and small group activities. My students spent the majority of class time working in groups, and I spent most of this time moving from group to group to address individual questions and gather feedback regarding how students were engaging in the course. Since I didn't know which twelve of my eighteen students had consented to participate in the study until after final grades were submitted, I took notes and made observations on all students in the course.

To apply the pedagogical considerations, I incorporated social media throughout a standard workload of weekly readings and written assignments. The course centered upon four prose workshops and a final portfolio, with the expectation that every student would select portions of their creative writing to share. Although the course was listed as a fiction workshop, I encouraged students to write and submit works that aligned with their interests, whether in fiction, nonfiction, or autobiography, with the intention that students would then position themselves online to draw notice from outside audiences. To guide this expectation, I assigned Scribophile.com, a semi-public creative writing community that already fosters the kinds of

posting and feedback among writers that I wanted my students to engaged in. Since creative writing is by nature personal, I asked students to choose their public posts from among works they had previously submitted only to myself or their classmates. This way, I hoped that students would have the artistic freedom to write anything they wanted, knowing that nothing would be shared online until they themselves felt it "ready."

For in-class workshops, I used Google Drive in order to facilitate more conversational commenting outside class time. Students could see and respond to each other's comments in real time, and I hoped that this would spark more in-depth conversations about each workshop piece. By the end of the course, I expected each student to identify a relevant audience, revise a collection of polished workshop pieces for public dissemination, and then follow through using the social media platform of choice.

To foster critical reflection regarding the nature of social media and writing for public audiences, I chose readings that explored a wide range of publication venues. This included works by established authors, works by self-published authors, and works of writing that weren't "published" in the traditional sense, but were instead shared socially for specific purposes. In published works, I added context through additional secondary sources.

As a white male instructor, I'm aware that I have blind spots in cultural awareness, and it's understood that exclusionary practices can often go unspoken. I also feel an obligation to expose students to pressing social issues about which they might not otherwise be aware. To address these issues, I assigned readings that specifically showed how women and people of color have used the social distribution of writing in order to challenge discrimination and enact social change. I used Black Twitter and the case of Trayvon Martin to illustrate the social

impacts of digital media, and I used Helen Hunt Jackson's *A Century of Dishonor* to illustrate the fact that longer, printed texts have long filled a similar role.

The ultimate goal was to challenge the notion that there is a single, universal "standard" by which all "good" writing is judged. As students began establishing more public authorial identities, I wanted each individual to independently decide *which* standards of taste best applied to the creative texts they wanted to produce. Rather than focus on a few key texts, I used a wide variety of shorter texts from multiple prose genres. Humor from David Sedaris, somber details from Tim O'Brien, and the biting social commentary of ZZ Packer were assigned alongside one of the worst self-published zombie stories that Amazon can sell.

I wanted to avoid imposing my own personal tastes upon my students. More than that, I wanted my students to be aware that my personal tastes as a reader are *not* necessarily accurate measures of the tastes of relevant audiences. I wanted to invite self-expression, even the kinds of self-expression that students themselves might initially see as either inappropriate or insufficiently interesting for the classroom space. So I chose specific works that I *didn't* like, and I explained my reasons for not liking them, and then explained all of the reasons why most people *do* like them.

My experiences with the course revealed that my impulse to encourage creativity and investigate student habits became far more important than the attempt to help students become "better" at social media. In terms of technology usage, I underestimated the diversity of experience among my students. Some students barely used Facebook, while others were already well versed in using Twitter and blog platforms to reach audiences beyond their established friends and family. I also underestimated the degree of thoughtfulness that many students already

applied to their social media usage. Katie expressed long-held reservations about digital technologies:

> . . . the young adult generations today are the transitional ones. We are being introduced and sometimes conned into using technology and becoming dependent on it. I admit, I am far too attached to my phone, laptop, and the god that is the internet, but there are some aspects I wish would remain more traditional. (Though that is a relative term because traditional to the origins of publishing would mean cave paintings and papyrus.)

With such insights, my students were better able to contextualize their uses of technology than I was. Most did more than simply choose the right platform—as if anticipating Kuhl, they decided how certain platforms would help them become better *writers* as opposed to better *distributors* of self-expression.

This sense of "getting it right" seemed to be of overriding importance to most of my students. Olivia, working to create her "cautionary guide" for girls starting college, sought input from friends who had shared troubling experiences with her. Jenny, in writing about her semester abroad, forwarded her writing to classmates from that semester, both for fact-checking and to make sure she had represented her friends well. Beverly targeted her stories of following a band to their concerts across the country to fans of the same band and other like-minded concert-goers. More important than sharing the work was the fear that the writing might not accurately represent the experiences described.

This is quite a contrast to typical stereotypes of Millennials as "self-centered" or "technology dependent." It showed that, for my students, the challenges of writing were more important than the choice of medium—they continually adapted to uncertain social spaces,

wherein technology served as simply the medium for connection. Olivia experienced weeks of self-doubt before she was able to forward her story to her close friends on Facebook. And these connections crossed platforms—though she distributed her stories via Facebook, she followed up with her friends and received most of their feedback via text message. Jenny was "okay" with her study-abroad friends not having a chance to read and comment upon her stories about their recent trip. For Jessica, sharing a memoir about anorexia with her mother opened up a conversation with her mother that had not fully occurred earlier, and which in turn provided her with more details of the experience that she couldn't have accessed alone. In this classroom experience, both Turkle's dark view of impaired relationships and Williams's optimistic portrayals complex multimodal identities seemed overstated. Instead, digital media appeared to be a secondary consideration to social connection. For Jessica, I changed the assignment guidelines with the thought that this would "protect" her from the possible shame of revealing too much. But this had only a minor effect—she shared her story with her mother, and she saw the writing and sharing process as a part of moving beyond her prior eating disorder. For her, writing was less about "healing" and more about "getting it right," about accurately sharing her experience with others. In this sense, changing the assignment wasn't the important factor—creating a smaller audience with shared writing goals provided a safe space from which she could engage in the social sharing appropriate for her project.

The corollary is that the classroom space itself became far more important to student learning than the social media tools I assigned. Social interactions with classmates motivated students to continue writing while helping them accept their own shortcomings—even if that shortcoming was simply that they had attempted the impossible. As Tom explained in his end-of-semester reflection:

> I was disappointed in myself for a while, but I'm not anymore. I realize that 15,000 words in one month is *way* more than i [sic] would have done, had I not been taking part in NaNoWriMo. Besides that, I feel like the quality of writing that I put out was good. I'm proud of what I did.
>
> Also, reading the writing of the rest of the group was really helpful. It kept me motivated to work at their pace. A couple of us, I know, finished at roughly the same spot. [Two students] finished with 50,000 words, but as far as I know, the rest of us ended up with something closer to 15,000. Nothing to be ashamed of, but not exactly what we had planned going into the month.

I had wanted my students to see that a strong relationship with their audiences would encourage longer and better writing, but I had been pushing for these relationships to occur online. Clearly, the intimate space of the classroom provided a better audience for this goal. My students revealed that the "marketing" of writing cannot be separated from the emotional reality of being a human being who is in the process of *becoming* a writer. Like many teachers, I have long told students, "You are already writers." I've long tailored this message to digital natives of the Millennial generation, pointing out that the back-and-forth texts of Facebook and Twitter represent a complex writing practice. During the teaching internship, I went a step further: "My goal is to integrate each of you into a community of writers," I told them. "My goal is to help you identify and attract the audiences that will keep you writing."

But I'd never asked whether or not they believed me. I never realized the degree to which the classroom is affected by student narratives of what counts as a valuable learning experience. I only discovered this outside the classroom, during the one-on-one meetings with my students. The conversational nature of these revealed small-group dynamics I couldn't observe directly.

For example, as students prepared to begin their final projects, Katie began actively recruiting her classmates to join the NaNoWriMo group. Since each participant would be required to write 20,000 words within thirty days to complete the final project, she wanted to make sure she had enough people in her group to keep her motivated. But I only learned of Katie's enthusiasm for this project during a meeting with Eve, who didn't share Katie's enthusiasm, or join her group. Katie never brought this up during our meetings or during my in-class interactions with her—she probably didn't realize just how unusual it would be for a student writer to recruit writers to take on an "impossible" writing task, whereas Eve felt the awkwardness of having to turn a friend down.

This was a recurrent pattern—interpersonal interactions beyond my purview significantly affected student experiences of the course, and the individual meetings revealed this serious blind spot in my classroom observations. Harriet, for example, related that she was unable to speak in class if I was within earshot. It was clear from her Google Docs comments and the reports of her group members that she was a very active participant in the course, but I had never observed this firsthand. Stacy explained how she and Beverly learned about Tumblr from another classmate during in-class interactions I'd never noticed. Reviewing their written work would have never revealed these interactions—had I been present at their table, it's unlikely that another student would have taken the lead in teaching them an entirely new social media platform.

But these also revealed ongoing questions regarding the correlation between learning and social connection. Stacy and Beverly's group was the one that "fell apart." Both students showed a fundamental disconnection from the classroom, and I think this contributed to the failure of their entire group to provide sufficient feedback and support to motivate continued work. Both

used Tumblr, and both expressed ambitious goals for sharing their work with online audiences. They should have been model students for my pedagogy—individuals engaging with an unfamiliar social media platform with the goal of reaching out to new audiences beyond the classroom. But neither provided significant written feedback for their peers, and neither cultivated significant online audiences. But I can't entirely explain why. Was it simply that they failed to put forth the effort? Or was it that their entire group of four students failed to provide sufficient motivation? During workshops, Stacy received encouraging feedback to "keep writing," while Beverley received "helpful" feedback to "improve," but neither received the kind of thoughtful, in-depth comments from peers that I regularly saw in other groups. Their workshops were so lacking in feedback that I dissolved their group, assigning the students to new groups so they could get more peer feedback on their final projects. I kept Beverley and Stacy together, since they clearly had so much in common, but neither became as engaged as other participants in the study.

As expected, many students did not initially see social media activity as "classroom" work, but the rigidity of these attitudes varied from student to student. At one extreme was Desiree, who was incredibly successful in building connections and sharing her creative works online, but who entirely dismissed the value of these efforts. During a one-on-one meeting, she voiced fears that she was falling behind in the class because she was spending so much time using Scribophile. She described it as her "new Facebook," the social network she accessed on a daily basis in order to connect with others online. There, she shared sections of her short stories, made revisions in response to feedback, and then posted comments for other writers. Her interactions fit the model of what I hoped every student would experience—the community of writers led her to engage in better writing habits that would improve her work while drawing in

audiences. She explained that one of her works was on its sixth version, with further revisions planned. She was posting critiques on perhaps dozens of outside stories, and she'd been receiving consistent feedback on her own work from between five and twelve "regular followers." Yet she was concerned that she "wasn't doing enough work" for the course because she was spending so much time in back-and-forth "chat" conversations. Desiree saw these interpersonal connections as purely social interactions, not at all related to the final project or her development as a writer.

This echoes the words from a student interviewed by Bronwyn Williams: "It's all writing, I guess. . . . But what I do at home is for fun. School is work" (183). And for Desiree, the assignment to post stories to Scribophile and engage with other writers in that community had apparently crossed the boundary from "school" to "fun."

Desiree, however, still found the time to engage in this "fun" work. Most students chose not to. Instead, they wanted to focus on the creative products of a traditional workshop course, and they did improve as writers. Beverly's early texts about a bus trip to follow her favorite band offered dense summations of events—her later expansions included more dialogue, greater use of setting details, and a deeper examination of emotional experience in order to convey the depth of her experience. Eve, writing with the genre of diary entries, learned to convey tone and the bidirectional nature of family relationships through a genre which provides little space for explicit setting or direct dialogue. Katie revealed midway through the course that she had great difficulty overcoming her own self-critique—by the end of the course, she had completed 15,000 words of a new novel.

To a degree, the "digital" focus of the course became subsumed under the traditional model of producing compelling texts. But I didn't realize the importance of this until a one-on-

one meeting with Jessica, when she first mentioned her desire to write about her personal experiences with anorexia. Naturally, I couldn't force her to post that online—at the same time, I couldn't ask her to write something else, because clearly that was the experience she needed to engage with as a writer. And so I changed the social media component, deciding that we could count her reading of another memoir of anorexia as "social" in that she was taking in the experience of another person, albeit someone published and well known.

As the course continued, other students needed similar modifications in order to maximize their progress as writers. One group of students decided to attempt National Novel Writing Month—they gave themselves zero time for revisions, let alone sharing work online. Jessica joined a group where all the members used outside reading as their social media engagement. This led to a greater degree of intimacy within the classroom. Jessica didn't have to share her workshop pieces with the world, or even the entire class—instead, I restricted the workshops to the established small groups. And I think this allowed Jessica to write her life in ways that would have been otherwise impossible. As she writes in her final reflection: "I never thought I would feel comfortable sharing my life story with other people. The girls in my workshop group as well as my professor have really made me feel comfortable. I have received a lot of great, helpful feedback and am grateful that I was able to open up to other people."

About half the students in the class decided that public social media platforms simply wouldn't help them become better writers. Among those who used social media, most used it to connect with friends and family to solicit feedback and to help recall actual life events. For these students, public promotion wasn't a consideration. I imagined students could "test the waters" with early drafts in their genres, but most didn't see the point in distributing works that weren't "ready." And a semester, some decided, wasn't enough time to become *ready* as a writer.

But these shifts occurred only because I was conducting an investigation of social media practices alongside my teaching. The study changed the classroom dynamic. The one-on-one meetings had been intended as primarily a data-gathering activity, but, because of the study, I asked my students more personal questions than I would have otherwise. This led to conversations that I didn't typically have during student conferences in prior semesters. Students told me about writing goals that they might not have articulated for themselves if not for these conversations. Some students shared ideas for projects that they wanted to write in their "free time," but that they didn't see as "important enough" or "safe enough" for the classroom. I was able to reassure students. I could specifically invite works that would have otherwise been avoided.

Additionally, the more personal nature of these conversations opened the door to "gossip." My students didn't just tell me about their writing—they talked about their interactions with other students. From these meetings, I learned about the small cliques meeting together outside class, engaging in the kinds of social sharing that I was assigning, but doing so through the personal connections of the course rather than the anticipated public outreach of social media.

In most cases, these interactions weren't visible through student work or their in-class interactions—students composed their own writing, and their small-group discussions focused on whatever I had assigned for that day. But in groups of two or three, students gathered for informal critiques of works *before* revising and submitting for the assigned workshops.

This contrasted profoundly with my initial intent. Of the twelve participants in the study, only two succeeded in the kinds of public online distribution I'd envisioned at the outset. Yet each student cultivated relationships with classmates, albeit to varying degrees. Some of the

students created their own private Facebook group, and then met for pizza in the push to complete their final projects. They were excited to show me their use of social media, and I read through some of their posts, but there was nothing I could add. Even a comment of "nice group!" would have felt inappropriate. They had established their own mini-community within the larger community of the course—a mini-community that I could influence through my role as instructor, but one I could not join.

From these observations, it's clear that any attempt to "teach" social media must emerge from a discursive approach, regularly inviting student descriptions of how they use social media and how they see it influencing their writing habits. As Williams indicates, students are already engaged in writing practices that are far more collaborative than the traditional classroom genres. This group grasped the ways in which social media can produce and verify knowledge—not what I expected in light of Allen's work, or Turkle's.

Questions remain, however. Did this group of students accurately represent undergraduates as a whole? Or was this group substantially different from those interviewed by other scholars? Most importantly, how do we maintain technological currency in our classrooms in the face of an ongoing digital revolution? Among graduate students, I'm often seen as an "expert" on technology because I set up websites and Facebook pages, but my own technological proficiency has not given me the same collaborative outlook I witnessed among my students. As Hayles indicates, technology is changing the way we think, but these changes are not *changes* for our students. If we are to adapt to the new technological landscape, I believe that we will need to depend upon the advice and experiences of our students to reveal trends that transcend what was previously possible.

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