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Like a Tree on Its Side

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LIKE A TREE ON ITS SIDE

By

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In memory of my mom (1947-1998),
in honor of my family,
in the spirit of studying the complexities of all human bonds

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a collection of lyric poetry and personal essays. The two genres are spliced together in a design intended to use their visual differences and contextual similarities to more fully understand the people, places, and events examined here. The material is based on the author's personal experiences, but is reflected upon and shared in this form in hopes of highlighting the universality of human emotions. Thematically, it delves into the complexities of personal relationships—family dynamics, romantic interests, and one's knowledge of herself—and explores how they change over time.

INTRODUCTION

Phillip Lopate in his introduction to *The Art of the Personal Essay* reminds me of the potential value of all personal writing, noting that when a memoirist is most successful, her intimate work reveals to her readers a part of themselves. I believe in Lopate's claim that, "At the core of the personal essay [and poetry, for that matter] is the supposition that there is a certain unity to human experience." While my poems and essays are always personal and often private, this collection of the two genres is not about only me and those who affect me. By reflecting on my small experiences through creative writing, I'm suggesting a piece of the larger human experience—looking within and at myself to find what is true of us all.

This thesis began with the goal of creating a single work that's layered, balanced, and whole in terms of both content and structure. Immediately, I knew this meant not limiting myself to poetry or non-fiction alone. Part of bringing these forms together was allowing my poems and personal essays to inform each other and relate to one another, while retaining their distinctive qualities. What I discovered was that a poem and an essay written about essentially the same idea, theme, or person tended to pull me in different directions, to turn their phrases in different ways, and to gravitate toward different conclusions. Yet, in another way, the parallels between my works—the recurring figure of a single tree, the emotional omnipresence and physical absence of my mother, and the power of images (photographs, memories, and material possessions that take on the characteristics of lost people and places)—stress the natural ties between the two forms. The process of honoring the similarities and embracing the differences inherent in the dual-genre approach helped me to further explore the relationship between my personal, often poetic essays and my reality-based poems. The result is they cohabitate on these pages as family members: while genetically related, they otherwise wouldn't find themselves living together; when trapped in the same space, they learn from each other and grow.

Working in either of these two literary genres demands a multi-faceted approach—one of emotional vulnerability, introspection, and self-control—that shapes each piece through word choice, voice, and space. But I'm also interested in how these writing processes differ, how the act of creating poetry is different from that of crafting essays. When I begin a poem, I know my space on the page is limited, so I aim for the imagery and tone to carry the weight of my often-conflicted ideas and emotions. These internal contradictions, coupled with the fact that the outside world demands firm answers and strong opinions, lie at the heart of my poetry, around which I build lines using details intended to evoke a strong sense of place and character. These people and places, culled from my past and present, are the inspiration for my writing, both poetry and prose.

This collection of the two explores what I know most closely—my life, my family, my body, and my actions and reactions that affect them. Delving into these subjects, this work brings to the surface life's private yet universal milestones: from the rebellion of youth to the loss of a parent, first loves and lasting love, childhood bedrooms to first homes, from self-absorption to self-pity to self-acceptance. A single poem may begin with me in my car, remembering my mother, but can end fifteen lines later with the reader driving through her own moments of grief and loss. Poetry forces me to compress life's senselessness and epiphanies, to define the abstract using the concrete, and to think on a large scale while working within a small one.

The personal essay, on the other hand, asks me to expand, to say more than I thought I wanted to, to unravel in its long lines the tangled mess that is the difference between one's inner and outer selves. The uninhibited, wandering nature of non-fiction has allowed me to further explore the themes and beliefs behind my relatively focused poems. Within an essay, I push myself to balance the showing of what I've learned with the telling of what I don't understand about myself and the people I love.

The solidity of this project's content inspired its like-minded design: an organization intended to clarify ideas and unify disparate pieces. Balancing two visually contrasting forms in the same space meant bridging and utilizing the physical gaps between them. Rather than using structure to highlight the collection's contrasts, the arrangement aims to juxtapose the forms while creating a sense of thematic harmony. I refrained entirely from chapter divisions, feeling that they would serve only to fragment, rather than contribute to, the overall flow. The result

blends groups of poems with essays dealing with the same people and events in my life. The differing perspectives revealed through these combinations emphasize the emotional layers of a solitary moment in time and of the individual interpersonal relationships examined here. In each piece, I strived to reveal the complete truth, only to realize the false-ideality of such a goal. A single poem or essay can't possibly tell the *whole* story—with its many angles and different conclusions—but a careful collaboration of interwoven poetry and prose can come close. While I will never fully understand myself and my place in the world, making the connections between the pieces of this puzzle has pushed me to see, feel, and express all that I can within the confines of language.

To better articulate myself as both a personal essayist and a poet, I must engage in an on-going conversation with myself, to be introspective and argumentative. What Lopate says about personal essayists reflects my idea of poets as well: "[They] converse with the reader because they are already having dialogues and disputes with themselves. …[They] will open a new flank, locating a tension between two valid, opposing goals, or a partial virtue in some apparent ill, or an ambivalence in [their] own belief system." My aim is to force myself and my readers to consider our conflicted and shared emotions, ideas, reactions, and actions by taking an unyielding look at their reflection in my own mirror, and for me to analyze and reconstruct reality on paper, while remaining honest with myself and my readers. Writing this thesis has challenged me to study and honor the human condition, and to both inform and learn through the process.

…Nothing is said of the closeness between two people: how they grew in the shade of each other's presence. No one speaks of that exchange of gift and character—the way a person took on and recognized in himself the smile of a lover. Individuals are seen only in the context of these swirling social tides.

~Michael Ondaatje, *Running in the Family*

But there are moments, walking, when I catch a glimpse of myself in the
window glass,
say, the window of the corner video store, and I'm gripped by a cherishing
so deep

for my own blowing hair, chapped face, and unbuttoned coat that I'm
speechless:
I am living, I remember you.

~Marie Howe, from "What the Living Do"

What do we ever know that is higher than that power which, from time to time, seizes our lives, and reveals us startlingly to ourselves as creatures set down here bewildered? Why does death so catch us by surprise, and why love?

~Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life*

THOUGHTS INSPIRED BY MY FIRST WHITE HAIR

The day they sent the boys to the gymnasium
and took us *young ladies* to a cold chem lab classroom, the shades drawn,
a handful of female teachers and mothers standing before the chalkboard,
I knew my life would never turn out the way I'd planned.
This was why my mother was always yelling.
This was why my stepdad said I couldn't ride my brother's scooter.

I've been reminiscing about simpler times, romanticizing my past,
since I turned ten.
All those birthday cards with the double digit,
and my party in the dimly-lit skating rink,
and my mom's voice, asking me why I never invited any boys
left me feeling like I'd forgotten something important
or had dreamt something difficult to forget.
That night, I pulled my first typewriter (the present from Dad) onto my bed
and wrote a letter to no one in particular.
I described myself as lonely,
my room, my world, as too small.

The summer before sixth grade,
I went to Jewish sleep-away camp in the mountains
where a cute boy asked what was with the girl with hairy legs.
The other girls in my bunk had pink disposable razors
and shaved together in cliques of four or five on our cabin's front porch
so the boys could watch (but not stare)
at all those sun-tanned calves dripping with foam in the afternoon sun.
My best friend told me to just do it,
that I'd feel better and stop crying.
But I waited until I was safe at home, until I had my mom's permission
to change myself in a way I knew to be irreversible.

Two years later, when I found red in my underpants
I believed it to have the sour smell of womanhood itself.
But today, in pajama pants and flip flops, on my day off,
I do not smell like a woman.

And in my brown pencil skirt with a belt and brown leather heels with a buckle,
marching to the chalkboard of a classroom, *my* classroom,
I do not feel like a woman.

Last night, my clothes on the bedroom carpet,
I stood before the full-length mirror: a woman
in disbelief.
These are the thighs I have built for myself.
These are the breasts I was handed down.
These are the scarred knees and elbows of my youth,
the pelvis that will cradle my first child,
the body that will fail me.

ONE CLEAR NIGHT

There was this Fantasia-like meteor shower
and we'd invaded the beach,
lounging in someone's mom's sticky plastic chairs
making sand-angels,
testing the tide with our naked toes,
and getting drunk on
canned beer, the death of senior prom, and the sense
that the salt in the air was ours if only
we could figure out how to hold it.

I was as inconspicuous as the clouds.
Leaning on elbows reddened by the sand,
studying the sky,
I waited for the next skipping star
to leap-frog over a neighborhood of the universe
as small and alive as the grains
crunching between my teeth.

One falling, blazing rock:
a single heartbeat for the entire northern hemisphere.
Each chalk-streak across night's blackboard
erased instantly, leaving me to question
how many earthly seconds had escaped me.
Or were they never mine in the first place?

And what exactly was a second?
Was it the *one* of "one Mississippi"?
Or the *Mississippi*?
Or the moment in between?
Maybe the *one*, the moment, and the *Mississippi*
are a single second, one marvelous entity,
held together by a breath.

FOR PLAY

The day Amy's mother dragged us to Hit or Miss,
a clothing store for single moms, I ran through the rows
of floor-length wallpaper-print dresses, my fingers reaching
out to pull them behind me like The Material Girl's train
of tuxedoed men who fall like dominoes
from the pain of desire.

Amy and I pressed our cheeks to the silky undies
that hung from racks, unlike our own
sturdy cotton pairs, which came starched
and folded around cardboard rectangles, suffocating
in plastic packages of threes. Ours were *underpants*,
their style modeled after diapers. But these were *panties*
with skinny handles designed to show off things
we didn't even know we had.
Some of them weren't much at all—two strings
holding the wilted flower petal of the front in place.

But the bras came fully loaded, boobs built right in.
We gravitated to the plus-sizes to see if we could fit
our heads into cups that looked more like cereal bowls.
Dangling from hangers delicate as collarbones,
they flaunted their full, fleshless bosoms before us.

It was Amy who noticed the tags attached to each one—
pictures of women posing in their skivvies.
In an eighteen-hour demi-bra with scalloped cups,
a woman gazed longingly out an open window.
Her arched, bare neck deserving a tag of its own.
Another one offered a woman lounging
across an endless white bed, smiling
in her leopard print bikini bottoms and triangle top with faux
fur trim, one hand pressed gently upon the unkempt comforter,
fingers slightly spread.

Amy pulled at a tag and bit it free with her teeth.
She looked at me and put it in the front pocket of her overalls.
And I did the same, coveting the image of two women
in matching crushed velvet sets, both with their hands
on their hips and their heads cocked
like a couple of lovebirds.

GIRL, REVISITED

In college one night, our waitress was a girl I used to invite to sleepovers,
a friend from the playground,
and the only person I'd seen
from the town I called home before Mom died.
She was the girl
who repeatedly got her arm stuck between the slits in her orange plastic chair
and cried silently, her face turning
from freckled to pink to purple.

As my waitress she was more composed,
carrying fried mushrooms and horseradish to our table.
She asked me if I had heard about Amy Sweed.
Not another ecstasy overdose like Sean Katzenberg
who copied my wrong answers in Trig every week.
Not another lesbian, like our Valedictorian,
who applied to Yale only to turn them down.
But Amy,
who was nice enough to be my third grade best friend
but not cool enough to hang out with in middle school.
Amy wasn't allowed to have ice cream or soda,
but I could always talk her into a handful of our Halloween stash.

After school, we walked to my house or her family's church
where her stepfather taught,
where her mother volunteered,
where I saw a man, hanging and bleeding, for the first time.

While three months out of high school
I registered as a Psychology Major
and then a Communications Major
and then an English Major,
trying to find a hair color,
a bathroom,
a boyfriend,
or a patch of grass to call my own,

Amy moved from her canopy bed into a man's apartment
and four months later gave birth to a boy,
my waitress had heard
from a friend of a friend.

And what I'm remembering now
is the poem I couldn't finish years ago.
It's something I probably won't tell my future husband,
something I will think of
while spreading peanut butter across a slice of white bread
and folding it in half the way my future daughter will like it.
It's what Amy said to me late one night,
hours after my mom had tucked us into my bed,
turned on the illuminated globe that doubled as a nightlight,
and closed my bedroom door.

With soft Atlantic and Pacific-blue light bouncing off our bodies,
Amy and I played our game we called *pictures*.
I pretended I was a model:
a thing of undeniable beauty
in a Strawberry Shortcake nightgown moonlighting as a bikini.
Imaginary men surrounded me, looking, reaching, almost begging,
but for *what*, I did not know.
Amy played the photographer,
the one snapping the make-believe pictures with her empty hands.

Then we switched, so she could be the pretty one
for a while.
And I remember hating her for that long, thick dirty blonde hair.
We can't do this anymore, she told me,
I don't want to grow up to be a prostitute.
And neither did I. So we went to sleep—
she, covered with a white cotton sheet,
and I, warm with fear and guilt and something new.

THE MORNING AFTER

The summer before I moved away to college, only months before my mother died, she sat me down on her turquoise leather couch and told me not to *cohabitate* with *that young man*. This was not a dying wish. My mother had no idea a series of intense strokes would take her down to her tiled bathroom floor and throw her into a coma for a month, only to be brought back so she could wilt like a wildflower caught on a time-lapsed film. Sitting next to her on that sofa, I never would've guessed the sound of her voice—and her guidance that I had always misinterpreted as pushiness motivated by disappointment—would be missing from my life by final exams. But I listened anyway because she was my mother, a Jewish mother, and the only person who'd ever smacked me. Her words did not come in the form of motherly or womanly advice. No, this statement was a rule, an order, a threat that echoed the lessons she had learned from her own mistakes: girls need to be independent; good girls don't live with boys; and smart girls listen to their mothers.

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WEDNESDAY NIGHT THE PHONE RINGS

I hold my breath
as they whisper that
while I was sighing over a term paper
beneath a lizard lamp
on the third floor of a drought-stricken library
she was drowning on air as thick as syrup,
haloed by the pale fluorescence of Critical Care.

I hold my breath,
stale, between my throat and mouth
and cough-up a sound
just to let them know I'm still sitting on the line.
And she's gone now, they say
just
like
that.

I hold my breath
for that morning she gave me life,
for the lost chance to say all the right things,
for this moment that pushed me around
a corner I would never see again.

And I exhale
as she did—long and broken like a dotted line,
as if someone punched my stomach
for the relief of feeling
the wait is over.

***

Eight months later, I was eighteen and in love, stupid and rebellious, but without my mother to listen to or rebel against. I attended her funeral with bleached yellow hair and a diamond stud in my right nostril, and drove off with *that young man*. I wanted to go home, but my home, my mother's house, had been taken by the bank—my four-post bed, her turquoise leather couch, everything. So my boyfriend took me to his mom's house, where I buried my wet face in her clean pillowcases and in her long, dyed-blonde hair for days.

It was his mom who suggested he and I move in together to save money. Taking orders from a mother, any mother, seemed the right thing to do. At the time, I didn't know she had always wanted a girl instead of her two teenaged boys. I didn't know she was still married and that her husband ran an online casino from Moscow, while she contemplated buying breast implants to entertain herself and the fellas at the gym. I didn't know she had suspicions her older son was gay, and was relieved I had turned him around. I didn't understand how she needed me just as much as I needed her, even when she told me she would always love me, no matter what happened between her son and me. And so it was: My second year of college, he and I moved into our own apartment. His mother gave us a king-sized waterbed to seal the deal.

I awoke one morning in our waterbed, two and a half years later—his thrift store t-shirts and worn jeans on the carpet; a picture of my mom in bellbottoms, her arms around a tree in Central Park, tacked to the wall above my head—and knew I had to put an end to it. It wasn't that I didn't love him anymore, or that we had grown apart. It was that we hadn't grown at all. We still drove to campus together in the same car, split a bagel and a slice of quiche from the same coffee stand, and kissed when greeting and leaving each other between classes, at keg parties, and at Thanksgiving dinners at his mom's house. What was once his mysterious hippie fascination with Carlos Castaneda had become our tiresome, circular debate about the powers and limitations of the human body and mind. Somehow our discussions always returned to his obsessions: There was something *wrong* with him, he'd tell me; he really was this unrealized, undeveloped genius, but wasn't *in control* of his emotions, his tantrum-inducing anger and self-loathing; he needed—*we* needed—to drop out of this second-rate school and move to Croatia,

live on his grandfather's vineyard, and learn from his grandmother how to sever the chickens' heads from their bodies so we could feed our own.

But I could never move beyond the smaller problems. The way he shook his fork and knife between every single bite, like a woman trying to dry her hands in a public restroom; how he came home to find me stoned and quiet all the time and insisted on hovering over me, worried as a mother. Even the way he said *I love you* came in the form of a whine, a cry for pity, a question I didn't want to answer. I can't imagine what the rejection was doing to that young man, having lost his virginity to me (and me to him), and now, years later, he'd been reduced to drunken begging every weekend—in that goddamned waterbed.

A month after my mom died, he laid his heavy head on my chest and cried into my cotton nightgown, saying he wished it were his mother instead. And while I knew he didn't mean that, I understood how much he loved his mother, and how much he loved me.

But that morning, as the sun hit my face and his rounded bare back, I knew I had to put an end to it. The night before, sitting across from me at a Denny's booth, a mutual friend of ours asked me what I was going to do. "I'm going to break up with him," I said. "And then what?" he asked. "Then I'll move out and start sleeping with you." The guy actually blushed. His name was Bobby.

Bobby hadn't been with a girl in over a year. When I first met him, outside the sandwich shop where my boyfriend worked, I wrongly assumed he was gay, a WWJD-kid, or a narc. He was lanky, wore denim overalls like a farmer, and pulled up in his grandmother's Pontiac Grand Am, Billy Joel blaring out the open windows. We were going to the same college, and knew some of the same people, but we lived in different worlds. In 1997, he was Cadet Commander of 500 boys at his military high school, and wore his uniform, brass, tassels and all, to the Prom. Senior year, I was faking it—wasting it—as a child of the night, a raver-girl in glitter and boy-jeans, floating amongst strangers in outdoor dancehalls and abandoned shopping centers moonlighting as clubs. Bobby gave a speech in his college Oral Communications class about his Cuban grandmother and was the only person our age I knew who owned a dog and had never smoked pot. My big speech that year was titled "Eat Mangoes… Naked."

But soon Bobby was an official member of the group of regulars who hung around the apartment I shared with my boyfriend, eating delivery pizza, watching *Star Wars* marathons, and

waking up the next day on my couch. My boyfriend wanted to be his new best friend, wanted to talk to him until five in the morning about Nietzsche, Phish, and his Anthropology classes. Bobby wanted to go camping during the first nights of the Florida winter, listen to *Abbey Road* at top volume but never try to decipher the lyrics, forget all about his History professors and go roller skating and eat a soft pretzel at the snack bar; most of all, he wanted a girlfriend to stay the night in his musty efficiency, be amused when his beagle crooned along with ballads on the car radio, and share his pancakes and eggs over-easy at three in the morning on a school night.

Secretly, I imagined being Bobby's girlfriend. I pictured myself sitting at the kitchen table, listening to him retell the stories of the first time he saw snow or a Woody Allen movie. I would study him hunching over his textbooks, a pencil tucked behind his ear. I wanted to hear him say he liked my freckles and the way I sang when no one else was around.

My boyfriend had to get at least eight hours of sleep every night, making it almost too easy for me to leave our apartment in the middle of the night to meet Bobby at Denny's. We sat in the circular booth in the smoking section and chatted with the graveyard-shift waitress about her kids and her throat cancer. We brought our homework to the table, but rarely opened the books. Bobby asked me why I contaminated my body with tattoo-ink and marijuana, and my reason for driving my boyfriend to his mom's house every other weekend. I asked him about his "crazy" dad who moved into the family storage room when Bobby was in high school, nailed two-by-fours across the door, then disappeared on the Fourth of July the year Bobby left for college. And I asked him about his mother, the Cuban woman who gladly fried him grilled cheese sandwiches no matter what day or time he wandered in the door, the kindergarten teacher in the school picture he kept in his glove box, the one he called at ten o'clock to wish goodnight, every night. He told me about his plans of going to law school, but never becoming a lawyer or politician, and how he preferred hunting and spending time with his dog over any person he'd met since middle school—except me, of course.

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WHEN THE MAN I LOVE SPEAKS TO HIS FATHER

for Bobby

There are no ballpark bleachers, sofa cushions, or phone lines
between them.
He doesn't tell his father about law school,
about the quail he raises in our backyard,
about the girl he wants to marry.
And his father doesn't speak to him
about pushing carts at Publix,
about the reason the Republicans drilled listening devices
into his telephone and teeth,
about the index card that hangs from yarn around his neck,
a reminder of the date he broke his son's femur
almost twenty years ago.

Instead, there's my love's singular laugh,
his sigh that shakes me from the other side of our little house,
or the unmistakable sound of his knuckles
denting the drywall.

Sometimes when I'm in another room,
rinsing red sauce from our two dinner plates,
rewinding a rented movie,
or flipping through a magazine,
his one-way conversation sounds like a radio
blaring on, then off again
in this empty house.
I recognize the song,
but can't hear the words.

But I've learned I don't need to know
what he utters in the night,
what he calls out our open bedroom window,
his voice carrying over our dogs playing in the wet grass,

and beyond the yellow glow of our neighbor's porch.

I can just tell
by the way he tilts his neck,
the way he coughs into his fist when it's over,
the way he walks from the window to the bathroom,
closing the door behind him—
this is the man I love
talking to the man he loves.
My other half
talking to his missing half.

***

I had never cheated on my boyfriend. And I had already forgiven him for his slip in fidelity the year before. I would never have found out, had he not told me one night after we had been together in his twin bed in his mom's house. I knew the girl. She was from Germany or Switzerland, with just a trace of an accent that made her sound like she hadn't completely swallowed a bite of bread or something. She had acne scars and dark roots and walked with him to the gazebo in his mom's housing development, sipping from a bottle of something cheap and brown. Then she pulled her t-shirt over her head. He swore up and down all they did was kiss and that it was horrible and she smelled bad.

When Bobby and I kissed for the first time, he had been drinking beer at the bowling alley. I was the designated driver. At five in the morning, we sat in the dark kitchen of a friend's house. Earlier that day he gave me a pink Easter basket with an unopened bag of peanut butter cups inside. When he handed it to me, I realized something was happening, something I didn't want to happen. I wasn't in love with Bobby, and I feared he had real feelings for me. That night, in my friend's kitchen, his eyes were droopy and red. I had never seen him like this, and it scared me. Then he leaned in, his beer-breath warm on my lips. I let him push his mouth, his tongue, against mine until I gave in, and pushed back. I found him attractive in a way. His runner's build, the way he sat with his back against a wall, his arms wrapped around one knee. But this was not an act of lust. For him it might have been. But for me—I was kissing Bobby because my boyfriend wouldn't have to know, because it was exciting not to know how far this was going to go, how far I was going to let it. I was kissing Bobby because I could and because he wanted it, because he wanted me. I didn't think he would even remember it, as if it had never happened.

The next night, Bobby showed up at my apartment door at a quarter to nine to join me, my boyfriend, and another friend to watch a movie. He smiled at me, his lips together and eyebrows raised, and I knew I had done something stupid—beyond stupid; this was unforgivable and dishonest. I wasn't always sweet and understanding, or even approachable when it came to my boyfriend, but I had never lied to him, or to his mother. She was already talking about how smart our kids would be.

I didn't have to tell anybody. Bobby would never say anything. I wouldn't let it happen again.

Then the phone rang. On his way to my apartment, our friend was in a car accident and needed a ride to the hospital. My boyfriend, Bobby, and I sat in the ER lobby for two hours before my boyfriend was allowed to move beyond the triage door to check on our friend. Bobby and I were alone. "So," he said. I couldn't tell what he was thinking, what he wanted me to say. I didn't even know him that well.

That night, I held back from openly discussing our kiss. I didn't want to hurt Bobby, telling him it was just a silly mistake. Yet, I didn't want to push him away either. I wondered how long I could keep him interested without having to be unfaithful to my boyfriend again. Bobby pushed the issue every time we saw each other, playfully asking me to recount what happened, moment by moment, when he was too intoxicated to really appreciate it. I acted unamused, uninterested, cocking my head and using a smirk to say all the things I couldn't admit to him, to my boyfriend, to myself. I wasn't ready to let go with both hands of the one thing that felt safe and dependable, to reach out for something that didn't seem real. I didn't know what I wanted from a relationship, why I wanted one, or what I had to give.

My life felt beyond me, like a soap opera love triangle; like my dream in which I'm pregnant and huge, but can't remember having been with a man; like walking past a mirror, startled by my own reflection.

Neither one of us said anything to my boyfriend. But I found myself calling *him* the asshole, making up excuses for being angry, like his dirty boxers on the bathroom floor. He tried to explain: "I assumed you would—." And I cut him off: "You're always *assuming* things." Sometimes I did this in front of Bobby, and sometimes when no one else was around. My boyfriend came home one day, pulling his shirt up over his head as he walked through our front door, his flat chest and soft belly exposed in mid-day. "When are you going to stop drinking so much beer?" I said, my arm flying toward him, a finger aimed at his heart. "Look at you. You used to be so…." I stopped myself before it went too far, before I gave him another reason to leave me before I was ready to leave him.

A month or so passed. My boyfriend and I still drove to Italian class together, still shared the same textbook, still slept back to back, our bodies curling away from each other. But Bobby

and I had become closer. We sat on the same side of our booth, smoked one cigarette at a time, passing it from my lips to his. Finally we talked about that kiss, and soon there was another.

One night we got our pancakes to go, and drove to a pool in an apartment complex across town. We jumped the fence and rolled up our pant legs so we could dip our feet in the heated water. My pants were getting wet, and I knew I couldn't come home to my boyfriend in soggy jeans. He had become an obligation, our relationship an old promise I had already broken. Protecting it meant lying to us both or denying myself.

At the edge of that lighted pool, my bare pale body seemed to glow. I had never just sat there, naked, in front of anyone—including my boyfriend. Soon Bobby was naked too, and laughing, his eyes never leaving mine. That night, I slid beneath the covers of our waterbed, my boyfriend still asleep, my short hair still damp.

***

NAKED

How my dog looks
without his blue rhinestoned collar.
And how I feel when I finger my earlobes,
having forgotten my diamond studs
in their shot glass on the nightstand.
My ex said I was never completely so,
since I'd paid good money
to permanently stencil black ink
between my shoulder blades.

My bare back, pale and boney,
features a woman wearing indistinguishable clothes—
but she's not really naked either. Nothing shows,
the details rounded and shaded
so as not to embarrass me
when I'm at the beach
or pulling a blouse over my head,
letting a man see me
for the first time.

On summer days when I dare
to leave the apartment in spaghetti straps,
I'm asked who she is, this woman,
this dark nymph
with her thin arm reaching for the moon,
her palm cupping some freckles like a handful of stars.

But this woman has no name,
no past, no story
of her own.
She never knew my mother,
who died, having left me
the thick sterling coin
embossed with the woman's likeness.
This woman

didn’t have to see my mother’s
young body turn yellow
then gray as a tree in winter.
And this woman will never understand
why I had to feel those needles tap against my spine,
to trap her beneath my skin,
to clothe my body with an image of strength and grace
not found amongst the naked.

***

When I sat on the couch, next to my boyfriend, and told him I still loved him but was no longer in love, I never mentioned Bobby or Denny's or the pool. My three-year relationship was over, but I wasn't prepared to commit myself to a new one. I felt reborn with the prospect of dating, excited by the novelty of being unattached. I wasn't breaking up to be with Bobby, but the feelings he set fire to within me were the reason I was able to finally do it. My now ex-boyfriend kicked a dent in the door of my car the next time I drove him to Italian class. He dumped beer on my notes when I let him borrow them. He spit on me, two weeks later, when I stupidly admitted to him I was involved with Bobby. I told myself I owed it to him to be honest, as I passed the burden of the truth from my shoulders to his.

I didn't see him at our college graduation. But he was there, at his mom's house, the day I came to pick up my things. He told me he had slept with another girl. She was visiting a friend of his, having driven from her high school in some other state. "She used me," he said, smiling. "She screamed so loud I thought I was hurting her, and in the morning she was gone." His mom had put my mother's good jewelry and her purple perfume bottle with the blown-glass humming bird in a box in their garage. The photo of his mother and me, our heads touching, was missing from the fridge door. I would never see or speak to his mother again, even after mailing her a Mother's Day card. I've heard from college friends that my ex is working for his father now, running an online casino from Bulgaria or Bolivia, or some other place I've never been to.

Once Bobby and I moved away together, and he began law school and I started teaching, we were constantly asked how long we'd been a couple and how we met. Over dinner with new friends, we make it easy on ourselves: "over three years." But just how *much* over is always undecided. We don't have an anniversary date, which is convenient since it would be a reminder of a time in our relationship we'd rather not celebrate.

Tonight I dropped him off at the airport, sent him on his way to his grandmother's—to Abue's funeral. He flew in his new suit, looking handsome. He seemed to be a man I had known all my life, but never seen. He will return to me with the wedding ring off his grandmother's finger, placing the tiny platinum band in my palm, and telling me, once again, how she sewed it into the fabric of his mother's dress, the dress she wore on the plane that took

them from Cuba to Miami where, thirteen years later, his mother would meet his father. But I won't be slipping it over my knuckle to see how it feels. We've gone so long without an anniversary, I don't even want one.

Since Bobby's out of town, I'm videotaping our cop show, and I've decided to make chocolate pudding on the stove. My mom never taught me how to cook. I wasn't interested, and she didn't really know how. But she did make pudding the hard way. I don't know what she picked up from her own mother. They shared only twenty-something years before my grandmother died at forty-seven, a decade before my mother became a parent. Mom never told me what was passed down and what she figured out by herself. And in a sense, there's no distinguishing between what I've learned from her, from her absence, and on my own.

Before I go near the stove, I step outside, in my yard, for a cigarette. I haven't started *smoking*-smoking again, but it sure seems like I'm trying to. It has been raining for the past two days, and the flowers are speckled with soil. The short pink spiky ones have drowned since this morning. I don't know what kind these are. I bought and planted them the day after my twenty-fourth birthday, less than two weeks ago. I cut my nails that day, and ran my fingers through the newly-turned dirt. I had never planted anything before.

***

EACH INHALE PULLS ME CLOSER TO THE NEXT ONE

I slammed the front door to make sure my stepdad could hear
how he'd forced me to do something drastic. Then took off
through the yard, across the street, between the toothed palmetto bushes,
past someone's sliding glass doors to squat under their leaning oak
with roots that had cankered the concrete. Each pull on that first cigarette was mine.
I loved the way it made my head ache, smelled like my stepfather, pushed me
farther away.

At the end of that broken driveway, beneath a tree that would be chainsawed
down three years later, I started building a mountain with a single pebble, unaware
of how it was not unlike the dinner that sparks a couple's first fight,
or the pen-click that signifies the onset of civil war. I no longer own
the countless winter mornings. Smacking the snooze button too many times,
trading steamy showers for some slow-motion drags on a live wire shaking
between my knuckles.

***

Outside with my cigarette, I stand and stare at the sky, unable to remember the last time I've done this. Bobby is with his mother now. I wonder what it would feel like to be a mother and have no mother at the same time. Abue was eighty-seven. Bobby's mother is fifty, the same age my mother turned the year she died. I reach over and shut off the porch light. The stars are out, but it's still cloudy. The night is heavy with tomorrow's dew.

WHAT'S BETWEEN NIGHT AND DAY

I. Night
Suspended in time and the cool gray before dawn,
the man I love holds his breath
nineteen feet above a forest floor—
His back supported by the spine of an old pine,
his boot heels steadied by the metal footrest of a tree-stand,
his bowstring taut against the autumn wind,
his eyes, wide and brown as a buck's.

The deepest woods have never heard him laugh or cry,
or seen his head bowing over an open book or the bathroom sink.
But they know the man I never will—
swaying with a tree like a flake of its own bark,
smelling of decomposing leaves and the swampy bank of a nearby lake,
reading the length and color of shadows like lines on a map,
waiting for the rustle and crack
of palmettos and briars, of fur and bones.

II. Day
Under a pavilion at the North Florida Fair,
kneeling to a concrete floor littered
with dirt and hay,
I touch the face of a buffalo.
Her nose is the size of a shoe box.
Her tongue, a black leather glove, softened
from years of taming the body's knotted landscape.
The body, a range of small-scaled mountains
like those in the town of a model train set—
a fixture behind a fence.

By late afternoon I'm full of funnel cake and lemonade.
With a handful of pellet-food
bought from a bearded man in overalls,
my thin forearm fits easily between the bars of the fence
and out to the buffalo whom I imagine

had followed her brothers and sisters from a dusty plot in Montana
into an eighteen-wheeler.
But I scrape my elbow pulling away from her wide teeth
as they rub like a block of wet wood against my open palm.

BECAUSE IT'S GETTING COLDER IN FLORIDA:

A few yellow leaves tumble
across the windshield of your truck
on our way to Torreya National Park.
We sit, Indian style, on the cool, hard forest floor,
talking about magic tricks and the prospect of buying firewood,
boiled peanuts, Kahlua on the way home.

You tell me to shhhh—
your hunter's ears picked up something:
Two deer walking slowly, like wild horses on stilts,
toward the river's edge.
Your cell phone beeps in and out of service
but I hold my breath, moving only my eyes.
The smaller one, the female, stops maybe fifteen feet away
before turning and bouncing off between the thick trees.

On the drive home, you sing along with the Beatles,
moving from "Hello Hello" to "Helter Skelter" without missing a word.
I think about the doe: too old for spotted fur,
too young to cross the river without looking back,
and my surprise to see her
lift her back leg to scratch behind her ear like our beagle.

While you're in the liquor store, I shut off the Beatles,
find an AM station playing jazz tunes
straight out of a Woody Allen movie.
You hop in, pull a U-turn into a church parking lot
so we can stroll around their pumpkin patch,
Charlie Parker still blowing through my head like the evening wind.
You pick a short and dumpy one, a twelve-pounder;
I fill my arms with orange, green, and yellow gourds,
some with warts, some ridges.
What are those for? you ask.
To fill a wide white bowl
to be placed on our coffee table,

to bring the outside in.

At home, I crack open the windows
light candles and nag champa,
plug in the stained glass lamp my grandpa made.
You draw a funny face with eyebrows of surprise,
then plunge your hunting knife through the thick skin,
tossing pits, pith, and pulp onto the kitchen counter,
as you disembowel the sweet-smelling head.

SHAKING THE BRANCHES JUST TO SEE WHAT HOLDS ON

Taking pictures of each other standing next to red-brick towers or flower beds in the little towns that dot Germany's Romantic Road, Matt and I appeared, from afar, to be a young couple in love last summer. When it was cheaper, he asked for one bed, which forced me to sleep closer to him (my brother in boxers and tube socks) than I had to almost twenty years ago when Mom stuffed our lives into a condo in Florida after the divorce. On vacation, I spent night after night propped up by pillows in the bed of one hotel or another, in one country or another, watching Dutch-dubbed reruns of *Roseanne* or *Oprah* close-captioned in French. Around midnight, I'd turn down the volume so as not to rouse my brother's snoring body, now pale, round, and woolly like Dad's. After dinner, I usually suggested we not return to some diminutive hotel room. I wanted to see these towns and their locals all lit-up. "You go ahead," Matt would say. "But I'm too tired." What he meant was *I'm a party-pooper. I came here to take pictures of recognizable landmarks, to buy my girlfriend a Coliseum-refrigerator magnet, to sleep and wake as does a large family going to Disney World*. I remember often walking by myself across the streets from our hotels. When we stayed in London, I passed a noisy pub, scooted around the patrons who'd spilled into the street holding their pints and cigarettes, and wished I weren't the kind of girl who's too chicken-shit to have a drink by herself and strike up conversation in a strange place. In Munich, I left our room and then the deserted lobby looking for cigarettes and chocolate, but came back a few minutes later, empty-handed and lost without someone to tell me where to go and what to say. I pushed a room-key into a numbered door, only to find Matt fast asleep by eleven.

Our first week abroad, my brother's self-guided tour of London and Amsterdam, often felt like sitting in church, as if we had to refrain from talking or enjoying ourselves too much. The sickly absence of laughter and chitchat, of my barking dogs in the backyard, and inside jokes revisited over dinners with my boyfriend was depressing me. After a few days I was jonesing for

some real conversation, even an argument to wake us up—this, of course, would come soon enough. I didn't want to just *see* another part of the world and "let it soak in," as my brother told me he was doing. I wanted to experience it, to live it. I wanted memories more personal than postcards. When we rented a car on our last day in Amsterdam, we still had over two weeks to drive to Munich, fly to Rome, to Paris, then back to Orlando. I noted in my journal: *Traveling with my brother is like traveling alone, but with a stranger I eat, sleep, and walk next to.*

Apparently we had to leave the safety of Thanksgivings and Hanukahs at our grandmother's to discover we had nothing new to say to each other. Nothing, that is, that didn't require greasing the tired joints that hold us together: our mother now dead seven years, our stepfather whom we haven't heard from since he took us to court over Mom's things (her vanity, the lockbox from under the bed, her Will and Testament that he told his lawyer we stole), our real dad, and Dad's eighty-one-year-old mother to whom none of us pay enough attention, whose impending death I fear will also mark the demise of my relationship with my brother.

This trip was her present to us, a gift too extravagant for Matt's recent Bachelor's in Business and my promise to finish graduate school for writing. Before we left, Dad mailed us a check matching Grandma's—a gesture that surprised us both since he denied Matt's modest request to loan us a used digital camera from his New Jersey camera store. But Matt and I actually could have afforded the trip (and the camera) on our own. I wouldn't have been against spending some of my inheritance to see another part of the world for the first time. I don't think even Mom would've had a problem with that. When Matt and I spend our own money, it means avoiding being in debt to Dad, who's been tallying both of our lives in the form of red numbers in his mental ledger ever since Mom died, ever since her money became our money.

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IT'S A WONDER I CAN THINK AT ALL

The man I love is in my passenger seat,
belting out "Kodachrome" as if
he hasn't heard it since the day he turned eighteen
and stood, with his arms reaching
like branches for the sun,
on the lip of a rock that jutted out above a lake
somewhere in Virginia. I was the one
in the yellow two-piece, the one
with hair short enough to get me
mistaken for a boy, the one
wading below in that murky brown fountain of youth.

My dad copied this Simon and Garfunkle tape for me.
It showed up among the bills and junkmail a couple weeks ago.
No handwritten letter, no song list,
just another photograph
of Dad in his camera store, blending-in
with the sign that says "We Take Passport Photos Here"
and countless cases of film pushing
far beyond the four corners of the three-by-five glossy.
No wooden or shiny metal frame,
no fingerprints for me to find.

The camera, with its cold weight and patient eye,
has always been Dad's *thing*.
The one thing he can fix in the dark,
one thing that will never question, disappoint, or leave him.
Over the phone, late one night, he said
words are your thing,
but I would hate to think so.
And he was worried my brother
would never discover something of his own,
that he'd blow his tuition money in Amsterdam,
swim home, and wander around barefoot.

Dad used to believe
my brother would take over the store one day,
inherit his love for the gum-spotted carpet and the wall of film
that rises from behind the sales counter.
My father handed down his own very first camera
to my brother as a high school graduation present.
I remember it was green, flat, and thin like an old book,
a book my brother couldn't open.

My dad hasn't seen these words of mine—
about the father who has always
lived eight states away, didn't have the time
to teach me how to take real pictures,
and repeatedly asks the man I love about law school
in a way that's not unlike poking him with a stick.
The man who loves me
will never tell me
what my thing is. Today he sings
louder than Paul, reminding me
that the greens of summers were created
for eyes, ears, open mouths and bare feet,
not a single reflex lens
and a stack of dusty albums.

***

My brother was against footing the bill for this trip since he also inherited our father's ideas about spending. While Dad's dedicated an entire bedroom to housing his collections of watches, lighters, pens, and cameras, he buys only the day-old bagels and is known for returning shirts he'd worn for five years to LL Bean. Not wanting to spend his own money on a vacation, my brother would rather blow it on shiny stuff like his tricked-out Mercedes, his two motorcycles, X-Box, and mp3 players—things he bought with the hope of making himself happy. Otherwise, the boy needlessly lives on supermarket coupons, the dollar movie theater, and whatever clothes are on clearance. I've heard him sigh over the rising price of condensed soup and the fact that his girlfriend runs the dishwasher before it's full. I figure we already have it easier than most graduate students, so I don't want my dad and grandma paying for things I can afford. But Matt doesn't like to acknowledge how much he's got in the bank, only mentioning it when he wants to check my balance against his. Then he gets pissed off that compared to my tendency to abandon my kitchen for the nearest restaurant, his scrimping at Walmart and playing the stock market haven't paid off for him in the long run. In some respects, he acts like he didn't effortlessly receive those social security checks from the month Mom died until he turned eighteen two years later, as if he knows what it's like to put himself through college delivering pizzas.

Every morning of our vacation, Matt pulled me out of bed just in time for the hotel's free breakfast. My sleepy stomach could tolerate only coffee and toast, while he put away a couple hardboiled eggs, OJ, cornflakes, and a salami and cheese sandwich. He'd make an extra sandwich for lunch, roll it in a paper napkin, and stash it in his sweatshirt pocket until we got back to our room. After a couple hours of walking over grass and cobblestone, standing before Rembrandt's dewy pomegranates and grapes, or poking around outdoor markets and museum gift shops, I'd ask my brother if he wanted to stop to get something to eat.

"No, I have my sandwich." What he meant was *I* had his sandwich stored in my shoulder bag, now full of crumbs and the smell of spiced meat. My bag also held his baseball cap and sunglasses when they weren't on his head, the map, camera, chapstick, water bottle, cigarettes and lighter, loose change, gum, a pen and my journal, hand sanitizer, and Tylenol. My brother refused to carry the heavy black sporty bag, unless I was going to the bathroom. He also refused

to share a bag of potato chips he bought on the street and brought back to the hotel. "I'm not your boyfriend," he said. "You're on your own here."

Fighting about food and money quickly became our daily sore spot. "I don't think we should split the cost of food anymore," my brother said. "You eat more than I do, and you don't even ask how much it costs." Matt was referring to what had become my hourly intake of street food: chocolate croissants, pretzels, and wiener schnitzel. Until then, I hadn't even mentioned the fact that he always ordered beer, and I tap water. But then again, I usually got a cappuccino with desert and he didn't. Either way, we were on vacation, damn it, and I wasn't about to bargain-hunt for Paris's cheapest baguette.

When we got charged for what my brother assumed to be complimentary dinner rolls put on our table in Vatican City's most touristy pizza parlor, the cashier explained to my brother in perfect English how we had to pay for each roll we ate. I assumed we should just pay the man, leave, and bitch amongst ourselves. But my brother was holding our cash. "Where I come from," he said loudly, "when *you* put food on the table that *I* didn't order, it's complimentary. If I knew you were going to charge me a euro a piece, I wouldn't have eaten two of them." Patrons were staring at the rude American, and I walked out the door.

"I'm not an ignorant tourist," my brother told me as he joined me in the street. "I will not be taken advantage of. And you, you let that guy talk you into getting a side of pasta. He charged us extra for that, you know."

"Look," I told him, "when we get home, I'll give you a hundred dollars of my own money. Will that make you stop bothering me about what I spend for the rest of the trip?" My brother and I marched aimlessly through a park in Rome, yelling at each other, in front of children playing soccer and grandparents walking dogs, for almost thirty minutes about how each of us was ruining the other's time.

Matt didn't live with Dad long enough to pick up his habits, like cutting his own hair and avoiding the dentist for a decade just to save money. And Mom actually went into debt over new living room furniture and summer sleep-away camp for the two of us. So, where did my brother's miserly behavior come from? Or, maybe the question is the same one it always is between siblings: How can *we* be related? Or, maybe it's not a question, rather, an answer I already know: I wouldn't be friends with this person if we didn't have the same parents. I'm only two and a half years older than Matt. We went to the same college, but didn't hang out with

the same people, or with each other. My senior year, I lived so close to his apartment I could have walked there, but never did. I'm thankful our mother didn't have to see us like this, our lives pushing apart like two magnets of the same charge.

Surprisingly, Matt and I have traveled together before. The summer after he graduated from high school, we threw a tent into my VW Bug and drove from Orlando to Yellowstone. Maybe I've romanticized this time, as I have much of my life before grad school, but I remember those weeks as relaxing, the feeling between us comfortable, silly even. That was only four years before we flew to London, but since then my brother's grown old. He's even developed a patch of gray hair right in front, just left of center. At twenty, Mom was hiding her premature gray with a crayon-bright hue my dad still fondly calls strawberry-blonde. He actually thought he married a redhead. I've inherited albums full of their early years. Dad was already into serious photography by then, and took mock-professional shots of this girl who I'm sure he recognized as too pretty to be his: Mom posing on a beach blanket, Mom holding a daisy to her nose, Mom smiling with an orange peel covering her teeth—all with that short dyed-red hair.

I've also become the keeper of my own baby albums. By then Mom's head was completely white, a fact that years later embarrassed me in elementary school when kids thought she was my grandma. But the look was actually quite striking: her then perfect skin topped with curls the color of her virgin wedding dress. I'd like to believe my mother was making a statement by not coloring her hair, by rejecting the temptation to cover-up the physical proof of a life hard-fought. This was her small, quiet way of pushing back against the pressures she'd felt being motherless at twenty-one, the oldest sister of a sick young man who would later take his own life and of her teenage sister impregnated by a rapist on the subway, and later, as "the nice white lady" Special Ed. teacher in an all-black elementary school, and finally, as our single mother, the wife of two exhausted marriages. Although I couldn't recognize it then, my mother's decision to let her silver roots grow out was a mark of her strength—the one thing of which she had run out by the time she died of a stress-induced stroke at age fifty, a bottle-blonde.

I've asked Matt not to mess with his gray streak. "It makes you look mysterious."

"Why would I want to look mysterious?"

"It's a good thing." Then in my frat-boy voice, "Chicks dig it."

"I don't know. I just think it makes me look weird."

I hate it when my brother feels ugly or strange. His feelings of insecurity seem to stem from what's on the surface—the thirty pounds he's put on since he quit skateboarding and smoking cigarettes, the bone-spurs that popped-up in his arms and legs during puberty and ached when he ran, and the scars their surgical removal left behind. But my brother's shyness, his fear of going to a party where he doesn't know everyone or of walking at his college graduation ceremony because of the crowd, comes from feeling truly different on the inside, from having grown-up a motherless child. On the outside, Matt's reserved nature is the result of his acute acne for which he took medicine three times a day every day of our European vacation. His medicine prevented him from going in the sun, which posed a problem during our long days spent walking the streets in summertime. It also determined his eating schedule since he couldn't eat a couple hours before or after having taken the pills. The most problematic side effect was the over-production of oil on his face. It would begin a couple hours after breakfast; first came the redness, then this pronounced greasiness across his forehead and nose. I have to admit it started to gross me out after a while, and I didn't know what was wrong.

Sitting in an air-conditioned metro station, I just had to ask, "Do you want a tissue or something?"

Matt explained how if he so much as patted his face, he would break out. "It's better to just let it build up. Why, does it bother you?"

"No, I just thought it might be uncomfortable for you." Or for me and the guy sitting across from us.

"Not really, but I can tell people notice it. Like my friends, they never say anything, but I know they're staring at my face. My girlfriend said she doesn't even see it anymore." I've never asked my brother about this again.

At one of the airport security checkpoints, he got pulled to the side by a large man with a gun at his hip. "You stressing, man?" he asked Matt while taking his carry-on to an examination table.

"What?" My brother and I had no idea what was going on.

"You stressed about something? Something bothering you?" The security guard unzipped Matt's bag and pulled out his underwear and flip-flops. Matt and I looked at each other. "You're really sweatin', man."

At that moment, I felt so embarrassed for my brother. He was being flagged as a possible terrorist because of his poor complexion. I thought, if I were him, I'd probably be crying inside. Walking away from the security guard, carry-on bag in hand, Matt turned to me and said, "I can't wait to tell my dermatologist about this one."

Sometimes I think I know my brother as I know myself. I think I know him well enough to write about him, to make fun of him for the sake of making myself feel better, and to feel sorry for him when I think I'm the one who's got her shit together. Matt's the one person against whom I can judge myself. We began at the same starting line and made it over the same hill, so if I'm doing as well as my brother, then I'm okay.

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AGING FRUIT

Just admit it, my brother insists. *Never having to come back home*
was a relief. His words kick sand onto the tiny embers of my patience

as I forget to notice these rain-shined streets of Munich in summertime,
having wasted seven blocks of our vacation and the past

five years shaking the branches of our tiny wind-blown family
tree, just to see what holds on. One summer we slept in different cabins

at the same Jewish camp in Pennsylvania, and felt sick for the same house,
the same mom, the same crumb-covered backseat of the same Pontiac. When he pretended

to be anything less than my biggest fan, I scraped his arm with the wild-boar bristles
in my hairbrush or imprinted the frowns of my painted fingernails into his husky thighs.

Made him think I would always be bigger, better, smarter. But in this place
where we can recognize and understand only each other, at a time when talking

as two adults should be easier than ordering a glass of non-carbonated water,
I can't bully this new man into liking who I've grown up to be. He won't run crying

to our mother, who we buried before he was old enough to drive. And I've finally stopped
believing that one day a cold-hardy trunk will rise from the heart

of the tender avocado he and I planted deep in the backyard.

***

When we were kids, Matt was Dad's favorite. Mom never played favorites, as we both got our equal share of her hugs and kisses, slaps on the ass and weekend groundings. Her love for us and ours for her didn't need to be measured. But Dad drove down from Jersey only for a weekend at a time, a few weekends a year, so I measured every moment he spent with us. Not knowing either of his children very well, my father favored his son, the one whose IQ got him into the gifted program, the one who showed less interest in doing cartwheels to get his attention and more interest in the things *he* liked to do: show us how to fire a BB gun, how to shoot pool, how to take a picture, and how to be quiet in the public library so he could read the Sunday paper.

During one weekend visit when I was ten, I refused to see him. I told Mom the night before he pulled into our driveway that I didn't want to go with my father, didn't want to get into his Mercedes, the same one he would give to Matt a month after her funeral, didn't want to stay up late watching Charlie Chaplin movies in Dad's South Florida condo, the place Matt and I now use to store all the things college kids leave behind: our baby blankets, Little League trophies, a telescope, yearbooks.

When Mom died, my brother and I had to steal our own things. Everything we couldn't sneak out when our stepfather, John, wasn't looking, he would sell with the house. John was eighteen years older than my mom, so no one, especially him, was prepared for her to go first. Within a month, the bills piled up, and he grew desperate since it had been her teacher's salary that kept his head above water. I remember hauling stuff into my boyfriend's mom's Jeep while she distracted him in the kitchen—photo albums, my mother's jewelry box, her purses and shoes, a rocking chair, the painting that hung over the piano, a set of blue Wedgwood plates—and moved into her house until I went back to college. But when John kicked my brother out of the house at sixteen, Matt had no place to go, no place to bring his cardboard boxes packed with our family's memorabilia. He tried living with me at the boyfriend's mom's house, then stayed with a friend until John called the cops because the bank wouldn't let him cash Matt's social security checks. The officers found Matt smoking a cigarette in the driveway of a friend's house and called our dad. *Your son's a minor. He needs parental supervision.* Before I retuned to Orlando as a college sophomore, I helped Matt move into the converted basement of Dad's New Jersey

house, a weekend I don't remember. Torn between grieving and rebelling, and too self-consumed to think about my brother, I left him alone with a father neither one of us really knew.

"We would have these contests," Matt told me one night over dinner in Paris, "to see how long we could go without speaking to each other. He drove me to school in silence. It was like living alone down there in my room, only worse because Dad was right upstairs, eating his dinner in the kitchen. He never asked me if I needed anything, never asked me how I was doing." I knew my brother didn't like living there, but I had always thought it was because he had lost his friends, his school, his Florida driver's license, his home. I knew the living situation with Dad was bad enough that Matt lasted only one year, then moved back to Florida to live with our grandmother until he graduated high school a year later. But I didn't know our father had it in him to be so cold, to hurt the son he says he'd always wanted, his favorite. I felt myself starting to cry right there in front of the French couple sitting next to us. But I couldn't let myself pity my brother because it's just like pitying myself. Indulging in tears and cursing our father (or stepfather) wasn't going to make either of us feel better. We'd tried it before; over breakfasts with Grandma, the three of us had dissected and psychoanalyzed Dad until he became less of the baffling person he really is and more like an inexplicable natural disaster that had flattened our home. So this time I tried making up excuses.

"I don't think Dad knew what to say, what to do. He didn't know how to be a father."

But Matt knew the truth. "He didn't know how to be a normal person," he said, "just a real human being. That's all I wanted from him."

Matt moved out of Dad's basement six years ago. The last time either of us saw him was at Matt's college graduation last December. "How did you forgive him?" How could my brother even stand to look at our father now, I had to know.

"I try not to think about it. But honestly, I need the money. I want Dad to keep paying my rent and tuition and health insurance. I plan to take him for every dollar I can. The way I look at it, he owes me."

Sitting at that table in France, Matt and I didn't know yet about the big check Dad would mail me in an envelope with no card for my twenty-fifth birthday. It came out of nowhere, but I wasn't complaining. I called my dad to thank him, but I knew better than to tell my brother about it. After Matt's college graduation ceremony, our withered family tree went back to his apartment. Grandma was there, so genuinely proud of my brother, but just as worried that her

son would screw up Matt's big day. Dad had just chugged NyQuil from the bottle, said he wasn't feeling good. Before he passed out on Matt's couch for the next four hours, before we had to wake him just in time to make his return flight to Jersey, he handed each of us an envelope. Mine contained another check, this one for Hanukah, and a letter handwritten on stationary from Dad's previous night's hotel room. Again, the money was unexpected, but well appreciated. The note read: *You are the complete package of beauty and brains, wit and charm, humor and purpose, and ambition laced with pragmatism. To say that I am proud to be your dad would be an understatement. To say that I love you would be a gross understatement.* I wasn't the one who needed to hear this bullshit from him. I just prayed that my brother's envelope held a letter similar to mine.

We both hugged our father then got in my car to pick up lunch. We left Dad and Grandma at Matt's apartment to fend for themselves. Once in the car, away from Dad, I spoke without thinking: "I thought he stopped giving Hanukah gifts years ago. A thousand dollars—it couldn't have come at a better time. I really need to replace that old laptop."

My brother snickered then dropped his head back against the car seat. "I don't fucking believe it. I graduate from college—okay, so I didn't get honors like you did, but I still made it. Got better grades than Dad did, I'm sure. And there was a time when I thought I would never even go to college. And he gives you the same amount as my graduation present—and for what? For Hanukah? What the fuck? Does he just not like me? That must be it. He just likes you more. You're his favorite. You're fucking perfect to him. What was that he said today? That you could have been a singer if you wanted to? Are you kidding me? I'm sorry, Dana, but you cannot sing. He just thinks you're fucking perfect and I'm the asshole. I'm the disappointment."

There was nothing I could say to make him feel better. I *had* become the favorite, but not because of who I was, the person I'd grown up to be, a person my father had never gotten to know. I reminded Dad of my mother—the one who got away, the one he tells me he still dreams about—and Matt reminded Dad of himself. Neither was a fair comparison. I tried explaining this to my brother, but he didn't want to hear anything from me.

After a moment of silence, I asked, "What did his letter say?"

"Nothing much. More of Dad's bullshit."

Now that Matt and I live four hours apart, we talk more often than we did during college. After we flew back home from Paris, we took a break and didn't speak to each other for about two months. Then he bought a plane ticket and came to stay with me for a few days, something he had never done before. My boyfriend was out of the country at the time, and I was glad to have the house to ourselves. I saw this visit, and our willingness to spend even more time alone together after Europe, as a new beginning for my brother and me. This must be the way it goes with siblings—they grow up and put everything behind them. They become equals, just two adults, old friends.

I gave Matt a tour of my little house, and felt proud that he seemed impressed. My dad has never come to see where I live, and Grandma's too old to drive so far. My brother and I sat down on my couch and he looked around. "So this is where all Mom's stuff went." He took an inventory, counting on his fingers the things that make my house my home, things I have put on display, looked at, sat in, dusted and polished, and held onto for seven years. "I don't believe this. What else do you have?"

I felt threatened. These were only things, yes, material possessions my mother bought to make her house pretty, to make herself feel better, to prove she had come from nothing and had made something of herself. They were her taste, but I had grown to love them too. These things were no longer Mom's, they were mine.

"I have her jewelry box," I said. Then, angrily, "Do you want to see it?" I tried not to yell at him. She was his mother too.

***

TO MY MOTHER AT KENNEDY SPACE CENTER

June 14, 1986

I know your face,
small like mine
and not yet weighed down
by those years ahead
of raising me the hard way,

from the picture I keep in the wooden box
that once held your glasses,
dead wildflowers,
and one of your good rings, the one
I slide over my thumb knuckle to keep you
against my skin.

You wear tortoise-shell sunglasses
on top of your head, and squint
at the late afternoon sun, as we sit knee
to knee on a bench, eating green snowcones.

When I stare hard enough, I can almost
hear you say something
about the napkins in your purse
or the rocket sitting heavy
like a tombstone in the field ahead of us.

But your voice is muted
as a brushstroke in this still life
of mother and child, this relic
from a long day forgotten.

I've waded through the painted lake
of this photograph, sifting
for a rock to grab onto
or a soft spot to dig my toes in.

I smelled it once,
holding it so close
your image blurred
until you disappeared.

***

Matt had been in my house for under an hour and we were sifting through Mom's necklaces, earrings, broaches, bracelets, and rings. He was making piles on my coffee table based on what he thought the items were worth, what they could be sold for. He didn't really want the money—he simply had no other way of determining their value. My brother didn't know the diamonds and jewels our mother wore until I showed him, didn't remember which pieces were as much a part of her as her makeup and which ones she left in the wooden box's bottom drawer. I rarely ever buy jewelry, and my boyfriend knows not to buy me any because I already own every piece I want. I enjoy rocking in Mom's chair. I love to study the painting that once hung over our piano. I could live without those blue plates. But her jewelry—she put these earrings through her own ears, as I do every morning. I learned from her to consider the shape of a blouse's neckline before choosing the right pendant. If we were going to temple for the high holy days, she'd let me enter her bedroom filled with the smell of her perfume to pick a gold chain to match my dress. Then I'd clasp a bracelet around her wrist. At first it was a guilty pleasure to find the jewelry box on my own dresser, to not ask her permission before opening its doors. A year after her death, I slid a ring over each of my knuckles and held out my jeweled fingers. I looped a handful of chains and beaded strands around my neck, put a different stud or hoop through each of my eight ear piercings. I sat on the edge of my bed, covered my face with my heavy hands. I had pushed myself too fast. I wasn't ready to play dress up with these things that were no longer my mother's, but did not yet belong to me.

Matt wanted her wedding ring, not knowing the setting was tacky and outdated because our stepfather had picked it out. I let my brother have it, pretending this was a big sacrifice for which I should get to choose whatever else I wanted. I moved my favorite charm, with its onyx palm tree and mother of pearl ocean, to my pile. I always imagined my mother having picked this up from a table at the Sunday flea market in New York City. After an hour, we had emptied the box, and a lifetime's worth of a dead woman's trinkets had been split in half. Matt got away with the one ring Mom told me would be mine one day. Opal is my birthstone. My brother let me keep the matching necklace. I want to know where he stores these things, since he doesn't own a jewelry box, but will never ask him.

I called Matt today just to get an old friend's phone number. But this time I didn't even want to speak with him, really, didn't want to further complicate these already conflicted feelings I'm trying to sort out on paper, didn't want to mess with this persona I'd constructed for my own sake. I knew who my brother was and I was sticking to it.

"Last night I broke up with Melanie," he told me over the phone. The news didn't shock me, since in one way, my brother is a lot like me. He's been seriously dating someone for as long as I've been dating my boyfriend, about five years. All of Melanie's friends are engaged or married, as are mine. "It's this race to the altar," Matt said. "But I don't want to get married until I'm ready to have kids. All my friends are still getting fucked-up every night, hooking up with all these girls, like in high school." But that wasn't really what was bothering him. My brother wasn't aching for a guys' night out. Recently, he's applied to an MBA program, blindly following the path of higher education that's been expected of us both. Mom earned her Master's in under two years, Grandma was "grandfathered" into a degree program due to her career in social work and graduated with honors, and Dad would have finished his Master's in business had he been able to pull himself away from the local pool hall.

I'm defending my thesis this summer, but applied to the writing program only to further delay making a real decision about what I wanted to do with my life. Dad and Grandma applauded my acceptance, while I recognized it as a copout. Being a grad student meant is was okay for Daddy to pay my rent and health insurance, for me to dabble in poetry instead of searching for work that's more useful to the world and to myself, for me to bury my head in the pile of academic bullshit. I chose to step into this time warp from which I'm about to emerge more certain than I was three years ago that I don't want to be a writer. It's taken me this long to realize Poet is not a job title, especially since I want to eat everyday.

"I always thought MBA equals money," my brother continued. "But what I really want is to be happy. Ever since Mom died, I just wanted to make myself happy. If you're not happy, I mean, what's the point of being here?"

***

MS. WINFREY

Your mouth, wide open like the O of your name
brand, has talked its way into my afternoons.
You are the Every Woman, america's girlfriend,
the black friend I've always wanted, the popular girl
with boots and dinner parties to envy, the queen
who needs no king.
Yet you are just like me.

I close my eyes and nod, as you do,
when Barbara Streisand or Maya Angelou visits
one of your summer homes, speaks to us
in lyrics. I imagine myself in my *own*
room of custom-made sectionals
with matching window dressings, roses cut fresh
from my English garden, the perfect shade of sunlight
coating my life in warmth and self-satisfaction.

I've gorged myself on your diet
of spa treatments, girls' nights, and the fruitless search
for the world's most flattering skirt or perfect man.
How can I sleep
on these sheets that should have been washed last weekend
and wake up between the forgiving dirt and sky of Africa?
Where can I trade in
my student loans, two dogs, and a treadmill for ugly sandals,
for new pencils, Christmas toys, and vaccinations?
Where do I sign? When can we leave?

***

Matt went on to tell me he's quit smoking pot because it had become the only thing he looked forward to everyday. He's working out, has lost some weight since I last saw him three months ago, filling out his graduation gown. Said he actually considered moving in with our mom's only sister, her high school-aged daughter, and husband. "I want to be part of a family again. If Mom were around, she'd tell me to get my shit together. She'd have some advice. Dad gives me nothing." As my brother spoke, I felt the gap, the miles, the arguments between us come to the surface and pop. "I need guidance." Suddenly, my brother sounded just like me, and I was both happy and sorry, not for him or for myself, but for the two of us.

I wanted to give him as much guidance as I could, wanted to be the big sister, to say to him all the things I wish someone had said to me. I told him about my boyfriend, about how he was almost finished with law school and realized he hated the idea of becoming a lawyer. So he called his mother, who's taught kindergarten since she was twenty-one. "She told him this was part of growing up. Everybody has to figure these things out for themselves. She couldn't tell him what he needed to do for a living. And my boyfriend got so frustrated with her. *You mean to tell me with your fifty years of wisdom and experience that you have nothing to tell me that I haven't heard before? Please, Mom, help me out here.* In the end, she told him to get a job, to try something, and if it wasn't for him, to try something else."

"And all these years, I've been hearing Dad's stories," Matt said. "About how he dropped everything and traveled to Europe with his friends when he was my age. Maybe if I were surrounded by beautiful things and different people, if I moved to Amsterdam, I could sit in a park, smoke my joint, and really figure shit out."

My brother is so much like me, in that moment I wanted to burst with excitement at this realization, and pray for us out of pity for our foolishness. I felt it was my responsibility to bring us back to reality. I needed to say something mature, something he wasn't able to think of on his own, something our mother would have said. "I think that's a really romanticized view. You go over there, you bum around for a while, and realize you need to support yourself. So you find a job, get an apartment, maybe meet a new girl. You rebuild the life you had over here. No matter where you go, you'll still be you." It felt good to say this to someone besides myself. I hoped I was saying the right thing, that I wasn't just kidding us both.

"I know," he said. And I felt relieved, sort of. "I'm just so thankful that I have the finances to even think about this, to sit around and get fat, and go to school without having to work two jobs." Yes. I am thankful too. We are so lucky and ungrateful in some ways, so lucky and ungrateful for having each other—things I do not say aloud. "Well, it was good talking to you, Dana." I didn't want this conversation to end, but I knew I had run out of things to say that I fully believed in myself. I wasn't his mother, but I have become my own parent, and he will learn he must do the same for himself, as everyone does for themselves. "I'll be okay," he said and hung up.

LIKE A TREE ON ITS SIDE

I. Cheerful Paint

How lovely to see my life packed away,
its mouth taped shut,
its true purpose captured in words
like *Fragile* and *Junk Drawer*.

I've schlepped this collection of
twisted metal forks,
vacant fish tanks,
blue bathroom accessories,
and my aunt's subway sketches
of New York's droopy faces
down the interstate from there to here.
Here: Where there's no sense in denying
that *cheerful* means *pink*.

II. Great Location

On the other side of the cul-de-sac,
a skinny woman in spandex paces
around her golden sedan, sweating,
and sucking from a water bottle.
She asks me if I have anything
sweet in the house
and points to her little girl
sitting at the end of their driveway.
But nothing in my boxes
is made of simple sugars
or anything good for you.

The girl stumbles into the street
in her American flag t-shirt and diaper
and waves at me just before

the soft pads of her bare feet
find something sharp that sends her falling
and crawling back to her mother, who pushes
her head into their house.

III. Cozy but Spacious

The organ-grinder tune of an ice cream truck
waltzes past my walk-in closet/office/den
where I'm pushing my desk across a carpet
still smelling of someone I'll never meet.

I picture that little girl drifting
over our rooftops
in a flower-print sundress and jelly sandals.
The long tail of an oversized red balloon
clutched in her sticky fingers.
Wait up, I call out,
my voice thrown back at me
from the empty walls.

IV. Private Yard

A thick breeze pushes through
my screen door, luring me
from a crate of poorly-labeled videotapes
into my rectangle of weeds and sand out back.
From his side of our chain link fence,
my next-door neighbor tells me
his road name is Mad Dog.
He and his roommate, the quiet one
with the beard and sunglasses,
have lived here for eight years.
My guess is they're a couple
of old bikers who refuse to take off their leather
skullcaps for good, but traded their matching Harleys
back in '92 for this flamingo-smeared townhouse
and a queen-sized bed.

Mad Dog stands with his big hands
in the little pockets of his cut-off jean shorts,
watching their chihuahua, Juanita,
circle a patch of yellowed grass.
When she's finished, he lifts her to his chest,

wipes the dirt from each shaking paw
onto the stomach of his shirt,
kisses the space between her ears,
and welcomes me home.

THE CALLING

In fifth grade, I had my first Christmas, complete with what my stepdad referred to as a *Hanukah-bush*. That's what he told the pine-tree salesman we were looking for, as he pointed his thumb at my brother and me. The year before, our mother had married him, this six-foot Irish-Italian Catholic with a year-round farmer's tan. John was the first Gentile in our family, and was closer in age to my grandmother than my mom, a fact I wouldn't figure out until almost a decade later. John drove my brother and me to a Family Dollar store and told us we could pick out anything we wanted for under the tree. I knew that wasn't how Christmas was supposed to work, but I was won-over by the thought of knowing what would be waiting for me beneath the wrapping paper. Before that year, December meant plugging in the electric menorah for eight glorious days of peanut butter sandwiches on matzo, and waiting for sundown to unwrap unknown treasures that turned out to be things like nightgowns, a cubic zirconia ring, and sparkly nail polish—presents clearly picked out by my grandmother and Mom, not crafted by some elves. Unlike most of the kids at school, I had made it to the age of ten without knowing the pleasure (followed by the unavoidable pain) of being raised on Santa.

Being Jewish made me special. It was up there with coming to class with red and green rubber bands in your braces or a leg cast everyone could sign during recess. I was actually excited when the homeroom teacher called on me to tell the story about the oil lamp and the unleavened bread, but I was humbled when it came to music class. "The Dreidel Song," with lyrics as catchy and mindless as a radio jingle, was overshadowed year after year by the power and grace of "The Carol of the Bells," the one thing that tempted me to wish my family hung a crucifix instead of a mezuzah at the door of our house. I tried so hard to make my tinny voice fill the music room from carpeted wall to wall with the fullness of a gospel choir, only to be disappointed when I got home and figured out I couldn't recreate the "round" effect by myself. I once got a solo part as the dead grandmother in our temple's production of *Fiddler on the Roof*,

but the musical numbers weren't as memorable as any scene from *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation* or *Home Alone*. Jewish entertainment was always filled with jokes about chopped liver and Yiddish sayings I just didn't understand. But in our school play, *Surfing Santa*, my brother was cast as the lead, a singing, hula-dancing Saint Nick in an Acapulco shirt and flip-flops. On opening night, John joked with the parents sitting next to us, remarking how they should've given *this* Santa a yarmulke—only, my stepdad called it a beanie.

In temple, our cantor sang only in Hebrew, a mix of her angelic crooning and what sounded to me like throat clearing. After years of going to family services on high holy days, religious summer camps, and carpooling to Sunday school, I could sing along, but had no idea what I was saying. Somehow I got the idea that being able to speak Hebrew was the sign of being a good, religious person. Goodness and religiousness seemed inherently related, like being good in math and being smart, or being both pretty and popular. Mom exposed us to religion because it was good for us, because it was her responsibility as a Jewish mother, and because people who were Jewish were supposed to be proud of that fact.

I wanted to be a good person and proud of the Jew I was taught to be, so I walked around our house for hours at a time, my newly acquired mini toy torah in my hands, pushing my pointer finger from right to left across each line of its calligraphy symbols. From my mouth came a continuous slur of guttural sounds more akin to pig Latin than Hebrew. After a week or so of this, my mother made me stop because it was both annoying and disconcerting. In search of a quieter way to be religious, I checked out a children's book on Adam and Eve, but couldn't stop myself from studying their leafy underwear. While my formal Hebrew instruction and Sunday schooling marched ahead for years, I wasn't any closer to understanding the role of religion in my life. On Sunday mornings, the kids in my class bullshitted about what was on *Saturday Night Live* in more detail than we ever talked about the Holocaust, why we weren't supposed to eat the pig, or why we had no equivalent to the Pope. Outside of the synagogue, Sunday school, and Hebrew class, my world seemed to have nothing to do with my being Jewish. I didn't *feel* my religion the way I thought I should, like I could feel the dirt push against my palms when I cartwheeled across the yard. I couldn't see it when I studied the curves of my eyebrows or hips in the bathroom mirror. No matter how hard I listened for it, I never heard it call out to me like my mother's voice. At the age of twelve, I made my first adult decision: to *not* get bat mitzvahed, even though it meant turning away the most extravagant gifts and the biggest party

that would ever come my way. This marked the end of my religious study for the rest of my young life.

In my family this wasn't a radical move. My father and his parents later came out as non-practicing Jews. Grandma will tell you Judaism is a culture, not just a religion. So she relishes one and basically ignores the other. She never talks about Moses, the Old Testament, or what happens when we die. She'd rather talk about the instability of Israel, take a class on Yiddish, or teach me how to cook latkes. She wants to be cremated and has no problem with my tattoo. But she feels more comfortable playing canasta with her *Jewish* friends. "You never encounter, you know, anti-Semitism?" she asked me once. If I have, I'm oblivious to it. "I'm glad to hear that," she said. "People can say nasty, hurtful things." One time, my grandmother was waiting in line with a friend at a department store giving away a tiny potted plant to each paying customer. Her friend left the line to use the bathroom, so my grandma paid for her friend's item and asked the woman behind the register if she could have an extra plant. From behind her in line, a woman called out, "You people always want something for nothing." *You people*, my grandma repeated when telling me the story. But I'm still not convinced the woman didn't mean *you old people*. On another occasion, my grandmother was spreading the news about the great deal she got at a local restaurant. "What's your last name, again?" someone asked.

Recently my grandma's moved into an assisted living facility, even though she's completely independent and does everything from lifting weights to checking her email. The other residents treat her "differently," she told my brother and me, because she's Jewish. "Oh, they're nice to me; they're pleasant. But they don't want to be friends. They don't invite me to their table or to play cards." I couldn't believe it. "They know just by looking at you," she said.

"How? How can they tell you're Jewish?"

"I can tell by looking at them that they're *not*, and they can tell that I am. Besides, my name gives it away. I'm glad your generation doesn't have to worry about these things."

When we were little, Dad would make up stories about Moishe Kpoia, a fictional character who does everything backwards. To this day, my father likes to throw around words like *tochus* and *meshugina* in everyday conversation. He thinks it's funny to tell the story of how he studied for his bar mitzvah only by memorizing a vinyl recording of his rabbi reading my

father's portion of the torah. The day he turned thirteen, behind the podium and before a room of other bar mitzvah boys and their parents, my father recited his way into manhood. The next day, he reentered the New Jersey suburbs—a husky boy in knee socks and Buddy Holly glasses, a loaded water handgun in his shirt pocket, and fifty cents for an afternoon of movies and Good and Plenty's clenched in his sweaty palm.

Two years after my decision to stop going to Hebrew instruction and Sunday school, my brother led a congregation of what seemed like a hundred people as he read straight from the torah. That was the first day our father and stepfather spent an afternoon mingling and noshing in the same living room. The next and final time would be the day of our mother's funeral, three years later. Mom was so proud that she cried on stage in her royal-blue suit as her only son bowed his head and used the finger of God to keep his place on the enormous handwritten scroll before him. My brother had studied for years for this very moment and shared what he had learned with the crowd in a short but clearly written sermon. Hours later, our family and friends reconvened in a beachfront hotel reception hall decked-out in automobile-themed centerpieces, balloons, and party favors. A blown-up picture of my brother leaning against a yellow sports car was the inspiration, and the Lamborghini-shaped cake was the showstopper.

I was a high school sophomore and was granted Mom's permission to invite my little clique of best friends, none of whom were Jewish, whose presence in my daily life I considered as vital as food and water. Heather got me in trouble after waiting in line behind my aunt and grandpa to congratulate the bar mitzvah boy at the microphone. Once she got her chance, my best friend leaned in: "I just want to say—gefilte fish." An hour later she started a mosh-pit on the tiny wooden dancefloor, whipping around her hair and smashing into my brother's friends from the middle school band. One boy got an elbow in the eye and had to go home early. My stepdad pulled me aside and demanded to know what Heather was "on" and wanted me to confess if I had ingested any of it myself. At that time, none of my friends nor I had ever had more than a sip of Manischevitz. By that time the following year, Heather, the other girls, and I would find ourselves getting high for the first time in the trees behind a church across the street from my parents' house.

When my dad had his moment at the microphone, he gushed about how proud he was of his only son, once just a little baby and now a young man. To our father, this day was not about tradition, about speaking God's language, or being a good person. This day reminded him of the

passing of time, the lifetime that had gotten away from him since his own bar mitzvah and the one he spent living eight states away from his children who were growing up without him. To further express his feelings about my brother's accomplishment, and to relieve himself of some of the guilt and regret my father still holds on to, Dad gave Matt a savings bond for more money than I had ever thought about spending. Then he gave me the same gift, telling us my decision *not* to have a bat mitzvah was just as important as Matt's decision. My brother argued that I was just lazy, and had simply excused myself from the hard work he agreed to before his eleventh birthday. These feelings were soon forgotten, but then resurfaced almost ten years later—soon after we saw our old rabbi on the news for soliciting a boy on the internet.

After Mom's death, I stopped observing the Jewish holidays, aside from going through the motions on Hanukah with my brother and grandmother. It wasn't because my loss seemed senseless, my once benevolent God now ruthless and vengeful. I just couldn't imagine lighting candles or preparing a Passover sader in my apartment, arranging the bitter herbs, the chicken bone, and the hardboiled egg on a wooden platter like my mother had every year before. I was no longer willing to fast once a year, to cleanse my body from one sundown to the next in the name of repentance. I would not be made to feel sorry for who I had become or the decisions I had made. I have never since attended the annual service that remembers the dead, the one that always made my mother cry as she rose from her seat to whisper the names of her brother, father, and mother. I stopped going to temple all together, and eventually stopped thinking of myself as a real Jew. My family is Jewish, my blood is Jewish, my childhood was Jewish. But I have not only stopped practicing—I've stopped being.

***

MY MOTHER IN CYBERSPACE

I can press search, and find a fact, a person, but not what I've most dearly lost.
— "Memory," Stephen Dunn

I force myself to imagine her—
not in one of her satin nightgowns, sipping coffee,
her coral lips imprinted on the mug's rim—
but reincarnated
as a 1 or a 0,
a white blip on my black screen.

I press the keys to see her
name appear
as dark and tangible as a fistful of earth.

With 1, 947 perfect matches
there must be a way
to bring her
and I together.

Find her for me, you god
of a machine, you all knowing
beast. Carry her through
your endless copper veins

so I can see
the profile of her chin
as she cries over a silly old movie
or something I said to hurt her.

Let me reach out
and run the fleshy tip of my finger against
the flat dots of her image, against
the space between us, against

everything I know
to be true and sane.

***

The next time I would step foot inside a synagogue was for my only first-cousin's bat mitzvah on Long Island, where my mother's sister and her family live. I have a picture from that day above my desk: my brother in a rented suit with his arm around me. That was the first time I had seen Matt genuinely happy in a while. By that time he had already moved in and out of Dad's New Jersey house, and was living with Grandma in South Florida until his high school graduation a few months later. My brother's new life gave him much of what had been taken from him: his car, his friends, his bearings. He was learning the Waltz and the Cha-Cha at ballroom dancing classes with Grandma in the rec. center of her retirement community. She baked him salmon for dinner and did his laundry. Matt spent the weekends of his senior year at the beach and his afternoons skateboarding in the driveways of friends who lived right down the street from our old house, Mom's house. He called me when the new family cut down the big tree in what was once our front yard.

Grandma recently told me that she has never forgiven her son for neglecting to call to speak with Matt during that time. He never asked Grandma if she needed extra money to buy his son's food and clothes for a year. He never drove down to Florida to see Matt's bedroom or to register him at the local high school. But Dad was there that day at our cousin's bat mitzvah, less awkward in his role as professional photographer than that of father for the day. That was the first time my brother had seen him since Matt packed his clothes into his car and drove twenty hours south to pick up where his old life had suddenly stopped.

The day of my brother's high school graduation, Dad couldn't resist the temptation to talk in his most reverential tone about Mom, whom I remember screaming into the phone every time he called for years. She'd hang up and start crying, cursing herself for giving us such a man for a father. "I'm so sorry your dad is such a selfish SOB." But those words had been forgotten amongst trees that died years ago, as my father revised his memory of the mother of his children in the same way he had that of his own dad, a man he didn't speak to for close to a decade until the day my grandmother called to say Grandpa had cancer. "I just wish your mom and my father could be here," Dad said, "to see you graduate."

"They're here," my grandmother said. "They know."

My father snickered. "You don't actually believe that, do you?"

Grandma sighed and shrugged her shoulders. "You know what I mean, Karl."

"She didn't mean that. My mom's one of the most anti-religious people around," Dad said to no one in particular before leaving the room.

My mom once told me she had seen a ghost. It looked like a dim light in the basement of one of her homes before I was born, maybe even before she met my father. "It was friendly," she said. "I mean, I wasn't afraid of it. And then one day it was just gone." Mom wasn't a hokey person. She didn't have any strange fears or habits, aside from obsessively cleaning the house every Sunday. She never talked to me about death or the afterlife, but I remember her casually instructing me to just put her out of her misery when she got too old. When she died, more than a decade before she was scheduled to retire from teaching, I didn't let myself rethink my ideas about the afterlife. I didn't believe in heaven or hell. *Something* had to get the whole ball rolling, but God wasn't a being, rather a concept I believed the human mind couldn't possibly comprehend. Life would be just too simple and pointless, I thought, if we were capable of understanding God and what he/she/it wanted from us. Life itself was a force of nature like water, a form of energy that could never be created or destroyed. It would have been too easy to allow myself to picture the soul, a transparent vision of my mother, rising from her bed and floating into the clouds. What I considered to be her soul was her mind, her thoughts, and emotions, which had passed away a month before her funeral, as she stood at her bathroom sink only moments after the strokes had hit her brain. That's where my stepdad found her, with her hands playing in the running water as if she'd never seen it before. I knew eventually my mother's body would decompose, her energy return to the universe, like a single leaf on the forest floor.

I understood I would never see her again, but on some level, I was afraid that I was wrong.

***

REPLACING YOU

The moment you left, I imagined
your return, but didn't want god's help
with all that blinding light
and angels holding a single note.
Just you
with your hair dyed red like before
I was born and your muddy tears
from laughing too hard.

I expected to run into you
in the supermarket, catch you
double-checking the sugar in my cereal,
or find you in my bathroom, reaching up
to change the dead
light bulb in my vanity.

For years, I thought you
were following me. But it was only
the shadow of a child scaling a tree,
your bathrobe draped over the back of a chair,
an abandoned tricycle being pushed
by the wind.

Last night, your white body,
quiet and hollow
as the skeleton of a deer, came to me
in my sleep.
My eyes wide,
swatting at the black air around me,
I begged you: leave me
alone.

***

After bungee jumping in Cancun and then driving with me across the country, my brother joined me at college in Orlando. The idea of going to temple together never came up, but we did drive down to Grandma's every winter break for matzo brie and the closest thing we had to home. While we didn't indulge in eight day's worth of gifts, each night we twisted the flame-shaped bulbs into Grandma's menorah, Matt and I rattled off the prayer we were taught in preschool, and the three of us played Rummy Cube, ate brownies, and talked about Mom. Some nights, Grandma could stay up until one, sipping decaf tea and laughing until she needed to blow her nose. Other times, she tired early from the day's activity at a shopping mall or preparing her "big salad," a kosher-salted chicken, and matzo ball soup.

One night, hours after grandma had put on her robe, cleared the table, and said goodnight, Matt and I stayed up looking through her photo albums. I found a picture of Grandma in a bathing suit and an afro, lounging in a beach chair, a cigarette between her fingers. My mother had told me how she smoked when they first met, but I could never picture it. Another photograph had been cut in half, a former friend or lover permanently removed from posterity. There were pictures of our pregnant mother, and Matt and I stared closely, looking for clues as to which one of us was growing inside her. Getting tired, we turned the plastic pages quicker, and watched as the years flew by in fast-forward. Soon, Grandpa was missing from the group photos taken every Hanukah, and then pictures of Mom were few and far between. "I'm going to go to sleep," Matt said and closed the bathroom door behind him. I began reading a book to distract my mind from the flattened, fading memories. Then I heard a shriek. Just one.

It was a woman's voice coming from just beyond the other side of the bedroom door. I opened the door, looked around. Nothing. Grandma was still asleep. This was the incarnation of the irrational fear that had kept me on my toes for years. Once I saw my mother in a coma, her mouth emitting the musty smell of rotting leaves, I considered her body dead. But I wasn't ready to think of *her* as being gone forever. So I feared running into her again, terrified of the thought of seeing her reflection in a mirror when the lights were off or hearing her whisper in my ear when I called out her name.

I knocked on the bathroom door. "Did you say something?" I asked Matt, but I knew it wasn't him.

"No, but I heard something."

"What did you hear?"

"Like, a woman scream."

"That's what I heard," I said. "I'm freaked out."

"Why?"

"Because it wasn't Grandma, and there's no one else here."

"What?" My brother's tone suggested that what he was about to say was ridiculous. "You think that was *Mom*?" I was too embarrassed and scared to admit it, but that was the only answer my brain could think of. And I haven't come up with a better one yet.

***

MORNING DRIVE

All I have
are twelve minutes,
four left turns
and Joni Mitchell
breaking through the autumn fog
with songs of Christmas trees,
frying pans,
and a park in Paris.

Her voice turns to blue
as I make a left at the old cemetery.
In recent days, on the way home,
I've considered pulling over to step lightly
between those white tombstones
slick from a sunshower.
I've never strolled through a graveyard,
never scaled a rusted iron fence at night
to make love,
take black and white photos,
or visit my mother.
Never seen the slab
that bears her name,
sits atop her bones.

This morning, I don't pull over
or even slow down,
my engine racing to the top of the next hill.
But I have to put an end
to that sweet wailing voice
and turn up Stevie Wonder
before this becomes one of those days
when I can't shake off the morning rain.

***

Every year, for the past seven years, my brother has asked me to go with him when he visits our mother's gravesite. I haven't seen it since the afternoon her body was returned to the earth. A year later, her headstone was unveiled. I've never read its inscription. I'm not sure who wrote it. One day Matt called to tell me the stone was cracked in half. No one knows how it happened, and we've yet to pay to have it replaced.

Until just the other week, I didn't know my grandmother has been returning to the cemetery about once every year to pay her respects to the woman she remembers meeting for the first time almost forty years ago. "When your dad brought her home, your mom was younger than you are now. She was so shy, she barely said a word. And she was this *tiny* thing," Grandma told me, "like a bird." When I told her I hadn't made my way back there, to visit Mom's resting place, she said I'd go when I was ready. But I'm not waiting for the right moment, for it to feel important, for it to offer me that sense of closure the living yearn for. Finding closure would mean creating an end to something I want to go on forever. I want my mother's role in my life to grow and change with me, for our relationship to mature into the old friendship we never had, for my memory of her as a woman, not just as a mother, to continue to teach me new things about myself and the world around me—not for her life to be reduced to her death and to moments of self-pity at a plot of land she never saw. The hole where we buried her body meant nothing to my mom, and had nothing to do with our eighteen years together, so it means little to me.

"It's a good place to stop and think about her," Matt told me. But I don't need to stop moving, to stop living, even for a moment, to remember her. Since that Wednesday night when the phone rang, not a single day has passed that I haven't thought about my mother. I'm sure I think about her now more than I did when she was around.

My brother has never fully grieved the loss of his mother. When he was fifteen, life didn't let him stop or even slow down to think about himself, to focus on and deal with his pain. He loves his mother, he misses her, he would do anything to have her back. But the most forgiving part of grieving—of truly letting your emotions, your mind, and the face you show the world fall apart—is the acceptance it eventually brings.

Last fall, Matt and I spent Thanksgiving at Grandma's new home, her beautifully decorated apartment that happens to be part of an old people's home. The little house she sold months before was the last place Mom had visited for Thanksgiving dinner. Since Matt had moved away to college, he and I would visit Grandma and sleep in his old room. In the mornings, we'd stumble out in our PJ's to find our grandmother in the kitchen listening to NPR and folding our laundry, balancing her checkbook in the office, or reading a book in the TV room by the sliding glass doors. Her new place doesn't have room for a table in the kitchen. Her office is a built-in desk in the only bedroom. Matt and I spent that Thanksgiving night on cots hauled up from the main office. When I had to pee in the middle of the night, I snuck passed Grandma's bed and didn't flush the toilet so as not to wake her.

That winter, I asked my brother if he wanted to go to temple for Hanukah, for the first night's service. I told him it might be interesting and would give us something new to do with Grandma. In reality, I knew it wouldn't be any fun. But I wanted the holidays to feel like they used to—with all the hassle of getting dressed up, driving across town, and paying just to get a seat, then sitting there, studying the pattern on the carpet and the hair of the person in front of me until that exhilarating moment when they let us into an adjacent room for coffee and rugelach. I wanted this time of year to seem necessary and larger than myself, to take part in something that stands for what's good, for family, for our past.

Matt wasn't into it. He thought only about how boring it would be, how time-consuming, expensive, and pointless. Grandma said she'd go if *we* wanted to, but I knew the last time she went to temple, her purse was stolen out of her car. I recognized the weakness in my own impulse, but was too embarrassed to share my real reason for wanting this. I was trying to reopen a door that wasn't closed, but had burned down years ago. Or maybe it was never there in the first place. I didn't want to return to temple, to a faith that was never part of me. I just wanted to go home again.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Dana Kantrowitz once served as the Managing Editor and then Editor in Chief of the student literary magazine *The Cypress Dome*, as well as an acquisitions editorial intern at *The Florida Review*, for which she interviewed Lorrie Moore. She has tutored college, doctoral, and professional writers in composition skills ranging from basic grammar to polishing dissertations. As a freelancer certified in editing and publishing, Dana has assisted in the writing and revision of websites, a self-help book, a sports-training manual, book proposals, a teacher guide, novels, short stories, medial journal articles, professional letters, and a personal memoir. She has also taught College Freshmen Composition courses at Florida State University.

In 2004, she interned as an editorial and creative assistant at an NPR affiliate station in Tallahassee, Florida. One of the on-air programs she helped to edit earned two Gold World Medals at the international 2005 New York Festivals. She has also worked as the program assistant to Runaway with Words, Inc., an outreach program that brings poetry workshops to at-risk youth, rape crisis centers, and incarcerated women. Dana still serves as an officer of this organization. She is currently assisting in the founding of Imagination Room Multimedia, Inc., a non-profit production company designed to create distinctive original projects of educational, entertainment, and cultural value for diverse communities. IRM's first endeavor is an upcoming Public Radio International documentary on the life of Zora Neale Hurston, funded in part by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

Dana's essay on her personal poetry-revision technique is featured in *Acts of Revision* (2004), edited by Wendy Bishop.

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