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**A Pound of Dirt in Spoonfuls**

By

Gloria Pearlman-Warren

Accepted in Partial Completion  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Fine Arts

ADVISORY COMMITTEE

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Gloria Pearlman

May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2022

**A Pound of Dirt in Spoonfuls**

A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Faculty of  
Western Washington University

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Fine Arts

by  
Gloria Pearlman-Warren  
May 2022

## Abstract

*A Pound of Dirt in Spoonfuls* is a collection of essays that seeks to tell stories about the body in interaction with the world, our environment, and other bodies both physical and celestial. A hybrid experimentation, *Spoonfuls* includes prose, poetry, and visual images to examine grief, intimacy, conception, and growth. Included in the collection is an archive of familial trauma, an interrogation of a fertility deity, a catalogue of broken bones, and a still life rendered in prose.

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“Bottom Feeders: Specimens in Silhouette” originally appeared in *Atlas & Alice*.

## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iv
Acknowledgements.....	v
Stilling Life: On the Resurrection of the Dead in Creative Nonfiction.....	1
Countdown.....	12
Stories from the Archive of My Mother’s Deathbed I.....	13
The Lobster’s Secrets.....	15
Eyes of the Bayou.....	18
Soil Mapping.....	22
God of Tricks and Trinkets.....	25
Stories from the Archive of My Mother’s Deathbed II.....	29
A Third Person in the Hallway.....	31
Cosmological.....	33
A Series of Four Mirrors.....	34
Thirteen Ways of Looking at Bones.....	36
Stories from the Archive of My Mother’s Deathbed III.....	39
Still Life with Five Everyday Objects.....	41
Good Clean Dirt.....	49
Stories from the Archive of My Mother’s Deathbed IV.....	55
Well Being.....	57
The Museum of Us.....	59
Stories from the Archive of My Mother’s Deathbed V.....	61
Bottom Feeder: Specimens in Silhouette.....	62
Works Cited.....	67

## Stilling Life: On the Resurrection of the Dead in Creative Nonfiction

The creation of a still life is an act of prolonged examination, producing a closeness with objects, which decay at a pace too rapid for the artist to capture. Fruit rots and flowers wilt and the artist is painting against the effects of time. Ana de Alvear's photorealistic still life drawings were shown at the San Diego Museum of Art in an exhibit entitled "Everything You See Could Be a Lie."



Ana de Alvear, *Two Hares*, 2014.

Though taking compositional structure from traditional still life of the 17th century, Alvear's subjects of stuffed animals strung up in the style of dead game, plastic flower arrangements, and fake butterflies hung on fishing line composed the most intriguing conglomerates of objects I've seen in the still life form. I saw the exhibit at the same museum that punctuates most of my childhood memories after finishing *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon* by Mark Doty, a memoir of an obsession with one single painting by Osais Beert.

One of Doty's main arguments in his analysis of the art form was the fact that subjects of still life will rot, and, well, Alvear's won't. The intimacy Doty ascribes to the painting which forms the center point of *Still Life* is turned into an inside joke by Alvear's work—a nudge against origin. Her drawings exhibit this same intimacy of examination, but through the quality of hyperrealism craft the stillest possible life in which hearts have never beat and not even the subtle movements of decay are visible.

The realism of Alvear's work in the medium of colored pencil induces photographic quality; they are so true to life, they evoke *trompe l'oeil* (fooling the eye) techniques which Belgian surrealist artist, René Magritte, called "the treachery of images" (SDMA). As I walked



the exhibit, I felt the overwhelming sensation that I had been lied to with the truth of things, an experience not unlike writing and reading creative nonfiction

As soon as I began to consider still life paintings as a fruitful form in conjunction with creative nonfiction, the concept began to appear, innocuous at first and then increasingly insistent on the periphery of my reading and my evolving understanding of this work. The intimacy between the creative nonfiction writer and subject is also a drawing from life. It may be in prose, but we writers use our frames, shift perspective, and cultivate the real into representation. We objectify, not with any malicious intent, but for the same reason Beert cut the lemon—to reveal the vulnerable insides of our characters.

The still life is an art that “reaches for a scale beyond the human,” as is the writer who seeks to resurrect the dead in prose (Doty 53). This reaching I do with writing, across boundaries I cannot penetrate and into the spaces between decay, is also a still life. I have fallen in love with a painting I cannot stop looking at; I’ve felt the loss of my subject, and therefore have been cast into a cycle of examination and representation.

When I told my friend, a painter, of my preoccupation with still life he said, “artists should be wary of clutching the objects too closely or handling a single object for too long.” Returning too often to stroke an object in your composition, like returning too often to a memory, will corrupt its image and meaning over time. You will not be able to render an object you cannot let go of, and this is true for a person you seek to bring to life on the page.

In still life, objects “form not a single whole but a concert, a community of separate presence...they are each a separate city, a separate child in a field of silent children” (Doty 17). The dead are already transformed into caricatures by virtue of being brought to the page without consenting to representation. Writers can bring characters into the “field” of their work, placing

them in “concert” with crafted content that elucidates new meaning. Creative nonfiction is already a constructed truth and writing about the dead gives amnesty to the writer who selects for omissions and inclusions. Omission is a kind of lie, and I am lying when I write.

My family is rife with tellers of tale tales, that kind of verbal storytelling that grows more outlandish with each retelling. In order to tell my stories—the kind of child silenced, whose reality was malleable in relation to the body that created her, I must also partake in this kind of explosion of the facts. I show snippets, sparse snippets, painting a still life of us—two objects in static form. This is the voice I take back, and she shouldn’t be trusted to report on the facts.

The death of the mother has often thrust the writer into memoir. Following the death of her mother, Dorothy Allison wrote *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*, a hybrid photographic memoir that elucidates aspects of Allison’s first novel. Ocean Vuong’s epistolary novel, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, was written following the death of his own, and quotes Roland Barthes, who after his mother’s death began *Mourning Diary*: “a writer is someone who plays with the body of [their] mother, in order to glorify it, to embellish it” (Vuong 31). Geoff Dyer described *Mourning Diary* as a “mere hypothesis” to Barthes’ later work *Camera Lucida*, merely a precursor to his theory that “if photography is to be discussed on a serious level, it must be described in relation to death” (x, xi). Writing about grief produces not just literature, but also a route into theoretical inquiry.

There is a reason why creative nonfiction, the memoir as genre, has so often played host to the grief of writers. This impulse to write our grieving into the tangible demands careful examination and representation of our own experiences, allowing us to build meaning into death. Thus, while there is a freedom in writing about the dead, there is also some amount of obsession, of desperate clutching onto what has already passed and will fall into a state of decay. Vuong

likens this embellishing of the dead through writing to “a careful bruising” through which the writer hopes to heal not just themselves, but also, illogically, their subject who is long past healing (85).

This portrait I continually paint of my mother long after her death is intimate, perhaps an intimacy unreachable to us when she was alive. Doty describes the object of his fascination, *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon*, as an intimate representation: “all that is personal has fallen away” yet this still life is “alight with a feeling of intimacy” (49). As I continue to write her into character, moving further away from the body that birthed me to a presence on my pages, she and I, writer and character are connected, umbilically, by the intimacy of examination.

Though writing is a medium through which silences are broken, I’m also replicating that which I seek to disrupt, since “the still life resides in absolute silence” (18). In the still life I create on the page, my mother and I are each a “separate presence” circling around one another. She is dead, but through writing I perform resurrection, and “life after the knowledge of death, is after all, still life” (Doty 69). We contextualize death through our knowledge of life. By choosing to write my mother as a character, I necessitate releasing my hold on the body, the physical realities, any factual facets of her, in order to place her in “concert” with the silent child I create, who is me and also not me at all. This posturing “make[s] another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into image” (Barthes 10). By viewing my material self and experiences through the lens of writing, I recreate my body in the same way a camera lens instigates the posing of its subject.

Vuong called his novel *a book about people trying to live in the aftermath*. In this aftermath, I am still beholden to her and do this “careful bruising” on myself and on her character (85). This is why Doty’s description of the great pun of still life feels so apt for

understanding how we write about the dead: “life with death in it” (69). How do we capture the dead with words the way a lens steals light? How do we resist clutching too tightly to the objects of our memoiric obsessions?

Photography is a stilling of the story, a flash out of context and “snapshots will both fix and ruin your memory” (Dillard 243). Attempting to craft narrative from these materials is a route into memories we do not possess and in the practice of crafting characters out of the dead, one of our most valuable tools. With an eye for photographic analysis, Judith Kitchen studies the composition of inherited family photographs and performs a critical fabulation around these people who are “lost the very second the shutter clicks” (xii).

In the crafting of *Half in Shade*, the act of photography is a kind of grieving of the present, making the examination of photographic image a mournful act of remembrance. The photograph itself is a kind of loss, a record of brief moments that go on to disrupt memory and break perspective. The photograph captures light, but reveals nothing, making each image “a loss recorded” (Kitchen 5). The technology of the camera lens “immobilizes a rapid scene in its decisive instant” (Barthes 33). Kitchen describes this experience of photographic fabulation as a “triangulation” between herself, the object of the photographic, and the subject— “ancestors still to their essence” (xii, 30). Essays seek to perform this capturing of events, altering their form from memory to art. The fabulations Kitchen enacts on photography fills in the silences that surround the stillness.

The portrait photographer, Sally Mann, wrote in the preface to her autobiography, *Hold Still: A Memoir with Photographs*, that “memory’s truth” is no closer to objective truth as “a pearl is to a piece of sand.” I think the task is to calcify the grains of memory and make them luminesce. This work requires a divorce from the real and present facts of life. The event is the

irritant, the grain we calcify around by doing the work of writing, thus polishing fact into art. We solidify the malleable memory, pressing it into stillness on the page.

This is a different kind of recording, a painting of that which long ago decayed and must now be resurrected. Creative nonfiction is not concerned with rendering a life in bureaucratic terms: the cause of death, the dates of birth—the records of a life. In an act of grieving, galvanism charges the dead through piecemeal memory. We seek to recreate these slivers in written word. Through this careful sewing, facets of this adulterated person stitch together snapshots, building a body useful for our purposes. Photography is also a technology through which the subject is transformed into “a museum object,” and “to become object [makes] one suffer as much as a surgical operation” (Barthes 13). This “surgical operation” is Beert’s slicing of the lemon for exposure and the sewing of fragments in creative nonfiction. It is easier, and I would argue kinder, to perform these acts on the deceased.

Interspersed throughout Kitchen’s photographic fabrications are two essays paired in the juxtaposition of certainty and uncertainty. On uncertainty, she writes, “It is still: stiller than a held breath, stiller than water frozen in the birdbath, stiller than the color white” (57). It is this stillness of uncertainty I wish to convey in the characterization of the dead. You cannot be certain and by mining memories for writing “however true you make that writing, you’ve created a monster” (Dillard 243). I’ve been making monsters out of my loss. I’ve been playing with the body of my mother, digging into ash and finger-painting still life portraits. I have been charging my memories with electricity and keyboard clicks, galvanizing a corpse for the sake of my art.

The work of Doty and Kitchen establish that one can write from nothing but an image, be it photography or still life painting, but is it possible to write a photograph, is it possible to composite characters *into* a still life? Alison Bechdel’s graphic memoir, *Fun Home* grapples with

each of these artistic genres, the still life and the photograph, while she reconstructs her father as a character after his death. By drawing graphic representations of family photographs and events, Bechdel pieces together a portrait of her family and her father in the aftermath of his presumed suicide. To do this work, she crafts the family home into a museum, “not a real home at all but the simulacrum of one” (17). The memoirist becomes docent as Bechdel guides us through frames of family life in the ‘fun home’—short for funeral home. This is a childhood always beholden to the needs of the dead.

The family mortuary business and moreover, her father’s suicide, become key thematic elements in this graphic memoir. This museum tour through a family is crafted both on the pages of the book and through the father’s cultivation of “the air of authenticity” a family lends a closeted gay man (Bechdel 13). In this performance of heteronormativity, the characters become objects in the composite of “a sort of still life with children” (13). As the reader looks over the frames of this comic book, in each are characters stilled by Bechdel’s pen, taken from the world and mounted on the walls of this memoir.

Bechdel also uses photographs rendered by line drawing to craft this queer narrative, constructing herself and her father as “inversions of one another” (98). By examining photographs taken of each in their early twenties, and recreating them in comic form, Bechdel finds insight into their shared queerness and bodily similarity, creating something “about as close as a translation can get” (120). Creative nonfiction seeks to do this kind of translation work—an interpretation of existing content into a form accessible for a reader; it cannot be a direct translation of facts or the unreachable truth of the past. Memoir gets as close to “memory’s truth” as possible, to the emotional core of the facts as they are recalled, which is always imperfect and already a story.

To craft a work of creative nonfiction, is to allow memory to fuel and inform and allow it to be replaced, to become a “changeling on the doorstep” (Dillard 243). Dillard says if you value your memories or have sentimental attachment to them, you should avoid writing memoir, but the structure of text is a reflection of the organization of the mind (242-43). I am already narrating, so I have to wonder on whose doorstep I will leave my monster?

Much in the way of a mortician, writers add color, arranging fleshy human pieces on the page to imitate life. We make simulacrum of the dead in writing. As much as a photograph or a still life grieves, writing does so equally. Every piece I’ve written is an act of grieving, not just over the loss of my mother, but also the loss of each moment that passes and each memory that fades. And here is the greatest irony of writing nonfiction, it instigates loss, it replicates and simulates death. Every essay is a death of a memory. It’s sacrificial. I return to creative nonfiction compulsively to pick at the scabs of experience and bleed fresh material.

With each cauterization of my memory and experiences, I am killing off a piece of myself. This genre I reside in, this way of being in the world as an essayist, is a series of small experiential suicides, and that is an absurd activity. But I want to know death intimately, so I write about the dead in order to examine that state, a state so out of my own reach I must continually return to writing. I am resting in the same pitfalls Barthes resided in while writing *Mourning Diary*, examining writing “not as a question (a theme) but as a wound” (Barthes 21). But the culmination of this work thrust Barthes into an examination of the essence of the photograph in *Camera Lucida*; each work was calcified around the grain of experiencing the death of his mother.

With this preoccupation with death, I have made myself mortician. I have charged myself with the undertaking of representing the dead, even the ones who would resist. Using filler and

paint, I turn my mother into something else; no matter how close I get to her truth or my own, I'm still creating a monster with the object that takes her place. I lose her and the child I once was by putting them to the paper. Bechdel writes of the role of the mortician: "long nights employed in this scutwork of the flesh would make anyone reconsider the logic of not postponing the inevitable" (48-49). That death is inevitable has been made obvious to me, and I am as contented with the knowledge as a human can be. If death is certain, then it must be the absurdity of life that I grapple with. There seems no meaning I can make from death that doesn't lead me back to the illogical nature of life, and in this cycle, I remain, fingers clasped on a worry stone of grief.

The logic we must then grapple with is this postponement, or living. *Fun Home* is a negotiation of the suicidal act as much as it is a portrait of childhood. Though Bechdel maintains her father's death was not officially ruled a suicide, the memoir treats his death as such, ignoring bureaucratic truths on the cause of death. For Bechdel, it's a suicide. For myself, too, I know my mother's death was a slow, but intentional suicide, regardless of the facts of the death certificate. Bechdel's framing becomes key, convincing you of the nature of the death while maintaining that she could be wrong. The nature of writing the *truth* requires some reworking, some omissions, perhaps even some lies.

Citing Camus', *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Bechdel crafts her father as the "haphazard scholar," imagining he's underlined the passage: "The subject of this essay is precisely this relationship between the absurd and suicide, the exact degree to which suicide is a solution to the absurd" (Camus 2). But Bechdel's father did not read to the end, thus missing Camus' conclusion that "suicide is illogical" (Bechdel 47). It is, however, useful to know how Camus puts it:



“There is no sun without shadow, and it is essential to know the night. The absurd man says yes and his efforts will henceforth be unceasing. If there is a personal fate, there is no higher destiny, or at least there is, but one which he concludes is inevitable and despicable...Thus, convinced of the wholly human origin of all that is human, a blind man eager to see who knows that the night has no end, he is still on the go. The rock is still rolling” (24).

We wrestle with the concept of death as people living in the aftermath of such ungraspable notions as “one second a person is there, the next they’re not” (Bechdel 47).

Humans *make* art, objects, literature; disappearing is thus, a disquieting notion. Memories evaporate just the same. Some memories eclipse others, but when you are made of flesh, some memories live in the bones. Since “understanding will always lag behind experience,” writing replaces memory with solidified reconstructions (Leach 122). What is chosen is the exact representations of those memories, and through this cultivation, this choice between omission and inclusion, lived experience is made storytelling, made into art.

Painting fruit and oysters, drawing stuffed animals, using lenses and chemicals to capture light are all incredibly absurd, yet resolutely human impulses. As I look at Alvear’s realistic rendering of plastic still life arrangements, complete with *memento mori* insects I realize the artist is always in the process of crafting a still life, of attempting to freeze some image, some memory, some feeling in its inevitable process of decay. The impulse to capture, is “a fascination with what has died but is represented as wanting to be alive” (Barthes xi).

Camus suggests it is that inevitable nature of death we push against, absurdly so, but continuing nonetheless to roll the rock each day, for “one always finds one’s burden again,” and that is the price of living (24). This task, this pushing against the slippage of memory, these attempts to calcify around the irritants that prompt us into storytelling, is a Sisyphean effort. Just as relentless, we push against experience. We attempt to capture the light, the shade cast, and that

endless night. A suicide is “prepared within the silence of the heart, as is a great work of art”  
(Camus 2). In these silences, I write.

## Countdown

Dear woman on the cusp of thirty, coming to know love in skin-pressed grooves left by shag carpeting while the wall clock hangs precariously and ticks a half beat off: I know you want to tinker with that ticking hand, wind it back, press its pointed end to your navel, but leave the clock hanging precariously on a nail that wavers dangerously down; its face will keep watch over couch sleepers and sugar-mouthed boys, since daughters bleed in ways boys don't, browbones, some stitched, and others left to scar, in red-streak trails off hanging toenail; they will forget pain in excitement, drag dry razors over shinbone or else dismantle those razors to favor flexible sharp edges, and she will curse and hate and scream at you and you will curse and hate and scream right back and then you'll both be bleeding, so leave the clock where it is, don't even attempt to fix the nail, if it comes down it will be on his head.

## Stories from the Archive of My Mother's Deathbed I

When my mother returns from her second active-duty air force deployment, I am seven and I sleep in her bed for the next two years because I never want her to leave again. That deployment was the one she wasn't supposed to go on, but had to anyways, because things had escalated in Iraq and Afghanistan in the wake of September 11<sup>th</sup>. She was buying the supplies to fuel the beginning of America's longest wars—wars about the day that tinged military families' lives with uncertainty.

It was when I started sleeping in my mother's bed every night that I began to hear her stories, always in her bedroom, lit with the glow of the small TV with built in VHS player in the background. She always slept with the TV on, it soothed her anxieties the way her voice soothed my own.

It was there that I heard stories of summers spent with my great-grandparents. Rose, who led the family with beans and tortillas, freshly ironed laundry, and her stories. Albert, who worked two jobs his whole life, could fix just about anything and read the ads from the paper out loud. *Ten cents off on a dozen eggs! Two heads of cabbage for one!* And on and on he went.

Their dog, Tinker, had one eye and was old and small and ugly. He ate fallen peaches from the trees in the backyard and buried the pits in holes he dug with gusto. In few weeks they'd sprout new trees in between the broken-down washing machines and spare parts, and in the summer the peach trees would grow heavy and golden, the peaches warm with Arizona sun.

She tells me my grandmother would drive through the hot Arizona nights in a beat-up Datsun with busted air conditioning to the small town of Benson. She'd leave my mother and her sister with their grandparents in a safe small town. They'd always arrive late at night and Rose would kick Albert out of bed so that her two grandchildren could slip between her clean starched

sheets on either side. They'd be awake long into the night, listening to Grandma's stories in the dark when they should have been sleeping.

Benson summers were hot and dusty, wide-open desert in every direction, a creek reduced to a small stream of water, beans cooking on the stove, peaches piled on the kitchen counters. She and her sister would play in Grandma Rose's closet, between the hanging clothes, the pockets filled with mothballs, stepping into shoes that were too big for them. My mother loved the smell of mothballs the way I love the smell of moldy books. They are the smells of houses nowhere close to perfect, where water and moth damage is common enough to comfort. We grew to love the strange dusky smells of houses well-tended but not well-built.

My mother tells me about Albert, my great-grandfather, and a bastard child just like me. He was the product of an out of wedlock affair across racial lines in a time in which lines were not to be crossed. He would remain caught in between two cultures and races that were prohibited from mixing, passing as Mexican, raised Mexican, marrying Mexican, marrying Rose. There is one picture of Rose and Albert in their youth, sitting on a fence and squinting with the white-hot sun in their eyes, the expansive desert stretching out behind them, and his arms around her. I wanted to be Rose—a flower, a matriarch, a storyteller.

## The Lobster's Secrets

My mother drives down to Mission Bay in the old Datsun, first her mother's, then her sister's, then her's, with the neighbor girls from across the street. It's summertime. Lobster season won't begin till next October. The Adams girls follow her sly smile into the back of the Datsun and down to the beach with the old wooden coaster. They walk out on the rocky sea wall with snorkels and masks, wearing bikinis their mothers wouldn't buy for them and float face down in the ebbing water of the Pacific. It was colder back then, before the seas warmed to kill the kelp forests, and it's the Spiny California Lobster's mating season. The crustaceans are searching for love on the sandy floor of the bay.

Maybe she was searching for love too. In the hands clasping hands as they waded into the bay or in the sun on bare skin or in darkened garages where crushes always seemed to choose the pretty sister.

My grandmother receives a call from Mrs. Adams, a scared, uncertain call muffled by old landlines and a whispered urgency. "Dorothy, I think you better come across the street." There are two lobsters in the kitchen sink—about two grand in illegal hunting fines. "You better cook those fast and hide the rest in the trash and we have to make them promise that they will never do anything like this ever again," says my grandmother.

She wonders how her daughter knew where to find lobsters, how she caught them barehanded and how she roped the Adams girls into illegal crustacean hunting. It's the kind of thing my mother would still be doing at twenty-four with the man her father's age—fly fishing in jean shorts, working wood into seamless creations, and hiking Cowles Mountain.

There must have been a hundred summer days like that spent jumping into the waves at Sunset Cliffs and floating past the breakers on those long stretches of coastline before the masses of people began to fill them up. Hector Avenue was a haven of the working people, of families raised on the hard work of mothers and the tragedies of fathers—alcoholics, southern Californian garage pot smokers, divorcees and suicides. It was a world of runaways and early pregnancies, diversity cross-city busing and acid tabs. Those 1-2-3 houses evolved just as much as the families who lived inside them and sixty years later each is a jumble of redone paint jobs, additions, and extended driveways. Each family, a jumble of subtractions and losses, and those garages are filled with artifacts of the past, too plentiful to manage, too painful to unearth.

I don't want to lose the house that sheltered my mother's young self, the parts of her that disregarded rules put in place for good reason. She made marks on that house turned museum: the kicked hole in the door of the back bedroom that she kissed me goodbye in when motherhood had tempered her rage from kicks to words to self-destruction. Her doodles are still etched onto the tape measurer in the kitchen junk drawer, and I see her in a long white dress, happy in the arms of a man who's not my father, dancing on the long-ago rotted deck under the persistent pepper tree in the backyard.

We've cut down the pepper tree more times than I can count, it comes back every time accompanied by waist-high weeds that slowly invade the concrete slab that used to be a patio, the sidewalks that are too narrow, and driveways that are too short. Now, we own the only house on the block not yet torn to the bones and built up again. So, it still feels like her feet walked across that patio, a fresh garden strawberry between her lips and a scowl on her face. As sons and daughters, we are left holding only a few decades of our parent's life, they are people defined by

our own existence and we never really know them. We can't reach into the past, can't even imagine a world before us.

*My granddaughters don't talk to me like I am their mother's mother.*

My grandmother said that, and I wracked my brain trying to understand why or what it could have meant. As she spins the story of my mother and the lobsters, I see my grandmother clearly. Her storytelling is only tedious when she's trying too hard, but it's when she slips into a memory, something real and her own, that her words flow freely. How she must have watched my mother, how much she would have missed in those fleeting moments of observation, how baffled she was by her own creation. I can see how closed doors became kicked doors and how life was plucked from the bottom of the bay and cut short by my mother's own hands. I see her now, windows rolled down in the old Datsun, dark hair and full lips curved into a smile, like she knew a secret.



## **Eyes of the Bayou**

When my parents still shared custody, my father had me every other weekend. He'd arrange fake roses in garish shades of blue and yellow around the house where he was raising my half-brothers. The cloth petals were dotted with little plastic water droplets, he'd spray the blooms with his cologne so they would smell nice. I think he was trying to woo me in that way men who don't know little girls treat their daughters like women. Sometimes the scent wafts past me in the street and I think of standing on the threshold of my father's house, humid air at my back and thick rivers of cologne circulating the living room.

What do I know of this father who sprayed fake roses with men's cologne? I know he cooked pancakes in a thick layer of fat, the same pan he fried his bacon in. I know he only bought live Christmas trees that were left to die in a nest of pine needles embedded in shag carpet and that he and his sons turned it into a bonfire in the backyard. I know he didn't much care for the Lutheran Church, which my mother put her Air Force-instilled Christian heart into with bible study for her and Sunday school for me. He was a Baptist who danced, drank too much, and never went to church. He had a boat abandoned in the front yard and filled with leaves and debris shedding from the trees where he would sit and drink in the Sunday afternoons, his hands greasy from tinkering with a stubborn engine.

Sometimes he'd be on the porch with another girlfriend, smoking and tapping off ash over the rim of an empty bottle. He let me stay up late watching cartoons that would have suddenly changed to late-night B-rated horror when I woke up in the dark hours and couldn't pull the clicker out from where it was wedged between his body and the couch. I sat there on the floor waiting for him to wake up and when he does, he asks, "what are you watching?" As if I was the one to change the channel. I remember finding my mother asleep on the couch. I

remember times I couldn't wake her either. I would sit very quietly on the floor and watch TV until she woke up.

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When the puddle jumper touches down on a stretch of isolated tarmac, the blood in my veins feels at home. Before now, my blood has been silent on the topic of where it wanted to be, but now it seems to yearn for this place in the Florida panhandle. My body seems to know this ground, my heart beats to the pressure of the air here.

I stare out the window at the thick forested land, flat, but you can't even see a few hundred yards ahead. The trees are dense walls all around us. Wide open spaces scare boys from bayou country, boys like my father. This is the place I was conceived and born to, the land that fed my body, the air my mother breathed that formed my own struggling lungs, the landscapes of my infant eyes.

Even the air feels good, walking like wading, breathing like drinking. I want to clutch it in my fist, my young and hopeful fist. I want to bottle it and sip it to keep me rooted. I watch the forests blur as we drive, a block of trees doesn't bore me. Forests are more interesting than the wide endless deserts I just came from. I peer into the forests like I'm peering into the eyes of my father. When I catch glimpses of bayous and Spanish moss and murky brown waters, I can see the parts of me that are rooted in him. It begins to rain, a heavy misty downpour that comes down hard and fast and leaves seed pods on the ground of the hotel parking lot. My mother says that in the summer, this rain comes like clockwork every afternoon.

We drive to my father's old house, a one-story brick house in big lot of overgrown grass and untrimmed trees. I remember it had that dark sea foam green carpeting from the nineties. I

remember my toddler sandals squishing into that shag carpet when it was soaked from flood. We only look for a second. I don't think she wants to stay too long.

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We sit in a courtroom, waiting for our turn, watching as domestic disputes are settled by a judge in a room much less formal than I'd pictured. This is my first time in child support court. My father has called this hearing to reduce the amount of child support he owes, considering unemployment, a downtrodden economy, the thousands of dollars of back child support piling on debt. I ask my mother why the Florida Department of Revenue still handles our case, even though none of us live here anymore. She says that's just the way it is.

I look into each face that enters the courtroom while we wait, hoping I'll see him, wondering if I'll even recognize him. He doesn't show. The judge looks at us, mother and daughter, and then to my father's lawyer, who argues that Phoenix is farther from Florida than Las Vegas, which is geographically incorrect. The judge dismisses the case.

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When we go to our old house, my mother turns onto Cherry Lane and passes broken down townhouses, children's toys littering the yards, more overgrown grasses. Some of the windows are busted out with beach towels hanging in the gaping holes. She says that these houses sit lower, that they've probably flooded many times over the years. They look it.

We don't see anyone. I can hardly believe anyone still lives here because the houses that don't look condemned look abandoned. But the silence makes us brave, so we walk up to our home, standing in the patch of dirt under the window where we planted pretty flowers we knew would wilt and die when the rains came and drowned them. We press ourselves to the window,

hands shielding out the light of the afternoon. It's empty and renovated to look just like the 1-2-3 houses back in our middle-class suburbs, the same beige carpeting, kitchen redone with cheap, ubiquitous granite, and its empty and hollow and not at all like I remember.

She takes me to the white sand beaches, where the water is clear and currents run warm, riptides just beyond the breaker and the ground like a fine dust underfoot. It's just like I remember.

## Soil Mapping

I remember a windstorm kicking up sand in gusts, blowing it to shards of glass against my bare calves. Fragments of shells and beach erosion lived between my infant toes.

I've known sand powdery against the coast of the Gulf, then shot with crude oil.<sup>1</sup> I've known dormant volcanic beaches, more rocky shore and rust red.

I knew sand so soothing and warm to the touch, I buried myself calmly in its embrace, laid my cheek against its hallows, mixed it with my hair.

I've known desert sand, which is just dirt that knows no silt. I've tried to make mud with it in vain yet painted my palms and feet just the same. I washed myself in dredging waters and found myself cleaner than I've ever been.<sup>2</sup>

I brought home factory-fertilized dirt, rich in nitrogen and phosphorus and other things plants like, dug my hands again and again into those bags of soil to weather a lonely summer.

Rivers overflow their banks and make valleys grow. Rivers deposit salt and kill the land they quench of thirst, until a desert takes place.<sup>3</sup>

I've spent time wallowing in dirt, with ecstasy, the way a pig would, joyfully and with no regard.

This too is an act of grieving, bathing loss, rolling with the waves of it.

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<sup>1</sup> I was crying as we watched oil lap at the shores.

<sup>2</sup> It was a water fountain pretending to be infinite.

<sup>3</sup> When the fires started coming each year, the creek dried up.

I've eaten dirt. Particles clinging to dried fungi. Rushing waters of sand that found their way into my sinuses, I seemed to leak rough grains.

The beach is a stretch of tall mountains, when you press your cheek to the land, the crests of those peaks cascade rivers of sand with the wind.

I flung the ashes off the cliffs at sunrise<sup>4</sup>, the wind took them, they settled in sea foam. Some settled on the tips of my shoes, mingled with the fine dust of sedimentary bluffs. *Warning: unstable edge.*

I have to eat a pound before I die<sup>5</sup>. A pound of earth in spoonfuls, licked from the lines of my palm, sucking salt and silt from porous skin.

Dust lives in the corners, on the windowsill, made of us and pollen that didn't catch and bugs we didn't trap alive. I'd like to collect it, fill a pot with dust and a seed that doesn't want to be there.

A poem is unparaphrasable, existing only in its own body, and all I can say of dirt and dust, must finally fall short. I'm stealing here.<sup>6</sup>

I'm stealing myself to say that my ecology is half-an-inch of ash in a clean olive jar. My ecology is what had to be saved from the precipice.

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<sup>4</sup> The sun rises in the east, the west coast owns the sunset.

<sup>5</sup> "Don't be afraid of dirt, it's good for you" my mother says.

<sup>6</sup> I'm stealing from Mark Doty's obsession with a painting.

That craggy bluff, that cracked desert, that forest floor, each a landscape I return to again and again, is an edge I pull back from.

My bare foot steps into the ground, a slight pushing, and I set off a string of capillaries stretching out from tree to tree, wafting spores, teeming decays.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> “a delight: the phrase fungal duff, meaning a healthy forest soil, swirling with the living the dead make” -Ross Gay

## God of Tricks and Trinkets

Kokopelli is a Hopi deity with hands in many baskets. Presiding over the unions of new couples, he imbues their bodies with fertility and delivers brides gifts of infants, but he does the same for the game animals—the deer and rams and sheep. Gods of fertility are often of the fields as well, they make babies multiply from sperm and egg cells, then raise the seeds they spread to feed those mouths. Kokopelli became synonymous with feast, joy, music and dance. As a traveler, Kokopelli brought trinkets from faraway places, nestled somewhere among the seeds and babies. Instilled with the gift of language, the fertility god brought stories told in the movement of his body and the languages of the diaspora he travelled.



I clung to the back of Kokopelli as he brought me from the Arizona desert to my mother's womb in the Florida panhandle. I watched his reaching proboscis bob with each step like a baby's mobile casting shadowy figures against the sun, and the music of his flute waved away the chills of a winter baby delivered too far from the cusp of spring.

The days are short now, edging out of the month of my birth. They get brighter in such small increments. There are three more minutes of light today than there were yesterday. I want to cover myself in his image, blow on his flute and will spring closer. Even if that means a few seeds are dropped and catch hold in me now. The blister pack of yellow pills will confuse the signals. Once I thought I'd tattoo his likeness into my hipbone as a warning of fertile ground ahead, but a deity of such frivolity and pleasure is a trickster as well and to wear his image is an invitation to the uncontrollable, the chaotic.





Mass-produced imaging of the Kokopelli show a hollow place between the legs where the appendage used to be. The ithyphallic Kokopelli can be found on the stone walls of caves and adorning Hohokam pottery from the latter half of the first millennia after death (AD). Insect-like and hunchbacked with a thick phallus, Kokopelli's first form is not fuckable, but more importantly not wearable either. Anthropomorphized into something more recognizably human, yet less mammalian than ever, a fertility God with no genitalia is sold on t-shirts and mugs in any souvenir shop in southwest. It's difficult to find an intact deity these days.



All the women in my family wear Kokopelli, deity of growth and propagation. My mother carried him on a key chain all my life, but no one ever told me to fear Kokopelli. He is not the deity for young girls with his squabbling babes slinged across his back, the ample seed he spends on his travels as he wills spring into the bodies of ripe women. My mother warned me: *Women in this family are as fertile as the day is long.* A woman accumulates so many trinkets in a lifetime: a pendant without a chain, a grandmother's brooch, a gold-plated cigarette case I never saw my mother use, though I saw her smoke most of my life.



My mother never wore her jewelry, at least, not from when I can remember. In old pictures, I catch glimpses of familiar earrings now without the match, a string of pearls my father bought her, a ring that fits snug on the middle finger as she cradles her chin and covers the corner of a smile. In some she is decked in gold from the markets of Saudi Arabia—a braided chain

bracelet that slips off my thin wrist and gold hoops that don't suit me. Other pieces have no photographic evidence. They just turned up in a little box hidden away in a dresser drawer. I found this pair of earrings, engraved with a kokopelli on each oval of silver, I'd never seen before. Some mornings I add the tarnished earrings to my own series of small hoops. In a kind of ode or futile rebellion, I haven't yet polished away the grime of many years.

She wouldn't have liked the rings lining my ears or that I slip the hook of her earrings in alongside my standard hoops. I remember her telling me I'd stretch out my earlobes if I wore anything too heavy. She was a woman of the eighties. Dramatic statement earrings and heavy clip-ons had stretched the lobes of many women, so she told me again and again not to pull on my ears, convinced they'd never go back to normal. Perhaps the weight of all these ornaments will catch up to me, but how else will I hold all of the pieces of her life and all of the things I've yet to gather. I will have to be stronger if I'm to carry these things and stronger yet if I'm to ever let them go.



My grandmother found Kokopelli at a roadside lookout in New Mexico long after her daughters were grown. Along the pavement at the desert rest stop, craftsmen and artists sold jewelry and knickknacks to tourists passing through. Her friend bought a Kokopelli pendent shaped in silver as a gift.

Now she is giving away her jewelry, turning out boxes onto the bedspread while my aunt and I watch her empty and repack drawers. She presses rings and stones and beads into our hands, and reluctantly, we begin to dispense these offerings—a bracelet for my cousin, a vintage choker for auntie, a tiger's eye set in a silver ring for myself. It's an act of anticipation for

purging of life's accumulations. Soon she will rid herself of a lifetime of books and the very walls that contain us, but she keeps the Kokopelli. Around my grandmother's neck, he hangs from a chain, three-pronged head bent over his flute, his once substantial penis, amputated.

## **Stories from the Archive of My Mother's Deathbed II**

It was in that bed, when I should have been sleeping that she told me I was named Gloria after my grandmother. Not the one who drove through the Arizona desert, not the one who canned the peaches from the backyard, and not the one who had a child out of wedlock, but my father's mother. His family was always too southern and traditional to accept my mother, the kind of woman who did not keep hot dinners in the oven when their husbands or sons did not come home on time.

She wanted to name me Glory after the late-80's film about the 54<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the Union army during the Civil War. She says to me: "I decided to name you Gloria, he couldn't argue with that cause it's his mother's name. I could always call you Glory if I wanted to." She says it like conspiracy, like warfare from within the country of our illegitimate family.

Everything from my conception to my name involved compromise after compromise. If my parents had married, I imagine my life would have gone like that all the time, a bargaining chip and a way to spite your lover all in one. I would have been passed between them and tugged and torn both ways. A compromise, at best leaves both parties unhappy, at worst, it causes a civil war.

For my name, everything had to be split down the middle, fair and square. The name of a woman who kept dinner warm in the oven, the name of a woman who canned peaches, the borrowed name of a Russian Jewish immigrant and his own bastard son, and the name of a traditional southern family. Half my mother and half my father.

My mother didn't compromise with me, not on anything and, according to her, not on the truth. When I'm eight she tells me about Mrs. Abernathy. I learn about periods lying in the dark,

as she tells me about the teacher who told all the fifth-grade girls that their time of month would be a joyful reminder you that you were a woman—that having a period made you a woman.

My mother went home that afternoon, walking the same route from elementary school to home that I walked while she was half a world away supporting a war on terror, and started her period. She says she would have thought she was dying, if not for Mrs. Abernathy.

The day I started my period, my mother and I fought. It seems like it might have been the first time I had rage to throw back at her. We yelled and screamed and cursed, a standoff at the mouth of the hallway with an escape route at my back. The bathroom door slammed, and I saw blood seep unmistakably from myself.

My mother vowed to never Abernathy her kid, said she would tell me everything I needed to know, especially if I was old enough to ask. She didn't leave me at the mercy of finding out something vital and important from an Abernathy.

When she comes home early from a business trip, I'm told there was no trip, just a week in rehab. She professed to always tell me the truth, and as I grew up, I began to learn which truths to tell her, which truths she was telling me and which ones I couldn't repeat to anyone. Truths that I couldn't tell anyone were secrets. She told me a lot of secrets.

## **A Third Person in the Hallway**

*It is dangerous to believe in a baby's lack of memory. -Alison Benis White*

I've been remembering life in third person, watching myself live it again and again. I craft memory through mother, her words, her stories, always gazing back through her perspective. I remember watching her cry. Head cradled in hands, her back against the door of my nursery, while I cried in my crib.

I shouldn't remember that.

I used to sneak out at night. I used to tiptoe past her to the backdoor. I used to listen for kitchen sounds and ice-glass clatters. I used to move slowly, aware of every sound my body could make against tile to stop the slow slide of the backdoor and rustle of blinds.

I pause in the hallway, a territory of neutral ground, of careful listening and strategic avoidance. I count the muffled footsteps at three in the morning, wait for a thud of wood against doorframe vibrating through thin walls. The air in our home tightens hallway into no man's land. We stand on opposite sides of our soft open doorways, daring each other to disrupt the quiet truce of night.

I provoke sometimes.

To see rage beat against her body, slick through her veins and poured out into me, as if to say, I have not dissipated. I am not soluble. I am still here beating. Against arms of men and country and mother, her fury fools me, into thinking she can't die.

The two of us circled around each other, with too much empty space between, neither were willing to fill. We were a woman and a child, sweaty fingers entangled as she dragged me through our life, held me out to the world and hid behind me.

Gravity is quite comforting when I pay attention to the way it holds my body flush with cotton batting as muscle relaxers kick in. Better than uncanny floating. We're lucky the earth clings to us as desperately as we dig in. I grasp, but the gravity of us, my mother's pull, wavers in the night; the sun always pulls towards earth, and I always come back.

I cut the tether.

I am standing in the hallway watching her sob. I am standing in the hallway listening to myself wail behind the door. Letting babies cry it out because they'll never settle, never learn to be alone in the long nights of infancy, we cried separately, daring the other to stop.

## Cosmological

to spite sea walls and brush fires

we could make a person if you wanted

we could give flames

jumping highway's crossed bones

give them good death, graceful exits—

on this new life trajectory exists

arcs spinning round ourselves

black holes may yet be predisposed to growing universes.

we could give them fiberglass shavings

pillowy piles bowed to dust devils

we could give them ashes ours and everyone who's ever been

here because we are here,

we always have been.



## A Series of Four Mirrors

### Mirror 1

In the mirror pasted to the back of the door—frameless corners spotty with black age, I step closer and remember how you used to kiss your reflection. I press my lips to my own and find the impenetrable place. I keep getting caught in mirrors, falling into the mottled shapes in tinted windows, eyeing the outlines of me. I watch your lines too. Wait for them to press me through that thin glass.

### Mirror 2

If I latched into the wall of your uterus, while the two of you rocked together on a seabed, it would explain why you cried for love of the chlorine blue at the bottom of the pool, why you dragged me from the gulf riptides, why the two of us were always thirsty.

*Are you still thirsty way out there in the Pacific currents?*

You held a mirror between your thighs and spurred a reflection that walked away from you. It may have taken eighteen years, but I did leave eventually. *Did you reach down when I was still stretched on the bloody precipice of two bodies?*

Probably not. Failing to reach is to be expected, you were high on the drugs of labor. High on oxytocin love child creation. High on soft fontanel and malleable bones. I feel I must thank the picnic quilt or his waterbed. *Did you conceive me on the waterbed?*

### **Mirror 3**

We match now. I wish you could see it, our curled loose fists and wrists bent, tucked appendages and phalanges under the sleeping chin. Waking arthritic with shooting charges frowning in our sleep. Our knees jut angles from the same ray. My hips grew round as a supermoon, not to be trusted. I remember when you called me to watch it rise, crying at the night sky's oblong orbits.

### **Mirror 4**

There is this soft squishy thing inside me. I can reach into my chest and sink my finger in its porous surface. It is the place I calcify my skeleton around, has no purpose, filters no toxins, a stagnant conglomerate of spongy bits, neither pumps nor charges just lays there along the base of me, sucking moisture into its ravenous mouth, always thirsty for the leaking excess.

When I stroke it fans open, a clam of damp feathers, teeth gone grey with age. Spot the places I've treated with precious silvers filling the rotting that birthed it. I go hungry to feel the curve of its shoulders and petals curled against the strain. I feed it pearls and bloom it out to open the sensitive parts that wince against fingertip ridges, the cells soak pleasure right down to root. I soak in the joy of it; a dearth that sharpens me against whetstone.

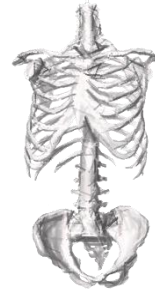
## Thirteen Ways of Looking at Bones

1.

Once I knew all the bones. I stuck them in my head one night, every tarsal and pinion. I knew which cog went where and I sang their praises to the tune of every song on the radio. Scared to forget natural orders of the vertebrae, the regions of my pelvis, I heaved them onto the page with cramped phalanges for fear they'd float out of my cranium before I could prove I knew all two hundred and thirteen.

2.

The hip bone juts upwards, a ridge to be traversed by tilting fingers. If I twist to the side, arch the back, the skin tightens around it, belly sucked in, its peaks rise up. The soft hollow there in the middle where the breath catches, sinks lower. I remember when we were both too thin and poked each other with sharp joints in the dorm room of a winter spent ignoring our insistent stomachs.



3.

He should have told me not to look in the mirror. The pupils of the eyes will magnify, zoom in and out, show cheekbones with sunken lines of contour exaggerated, the lines of shoulder blades and the count of the ribs somehow multiplied. I dare myself to look each time. I am made of branching spider veins and splotches of red the first, too many bones the next. Why would I be looking in the mirror, if I could be looking at him?

4.

The x-ray tech positions me, sets the elbow firmly on the table, lifts the hand up, open and grasping towards the overhead light. *Hold it.* I flex my arm, tighten muscle around sinew and bone and nod. He lets go and the arm, this pale and flabby thing, flops over. The doctor uses a laser pointer to show me where the joint has overlapped, folded in on itself. They piece it back together with steel pins and send me home with a week's worth of opiates made liquid for easy dosing of children.



5.

I like the spaces between the bones, the nitrogen pockets. I bend to touch my toes, the hip goes, *pop*. Warm rounded sound, deep and echoing through the socket. They call it cavitation, release. 28 possibilities on the grasping fingers alone. Perhaps a half dozen more if special attention is paid to the toes.

If she caught hold of a foot from the other end of the couch, my mother would pull my toes until they popped. I think of her when I crack the crooked pinky toe the doctors told her would straighten with time. I can pop the shoulder where it meets the socket on the left-hand side if I hold my wrist steady and pull. The back too if I can tense the knotted muscles around the spine and arch the body, but it works better with a partner to push against. Did you know that most of us are growing lopsided? Shoulders sloping down on one side, heads permanently cocked for compensation, and spines curved in all the wrong places. When I couldn't keep up with the knots in his back, a chiropractor pushed the skeleton into alignment, release. When my elbow emerged stiff and atrophied, my mother forced the arm to bend to her, to straighten again. The joint remade at her insistence, hurt like breaking.



6.

There's a crack running through the big blue bowl I kept from my mother's kitchen. It might not break yet. It's just a thin line marring the integrity of the ceramic, a hairline fracture. My mother and I both broke our wrists, same place, same age, just a hair too broken to heal without a cast. I've been worried this bowl will shatter like the chipped second-hand plate that crumbled under wet hands and sliced my thumb. I called my grandmother, towel-wrapped hand held in the air. *Have you ever broken something a little, but not enough?*

7.

When did my ribs become so obscured?  
I have to count them with fingers instead of eyes. I remember when they interrupted the lines of my body like the black keys of my grandmother's piano. Liam's fingertips avoid them in the cold airstream trailer in Oakland. We were too drunk to lock the door shut.

8.

She said I broke her tailbone in labor. I pressed against it with an insistent head, and it shattered into pieces on the hospital bed. The nurses collected the fragments. That little of vertebrae of shape by entrance.  
fused nub bent out my grand



9.



I have the same kneecaps as my mother. Hers were padded with a layer of flesh most of my life, while mine protruded, covered in razor-nicks and knock-kneed, according to her and my grandmother. *It's like someone told you to keep your knees together.* I hold a flood-damaged photo: she crouches to my toddler height, the bend of the joint, the disconnected patella, matches mine now. My mother had the same kneecaps as me. She never did teach me to shave the angles of these legs.

10.

My mother cracked her head against the tile floor. The calcium-fortified cheerios and watery non-fat milk sloshed and filled my hands when the dining table jolted. I watched it pool on the scratched wood and rush over the side. Dam breaking. Little O's floating. The metal chain on the ceiling fan swinging. Small milk-damp hands holding the trashcan and dialing the phone. They held up negatives of her swollen head in the small hospital. *Wake her up every hour, make sure she's still alive.*



12.

I have a scar on my browbone. It takes a shortcut through my right eyebrow from the supraorbital ridge to the hollow space of the eye socket. I was four and I remember the bedroom spinning for a moment, saw blood soaking my mom's t-shirt from shoulder to breast.  She pushed me away to examine the cut. Later she would say  she feared I lost an eye. I grew to like the asymmetry, but once someone asked if I had gotten stitches, I had a man with a hollow needle near Fremont Street pierce through the cartilage of the opposite ear for balance.

13.

We are born with three hundred bones floating, loosely hinged with cartilage and soft fontanel cracks between our protective skulls. We are pliable things that stiffen with calcium, malleable things that defy molds. "She'll be tall," they said until the lines on the wall got closer together each year and then stopped. I'm not even twenty-five. I still have time to be more than I am now; there might be bones yet to grow and fuse together.

### Stories from the Archive of My Mother's Deathbed III

She tells me that her first friend in the Air Force was raped by a colleague, in the nineties, when most of the women in the military were harassed, when many of them were assaulted, when a lot of them were raped, and when it was always a secret. When they request the same day off, their commander calls them into his office. He stares at them from across the desk, knowing that there was more to this story, but my mother didn't tell secrets. *I can't tell you why, but we need it, and you have to let us.* They drive two towns over to a clinic where Christian activists picketed outside, yelling at women and screaming *murder* instead of *rape*. "It's a secret," she whispers to me, "don't ever tell anyone."

She tells me about the jobs she worked. How at fourteen she rode her bike three miles to a carwash, where the older guys taught her how to drive, and where the boss took them off the clock when they weren't busy, so he wouldn't have to pay them. She delivered pizzas for Dominos in the 80's to a house that took in pregnant teenage girls, kept them out of school, safe and hidden until they could have their babies and give them up for adoption.

She tells me that the house we lived in after I was born, was in shit neighborhood, where everyone was dirt poor, the infrastructure non-existent, the rent cheap. Our neighbor was a dealer, and his customers often knocked on our door by mistake. He had our backs in the neighborly way of picking our lock when we lost our keys and taking the flood damaged couch off our hands.

The people down the street raised Pitbulls and held dogfights, and one day some of their dogs got loose. They went after our neighbor's little girl, who ran to the bed of her father's truck, just out of reach of getting mauled. He came out with a shotgun. Then one went after my dad,

and he stabbed it in the head with his knife. While my mother called the cops from inside the house, I slept in the nursery upstairs.

These stories had conflicts that were tangible, something I could picture instead of faraway places and destroyed buildings that only meant my mother would be taken away again. These are the truths that could make my life make sense. A clear enemy, a clear shot.

She told me these kinds of stories often. The truth, or at least her version of it, was important to her. She didn't believe in lying to your kids to protect them.

She tells me that her childhood friend's mother was schizophrenic, that she was always unplugging the alarm clocks and appliances. She says they were even poorer than her family, and that her friend's older brother was troubled, that he molested his younger sisters. I couldn't repeat that because it was a secret.

I watch my friend's mother push bookshelves against the front door. She's schizophrenic, too. Her daughter makes excuses for the way she lives, even as she grows thinner and paler, even when bruises appear around her eye.

I watch women mirrored across generations, women who can't help their daughters any more than they can help themselves.

My mother tells me that her friend ran away from home when they were thirteen—the kind of runaway that doesn't come home in a week, hoping her parents will forgive her. She was the kind of runaway that shows up two years later, with hair chopped short by someone with little feeling for the work, her eyes empty.

When I'm nine years old she holds me in her arms and tells me why she had to go to rehab. That she was an alcoholic, and that it was a secret. That we would go to meetings called Alcoholics Anonymous and that would be a secret too.

## Still Life with Five Everyday Objects

### 1: Cotton Swabs

I remember that night at the motel in the barren spaces of wine country. An hour north of San Francisco, I know he doesn't remember what happened after the long straight drive through the dusty bowl of the central valley and the winding traffic on the outskirts of the city, I know he remembers some of it vividly.

Liam came back with a few stolen cotton swabs, a bottle of water. I'm in the hotel shower, listening for the door's rattle. He is there in the other room while I'm drying off with bleached rough towels. He's fumbling with the contents of his pockets and a plastic bag.

His knuckles are ripped in bloody patches from the sharp edges of the beer bottle caps that fell into the hard-to-reach places in my car. He remembers using the edge of a lighter to pry them off. For the next few months, I'll find them scattered under the front seat.

He offers to go into the bathroom as he's cutting up an empty can, making a shallow bowl with the bottom. I won't ask him to hide, and a part of me is curious. I want to see. He hovers a lighter under the bowl, a white washrag turns black where it's wrapped around the hot metal. He ties my sock around his arm, our backs against the headboard of this motel bed, he lets me see all of it.

He remembers that moment but doesn't remember if it registered on the first or second try. He stripped to his boxers and asked me to hold him that night but doesn't remember calling me by another name, that he apologized the first few times, then passed out in my arms. I never wanted to watch again. But in the morning, he pulled up cotton shots into the same syringe, one, two, and I drove us through the mountains back to Humboldt.



## 2: Duffel Bags

It's hard to be the one who does the leaving. You get into your car knowing there are too many empty hours ahead and you're driving in the wrong direction. My mom said that it was always harder to be the one that gets left behind, but I haven't gotten left behind in a while.

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It's ten on Saturday evening, and I'm in my third-floor apartment watching the taillights of his Prius flicker on and off. Liam is picking up his duffel bag and asking if I ever got used to leaving. *No. Maybe after the first couple times it gets easier, but no, you never get used to it.* We're on the couch. His stubble is coming in and we're trying not to think about the half-packed duffel bag. He wakes up anxious and won't admit it till early afternoon. I bring the cat whose tongue is lolling and drying out in the warmth of the heater that turns on randomly and makes the TV hard to hear. He lays his head on my shoulder. We watch the cat wake up and get annoyed by the pop pops of television gun fire.

It's 2:30 in the morning and he doesn't want to sleep. I feel him get into bed. It's our last night of this. We're playing house in my grad school apartment. Or I'm playing grad school in the corner of the living room and he's playing artist on the couch with the pencils I got him for Christmas. *Are you coming for Christmas?* His mother asks every year hoping the answer is always yes, I still love your son, still want your family because mine is broken in a way that doesn't make for entertaining conversation over a Christmas roast.

Four years ago, I could take all of his pain right down deep into my chest and cradle him along with it, make it my own. Now I keep that pain wedged in the tight space between us,

resting against the bottom of my rib cage and the spot just under his shoulder blades where his muscles knot on the left side.

A few days later, I go to the grocery store and come back with only half the list and two bunches of sunflowers. I start crying in bed that night, hiding it in dark. He's not asleep. I keep trying to stifle them, but every time his tentative hand holds mine, they start again. *I'm sorry. Sometimes this just happens.* And we don't speak the silences of February, since my grandpa and the handgun. He closes the space, brings my head to his chest where the tears get messy and snotty and in my hair. I let him.

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After my grandfather ended his life in an empty gravel lot flanked by a rundown basketball court and two locked dumpsters, it aroused a deep-seated anxiety in me that I had chosen to love someone who I'd likely lose and most likely by his own hand. And, god, I felt guilty for making the association, and for the way that I felt my heart closing and hardening against further loss without my allowance.

A month later, Liam came with me to the memorial, charmed the old ladies and took me out for smoke breaks. He said the first time he came to stay at my grandparent's home was the one moment he could identify being content and being sober at the same time.

No one I ever brought home had liked my grandfather before. My grandfather wanted to know what you were thinking, and he wanted to ask you why. I could share my grief with Liam because he too felt the loss of this man who he had seen in himself. We were quieted by the choice to end life so brutally and in such a lonely way, and it made the two of us stronger

together. The hopeful part of me thinks it may yet save him from suicide. I know you haven't gone away.

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When my mother said it's harder to be the one that gets left behind, she was soothing a child who was stowed away in a safe place when she left by airport shuttle. It's worse to be the one that packs a duffel bag and drives away. I've been both—the left behind and the one who says they'll be back.

*No. It never gets easier.*

### 3: Razors

We're talking about my mother. He says he understood her impulse. Liam is drinking on one end of the west coast, and I'm drinking on the other. I tell him that I still don't understand, that these years still haven't dulled the loss. I've never asked before if he resents me for the night I asked to watch. I ask now, on this night, three days into watching the polls roll in for a second time. Night is where we stroke our shame.

It's almost midnight and he's saying he wants to shave his head, take monastic vows, find a reason to live. It scares me. I want to see what he does in the world; I want to be able to reach him. He's been bouncing around his VPN. Trying to find some meaning in the corners of the internet, he's been thinking of giving up on modernity.

I've been alone again and writing; I've been cleansing crystals in lavender water and freezing under the full moon, wasting salt in lines on the patio. I bleed each month so much more than I used to when I was skinny and hiding in a dorm room. I could paint myself in it like I used to with a razor blade.

He left a pack of razors in my bathroom when he left. They're in the drawer with the cotton swabs. But I don't think of that night in the hotel or those thick aged-white scars on my legs when I open it. It's just razors and cottons swabs.

He once laid his head on my bare legs and said:

*I hope you get to cover these in beautiful colors.*

#### **4: Wool Cardigan**

His mother is smelling the pockets of his knit cardigan, checking for stray bundles of pot lost in the wool. We meet her at the hotel, and she drapes it across his grandmother's shoulders. She is in her stocking feet. One of the sleeves is still inside out. I step closer and pull the sleeve right, even though she's not particularly nice to me. She asks me the same questions each Christmas, and I've taken to giving her different answers to keep things interesting. It's something he would do; he's been rubbing off on me.

His cousin is twenty, in a wedding dress and flocked by three girls too young to be bridesmaids. There are flowers in her hair and baby fat on her cheeks; it feels like watching a girl play dress up. He's wearing a black velvet suit jacket, structured at the waist because we went shopping at White House, Black Market on New Year's Day, and a bolo tie borrowed from a friend. I wear my mother's silver and a red dress that's too tight and too short. His sister wore knee-length and pearls.

We get drunk that night, me from heavy handed pours of waiters paid by the bottle, and him from the open bar when his parents aren't looking. The dinner served has barely any carbs, and as we're sharing a cigarette outside, I say, "Three different kinds of animals had to die for that meal."

"That's hot," he replies as he portions a dab for me to hit.

His parents leave early, corralled by their girl in pearls, trying to bring the grandmother still in her stockinged feet with the cardigan I've seen a hundred times in less decadent contexts. It's slung over his messy desk in a dorm room covering syringe caps and greasy paper plates.

He's wearing it on the low brick wall in his backyard under the stars while I dole out my own shame in small doses.

I'm in my last semester of college, a poetry class that I have to pass to graduate. Any feel for the line, for verse is lost on me, because parts of me went missing when my grandfather did.

*Prompt: Write a love poem that's not a love poem or something to that effect.*

I'm thinking about that sweater he got in Ireland and that room with the twenty-year old in the wedding dress and his mother offering to dry clean the pot smell away. No one has ever offered to send my clothes off for dry cleaning. My family doesn't have country club weddings with open bars. The last wedding in my family looked like several cars and motor homes on the boundaries of an old ranch in Arizona, too much box wine, the cops getting called, my aunt passed out in her Jetta. So, I write a love poem, an angry one because the places where poor and working class carved themselves into me are still raw, and his family wears post-graduate education, natural fibers, their own pearls instead of silver inherited from dead mothers.

## 5: Narcan

I didn't know I'd be here, farther north and deeper into a forest I didn't yet know the extent of. I didn't know Liam would be here either, passed out in my bed as the votes rolled in too many red. Fingertips blue and skin pale, watching Pennsylvania go and then the rest, he nodded off soon after.

I stayed awake, because there was no room for me in the bed and I couldn't move all six feet of him, all the dead weight, and long limbs. I couldn't go to sleep for fear he'd stop breathing because the yelling outside was the only reminder that anything was happening past the four walls of this dorm.

For me, everything was here, in the slow rise of his chest and every exhale. I watched the election. I watched him. I watched the election results roll in against the edge of an almost overdose, through a night of breaths per minute, votes per state and so much red. Like the sweater he was wearing the first day I saw him, and I knew he'd be something to remember.

The next morning, I had to tell him we lost, but we had lost a long time before.

## Good Clean Dirt

I arrive on the doorstep with a suitcase and a paper bag from the grocery store: dry oats, unsweetened peanut butter, unsalted almond butter, honey, a bunch of bananas and apples. It's all I've been eating lately. I'm seeking refuge in the suburbs of Las Vegas with my best friend, Tate, his parents, and his younger brother. I'm trying to gain back the weight.

The year before, Tate and *Mamo* came to my house with little slices of cream cheesecakes wrapped in foil. It was their offering to the grieving ones. So, when I'm drawn back to the desert, they take me in, girl with no parents, girl living out of her car and bouncing around the southwest. They ask no questions of my continued presence as weeks stretch to a month. They don't ask about the oatmeal.

In the mornings, I take my tea on the patio in the backyard. I do some stretching on a yoga mat. I eat oatmeal, two sometimes three times a day, gaining back the pounds I lost over the last six months. Tate leaves for his shifts as a prep cook and I make his bed, straighten his room and the corner where my things have taken on new life and begun to occupy his small space.

I drive his little brother to the mall with his friends in the back, listening to their teenage gossip, the who's been hooking up with who, what happened last night in the tunnels. I pick up lentils on the way home for *Mamo*. It's a simple way to spend a summer. And I craved simplicity and peanut butter that summer.



I arrived just in time for the first heat wave, projected at 112 degrees. One morning, Tate and I wake up under a duvet each in the crisp air conditioning that bounces off the tile floors. I hid a worn plastic bag with five or six grams of mushrooms from Northern California in his desk,



and we have no plans for the day. We make the bed, dress in comfy clothes, and eat shrooms for breakfast. The rolling in our stomachs crests up and down as we play with the fairy lights hanging over the bed. They light up the blood behind our fingertips when we grasp them, do the same to nostrils and toes and ears. We take turns showing each other, the blood pumping inside us, holding the little bulbs between lips and teeth glowing.



Tate's room is dark most of the time, the window covered by a tapestry I bought when I was fifteen and handed down to him. One afternoon, I hide in the corner where the bed is pushed up against the wall. The sun is blocked out, no lamps are on, and I'm sad because loss gnaws against my stomach and I'm too thin and my stomach hurts when I eat. There's a soft knock on the sliding door, his room was meant to be an office, then painted purple and green for a bedroom, then occupied by a boy now a young man. I'm sure that Tate has come home sweaty and smelling like the trays of onions he chopped for hours.

But it's *Tato* who peaks around the door to offer hot chocolate. I wipe the tears off my face and sit with him at the kitchen table as he presses pure cocoa power into a paste with the round of spoon against the bottom of a mug and heats milk on the stove. He drinks espresso from the stovetop percolator full to the top of a mug but pushes sugar toward me. I take a sip first because I've never had hot chocolate made rich and bitter and not with Swiss Miss. I add a couple spoonfuls and we sit quietly.



I want to put the world in my mouth. This want of novelty drives Tate and I from the room. The outside looks pleasant enough, no clouds in the sky, the manicured lawns are bright and even, so we make stumbling preparations with shoes and a bag with necessary supplies.

We smoke in my car on the deserted street. No one will go outside today. The blacktop can get up to 160 degrees, the sidewalks a little less, and in a car quickly up to 120, but the weed kickstarts the trip, so it's almost worth it.

The plan is to seek shade, solitude, and trees at a park around the corner. In the Henderson suburbs, you'll hardly ever be more than a half mile or so from a park. That's the claim to fame—affordable bubble-burst homes in family neighborhoods. Easy access to a Whole Foods or a Target, the best schools of an underperforming, underfunded district and always a greenspace within walking distance.

Halfway up the street my vision goes dark and begins to make patterns with the reddish browns of my eyelids. I was sinking into the warm womb of myself. I went with it willingly, reveling in the warmth of burning concrete. I thought the sun kinder than it was. I probably had heat stroke.

I was laying in someone's driveway. That is what someone would have to see if anyone ever walked the streets when it was that hot. But most neighborhoods will have an eerie emptiness to them in the heat of the day. The sun beats down and absorbs all the sprinkler water from last night, the wind rustles the leaves of carefully rounded bushes and trees, no front doors open.

He pulls me up, pulls my arm over his shoulder and walks us another fifty yards or so until we round the corner and are out of sight of his house and others. For a time, I only feel his

arm around my waist, the heat underfoot. I wonder when I'll see again. I don't voice this concern. Fear is highly transmittable in these contexts.

Then he sits me down on the sidewalk and dumps water on my head. My eyes open to a world so drenched in sunlight it hurts to remember just how bright the desert can be. I find that I feel quite profoundly like a sunflower. I tell him so. Fed by light and water, I'm reborn by way of water bottle into a safe and well-tempered world.

From here on the corner, the park is just visible beyond the mirages that rise from the road. It seems to beckon with an enticement that feels so childlike our excitement is renewed. The fear that had filled us both a moment ago dissipates and we are simply going to the park. Crossing the empty street with a single-minded drive on the wavering hill of grass ahead, we collapse onto the ground in the dappled shade.

We are laying in the grass, watching the trees. My hair and clothes are already drying as if the dousing never happened. At the water fountain we drink, fill the empty bottle sacrificed to my heat exhaustion, take turns cupping the water in our hands and pouring it over the other again and again. Each time feels like brightening birth, baptismal shocks of soft water curling around our ears. It becomes compulsive, each welling in cupped hands, each emptying palmfuls onto the other. The heat dries us so fast we have to go back for more salvation.

The water has collected in little puddles on the rocky soil. We splash in them, feel the slap of water on the pads of our feet. I set out to make mud, but I'm missing the silt and the clay. I mix in more water, turning the soil again and again, willing it to a consistency hospitable for growth. I cover my feet in it anyway, the palms of my hands, the backs, then my legs. I offer to cover him too, but Tate doesn't like to be dirty.

I'm rooting the places where I touch the earth, burying them with dirt. He lets me cover his feet. I pay special attention to the toes and the webs in between. He helps me wash my hands, so I can drink another insatiable handful. The grit of it has smoothed my skin, washed away sweat from the lines of my palms and between my toes. I have been scrubbed pure by that dirt. I am as clean as I'll ever be.

We tip our heads back, holding mouthfuls of cold water open to the sky as if waiting for the sun to evaporate the well of our bodies or the monsoons to flood us. We close our throats and fill each other with water. We take turns gazing into the basins we have made with our mouths, splashing a single finger against the soft palate. We are fountains, bubbling and gurgling through our noses, spitting it out in small, untidy geysers. It feels good to play this way. To drink, to drench, to dry and start again.

This play is tireless, an endless cycle of drying and soaking, of soiling and rinsing, and I feel we'll never run out of water, of sun, of dirt, of joy. We walk home filthy, damp, sunburned, and giddy. We return to the house, walking hand in hand with giggles still in our lungs and smiles despite the heat. His mother asks what we did all day, and we tell her the truth: We went and played at the park.



My mother said, *you have to eat a pound of dirt before you die*. A pound is the tipping point, the place of no return. I eat half of his. Between us, he and I, a few milligrams perhaps lingering in the plastic baggy, specks more that float in the water-logged fountain, traces on my fingers as I splash the water in his mouth.

Maybe she meant a little bit of dirt is harmless or maybe she meant that over the course of a full well-lived life, you'll make it to a grand total of a pound of dirt from beach days and unwashed celery and wiping the smudge of a garden glove against your chin. Perhaps she was pointing out that a commitment to such a quantity guarantees death.



I worm my way into the household that month. Empty the dishwasher. Aim to please. Pick up Polish words in passing. They fall out my head. When I leave, *Mamo* and *Tato* wrap me into the center of them to say goodbye, they place me between their bodies, and hold me like I belong to them.

## **Stories from the Archive of My Mother's Deathbed IV**

I stop sleeping in my mother's bed when she leaves the military, but she still tells me secrets, and we have more and more each year. Our doors are always closed, front door always locked, blinds always shut tight.

My nana begins to tell me stories. She begins to tell me secrets as the two of us orbit around my mother when she gets sick. She tells me that when she was a single mother, she was always scared, and she kept the blinds closed too. Nana was scared of her shadow, of all shadows. Sometimes, she was scared of her daughter too.

She tells me that my mother once ran away from home, but that she was the kind of runaway who calls after a week, wanting forgiveness, wanting to go home, and leaving behind the girl who had no home to go back to.

She tells me my mother left school when she was fifteen. My mother would spend all day with a pen and paper, drawing the same intricate pattern again and again. She wouldn't leave her room for days. She whispers these things to me as my mother gets sicker.

My mother tries to parent from her deathbed. She reminds me not to walk to my car alone at night. Downstairs, Nana whispers that when my mother was fourteen, she was raped in a parking lot at night, and that's why she was scared for me. I hadn't heard that story before, but I already knew why my mom said what she said. I didn't need to know about parking lots to understand why she was always afraid. Mothers pass their fears on to their daughters hoping that fear will make them safer somehow.

Nana tells me, as we sit in a sparse hospice room, that she might have never been a nurse, that she might have been a nun instead, as her peers had always taunted and if the Latin masses

had prevailed. I know she is wondering how much pain she could have spared herself if she'd chosen differently.

I ask my grandfather about parking lots. He says he gave her a ride to a clinic once, the same kind of clinic she'd told me about, the kind that was always a secret. He tells me he didn't ask questions and she offered no answers. I already knew that story. She'd told me that story a long time before.

## Well Being

We fell out of the back of the car as the sun was coming up. His credit card was in the gutter. I couldn't find my ID which I'd last seen in his hands chopping up lines and was probably lost down a crack under the seats or caught up in blankets. *What was I just saying?*

We're standing in the kitchen around a butcher block island, taking a knife to a white crystal. It's a come up with no break, no peak to it. It undulates past me; I can't grasp it before the ebb. *Now I remember.*

It's late December and a cold still night, the whole neighborhood and unfamiliar cul-de-sac lit up with twinkles, some stars visible in a sky tinged with city light. We're too susceptible to chill.

We climbed into the car, just enough room with all the seats down and blankets piled soft. Our heat warms the space, fogs the windows. *Rail this.*

He ground the rest of the dust down fine and palatable against the blank screen of my laptop, orderly rows enough to keep the come down at bay, which felt a shuddering against the ribs.

*What was I just saying?*

When I arrived, the bong was broken. Newly broken and another had to be fetched before commencement. Hot water, boiling, cold shock and crack. We drive up to Oceanside, head shop, *ID please.* We don't have it. Come home empty handed and start cutting up plastic. Empty liter bottle finesse.

The lights are twinkling. I've been living out of my car on this trip. I keep a mattress pad in the back and the seats flattened down. The batteries are dying, and the lights keep flickering, or the wires are frayed, and we are fraying under the flashing. *I don't remember.*



I keep going off my SSRIs. It's easy to let the refills pile up when the pills don't change much of anything. In November, I fell off citalopram for the third or fourth time. This time was intentional. Reuptake inhibitor, like a plug in the drain to run a bath. *What was I just saying?*

I learned how to reduce harm with Bactine antibacterial spray. When I was young my mother would spray it on my scraped knees and blow gently to *take the sting out*. I sprayed it on the crooks of his arms. He took off his sweater and stood there in his short sleeves, reaching out, palms up. I blew gently. *What was I just saying?*

Accoutrements must be gathered. Supplies are best sorted when sober. Gum, water, dress in layers because cold will run hot and then run back. Keep a few Xanax on hand should things take a turn for the rough. Keep the car keys far away from the ignition, ideally lost in the back seat so one can claim ignorance. Build a nest. Have cash on hand. Don't flood the system.

I know this seems hardened, but this is a tenderness. How can I explain that sobriety is truer when it's commemorated with rolling, that when arms finally heal, taking drugs is a Christmas present, being sobered is a gift. *What was I just saying?*

*Now I remember.* Doctors have been giving me pills since I was thirteen. They claim the pills will fill my mind with just enough serotonin to bathe in. But MDMA floods the brain with a rush of that well-being hormone. It's best to unplug the drain beforehand. It's good to come down. We need to remember to come down.

*What was I just saying?*

## The Museum of Us

If I were to pray, I'd pray to the bacteria inhabiting the microbiome of our gut, love them for their unique make up, worship the way they enable decomposition inside us. We are their world made of many stretching lengths twisted and bundled small inside us. We are always dying, skin cells shedding away left along the paths we walk. Do not reject the filth, the dirt, the many ways that disease makes us stronger. Germs find their way into our permeable bodies through eyes and mouths and ears, become a part of us, become turncoats.

Squish your toes in the dirt where we bury the dead, mix it with water cupped in your hand, pound it smooth and soft and cover your face with the clay and soil like elephants do. Laugh that water up your nose and swallow it back down your throat. We are all body. That food brushing past your lips, stuck in your molars, that's you now. That crumb that lingers dry at the back of the throat isn't just inside you, but it has given itself to be part of your body. Those powders you sniff up your nose, those oils that seep into cracked skin, the air in your lungs for the briefest of breaths—in—out—are you.

And when we trim our baby hairs, we do not feel pain, but loss is tied into those locks, stashed in Ziploc like a secret in the bottom drawer of the bathroom cupboard.<sup>8</sup> The room where we wash those invaders down drains that lead far away and bristle crumbs from between our teeth with fluoride, where we flush ourselves down u-bends and gather in massive collection pits.<sup>9</sup> Here we collect our toenail clippings in half-moon confetti, mixed up in jars with every trim.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> My mother kept my baby hairs in one; it was lost in moving boxes. Tate's mother kept his hair, too, all eighteen inches of a daughter cropped short to son.

<sup>9</sup> We are the shit and vomit and isn't it nice that we're all together even when the door is closed.

<sup>10</sup> I've been collecting my fingernails and toenails for two years. I'm not sure why.

And when the sun beats down to turn your skin a painful red, hot to the touch as you lay outspread on blankets laden with your night sweats, on pillows who have absorbed those single tears that well and brim without reason, use those soft nail edges to scrap and lift up those thin sheets that peel from irradiated skins.<sup>11</sup> Press them, clamped between pages like wildflowers plucked before pollination. Revisit them, dry leaves impressed with the creases of your skin preserved.

I want you to swallow those pieces of your wintertime lips that chap and peel in the bone-dry heat of your homes, the blistering cold of winds that rush off the bay. Scrape them away from their bed in the crease-cornered spaces of your mouth with ridged teeth. Bite at those splinters that peel from edges of your nail beds, get them stuck between your teeth like the flimsy skin of popcorn kernels. Tear away the flesh—already dead—and notice the seeping behind those wounds where the skin cells split, bursting open red droplets. Lay that finger heavy on your tongue, thick and dense in the hollow where the wetness of your mouth shrivels the sensitive pad of your fingertips.

Should you attempt to protect those soft layers, take the ash from your fires, soft, pillowy, disappearing between blackened fingers,<sup>12</sup> dust your vulnerable shoulders, the thin, purpled skin under your eyes with the paste of these combustions. And if you cannot stamp out those embers with sole-hardened bare feet, let them blow away like seeds in spring winds—planting, swallowing large gulps of gusts that blow over the earth, picking up pollen,<sup>13</sup> dust, blowing over the crests of those hills of sand.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> I peeled layers from Tate's sunburnt back, a shedding of skin, and I wanted to save pieces of him.

<sup>12</sup> After a night in the drainage tunnels, I returned home with ash on my hands, pine needles in my hair, and cops in the dining room.

<sup>13</sup> Spring winds left our world blanketed in yellow, bursts of plant insemination and no fruiting trees to catch it.

<sup>14</sup> When I press my cheek to the earth, every mound of sand becomes a mountain.

## **Stories from the Archive of My Mother's Deathbed V**

The stories my mother told me were my history, carefully crafted and negotiated so that one day I could tape pieces of fairytales grim and impoverished back together. In her stories boats floated along neighborhood streets and everyone flooded eventually. Her stories were the things about childhood that are beautiful even when they're about small dusty towns in the middle of deserts. Her stories were about crying outside nursery room doors. They were about piles of gold lining the streets of foreign lands and the square where they'd cut your hand off if you tried to take more than life gave you. They were about realities that she knew I'd grow to see and ones already so deep inside me that I couldn't escape them. They were about women.

Resilient women who kept white couches spotless when even they didn't feel clean, women who starched sheets and pajamas and everything they could get their hands on, women who were addicts and women who could have been nuns, women who ran away and came back and women who never did, women who thought being a woman was about having a period and not about being scared in parking lots and wondering how you were going to raise your kids all by yourself, and how to sound convincing when you say you fell off the ladder, and how to call your kid from rehab and how to die while still being a mother.

## **Bottom Feeder: Specimens in Silhouette**

Summer heats the pool to a lukewarm even night cannot cool, the stagnant air only lacks sun. Step into the pool and there is hardly a difference on her skin, which has ceased to sweat in the dry night. The air might as well be another water to move through, thick as it is with the heat still rising from baked ground. She sits on the edge, watching the blue light of the pool bathe her legs, palely swaying through still water. Her skin goes dry, chlorine crisps the ends of her hair, and only the brightest stars emerge from a crowded purple cast sky.

I didn't mean to drown her. It was only that she withered so quickly before my eyes. I was saving the morphine for a rainy day, but summer monsoons kept holding back. She always cried so readily in smooth strokes of night swims; I couldn't choose another way. She had always been laid bare in the water, floating defenseless—the only time she let me see her.

When the monsoons came, they came hailing. Water rushed the streets, picked up tumbleweeds and cigarette butts, carrying them down the gutter. When the storm drains clogged and the rain kept coming, it flooded roads, overtook medians; there was no way to drive home. Before the storm broke a needle pierced me a few hundred times, depositing ink with each quick stab on the thin skin of the inner wrist, marking my body with evidence.

I never would have drowned in those drainage tunnels, the ones that carry away sins of our concrete, our city that forms a bowl against the rain shadow mountains. I can smell the rain coming, the way it mixes with wind. I can see the color of it, that purple dark approaching. While the flood channels wait to be filled, I wait for their filling to carry me away.

A moment of taking stock of the body I carry: it is shaped like me and looks like her. I lift her up. She is smaller than she was and weightless, wrists and fingers not quite yet emaciated,

just a thinness in the extremities to tell me I've already lost a portion. I carry her to the backyard, and it is night, but the pool glows bright as it would in day, white flickers refracting off the blue bottom like the sun set itself underwater. I take us to the edge of this pool and step down. I walk steadily into that water until she floats in my arms. She doesn't wake. I let her head fall back, a face framed in tension halo. She begins to sink, or I begin to pull her down and she is still under the surface.

I didn't drown my mother.

She was dead only a few months before I decided to get a tattoo. I stole her drawing, two rough leaves and three small berries from a Holly bush, and got it pushed underneath my skin. That needle pierces the inner wrist, pressing pain radiating sharp tingles again and again my brain floods with a loving kind of hurt. Just a pinch of her ashes mixed into the ink.

I could have consumed her too.

Once I marked myself with her name, the monsoon broke. Water rushed downhill and blocked the road towards home. I watched it come up over the median, fast moving and foaming with city debris. Bruised clouds folded over mountains, torn open, bleeding themselves clean on the whole valley. Hail threatened to pierce the windshield while the water rose around me. I

turned from the flood, wrist burning with the evidence of what I'd done, and waited for the waters to drain.

I hear my mother calling me, her voice rises, urgent and bouncing off the floors of our home. My bare feet make slapping sounds against tile, mix with her call, "Come!" The kitchen door is cracked, so I lean into the night and look towards the garden then down the path. I see her there towards the end, a shadow waving me forward, silhouetted against a soft glow; the night is very dark. I don't want to step away from the light the kitchen casts through the glass-paned door. "Come outside," she says:

"I want to show you something"

I walk down the path, running my hand along the wall of the house, so the night doesn't take me far. When I reach her, she grabs my hand and shifts to stand beside me. She says, "Look," pointing at the full moon, large and bright, alien like no moon I'd ever seen. So large as it rose, home seemed close enough to touch the pitted surface. I can see the shining against her cheeks and the moon, it seems to sit right there on the sidewalk, it seems to roll towards us as it rises. It seems to be making her cry and it's too bright to look at. It hurts my eyes. This moon scares me. I pull away and run back into the house; I leave her out in the night, crying at a big moon.

I found her out there some nights, a cigarette crushed between her fingers and a tattered notebooks' pages lifting in the wind, eyes wet with clouds, staring impossibly at a full moon. I went by her side and turned her wet face away from the moon. She sipped from the halo at first,

then gulped for the fullness of it. I fled from her still, back into the electric glow of the house. She stayed by its side all night.

I've been keeping close eyes on summer moons, trying to look for whatever it was she saw up there. I sit on the porch and watch the moon come up from behind the trees growing brighter and brighter, it's lighting up the clouds beside it. This glowing other-worldly orb, polarized like a morning. I don't trust this moon, it seems hardly dark outside. I've yet to see the moon itself, only light, rays of reflection off the surface of that rocky place nearby—softened sun.

I may drown myself in this moon. I may sit in the curve like a womb when it glows a bloody red. These cycles concern me. A daughter becoming a mother, phases of moonshine: the space a mirror lives when it gazes into another. I used to think the new moon, my mother's period and the Gregorian calendar began at day one. I remember when the tide broke between us, when none were in synch with the flux of another, we were flux together, mirrors in standoff, and the space between ebbing to riptide.

I know that rocky surface pulls against water, shifts back and forth. Once a storm surge met tidal push, we found a thousand dying stars in the sand. Starfish pale against sun rays. To save stars still twitching, we cradle delicate arms, mouths suckling air, spindly legs sticking to our palms dip back in gulf shallows. We were only two, not enough to save every star in the tide, so we brought home their dried bodies. She enlisted my help even as I kept running to water with half-dead. We carried armfuls of skeletons; dozens taken from the shore.

She piled them on counters, leaving sand grit across the floors and the kitchen sink. The low tide-dead dipped in bleach baths, washed with dish soap, set to dry. Our kitchen was devoted



to preserving bodies—a mortuary for bottom feeders. While most of the fish made their way to the trash, a few were left intact.

She painted them in glitter.

She later admitted to insanity and desperate preservation. They were fish. Ridding them of stench and decay with kitchen chemicals, a hysterical negation of what we'd seen and done: the death we witnessed at the hands of a storm and our hopeless hurling of their flesh into the sea. Two decades pass before the evidence of decay wafts away. I still have two stars whole, while she is ash—ocean—dried corpse, the last particles of her kept in a jar like specimen, until I return to the place where we found all those dying stars and tried in vain to save us from the moon.

I threw her in the ocean.

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