The Red Wheelbarrow

'in the flesh'

April 2003
The editors would like to thank Therese for her counsel on things like paper weight and the mere pleasure of saying her name. Therese. We would like to thank Delp for his koans. They were essential to the process. Knock on the sky and listen to the sound.

We want to thank Cathy for her flaming generosity and Chloe Zwiacher (see page 12); we also want to thank Lucy and each other and everyone.

*It takes a village to raise a child!* – Hillary Clinton

P.s. So many many thanks to James for stepping in and showing us how to make our own fancy, and for just being really handsome.

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The Red Wheelbarrow

so much depends upon
a red wheel barrow
glazed with rain water
beside the white chickens.

In the desert
I saw a creature, naked, bestial,
Who, squatting upon the ground,
Held his heart in his hands,
And ate of it.
I said: "Is it good, friend?"
"It is bitter-bitter," he answered;
"But I like it
Because it is bitter,
And because it is my heart."

Stephen Crane

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In seven days
at 4:30 p.m.
I will be eighteen years
and three months old—
So old,
So young.
My body growing older,
decaying despite my youth.
It's 1:40 in the morning
and I'm afraid someday
I will lift my left breast
to find a hole underneath,
the cavity of a purple bone cave
big enough to slide a hand into,
easy access to vital organs
instead of the beauty mark
that lies there now.
I'm afraid
no one will ever drag their fingers
across my skin there,
notice the dark brown dot,
brieﬂy lay their lips on it.
Instead
they'll see the hole,
reach in and pull at
whatever their ﬁngers
wrap themselves around—
a tired lung?
cracked bones?
the heart?
What is there but that?
Satan bows his central head, while the right savages the left like a hungry dog. 
Frank, an old-age, modern-day Dante, who has had enough of kids. 
And has sold his soul to keep them off his lawn, 
his silent emerald companion, his one labor that has borne fruit. 
Now he blanches at the reek of cold vomit caked in greased fur 
as the devil extends one massive hand. 
With a syringe he used earlier to check his insulin, 
Frank pulls his soul, translucent and shivering, out of his body and offers it. 
"Not enough to fill a thimble!"
Satan laughs and sloshes the soul above his head. 
"Just do it," says Frank 
Satan flaps his wings, snarls, "It is so." Frank slips back across the ice to Virgil who guides him back through Dis and its sinners writhing like loose power cables and displaying blackened tongues scrambling naked over dead grass in the ditches to grasp at his feet. 
He kicks at them, his boots connect with a noise like a cockroach being bitten in half.

Back up above, Frank sees that Lucifer has been true and his lawn lies beyond a miniature river of souls. 
Frank calls for the boatman, blind and crippled. 
He sees the damn neighbor kid crash his bike and thrash screaming in the shallows with souls dripping off him like ethereal sweat. 
Frank shouts "That'll teach you to piss in my bushes you little bastard."
On the other side of the river, his lawn is pristine, golf-course green grass, unscorched by bike tracks or some toy long discarded. 
He passes another neighbor kid trapped with flatterers in a ditch full of human waste. 
He pulls up an Adirondack, stirs Metamucil into a glass of water, and looks out over his own private hell. 
Let consequences come later - he says to the lawn-wreckers of the world at large, "Come and get me now."
It really wasn't until I saw a penis that I realized that a man was truly armed. It was like Adam and Eve all over again, bare bodies covered in sweat and small pink lumps where the mosquitoes had bitten us. The boy had led me through his neighborhood, both of us walking in and out of yellow light pooling on the tarmac. I knew this area, it was a "bad" part of Toronto, Don Mills, the asphalt like the black wood of theatre, the night air like drawn curtains, there were gang fights here all the time. We walked hand in hand and I couldn't take my eyes off him, I thought he was too good to be true. We'd never spoken before at school, my type of friends were handing out brochures on Darfur, holding salsa sessions after school, coming to school high and meditating together during lunch in the bathroom stalls. I had met him through a friend during one of those woozy summer gatherings that happen spontaneously in the middle of the sidewalk, kids blocking off a section of road and beginning to break in the watery heat, me sitting with my knees up to my chin on the curb. He had been dancing, and I was enthralled by his body. His shirt clung with sweat to his chest and I could see the muscles contracting beneath his skin. A man's body, I remember thinking. Yet he'd been more than that to me in the next few months. Around him sudden underground springs of tears would lift up and I would begin to cry in the middle of those summer parties in dark basements, leaning on his shoulder and listening to the lull of his voice. We would talk for hours, his mouth open wide in the middle of summer, miming himself as a five year old, catching snowflakes on his tongue. Me leaning forwards to him so that our noses touched, saying something stupid like, "I'm wild, I'm wild, I'm wild." We explored the city together, by foot, cutting through back yards, stepping over tomato plants, swinging together on monkey bars already cold from the night air.

That night as the air began to thicken and stain a dark purple, never really black out here in the city, he led me down a path into the Don Valley ravine. There was a rope of water trailing at its heart, the ravine like an inverted mountain. The sides crawled steeply upwards on either side, pregnant with leaves and stalks and trees in that high summer way, when everything was so ripe it was rotting. The flowers smelled like morning sickness, the fat white petals falling from the stem at the slightest touch. I still remember the park bench, how I did not dare to say no. It was dark, the air so humid, mixed with our sweat, I felt as if I were drowning the closer he came, the farther we got. Once clothed in the dark, surrounded by greenery so thick that the sounds of crickets rung off hard palettes of leaves, he changed. I remember trying to make his face out in the dark, wondering if an animal had taken his place. Guys had been docile to me since then, getting wet eyes when it was over, trying tentative advances up my skirt, looking awkward with a box of chocolates, at worst sending me a stinging email afterwards. This was different, suddenly I
Fifteen grams of carbohydrates.

While you're still very young, you and your mother go berry picking in the summer, apple in the fall. You don't like the apples; they're small and sour and resemble a tub of Play-do.

An hour outside of the Twin Cities, Minnesota farm country starts. An hour outside of the Twin Cities, Minnesota farm country starts. There are cabinets on the two windowless walls filled with piles of convenient foods: small boxes of cereal, Nutri-Grain Bars, oatmeal, Pop Tarts, fruit snack race cars, little cups of peanut butter, Milky Ways, jam, and frosted animal crackers, and the last of the 20-count box of Payday's. Everything is in single-serving sizes, nutrition facts printed on the sides. There are three drawers full of individually wrapped plastic forks, spoons, and knives that can't cut, a drawer of mayonnaise, mustard, honey mustard, and ketchup, a drawer of dressings, a drawer of cream cheese and salt and maple syrup. There is a microwave with a bowl of black bananas and apples sitting on top of it. In the corner there is a refrigerator stocked like the cupboards with milk boxes and juice boxes and yogurt and cans of vanilla Ensure, a freezer piled from one wall to the other to the ceiling with dozens of Styrofoam cups of ice cream, untouched Mighty Shakes, at least a year old, and exactly one sherbet cup.

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On the walls themselves are charts of everything a person needs in life. Love, passion, self respect, family, money, work, sex, education, personal possessions, and other luxuries are not included. The sane world boils down to the same inarguable truth: one woman, three fruits, two vegetables, two milks, five meats, six starches, five fats, to repeat every 24 hours, despite the stress of work or men or taking care of cats.

Fruit:
The requirements of a fruit are as follows: one serving contains 60 calories and fifteen grams of carbohydrates.

An hour outside of the Twin Cities, Minnesota farm country starts. While you're still very young, you and your mother go berry picking in the summer, apple in the fall. You don't like the apples; they're small and sour and

backstage that connected all the exhibits like an underground tunnel. Finding the teddy exhibit door he opened it, removed the bears, and sat me down on the chair. I found myself face to face with my mother, staring relieved in at me through the glass. I turned to him and said, "Make me disappear."

He flipped a switch, and the only change I noted was the look on my mothers face, the sudden blanching that poured over her smile. The way she reached up and touched the glass, knocked. I sat there and watched as my mother's panic grew. I watched her run out of sight, heard her pounding at the door to the back stage, calling my name. He remained standing, his hand on my shoulder, heavy like lead, moving now, stroking my small neck. I remember that I began to sweat, that his heavy worn palms spread the beads of perspiration over my skin. "Turn me back," I said to him. But he remained standing behind me and it was rude to order people around that were older than you. I remember watching his face. It was so still as if the man that had been in his eyes had disappeared along with the switch of a mirror. I don't know how long he stood there, breathing hard. It was only when my mother, appearing again in the glass, began to cry, brought out her cell phone and began to frantically punch in numbers that with a deft switch of his hand, he turned the mirror, and there I was again. My mother dropped her phone.

I remember how he brought me out afterwards, his palm in mine, how my mother grabbed me away, how I didn't even get a chance to say goodbye. She dragged me into a corner and began touching my dress, smoothing my hair, grabbing my legs and saying, 'Did he touch you Ruthie? Did he touch you anywhere?' I remember being confused, of course he had touched me, on my shoulder, he'd held my hand... and I could still feel the smoothed sweat and the raw spot on my neck where he had rubbed me. I began to shudder as my mother said, 'Do you see the glass, begun to cry, brought out her cell phone and began to frantically punch in numbers that with a deft switch of his hand, he turned the mirror, and there I was again. My mother dropped her phone.

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After that, growing older, my little female friends would play Barbie and Ken having sex. The dolls would have sex with their Velcro clothes off, their lumpy plastic bodies rubbing and hitting against the floors. I remember once, inviting two of my friends over, how I watched as two of them pushed my favorite Barbie and Ken together so violently that the Ken's head popped off and rolled away. Screaming, I had run to my brother who kindly reattached the head for me. Bringing the Ken back to my room I refused to let my friends touch him, and using a blue pen marked up his face and pushed him into the very back of my closet. From that day on, every time my hand came into contact with him while searching for something I would draw it back quickly, as if I could feel the beaded wet sweat on his plastic skin.
elegant as the tangled moss over the head of the small stone lion near the back of the campus. Sex was in the Songs of Solomon, where woman's breasts were fruits and the nights were referred to as "sweet". It was what Adam and Eve had in the Garden of Eden, amidst roaring waterfalls and crested red birds. It was something men did a lot in Bible tents with their wives. It was never Playboy bunnies, hard vibrating contraptions, bursting busts, bronzed legs, wet tongues, never just an acheing will to be desired, but something more like the large cool glasses of water I would douse down during the long summer days. I had been taught not to think, as popular criticism would have it, that sex was shameful, but instead that it was something private and sacred. It was veiled in smoke, much like the olden temples we would read about in the Old Testament, the layers of rooms, in the heart room the Covenant where only the priests could enter.

In primary school I had a passionate argument with one of the boys in my class. He was scrappy and tanned, a foreigner—vulgar and American, his eyes bugging out of his face. When he got upset he would stick his arms down his shorts and fling his hands out the leg holes while he spoke. Sex, I insisted, was sex, and it didn’t cause babies. God was the one that sent the babies. I remember knowing I was wrong even as I argued. His mother was a doctor, and doctors were the ones that knew the most things. The boy’s father, there was a rumor, had been a wild man that lived in Indonesian forests, only to be found, cleaned and civilized by his current wife. All that night I had tumultuous nightmares of a greasy oiled man jumping out from the forests and heaving against a small white woman, pressed up against a tree. At the end of which, he stepped back and a baby fell out from between her legs.

Later on, when I was about six or so, my mother bought my brother and I a membership to the Singaporean Science Discovery Center, one of the few productive things we could do in our tiny country besides go to the mega malls lining Suntech Plaza. Unlike in the north, there are no seasons to refer back to in our memory, the wet slush or the red leaves, we only had hot, hot summer sun, all year long, the sun that stuck in a wet film to your skin and left warmth glowing like another layer of blood beneath your skin. All I remember is, my mother and I standing outside a exhibit behind glass: a black room, a small chair with three teddy bears seated on it, and a silver mirror. There was a large red button, all the buttons were large there, on the panel, and when I pushed it the bears would suddenly disappear. One of the workers came up to me, a young man smelling harshly of strong cigarette smoke. I had learned, even by then, that, dealing with men was easier than dealing with ladies. I had already picked up on their fascination with my little round girl face, my tiny fluffy skirts, how to use a large pretty smile to inspire many favors from both uncles and male food vendors alike. When he went down on his haunches in front of me and touched my hair, I knew I had a new devotee. He asked me if I wanted to disappear like the teddy bears. I nodded and he led me off into a side corridor, waving to my concerned mother. Opening a door we entered a large

difficult to eat, the skin sticks in your teeth, irritates you to the point of tears, and you get mad that you can never lift the full pretty barrels. But the berries are different. You eat them great handfuls at a time, cover the bottom of your basket and empty it again, fill and empty, fill and empty, fill and spill the berries all over the ground, sit down where you are and eat each one out of the dirt until your belly bulges under your brother’s t-shirt.

For your seventh birthday, during apple season, your mother brings home a brown tabby kitten from the orchard with a beautiful tan “M” on his forehead. She can’t stand to have him fixed. “He’s a farm cat.” She says, “So you’ll have to teach him all of your city kid tricks.”

Vegetables:

One serving of vegetables contains 25 calories.
You hide food under your bed long before anyone starts calling it a disorder. One night, your family is eating dinner on their back porch. You get a turkey burger and cooked carrots and spinach; you eat the burger and don’t want to ruin the rest of the meal with the bad parts, but also hate to insult anyone’s cooking. So, you attempt to feed carrots to the dog when no one is looking.

“She sure is hopeful tonight,” Says your brother, scratching the dog’s ears while he takes another bite.

“I was just thinking that,” Says your mother mid-chew. 

“Uh-huh,” You say, “She misses Minoux.”

“Where is that cat?” They both ask, peering around the back yard.

“Beats me.” You say, artfully discarding the last of your carrots into a napkin under the table.


“With his girlfriend.” Says your mom. He says, “You’re lying.”

She says, “She’s young.” But from below the porch, a painful feline moan takes the air space.

Your brother looks at your mother. Your mother looks at her plate, the half-eaten burger.

“Hey, look what I ate!” You say, as the cat’s crying grows louder. For your seventh birthday, during apple season, your mother brings home a brown tabby kitten from the orchard with a beautiful tan “M” on his forehead. She can’t stand to have him fixed. “He’s a farm cat.” She says, “So you’ll have to teach him all of your city kid tricks.”

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“Hey, look what I ate!” You say, as the cat’s crying grows louder.
But the next day, your teacher tells you to eat lunch with her. She asks what your favorite subject is, math, if you have any pets, one dog and my cat. Soon the conversation dies away and she admits what she really wants is to say that she's heard what happened, that it must hurt to have a mother who cannot stand to live even for her children. Suddenly, the turkey sandwich you're eating doesn't taste right. You can't take another bite of it, say you're sick, and bee-line to the bathroom. As your stomach lurches towards your throat she knocks and says, "Yoo-hoo, are you okay?"

"I'm fine." You say, "I have the flu. Please go away."

Milk: 

One serving of milk contains 90 calories and 30 percent daily calcium.

There's a surprise waiting when your mother picks you up from school. A fat Himalayan lunges at you from the top of a wooden stool when you walk into the kitchen. It purrs and rubs its fur against your shins. "What's that?" you ask, startled, "Who's cat is that?"

"Her name's Sharma." Says your mother, with an odd, eager smile, "Her owner's on a trip, so she'll be staying here a while."

Something about Sharma doesn't seem right. She keeps you up all night rubbing against you under the covers. If you ignore her she starts moaning, and as you can see she never sleeps. She moans for hours. In the morning she only leaves you long enough to eat. As far as you can see she never sleeps.

In a week, your mother is going insane. She complains on the phone to her cat-owner friend, but there's no end to her torment. Finally at her wit's end, you can't say. You live with your father except for the few hours after school and don't see Minoux often. But you know there's no good in sending Sharma to live with her parents.

The problem is this is where Minoux, your cat, lives. Sometimes he doesn't leave for days, driven crazy by infections from fights or early old age. You can't say. You live with your father except for the few hours after school and don't see Minoux often. But you know there's no good in sending Sharma his way, so you follow her downstairs. You hear your mother lock you in, and there, across the room Minoux sits staring at you intruders. He's uglier than you remember, all bone, patches of dark raw skin showing where pieces of him have been bitten off.

Sharma gets low on the ground when she sees him and starts to growl. Soon Minoux is mimicking the sound. You're afraid Minoux might finish him. Something must be done; you run upstairs and pound on the door until your mother lets you out, bound to the kitchen and grab the milk and a bowl, then sprint back down, pour the milk until the dish is half-full and set it on the floor in front of Sharma. Pig of a cat, he goes for that. You pick up the bowl and back slowly up upstairs with it, Sharma following the milk closely.

Later that day, your mother announces that Sharma is nothing short of evil and should be put to sleep. She's taking her to the animal shelter. Sitting still in the basement, watching Minoux's breathing slow, you let her go.
Starch:
A starch contains 80 calories and 15 grams of carbohydrates.

Your dad picks you and your brother up from your mom's house on a
Wednesday in October. The month is almost over, cold just moving in in time
to ruin Halloween. But you just turned twelve on the tenth, and try to act older,
so you say there are better things to do than get fat on all that candy anyway.

You sit in the back of your car picking at a bag of it someone gave you
at school. Your father gets in the front seat, turns the key, and puts both hands
on the wheel. "How would you both feel," He asks as you put down the bag and
curl both arms around your gut, "about moving to Connecticut?"

You say "What?"
My brother says, "Why?"

At first you say you'd like the change, but when it sets in, that you'd
rather die.

You leave first day of Christmas Break. You cry and straight through
moving day, you beg to stay, don't tell a soul you're moving. Your mother
doesn't take you leaving well. She slips back into sickness like a leaf into a water
well, snakes around the house listening to your phone calls, is convinced some
days when you get home from walking that you've really been somewhere with
older men who you see regularly. The accusations get to be too much and soon
you and she stop talking.

So in front of her house getting ready to head out east, instead of
talking to her you pick up Minoux and give all your attention to him, gladly
ignore your mother standing behind

Fat:
One fat contains 45 calories and 5 grams of fat.

So happy to be home again, you tell your dad that you've decided not to
go back east with him. You're old enough to take the repercussions of your
actions and your mind is made. You're moving back to Minnesota to your
mother to finish eighth grade. Minoux's as good as dead, some injury in his
ear smelling like road kill, more black now than red. The last week of June, your
mother schedules an appointment for the vet. Meanwhile, you try to get in
touch with teachers from your old school to see if you can visit and talk about
enrollment for the fall. But your computer's been collecting dust since the year
your mother busted all the hardware thinking she'd found a hidden camera
there, and you can't get it to work at all.

Luckily you know a technology wiz from where your father used to
work. He's an engineer from India going for his America-recognized bachelors
You've known him for forever, and when you explain the situation he's happy to
let you come to work with him and use his computer. It only takes a minute but
he insists on treating you to lunch. The college cafeteria staff think it's cute to
see a little girl for once, and bake you special fries especially, the shape of smiley
faces. You try to eat them daintily, so take most of them to go.
There's a Hindu elephant on the dashboard of his car. You can't help but think of it later when he won't let you leave his apartment. So much strength. So many arms.

Later in your kitchen you stand with the box of French fries in your hand. Not knowing what else you're meant to do, you open it and see ten sick brown faces smiling up at you.

And then, like a sin, your mother creeps in. "We had to put Minoux to sleep. There were maggots in his ear and the infection was too deep. He never would have gotten better. So. What do you want to eat for dinner?"

What are you supposed to say? You close the box and throw what's left away.

In that room where I spend three weeks counting carbohydrates and conjugating French verbs for hospital school there is barely room to stand at my stoning ceremony. The head nurse takes a green rock from a bag and passes it between her hands. She tells us all about my first day, my stoic façade at intake, the strange combination of ice cream and fruit that I ate three times a day. She does not say how I shook like I had frost bite when the technician stuck the cups on me before my EKG, startled that I was just allowed my bare chest to wear. The nurse passes the rock to Dr. Levia, who draws more blood than the Red Cross, and talks about how I fought like hell to get out, mimics me leaning over my blood work beaming, "Isn't my potassium good? Aren't I doing well?"

Because it would tell them in a way I could not. The others have, comparatively, less to say. Fellow patients hold the rock like a precious gem, say what a good job I've done, wish me luck, and pass it on, wishing it was meant for them.

Along the far wall, our menus are pinned up along a thin cork strip, each one planned like a budget. I want to say that the numbers still tingle, that nothing is ever so precise, so nice and neat. That milk is more than milk, and meat is never just meat. I want to shout that there must be more than this constant filling and filtering out of patients and nutrients and thoughts, that some things just stick. I want to tell them that they're all sick themselves if they can't get it.

But the desire fades as easily as it came. And when everyone's been heard and the stone comes to me I don't say a word. I copy a poem on the observation window, Muñoz's "The Wind, One Brilliant Day" Open the pouch on my backpack and tuck the stone and the measures and the menus away.

---

**Dignity**

Lucy Nepstad

Sometimes become frightened thinking of all the spiders
I've eaten by accident in a lifetime—mouth open like a suction cup in dreams of skipping my stone all the way across the lake.

While I could harp on the germs, the possible contagions, it really comes down to not being awake to do it right;

cook each small, wiry leg in butter or garlic, fizzle it out until it's black and on its back.

Because there are many different ways to be the best, which means there's always something to lose—small, trusting moments with eyes closed.

Even now, I expect a part of me to rise the next time a foot perch daintily on my tongue, go to the door and turn the light on so that, somehow, I can at least watch myself swallow.
An earthworm has stopped moving underground and will soon become completely frozen. The two giggling kids with their box of matches have finally turned off Mickey's street towards home, their desire to laugh quenched for a minute. The little girl next door sits at her window in her room, not allowed to step out until she apologizes. She is content to stay in her room, and perhaps only hit her mother so she could do so. If only that plastic wood over there was real, she thinks, if only my closet had a toilet.

Micky on the other hand has taken a seat, her hands shaking, the tea kettle whistling, and her skin seems to melt off her bones. "Why? What is the sense in doing something like that?" she says. And the shadow of her refrigerator becomes large and too terrible to think of ever again. She has never considered it such a loss never to have married. She has always considered herself lucky to have loved and then lived rather than to have lived with someone unloved. But seeing the shadow and the bag on the floor makes her think that perhaps she made a mistake in thinking she was ever so selfless. The bag too is terrible, simply terrible.

A white cat coasts by the stove where Micky is sitting. Outside there are three chipmunks huddled together under an oak that's been known to drop leaves without warning. Just ask them. A bell is ringing, but that is inside now. The cat has just brushed against the chime hanging in the windowsill of the kitchen which is next to a string of red peppers that Micky has long wanted the courage to try. In the corner is a white handkerchief with a lipstick smudge in the middle. Micky remembers that the handkerchief is there but not the smudge. Near the door is a burnt paper bag with brown sludge coming out of the edges that she has pulled from the front porch to examine more closely. She has walked over from the stove to take a look at it with her hands on her hips. "But what's the sense in that?" she asks her cat Glee and for a minute fears to look at the metal kettle she's making tea with for catching a glimpse of her small reflection.

She thinks of the fur coat she wore for Christmas when she was five years old, her father who was most recognizable in a fedora. She thinks of that white pony she petted at her sorority sister's ranch one summer in Wyoming, how he came as close as she's ever been to another living thing when she held out a sugar cube. She thinks of Chip and how he used to spend 20 minutes in the morning slicking back his hair, how she had watched him from bed, pretending to be asleep. But this last thought is too much for poor Micky, she calls her cat Glee close and turns to the window where a very large leaf has just broke loose from her good oak.
She gets up as the whistle of the tea kettle is hurting her ears, and it is hurting the three chipmunk's ears too, and her dear cat Glee's. "I don't understand it one bit," she says as the kettle bubbles over. She sees the red peppers hanging on a string in the window, they've been hanging there for years. She thinks how there's no way they could still be hot, dried and old. The chickadee on the branch of her good oak calls for action. She takes a pepper in her hand and brings it to her pursed lips.

As she bites down a fish is swallowed whole on accident by a whale in an ocean 700 miles away. A Doberman guarding an asylum rests his weary eyes. Micky spits the pepper out in the sink and gasps for air, runs the water and uses her hands to get it to her mouth. It takes her 22 minutes to seat herself next to the paper bag where, finally, she laughs with a rusty hue of fire in her voice. She pulls her yarn shawl closer, pokes at the mess with her index finger. She sniffs and then tries to wave the scent away. "Why, it's poop."

wishing Mom would walk in and hug me and I can remember walking past her room and hearing the same sobs, but never opening the door. It was this denial, this façade of strength that we both assumed that drove a wedge between us. We walked around our own home, the death of my father, her husband, hanging like a mist over each room, so thick we were just barely visible to each other. It took me going away to school, and her own inward search for us to come back together, to share moments, and it is this gradual exchange of memories that I love and fear at the same time. I love it because sharing memories of my father is what keeps him alive and helps me to move past the obvious first stage of anger into the safer, more comforting territory of acceptance. But I fear it because there is a falsity to each memory I get from my mother; it is hers, not mine, and I'm afraid I won't be able to tell the difference.

I am slowly trying to redefine my life, to change the “before and after” mentality I cling to for security, like the blanket I used to carry around when I was small. But this is who I am. I will always elevate my father in my mind, even though he was a normal man with flaws and faults, all of which I choose to ignore. My mother and I can laugh over dinner about Dad when he yelled or washed my mouth out with soap, though sometimes when she dives into things I still can’t seem to remember I tune her out. I go back to summer afternoons with Dad on the boat, lying on the bow in my bathing suit, trying to get as tan as him. I go back to the smell of Lake Michigan, Coppertone, and WD-40. My mother is nowhere to be found, probably on the beach back at our cottage, sitting on a lounge chair, watching the dog. She’s probably drinking iced tea, reading People magazine, and smoking a cigarette she thinks I won’t smell two hours later and call her on at dinner that night. For that moment, it’s the slight rock of the waves lulling me to sleep, and my father quietly singing along to Jimmy Buffet that rings in my ears, not her chiding me for leaving my wet bathing suit on the hardwood floor. For right now, I can still do that, allow myself to drift back and not focus on the reality of my “after” with my mother. We share our stories, gather them like small stones on a beach, collect them, hoard them. One day I may have the strength to dig deep enough to recover my own lost memories, find my mother in my “before,” and fill that blank space, that hollowness that I carry inside me.
She hates that this is all I remember and asks me if I can forget it too, and grasp something else, as if my memories are as interchangeable as her handbags, buy one, discard another. She hates it because it reminds her of her own struggles, her own fears, which she has projected on me. I reassure her that it is her strength; the vague presence I do remember is someone whom my father respected, admired and loved. But whenever this moment is brought up she cringes and shakes her head, and it is me who has the privilege of grabbing her hand and squeezing, our roles reversed.

I am six years old, my hair in a messy ponytail, and I am wearing pink biker shorts and a pink shirt, bedazzled with rhinestones to form a small pony. I am not wearing shoes, but I have socks with ruffles and my feet do not touch the ground when I am on my mother's lap. We are at the island in our kitchen; there is an ashtray between my mother and godmother, El. They are smoking those long, delicate cigarettes that always remind me of wands and I would play with them when they weren't looking. There are glasses of white wine in front of them, ice in each. I am playing with their ashes as they laugh about something I don't understand. My mother has finished her glass and I am playing with the ice cubes. She smiles down at me and when she picks up one of them between her thumb and pointer finger, it drips on her sleeve. She places it in my palm, and I eat it. I remember the bitter taste of white wine on my tongue, the sharp aftertaste, and the two women laughing at my small gag.

I have hundreds of memories of my father, too many to count. I'm sure some of them are fabricated, figments of my imagination and my own attempt at recreating him in my mind. I can remember my father at the barn, grooming my horses, tightening my girth, signing lease papers. The horse shows I went to all include him, blue and red ribbons around his belt, brushing my horse's mane while I polished hooves or shined my boots. My father and I would go sailing, turtling the boat for fun or diving off the bow when the anchor was down. He taught me how to swim and dive and how to control a tiller. He is the one who helped me with my math homework and got me through reading The Little Princess. I can remember him reading me Goodnight Moon.

In all honesty, I am ashamed of my memories, though I try hard not to be. I was so determined not to block out memories as my mother did I was oblivious to the fact I was doing exactly that. My mother will sit with me now, my hands in hers, and tell me things that are too hard to hear. I remember nothing of my father's illness other than waking up to him in a pool of blood, and going to the hospital when he had his treatments and surgeries. I remember nothing of her involvement. When I came home for Spring Break after being in therapy I asked her to describe things I felt I needed to know, and then sat on the floor and cried, hands over my ears. I didn't think I'd have such a guttural reaction, almost primal. My stomach churned and I thought I would throw up when she detailed her memories. She had to pull my hands away from my head and put her arms around me as I shook, so confused at my own rejection of things I thought I wanted to know.

In the immediate wake of my father's death, my mother and I almost forgot each other, both so wrapped up in our own grief that we neglected to realize the best support system was in the bedroom two doors down. I can remember crying in my room by myself, clutching one of my father's shirts and

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From the balcony looking into the great room,

The night I first saw you the leaves of late fall were weighed down by rainwater and smooth puddle-arms caressed the side of the road. I watched you from the balcony, your body curled into a leather couch—you were nothing more than soft lines in the dim light. I could reach down and trace the lines with my fingers, following them as they circled around your body, spiraled across your cheeks, became lost trying to find their way back to their beginnings.

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.clyde rastetter

.30

.eleven
I remember every sight, smell, and sound of the fleeting second. I was determined not to become my mother. I was not going to have to call friends or family (in her case my aunt) to remember my childhood. I was going to remember everything, write a book, and stop the cycle. To this day, my mother calls my aunt on a daily basis and says, “Tell me something I don’t know,” and my aunt will launch into a story about something that happened to the both of them.

The day my father died I stopped trying to remember. Despite this, that day is the most vivid I have. I can recall second by second how it went by. Waking up to screaming, seeing the ambulance in the driveway, my mother curled on the floor of our kitchen with paramedics around her, seeing his body, kissing his cheek, calling my best friend, making calls to his business associates, and finally that night, sitting in bed with my mother’s best friend snoring next to me, pleading with God to take it back, let me wake up to waffles and NPR, not sirens and crying. That day is literally the oldest memory I have of my mother, as ridiculous as that seems. Three and a half years ago, when I was fourteen, and nothing earlier.

I hadn’t realized this until I was back in therapy a little less than a year ago. I was contemplating leaving a school that had nurtured me because I didn’t feel I had any more to write. I even want to get out of bed, and at the suggestion of my roommate I decided see another therapist. I sat in the doctor’s office, legs curled Indian-style as she asked me questions about my past and present. “What do you remember about your mom when you were a little kid?” I sat there, stunned, for almost twenty minutes, until answering, “I don’t know.” She wrote something down and I played with my rings. When she nodded, I began to cry. To this day I can remember very little of my mother before my dad died. It’s a terrible feeling to look your mother in the eyes when she’s trying to paint you a picture of an important moment but all you’re drawing is blanks. Her hurt is palpable, and I wish, somehow, I could change it. This past Christmas we sat on our couch, cats in our lap, and she asked about Goodnight Moon. Asked if I remembered not letting her leave my room until she read Goodnight Moon and sang me an Irish lullaby. I remembered the song, a quiet melody that I have in a music box, but I did not remember Goodnight Moon. I know the book, but I do not remember clutching her hand and begging for her to read it one more time. I don’t remember crawling into her lap on the rocking chair. I don’t remember any of it. She asks me these questions often. If we’re sitting at dinner or watching television the conversation always meanders back to my father. I go on about some memory of him I have and then she’ll ask, quietly, eyes averted, if I remember her there, as if she’s trying to grasp for me. I get the feeling sometimes, when we’ve talked about memories and moments, that my lack is really an emptiness. If I can’t remember her specific part in my childhood, I can’t remember her importance. She asks me simple questions, if I remember her brushing my hair or taking me to ballet, but I always answer honestly. I say no. I remember my father attempting to braid my hair and taking me to softball. I remember him yelling at the sidelines of my soccer game when I wouldn’t run (there was a bee near me), but I don’t remember her trying to calm him down. It’s as if each memory I have has been edited my mother snipped out, and there is white space in her absence.
My father used to call me by several nicknames, the kind I acted
embarrassed by when he used them in front of my friends, but secretly enjoyed.
They were random, and to this day I’m unsure just how many of them came
about. The one he used most was Goo, an abbreviation of Magoo, something he
called me for only a short while. It always reminded me of something that
oozed, as if I could slide under doors like the blob, and leave a slimy trail behind
me. Goo became Gooster, which eventually became the name of our sailboat,
and we both reveled when we heard the name announced over a loudspeaker at
a race. The Ginchiest was my personal favorite, derived from the Gidget
it was our little secret. To his friends I was WOW, or Walk on Water, a
nickname two of his work buddies still call me. I get voicemails on my cell
phone saying, "Hey, WOW, hope school is going well. Your mom tells me you
got to college. You know Billy's smiling down on you, have a great last
semester." It doesn’t bother me like it used to, the implication of my holier than
me, his only daughter, a reminder that I was his world, no matter how much I
rolled my eyes and sighed when WOW was brought up.

My mother’s nicknames are much more unoriginal, things like Lovey
and Pea. I remember these two, but the others I can’t recall, being erased by
growth or change in hair color or some other thing that just doesn’t fit me
anymore. Throughout school, from fourth grade until my sophomore year, my
mother would put cards in my lunch. Not little notes on napkins or a folded
piece of scrap paper but actual, store-bought greeting cards. My friends thought
it was the craziest thing in the world, each card in its brightly colored envelope,
announcing one of my nicknames to the entire table. In junior high I’d hide
them, read the note quickly then toss it back in my lunchbox. They were always
splendidly! When Jill picks you up for the barn, don’t forget to take your spurs;
you open your lunch. Ike kept every card I ever received from my mother; they’re
in four different boxes in my room at home, gathering dust. Occasionally, when
I’m angry at her or just need to feel that small emptiness in the pit of my
stomach disappear for a moment, I will pull them out, reread moments of my
childhood like I reread the Velveteen Rabbit every once in awhile, as if the
words will bring back memories I can’t seem to grasp.

My entire existence is basically categorized into two sections — before
Dad died and after Dad died. It’s a horrible way to live but sometimes your
mind unconsciously separates things in order to protect your consciousness.
The women in my family are the queens of this process. Throughout my entire
life I staunchly felt immune to their lack of memory. I would make sure at
important moments I would soak everything in, take a mental picture,
Finny. ‘She told us all this while panting behind us one day on the way to school. Joan kept rolling her eyes. She likes to do that. Her mom does it a lot when her dad talks, so it makes her feel grown-up.

“It doesn’t matter.” I say, “What are we going to do? Should we tell Miss Zola?”

Miss Zola is the teacher on recess duty today. She isn’t really a teacher, just an assistant to Mrs. Booning, the first grade teacher in the classroom down the hall.

Ella shakes her head. “I don’t think so, Gina. She’d tell us to stay away from it. Grown-ups never let you near animals. They—”

“Well, duh, Ella. Animals carry lice and parasites and diseases. You’re not supposed to touch them. Parents tell you that when you’re a baby because baby’s put everything in their mouths.” Joan says. She looks over at me and rolls her eyes again, as if to say, First graders. What are you going to do.

There are no other teachers out on the playground. Sally says, “Maybe we could move him till after school, you know, to a safe spot, and then get him before we go home. We could use my coat.” She holds out the plaid fleece.

“That is by far the dumbest idea you have ever had,” says Joan. They do not get along well. Sally has trouble in math, and is not a very good reader.

I look up again to make sure we are not being watched. This time, Brogan Dane catches my eye. He is the biggest fourth grader. He pushes littler kids around all the time, steals from their lockers, and even talks back to Mrs. Hench, the fourth grade Geography teacher. A year ago there was a rumor that his little brother had called him fat when he was mad, and so Brogan had broken his arm. Michael Hess says that Brogan once tied two cats together by the legs, and then hung them over a clothesline until all their blood went to their heads.

Brogan is walking towards us. I lean back down. “Brogan’s coming! Brogan’s coming”

Ella gasps, and we all stand up straight, facing outwards and close in tighter around the bird.

“What’d you guys find.” Even his voice is big and mean.

“Nothing.” I say. “We were just talking.”

“Let me see what you’re standing around.” he says, and puts his chubby hands on his hips. He is very round.

“Listen,” Joan steps forward. “We were just playing Indian Pow wow, and we were crouching around the fire trying to get warm because it is a very cold winter for the Indians.” She folds her arms over her chest.

Brogan laughs. “You liar. You lying bitch.” He has an older brother, and brags to the other third grade boys about how his brother teaches him “cuss” words. We don’t know what this word means, but we know it’s bad, and we all know we’ll never, ever say it.

Brogan pushes Joan out of the way. Sally and I move, too, but Ella stands in front of the Robin.
Raspberries hang heavy on their stems like sleepy old men with bellies full of beer. And blond girls bite into succulent strawberries, red-ripe and oozing juices that stain their lips, chins and tongues. Every storm is a new chaos: Fresh buds bend, thin and fragile, with the wind's resounding, smarting phantom smacks, and daffodil stalks snap, shivering in gusts. Blackberries plummet from their thorny chords, like juicy bombs that pop on impact with the ground. And the tumbled sounds of falling seas fill the ears of sleeping babies, awakened, weeping from dreams. But afterwards, when the rain subsides, the grass lays stuck and slick with mud and on the horizon the sky appears, peppered with the flight of thousands of blackbirds receding into the pallid fog that is the morning, again.

"Don't hurt him!" Ella says, louder now. "He's just little."
Brogan laughs. "A bird? Birds suck. My dad shoots them sometimes. He's gonna teach me how to shoot them, too."
He brushes past Ella. She tries to run at him, but Joan grabs hold of her and keeps her close.
Brogan bends down. "Dumb bird," he laughs, and then he stands up straight. He's smiling like he's thinking of doing something bad. It was the way he smiles when he sees a smaller boy across the playground and is just about to run over and knock him down. Now none of us are saying anything, and I think that maybe if we're quiet, he'll just go away. But then Brogan brings his foot down on the robin. His feet are as big as a real man's. The first snap is the worst, and the loudest. The bird might even have made a little chirp. He brings his foot down again and again, laughing, yelling, "Stupid-ass bird!"
Every time he lifts his foot the robin looks less like a bird. The beak flies out from under his sneaker and lands farther away in the leaves. I want to be sick. All of us are screaming. Except for Ella. Ella is just looking, tears streaming down her face, her eyes as wide as plates. She stands stock still, and stares at the tiny squished body.
Brogan wipes his shoe off on the leaves. "Dumb bird," he says again, but as he begins to walk away, Ella tears from Joan, and runs after him. We are all yelling her name, and there are more people coming over now.
Mr. Harris stepped out of his convertible and took one last picture of the building as he learned on his bright red car. He had always loved old things that should be torn down and forgotten but seemed as much a part of him as the street itself. Mr. Harris had tried to rent buildings in the brick apartment for the past two years. In its prime, the apartments sold as some of the most expensive in town. It had been in his family since it was built almost one hundred and fifty years ago. Mr. Harris originally wanted to sell it, but no one would buy now that most of the apartments had been converted to something only a few steps up from slum-housing. Every streetlight on the block had burned out except for one. The apartments were too large to be practical for the new kinds of people in the area. The last tenant had moved out the month before and Mr. Harris was footing all of the bills himself.

Mr. Harris wondered what the brick looked like in the beginning, the first week it was built. He imagined the buildings now bordering it had been gardens where roses grew, the paint inside fresh smelling. Mr. Harris wondered if any children lived there, playing outside. The women would have talked in the gazebo he envisioned at the back of the apartment. Mr. Harris listened to the sound of the crew starting the engines. He noticed that a small crowd had stopped to watch, most of them holding shopping bags, casually seeing what the commotion was about. A few had stopped their cars nearby and walked over to watch. Mr. Harris closed his eyes.

After dinner, he thought the men should have gone outside and played chess with large cigars in their mouths. Gas lanterns would have lined the walkway. Mr. Harris wished it were that simple now, got back into his car, and drove off. He heard the sound of the first wall being hit, the bricks crashing to the ground, and turned on the radio and drove home.
mountains and trees that had taken the lifespan of many generations to grow. Sometimes when he was wandering he thought in these terms, saw rocks spreading under his feet and hands as if they were chapters in the history books he had used in school. Now dwarfed by cement and steel, Elijah found himself on the outskirts of civilization for the first time in months. When he passed storefronts he looked inside, saw clothing hung off faceless bodies, stacks of books and flyers, or bouquets of arranged flowers. The idea of floristry escaped him. Watching the brief moments of his reflection as he passed picture-glass windows, he looked into florist shops at the roses, daises, lilies, and wondered how these flowers fit into the natural world. Elijah had seen wild roses tangled around rocks, slowly crushing the stone to nothing, and he had come across those mountain flowers that grew under his feet, but never the product of so many climates shoved together. The closeness of the streets and people was unsettling, and the flapping of sheets hung on clotheslines was an assault on his usual tranquility.

Elijah was looking for a brick apartment with the number 40496. There was a woman who had offered him over one-hundred dollars to help her move. It was enough money to keep him out of the city for at least three weeks. He was supposed to meet her at 11:00am, but from the position of the sun he thought he might be late. Elijah's palms began to sweat. This was why he hated to make himself available—obligations and deadlines made him nervous. The poorly painted building numbers told him he was only a few blocks away and he tried to speed up a little. Elijah's muscles were strong enough not to ache from the fast pace, but he was having trouble adjusting his step to fit the sidewalk instead of a changing natural terrain.

When he reached the apartment, Elijah hesitated before going inside. He spent a moment looking at the flowers trying to grow in window boxes. They were unhealthy and even from a distance he could see the pesticides clinging onto each petal. Turning his head, Elijah noticed that there wasn't a single tree trying to rise out of a hole in the cement in either direction down the street. In most cities, there had at least been that. He could hear a steady bass pumping from a car in the vicinity. Facing the building again, he tried see inside the windows and only saw his reflection. He felt the sun on the side of his face and walked toward the door, his hand slowly reaching for the knob. If he looked down at his feet he would have noticed the small flower growing in the crack by his right shoe, probably a seed spread from the window boxes. Elijah would have been glad to see that something could grow on its own and maybe it would have seemed like a heavy handed sign of nature's power. Perhaps not. Either way, it disappeared under his sneaker as the apartment door closed behind him. Elijah crossed onto the other side of the glass.

And tonight roses by the road
dove against the wind's breath
just as the doves rose, and rode
those same currents across the sky.

And I'm still wondering why
logic says cat is to fish
as bird is to worm, small dots indicate
the separation and connection of nouns,

little walls and bridges. What about
the cat that pounced upon the bird
pecking seeds below the feeder?
Poor white dove, small breaths.

And so, pigeon must be to bread.
Dove is to pigeon, I think,
as wolf is to dog. He sat wagging
and begging as I sliced a yellow apple
on the black marble counter top.
Glistening crescents. Hungry mouth.

Is that why the wolves howl at night,
to beg the moon for one sweet taste?

I have never heard their voices rise
nor seen doves ride, white in the night.

But I am sure they rose, red blossoming cries
I am sure they rode, trailing into the distance—
and Alpha Centauri A, in descending order. She tried to remember how far Vega was from the earth in light-years and couldn’t. The number was higher than twenty. Danica had wanted to be an astronomer since she was little, staring out her window at night while trying to identify each star by Bayer Designation as well as proper name using the information in a library text. Over the years she learned the Greek myths that accompanied the constellations and unfortunately this was what she could remember best. When she looked at the stars, her mind wanted to wander away from physics and mathematics to focus on the fact that Vega was in the constellation Lyra, which took its name from the instrument Hermes created out of a large tortoise shell. Sometimes Danica had to confess that she didn’t understand how the constellations connected to form the shapes they were supposed to. She couldn’t find a swan in the nine stars of Cygnus—a drawing like those M-shaped seagulls from preschool.

Looking again at the building she tried to name the stars behind her, the ones that reflected off the glass in the windows. It was difficult, relying on the brightness and the angles she guessed they made with the ground. When Danica turned around to check her approximations there was only one she had miscalculated. Sometimes she felt that finding and naming stars was akin to locating electrons in their orbital. Her friend Peter was majoring in quantum physics and once mentioned the way that electrons could be in two places at once or suddenly disappear without warning. Danica loved to think about this, knowing she didn’t really want the technicalities explained to her; there were already too many calculations orbiting around the hemispheres of her brain.

There was an hour left of usable night and Danica gave up studying. She was as prepared as she could be for her midterm and it was time to go back to her dorm and sleep. The stars were gliding across the sky like roller coasters riding on a fixed track. This reminded her of a high school physics class, the diagrams showing potential and kinetic energies increasing and decreasing as the coaster went from the zenith to the nadir of the ride. She liked this idea, letting it linger in her mind in the same way she held numbers while solving equations. It was peaceful to think of each star as one car of a roller coaster, sound waves carrying screaming voices across light-years. As much as it caught her fancy, Danica still couldn’t hear them. She stared at the stars in each window of the building, wondering what the people inside were dreaming. Years away in their minds constellations were burning out. Changing. Always changing like the formulas that were just beyond the limits of her knowledge.

V. A hiker

He was used to mountains, to climbing up steep rock faces. Elijah was born for a life outdoors, walking until he needed money for food or clothing. He had spent these past twenty years among things that were larger than him,
Tom's job usually just involved a lot of paperwork he never understood why this was a problem for her. Whether or not he was in the right, Linda left him and never looked back. Twenty-four years later he still stood in the shower and tried to remember how her skin felt or how exactly her eyebrow had arched across her face.

Still standing on the same square of cement, Tom was disappointed that he didn't have a reason to leave. There was no one waiting for him, no job that required a certain bedtime or reasonable hours of sleep. He started thinking about Annie again, his eyes searching every window for the ones that would have been hers. Tom found them on the second floor, left corner of the apartment. Running his hands through what was left of his grey hair, he tried to better remember the first time he had seen her.

The room had hardwood floors that must have been recently polished, reflecting the outline of leaded glass windows. Furniture was sparse. Annie was wearing a yellow sun dress and pinafore, one of those outfits that looked more like something from *Alice in Wonderland* than anything a person, even a young girl, would actually wear outdoors. The paramedics were moving her grandfather's body on a stretcher, policemen putting the gun into a plastic bag. Even as the social worker knelt down to talk to her, Annie watched her grandfather's corpse hover out of the room, part of the white sheet that covered him dragging on the floor. Tom suddenly noticed the hem of her dress was covered in blood. It was like someone had dipped her in red dye, the color was that even.

He remembered filling out the report haphazardly, watching Annie the entire time. Snapping back into the present, he noticed a shadow that had started to creep out from under his shoes. It was time to go somewhere else, he thought. Giving the building one last look, he conjured up the image of his ex-wife's face when she smiled—she had nice teeth. Tom realized he had wanted to see Annie smile. His wife left him before they could talk about children, but sometimes when they were together he had imagined what their offspring might look like. Tom thought about Annie standing alone in that large room, the empty apartment he would come home to. He hoped, wherever she had ended up, that she was happy.

*W. A scientist*

Danica was attempting to name the stars when she stopped and looked at the building which had obscured Vega from her sight. Her astronomy midterm was tomorrow and while this was a helpful way to study, the city was too bright in certain areas to do her much good. This block was largely unlit and, other than this brick building, most of the houses were too small to do her much damage.

Vega was the fifth brightest star in the sky behind Sirius, Canopus, Arcturus,
It was six men of Indostan,
to learning much inclined,
who went to see the elephant
(though all of them were blind),
that each by observation,
might satisfy his mind.

"The Blind Men and the Elephant"
John Godfrey Saxe

I. A man whose father just died
He wondered why all buildings looked like buildings. Jim had been pacing downtown for three hours. He was out of breath and it was still only five in the morning. There was barely enough light to distinguish the rich colors hidden in the brick of the apartment building. He could just make out the gold 40466 next to the door, numerals somewhere between print and cursive. There were three hours before his father’s funeral. He sat down on the corner.

Everything was dark and he remembered the big deal his father once made out of living in a brick building just like this one, emergency staircases running in Z’s down the side. The man had worked himself to death so his family could have solid brick and mortar instead of metal siding or cement block walls. Jim had never known why that was so important. When he was little he just wanted his dad to teach him how to play chess. He wasn’t one of those boys who wanted to stand in the backyard, catching a worn ball with an oversized mitt, white laundry hanging on the line. In truth, Jim had always hated the outdoors and old school bonding like fishing, hunting, or sports. Maybe that’s why they had never been close. Jim had always hated the outdoors and old school bonding like fishing, hunting, or sports.

He felt the sun rising before the light was even noticeable. It was like someone rubbing his leg muscles back into their youth, and he couldn’t help but feel like the light was slowly changing him. The brick building started to change too, paling into the pink inside of a seashell like the one he picked up in the morning. Everything was dark and he remembered the big deal his father once made out of living in a brick building just like this one, emergency staircases running in Z’s down the side. The man had worked himself to death so his family could have solid brick and mortar instead of metal siding or cement block walls. Jim had never known why that was so important. When he was little he just wanted his dad to teach him how to play chess. He wasn’t one of those boys who wanted to stand in the backyard, catching a worn ball with an oversized mitt, white laundry hanging on the line. In truth, Jim had always hated the outdoors and old school bonding like fishing, hunting, or sports. Maybe that’s why they had never been close.

He knew the big deal his father once made out of living in a brick building just like this one, emergency staircases running in Z’s down the side. The man had worked himself to death so his family could have solid brick and mortar instead of metal siding or cement block walls. Jim had never known why that was so important. When he was little he just wanted his dad to teach him how to play chess. He wasn’t one of those boys who wanted to stand in the backyard, catching a worn ball with an oversized mitt, white laundry hanging on the line. In truth, Jim had always hated the outdoors and old school bonding like fishing, hunting, or sports. Maybe that’s why they had never been close.

He wondered why all buildings looked like buildings. Jim had been pacing downtown for three hours. He was out of breath and it was still only five in the morning. There was barely enough light to distinguish the rich colors hidden in the brick of the apartment building. He could just make out the gold 40466 next to the door, numerals somewhere between print and cursive. There were three hours before his father’s funeral. He sat down on the corner.

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II. A woman about to be married
The shadows on the building looked like flowers—scattered lilies and roses lining the brick. It was about to rain, but to Mary, rain and snow and beams of sunlight were exactly the same. Today was the one year anniversary of their first date. Tomorrow she was getting married. It seemed as if they had been waiting forever, although their engagement had only been three months, just enough time to plan and send out invitations. Mary stopped on the corner and wondered what it would be like to live in geraniums. They seemed like the right flower to raise a family around, more understated than tea roses.

Her parents said they were shameful—roses were for adulterers, for people who were too passionately in love. Mary couldn’t let herself want to bring her family up around roses, but geraniums suited her just fine. She wondered what the building would look like with blue shutters. It seemed so Mediterranean bright flowers, bright shutters. Mary hadn’t been to the Mediterranean. She had been to Texas once and to New York, all up and down the California coast. But she had never left the country. Mary had always thought that once she left the city and went to college she would travel. Back then, she wanted to have a villa in Italy and sleep naked under Egyptian cotton sheets. As she stared again at the building, Mary touched her hair, pinned and curled tightly to her head.

Realizing she was almost late for the rehearsal, she looked down at the ground. A small tea rose had fallen at her feet. She picked it up and smelled, imagining her Italian garden, arching onto her tiptoes to dance as if it were nighttime in a foreign country.

III. A policeman who has just retired
Tom had seen this building before. When his hair was still brown he reported here for a routine cleanup of a suicide. The man involved was old, in his sixties, and rich. At the time, Tom wondered why someone would end his life so late in the game, especially with a lifestyle like this man’s. Tom’s mind blanked on what the old man’s name had been, but he remembered the little girl, Annie. Her grandfather was her only guardian and by the time Tom walked through the front doors to make his report, Annie had been left entirely alone.

Tom hadn’t thought about this particular incident in years and, compared to the other things he had seen in his three decades on the force, it wasn’t that important. Still, it gave him an odd feeling to be standing in front of the apartment, a man about the same age as Annie’s grandfather. He pushed his hands into the front pockets of his leather jacket, tilting his head up, the sun was at its zenith and there were no shadows, only a glare that bounced off his sunglasses. Through his jacket he could feel his belly expanding and shrinking, barely, with each breath. In Tom’s youth, genetics had been on his side; he never dreamed he’d end up with a physique like his father’s.

There had been many things in his life that Tom had to chalk up to tough luck although he had always supposed he wasn’t worse off than anyone else. He hated to complain, and when he was growing up his father told him to “Stop whimpering. Learn from it and move on.” Tom wasn’t sure he’d learned from his mistakes. It had been twenty-four years since his wife left him, saying she couldn’t handle not knowing if he’d come home at the end of the day. Since
It was six men of Indostan, to learning much inclined, who went to see the elephant (though all of them were blind), that each by observation, might satisfy his mind.

- "The Blind Men and the Elephant"
  John Godfrey Saxe

I. A man whose father just died

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Tom’s job usually just involved a lot of paperwork he never understood why this was a problem for her. Whether or not he was in the right, Linda left him and never looked back. Twenty-four years later he still stood in the shower and tried to remember how her skin felt or how exactly her eyebrow had arched across her face.

Still standing on the same square of cement, Tom was disappointed that he didn’t have a reason to leave. There was no one waiting for him, no job that required a certain bedtime or reasonable hours of sleep. He started thinking about Annie again, his eyes searching every window for the ones that would have been hers. Tom found them on the second floor, left corner of the apartment. Running his hands through what was left of his grey hair, he tried to better remember the first time he had seen her.

The room had hardwood floors that must have been recently polished, reflecting the outline of leaded glass windows. Furniture was sparse. Annie was wearing a yellow sun dress and pinafore, one of those outfits that looked more like something from *Alice in Wonderland* than anything a person, even a young girl, would actually wear outdoors. The paramedics were moving her grandfather’s body on a stretcher, policemen putting the gun into a plastic bag. Even as the social worker knelt down to talk to her, Annie watched her grandfather’s corpse hover out of the room, part of the white sheet that covered him dragging on the floor. Tom suddenly noticed the hem of her dress was covered in blood. It was like someone had dipped her in red dye, the color was that even.

He remembered filling out the report haphazardly, watching Annie the entire time. Snapping back into the present, he noticed a shadow that had started to creep out from under his shoes. It was time to go somewhere else, he thought. Giving the building one last look, he conjured up the image of his wife’s, ex-wife’s face when she smiled—she had nice teeth. Tom realized he had wanted to see Annie smile. His wife left him before they could talk about children, but sometimes when they were together he had imagined what their offspring might look like. Tom thought about Annie standing alone in that large room, the empty apartment he would come home to. He hoped, wherever she had ended up, that she was happy.

**W. A scientist**

Danica was attempting to name the stars when she stopped and looked at the building which had obscured Vega from her sight. Her astronomy midterm was tomorrow and while this was a helpful way to study, the city was too bright in certain areas to do her much good. This block was largely unlit and, other than this brick building, most of the houses were too small to do her much damage.

*Vega was the fifth brightest star in the sky behind Sirius, Canopus, Arcturus,*
and Alpha Centauri A, in descending order. She tried to remember how far Vega was from the earth in light-years and couldn't. The number was higher than twenty. Danica had wanted to be an astronomer since she was little, staring out her window at night while trying to identify each star by Bayer Designation as well as proper name using the information in a library text. Over the years she learned the Greek myths that accompanied the constellations and unfortunately this was what she could remember best. When she looked at the stars, her mind wanted to wander away from physics and mathematics to focus on the fact that Vega was in the constellation Lyra, which took its name from the instrument Hermes created out of a large tortoise shell. Sometimes Danica had to confess that she didn't understand how the constellations connected to form the shapes they were supposed to. She couldn't find a swan in the nine stars of Cygnus—a drawing like those M-shaped seagulls from preschool.

Looking again at the building she tried to name the stars behind her, the ones that reflected off the glass in the windows. It was difficult, relying on the brightness and the angle she guessed they made with the ground. When Danica turned around to check her approximations there was only one she had miscalculated. Sometimes she felt that finding and naming stars was akin to locating electrons in their orbital. Her friend Peter was majoring in quantum physics and once mentioned the way that electrons could be in two places at once or suddenly disappear without warning. Danica loved to think about this, knowing she didn't really want the technicalities explained to her; there were already too many calculations orbiting around the hemispheres of her brain.

There was an hour left of usable night and Danica gave up studying. She was as prepared as she could be for her midterm and it was time to go back to her dorm and sleep. The stars were gliding across the sky like roller coasters riding on a fixed track. This reminded her of a high school physics class, the diagrams showing potential and kinetic energies increasing and decreasing as the coaster went from the zenith to the nadir of the ride. She liked this idea, letting it linger in her mind in the same way she held numbers while solving equations. It was peaceful to think of each star as one car of a roller coaster, sound waves carrying screaming voices across light-years. As much as it caught her fancy, Danica still couldn't hear them. She stared at the stars in each window of the building, wondering what the people inside were dreaming. Years away in their minds constellations were burning out. Changing. Always changing like the formulas that were just beyond the limits of her knowledge.

V. A hiker

He was used to mountains, to climbing up steep rock faces. Elijah was born for a life outdoors, walking until he needed money for food or clothing. He had spent these past twenty years among things that were larger than him,
mountains and trees that had taken the lifespan of many generations to grow. Sometimes when he was wandering he thought in these terms, saw rocks spreading under his feet and hands as if they were chapters in the history books he had used in school. Now dwarfed by cement and steel, Elijah found himself on the outskirts of civilization for the first time in months. When he passed storefronts he looked inside, saw clothing hung off faceless bodies, stacks of books and flyers, or bouquets of arranged flowers. The idea of floristry escaped him. Watching the brief moments of his reflection as he passed picture-glass windows, he looked into florist shops at the roses, daisies, lilies, and wondered how these flowers fit into the natural world. Elijah had seen wild roses tangled around rocks, slowly crushing the stone to nothing, and he had come across those mountain flowers that grew under his feet, but never the product of so many climates shoved together. The closeness of the streets and people was unsettling, and the flapping of sheets hung on clotheslines was an assault on his usual tranquility.

Elijah was looking for a brick apartment with the number 40496. There was a woman who had offered him over one-hundred dollars to help her move. It was enough money to keep him out of the city for at least three weeks. He was supposed to meet her at 11:00am, but from the position of the sun he thought he might be late. Elijah's palms began to sweat. This was why he hated to make himself available—obligations and deadlines made him nervous. The poorly painted building numbers told him he was only a few blocks away and he tried to speed up a little. Elijah's muscles were strong enough not to ache from the fast pace, but he was having trouble adjusting his step to fit the sidewalk instead of a changing natural terrain.

When he reached the apartment, Elijah hesitated before going inside. He spent a moment looking at the flowers trying to grow in window boxes. They were unhealthy and even from a distance he could see the pesticides clinging onto each petal. Turning his head, Elijah noticed that there wasn't a single tree trying to rise out of a hole in the cement in either direction down the street. In most cities, there had at least been that. He could hear a steady bass pumping from a car in the vicinity. Facing the building again, he tried see inside the windows and only saw his reflection. He felt the sun on the side of his face and walked toward the door, his hand slowly reaching for the knob. If he looked down at his feet he would have noticed the small flower growing in the crack by his right shoe, probably a seed spread from the window boxes. Elijah would have been glad to see that something could grow on its own and maybe it would have seemed like a heavy handed sign of nature's power. Perhaps not. Either way, it disappeared under his sneaker as the apartment door closed behind him. Elijah crossed onto the other side of the glass.

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Apple is to Moon 

-rebecca shaw-

—and tonight roses by the road
dove against the wind's breath

just as the doves rose, and rode
those same currents across the sky.

And I'm still wondering why
logic says cat is to fish

as bird is to worm, small dots indicate
the separation and connection of nouns,

little walls and bridges. What about
the cat that pounced upon the bird

pecking seeds below the feeder?
Poor white dove, small breaths.

And so, pigeon must be to bread.
Dove is to pigeon, I think,

as wolf is to dog. He sat wagging
and begging as I sliced a yellow apple

on the black marble counter top.
Glistening crescents. Hungry mouth.

Is that why the wolves howl at night,
to beg the moon for one sweet taste?

I have never heard their voices rise
nor seen doves ride, white in the night.

But I am sure they rose, red blossoming cries
I am sure they rode, trailing into the distance—
VI. A landlord

Mr. Harris stepped out of his convertible and took one last picture of the building as he learned on his bright red car. He had always loved old things that should be torn down and forgotten but seemed as much a part of him as the street itself. Mr. Harris had tried to rent buildings in the brick apartment for the past two years. In its prime, the apartments sold as some of the most expensive in town. It had been in his family since it was built almost one hundred and fifty years ago. Mr. Harris originally wanted to sell it, but no one would buy now that most of the apartments had been converted to something only a few steps up from slum-housing. Every streetlight on the block had burned out except for one. The apartments were too large to be practical for the new kinds of people in the area. The last tenant had moved out the month before and Mr. Harris was footing all of the bills himself.

Mr. Harris wondered what the brick looked like in the beginning, the first week it was built. He imagined the buildings now bordering it had been gardens where roses grew, the paint inside fresh smelling. Mr. Harris wondered if any children lived there, playing outside. The women would have talked in the gazebo he envisioned at the back of the apartment. Mr. Harris listened to the sound of the crew starting the engines. He noticed that a small crowd had stopped to watch, most of them holding shopping bags, casually seeing what the commotion was about. A few had stopped their cars nearby and walked over to watch. Mr. Harris closed his eyes.

After dinner, he thought the men should have gone outside and played chess with large cigars in their mouths. Gas lanterns would have lined the walkway. Mr. Harris wished it were that simple now, got back into his car, and drove off. He heard the sound of the first wall being hit, the bricks crashing to the ground, and turned on the radio and drove home.
Raspberries hang heavy on their stems like sleepy old men with bellies full of beer. And blond girls bite into succulent strawberries, red-ripe and oozing juices that stain their lips, chins and tongues. Every storm is a new chaos: Fresh buds bend, thin and fragile, with the wind's resounding, smarting phantom smacks, and daffodil stalks snap, shivering in gusts. Blackberries plummet from their thorny chords, like juicy bombs that pop on impact with the ground. And the tumbled sounds of falling seas fill the ears of sleeping babies, awakened, weeping from dreams. But afterwards, when the rain subsides, the grass lays stuck and slick with mud and on the horizon the sky appears, peppered with the flight of thousands of blackbirds receding into the pallid fog that is the morning, again.

"Don't hurt him!" Ella says, louder now. "He's just little."
Brogan laughs. "A bird? Birds suck. My dad shoots them sometimes. He's gonna teach me how to shoot them, too."
He brushes past Ella. She tries to run at him, but Joan grabs hold of her and keeps her close.
Brogan bends down. "Dumb bird," he laughs, and then he stands up straight. He's smiling like he's thinking of doing something bad. It was the way he smiles when he sees a smaller boy across the playground and is just about to run over and knock him down. Now none of us are saying anything, and I think that maybe if we're quiet, he'll just go away. But then Brogan brings his foot down on the robin. His feet are as big as a real man's. The first snap is the worst, and the loudest. The bird might even have made a little chirp. He brings his foot down again and again, laughing, yelling, "Stupid-ass bird!" Every time he lifts his foot the robin looks less like a bird. The beak flies out from under his sneaker and lands farther away in the leaves. I want to be sick. All of us are screaming. Except for Ella. Ella is just looking, tears streaming down her face, her eyes as wide as plates. She stands stock still, and stares at the tiny squished body.
Brogan wipes his shoe off on the leaves. "Dumb bird," he says again, but as he begins to walk away, Ella tears from Joan, and runs after him. We are all yelling her name, and there are more people coming over now.
Finny. 'She told us all this while panting behind us one day on the way to
to school. Joan kept rolling her eyes. She likes to do that. Her mom does it a lot
when her dad talks, so it makes her feel grown-up.

"It doesn't matter." I say, "What are we going to do? Should we tell
Miss Zola?"

Miss Zola is the teacher on recess duty today. She isn't really a teacher,
just an assistant to Mrs. Booning, the first grade teacher in the classroom down
the hall.

Ella shakes her head. "I don't think so, Gina. She'd tell us to stay away
from it. Grown-ups never let you near animals. They—"

"Well, duh, Ella. Animals carry lice and parasites and diseases. You're
not supposed to touch them. Parents tell you that when you're a baby because
baby's put everything in their mouths." Joan says. She looks over at me and
rolls her eyes again, as if to say, First graders. What are you going to do.

There are no other teachers out on the playground. Sally says, "Maybe
we could move him till after school, you know, to a safe spot, and then get him
before we go home. We could use my coat." She holds out the plaid fleece.

"That is by far the dumbest idea you have ever had," says Joan. They do
not get along well. Sally has trouble in math, and is not a very good reader.

I look up again to make sure we are not being watched. This time,
Brogan Dane catches my eye. He is the biggest fourth grader. He pushes littler
kids around all the time, steals from their lockers, and even talks back to Mrs.
Hench, the fourth grade Geography teacher. A year ago there was a rumor that
his little brother had called him fat when he was mad, and so Brogan had broken
his arm. Michael Hess says that Brogan once tied two cats together by the legs,
and then hung them over a clothesline until all their blood went to their heads.

Brogan is walking towards us. I lean back down. "Brogan's coming!
Brogan's coming!"

Ella gasps, and we all stand up straight, facing outwards and close in
tighter around the bird.

"What'd you guys find." Even his voice is big and mean.

"Nothing," I say. "We were just talking."

"Listen," Joan steps forward. "We were just playing Indian Pow wow,
and we were crouching around the fire trying to get warm because it is a very
cold winter for the Indians." She folds her arms over her chest.

Brogan laughs. "You liar. You lying bitch." He has an older brother,
and brags to the other third grade boys about how his brother teaches him "cuss"
words. We don't know what this word means, but we know it's bad, and we all
know we'll never, ever say it.

Brogan pushes Joan out of the way. Sally and I move, too, but Ella
stands in front of the Robin.
Before and After

maggie cramer.

My father used to call me by several nicknames, the kind I acted embarrassed by when he used them in front of my friends, but secretly enjoyed. They were random, and to this day I’m unsure just how many of them came about. The one he used most was Goo, an abbreviation of Magoo, something he called me for only a short while. It always reminded me of something that oozed, as if I could slide under doors like the blob, and leave a slimy trail behind me. Goo became Gooster, which eventually became the name of our sailboat, and we both reveled when we heard the name announced over a loudspeaker at a race. The Ginchiest was my personal favorite, derived from the Gidget phone saying, “Hey, WOW, hope school is going well. Your mom tells me you got m to college. You know Billy’s smiling down on you, have a great last semester.” It doesn’t bother me like it used to, the implication of my holier than thou attitude. Now, it seems more like a reference to how my father felt about me, his only daughter, a reminder that I was his world, no matter how much I rolled my eyes and sighed when WOW was brought up.

My mother’s nicknames are much more unoriginal, things like Lovey and Pea. I remember these two, but the others I can’t recall, being erased by growth or change in hair color or some other thing that just doesn’t fit me anymore. Throughout school, from fourth grade until my sophomore year, my mother would put cards in my lunch. Not little notes on napkins or a folded piece of scrap paper but actual, store-bought greeting cards. My friends thought it was the craziest thing in the world, each card in its brightly colored envelope, announcing one of my nicknames to the entire table. In junior high I’d hide them, read the note quickly then toss it back in my lunchbox. They were always cheesy, something along the lines of “Hi, Lovey! Hope your day is going splendidly! When Jill picks you up for the barn, don’t forget to take your spurs; they’re still in your locker! Love you! Mommy!” Lots of exclamation points and hearts, not what you want that cute soccer player two tables over to see when you open your lunch. I kept every card I ever received from my mother; they’re in four different boxes in my room at home, gathering dust. Occasionally, when I’m angry at her or just need to feel that small emptiness in the pit of my stomach disappear for a moment, I will pull them out, re-read moments of my childhood like I reread the Velveteen Rabbit every once in awhile, as if the words will bring back memories I can’t seem to grasp.

My entire existence is basically categorized into two sections – before Dad died and after Dad died. It’s a horrible way to live but sometimes your mind unconsciously separates things in order to protect your consciousness. The women in my family are the queens of this process. Throughout my entire life I staunchly felt immune to their lack of memory. I would make sure at important moments I would soak everything in, take a mental picture,
remember every sight, smell, and sound of the fleeting second. I was determined not to become my mother. I was not going to have to call friends or family (in her case my aunt) to remember my childhood. I was going to remember everything, write a book, and stop the cycle. To this day, my mother calls my aunt on a daily basis and says, “Tell me something I don’t know,” and my aunt will launch into a story about something that happened to the both of them.

The day my father died stopped trying to remember. Despite this, that day is the most vivid I have. I can recall second by second how it went by. Waking up to screaming, seeing the ambulance in the driveway, my mother curled on the floor of our kitchen with paramedics around her, seeing his body, kissing his cheek, calling my best friend, making calls to his business associates, and finally that night, sitting in bed with my mother’s best friend snoring next to me, pleading with God to take it back, let me wake up to waffles and NPR, not sirens and crying. That day is literally the oldest memory I have of my mother, as ridiculous as that seems. Three and a half years ago, when I was fourteen, and nothing earlier.

I hadn’t realized this until I was back in therapy a little less than a year ago. I was contemplating leaving a school that had nurtured me because I didn’t feel I had any more to write. I even wanted to get out of bed, and at the suggestion of my roommate I decided to see another therapist. I sat in the doctor’s office, legs curled Indian-style as she asked me questions about my past and present. “What do you remember about your mom when you were a little kid?” I sat there, stunned, for almost twenty minutes, until answering, “I don’t know.” She wrote something down and I played with my rings. When she nodded, I began to cry.

To this day I can remember very little of my mother before my dad died. It’s a terrible feeling to look your mother in the eyes when she’s trying to paint you a picture of an important moment but all you’re drawing is blanks. Her hurt is palpable, and I wish, somehow, I could change it. This past Christmas we sat on our couch, cats in our lap, and she asked about Goodnight Moon. Asked if I remembered not letting her leave my room until she read Goodnight Moon and sang me an Irish lullaby. I remembered the song, a quiet melody that I have in a music box, but I did not remember Goodnight Moon. I know the book, but I do not remember clutching her hand and begging for her to read it one more time. I don’t remember crawling into her lap on the rocking chair. I don’t remember any of it. She asks me these questions often. If we’re sitting at dinner or watching television the conversation always meanders back to my father. I go on about some memory of him I have and then she’ll ask, quietly, eyes averted, if I remember her there, as if she’s trying to grasp for me. I get the feeling sometimes, when we’ve talked about memories and moments, that my lack is really an emptiness. If I can’t remember her specific part in my childhood, I can’t remember her importance. She asks me simple questions, if I remember her brushing my hair or taking me to ballet, but I always answer honestly. I say no. I remember my father attempting to braid my hair and taking me to softball. I remember him yelling at the sidelines of my soccer game when I wouldn’t run (there was a bee near me), but I don’t remember her trying to calm him down. It’s as if each memory I have has been edited my mother snipped out, and there is white space in her absence.

Jenna & Allie—

If you’re reading this, you already know.
The house has been boarded up. The windows, the doors, everything. We’re at the comfort Inn. Room 112.

I love you.

-Cloë

-twelvet

-twenty-nine.
She hates that this is all I remember and asks me if I can forget it too, and grasp something else, as if my memories are as interchangeable as her handbags, buy one, discard another. She hates it because it reminds her of her own struggles, her own fears, which she has projected on me. I reassure her that it is her strength; the vague presence I do remember is someone whom my father respected, admired and loved. But whenever this moment is brought up she cringes and shakes her head, and it is me who has the privilege of grabbing her hand and squeezing, our roles reversed.

I am six years old, my hair in a messy ponytail, and I am wearing pink biker shorts and a pink shirt, bedazzled with rhinestones to form a small pony. I am not wearing shoes, but I have socks with ruffles and my feet do not touch the ground when I am on my mother's lap. We are at the island in our kitchen; there is an ashtray between my mother and godmother, El. They are smoking those long, delicate cigarettes that always remind me of wands and I would play with them when they weren't looking. There are glasses of white wine in front of them, ice in each. I am playing with their ashes as they laugh about something I don't understand. My mother has finished her glass and I am playing with the ice cubes. She smiles down at me and when she picks up one of them between her thumb and pointer finger, it drips on her sleeve. She places it in my palm, and I eat it. I remember the bitter taste of white wine on my tongue, the sharp aftertaste, and the two women laughing at my small gag.

I have hundreds of memories of my father, too many to count. I'm sure some of them are fabricated, figments of my imagination and my own attempt at recreating him in my mind. I can remember my father at the barn, grooming my horses, tightening my girth, signing lease papers. The horse shows I went to all include him, blue and red ribbons around his belt, brushing my horse's mane while I polished hooves or shined my boots. My father and I would go sailing, turtling the boat for fun or diving off the bow when the anchor was down. He taught me how to swim and dive and how to control a tiller. He is the one who helped me with my math homework and got me through reading The Little Princess. I can remember him reading Goodnight Moon.

In all honesty, I am ashamed of my memories, though I try hard not to be. I was so determined not to block out memories as my mother did I was oblivious to the fact I was doing exactly that. My mother will sit with me now, my hands in hers, and tell me things that are too hard to hear. I remember nothing of my father's illness other than waking up to him in a pool of blood, and going to the hospital when he had his treatments and surgeries. I remember nothing of her involvement. When I came home for Spring Break after being in therapy I asked her to describe things I felt I needed to know, and then sat on the floor and cried, hands over my ears. I didn't think I'd have such a guttural reaction, almost primal. My stomach churned and I thought I would throw up when she detailed her memories. She had to pull my hands away from my head and put her arms around me as I shook, so confused at my own reaction, my own rejection of things I thought I wanted to know.

In the immediate wake of my father's death, my mother and I almost forgot each other, both so wrapped up in our own grief that we neglected to realize the best support system was in the bedroom two doors down. I can remember crying in my room by myself, clutching one of my father's shirts and

\begin{verse}
\textit{From the balcony looking into the great room,}
\end{verse}

\textit{The night I first saw you}
\textit{the leaves of late fall}
\textit{were weighed down by rainwater}
\textit{and smooth puddle-arms caressed}
\textit{the side of the road.}
\textit{I watched you from the balcony,}
\textit{your body}
\textit{curled into a leather couch—}
\textit{you were nothing more than soft lines}
\textit{in the dim light.}
\textit{I could reach down and trace}
\textit{the lines with my fingers,}
\textit{following them as they}
\textit{circled around your body,}
\textit{spiraled across your cheeks,}
\textit{became lost trying}
\textit{to find their way back to their beginnings.}

\begin{verse}
\textit{.clyde rastetter}
\end{verse}

\begin{verse}
\textit{thirty.}
\end{verse}

\begin{verse}
\textit{.eleven.}
\end{verse}
She gets up as the whistle of the tea kettle is hurting her ears, and it is hurting the three chipmunk's ears too, and her dear cat Glee's. "I don't understand it one bit," she says as the kettle bubbles over. She sees the red peppers hanging on a string in the window, they've been hanging there for years. She thinks how there's no way they could still be hot, dried and old. The chickadee on the branch of her good oak calls for action. She takes a pepper in her hand and brings it to her pursed lips.

As she bites down a fish is swallowed whole on accident by a whale in an ocean 700 miles away. A Doberman guarding an asylum rests his weary eyes. Micky spits the pepper out in the sink and gasps for air, runs the water and uses her hands to get it to her mouth. It takes her 22 minutes to seat herself next to the paper bag where, finally, she laughs with a rusty hue of fire in her voice. She pulls her yarn shawl closer, pokes at the mess with her index finger. She sniffs and then tries to wave the scent away. "Why, it's poop."

wishing Mom would walk in and hug me and I can remember walking past her room and hearing the same sobs, but never opening the door. It was this denial, this façade of strength that we both assumed that drove a wedge between us. We walked around our own home, the death of my father, her husband, hanging like a mist over each room, so thick we were just barely visible to each other. It took me going away to school, and her own inward search for us to come back together, to share moments, and it is this gradual exchange of memories that I love and fear at the same time. I love it because sharing memories of my father is what keeps him alive and helps me to move past the obvious first stage of anger into the safer, more comforting territory of acceptance. But I fear it because there is a falsity to each memory I get from my mother; it is hers, not mine, and I'm afraid I won't be able to tell the difference.

I am slowly trying to redefine my life, to change the "before and after" mentality I cling to for security, like the blanket I used to carry around when I was small. But this is who I am. I will always elevate my father in my mind, even though he was a normal man with flaws and faults, all of which I choose to ignore. My mother and I can laugh over dinner about Dad when he yelled or washed my mouth out with soap, though sometimes when she dives into things I still can't seem to remember I tune her out. I go back to summer afternoons with Dad on the boat, lying on the bow in my bathing suit, trying to get as tan as him. I go back to the smell of Lake Michigan, Coppertone, and WD-40. My mother is nowhere to be found, probably on the beach back at our cottage, sitting on a lounge chair, watching the dog. She's probably drinking iced tea, reading People magazine, and smoking a cigarette she thinks I won't smell two hours later and call her on at dinner that night. For that moment, it's the slight rock of the waves lulling me to sleep, and my father quietly singing along to Jimmy Buffet that rings in my ears, not her chiding me for leaving my wet bathing suit on the hardwood floor. For right now, I can still do that, allow myself to drift back and not focus on the reality of my "after" with my mother. We share our stories, gather them like small stones on a beach, collect them, hoard them. One day I may have the strength to dig deep enough to recover my own lost memories, find my mother in my "before," and fill that blank space, that hollowness that I carry inside me.
An earthworm has stopped moving underground and will soon become completely frozen. The two giggling kids with their box of matches have finally turned off Micky's street towards home, their desire to laugh quenched for a minute. The little girl next door sits at her window in her room, not allowed to step out until she apologizes. She is content to stay in her room, and perhaps only hit her mother so she could do so.

If only that plastic wood over there was real, she thinks, if only my closet had a toilet.

Micky on the other hand has taken a seat, her hands shaking, the tea kettle whistling, and her skin seems to melt off her bones. "Why? What is the sense in doing something like that?" she says. And the shadow of her refrigerator becomes large and too terrible to think of ever again. She has never considered it such a loss never to have married. She has always considered herself lucky to have loved and then lived rather than to have lived with someone unloved. But seeing the shadow and the bag on the floor makes her think that perhaps she made a mistake in thinking she was ever so selfless. The bag too is terrible, simply terrible.

A white cat coasts by the stove where Micky is sitting. Outside there are three chipmunks huddled together under an oak that's been known to drop leaves without warning. Just ask them. A bell is ringing, but that is inside now. The cat has just brushed against the chime hanging in the windowsill of the kitchen which is next to a string of red peppers that Micky has long wanted the courage to try. In the corner is a white handkerchief with a lipstick smudge in the middle. Micky remembers that the handkerchief is there but not the smudge. Near the door is a burnt paper bag with brown sludge coming out of the edges that she has pulled from the front porch to examine more closely. She has walked over from the stove to take a look at it with her hands on her hips.

"But what's the sense in that?" she asks her cat Glee and for a minute fears to look at the metal kettle she's making tea with for catching a glimpse of her small reflection.

She thinks of the fur coat she wore for Christmas when she was five years old, her father who was most recognizable in a fedora. She thinks of that white pony she petted at her sorority sister's ranch one summer in Wyoming, how he came as close as she's ever been to another living thing when she held out a sugar cube. She thinks of Chip and how he used to spend 20 minutes in the morning slicking back his hair, how she had watched him from bed, pretending to be asleep. But this last thought is too much for poor Micky, she calls her cat Glee close and turns to the window where a very large leaf has just broke loose from her good oak.

Frida.

You tell me to call you the inventress as you untangle yourself from your brace, a shadow hugging your ankles, your dress. Imprints of greens and reds from painted lace drawn on breasts. Tell me to pull the drawstring so that I can see the valves of your heart. And your blood is the flood that makes you sing as you paint a jungle of thick eyebrows, the face of Diego lost and hiding in your naked sister, you grew apart on your forehead. And you lay on the bed and open wide your legs, only to find your two lost vertebrae and a small hand, the baby never had a chance to land.

Frida, •ines pujos.

Prank by lucy nepstad.

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There's a Hindu elephant on the dashboard of his car. You can't help but think of it later when he won't let you leave his apartment. So much strength. So many arms.

Later in your kitchen you stand with the box of French fries in your hand. Not knowing what else you're meant to do, you open it and see ten sick brown faces smiling up at you.

And then, like a sin, your mother creeps in. "We had to put Minoux to sleep. There were maggots in his ear and the infection was too deep. He never would have gotten better. So. What do you want to eat for dinner?"

What are you supposed to say? You close the box and throw what's left away.

In that room where I spend three weeks counting carbohydrates and conjugating French verbs for hospital school there is barely room to stand at my stoning ceremony. The head nurse takes a green rock from a bag and passes it between her hands. She tells us all about my first day, my stoic façade at intake, the strange combination of ice cream and fruit that I ate three times a day. She does not say how I shook like I had frost bite when the technician stuck the cups on me before my EKG, startled that I was just allowed my bare chest to wear. The nurse passes the rock to Dr. Levia, who draws more blood than the Red Cross, and talks about how I fought like hell to get out, mimics me leaning over my blood work beaming, "Isn't my potassium good? Aren't I doing well?"

Because it would tell them in a way I could not.

The others have, comparatively, less to say. Fellow patients hold the rock like a precious gem, say what a good job I've done, wish me luck, and pass it on, wishing it was meant for them.

Along the far wall, our menus are pinned up along a thin cork strip, each one planned like a budget. I want to say that the numbers still trip me up, that nothing is ever so precise, so nice and neat. That milk is more than milk, and meat is never just meat. I want to shout that there must be more than this constant filling and filtering out of patients and nutrients and thoughts, that some things just stick. I want to tell them that they're all sick themselves if they can't get it.

But the desire fades as easily as it came. And when everyone's been heard and the stone comes to me I don't say a word. I copy a poem on the observation window, Muchado's "The Wind, One Brilliant Day" Open the pouch on my backpack and tuck the stone and the measures and the menus away.

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**Dignity**

Lucy Nepstad

Sometimes become frightened thinking of all the spiders
While I could harp on the germs, the possible contagions, it really comes down to not being awake to do it right:

cook each small, wiry leg in butter or garlic, fizzle it out until it's black and on its back.

Because there are many different ways to be the best, which means there's always something to lose—small, trusting moments with eyes closed.

Even now, I expect a part of me to rise the next time a foot perches daintily on my tongue, go to the door and turn the light on so that, somehow, I can at least watch myself swallow.
Starch:

A starch contains 80 calories and 15 grams of carbohydrates.

Your dad picks you and your brother up from your mom's house on a Wednesday in October. The month is almost over, cold just moving in in time to ruin Halloween. But you just turned twelve on the tenth, and try to act older, so you say there are better things to do than get fat on all that candy anyway.

You sit in the back of your car picking at a bag of it someone gave you at school. Your father gets in the front seat, turns the key, and puts both hands on the wheel. "How would you both feel," He asks as you put down the bag and curl both arms around your gut, "about moving to Connecticut?"

You say "What?"

My brother says, "Why?"

At first you say you'd like the change, but when it sets in, that you'd rather die.

You leave first day of Christmas Break. You cry and straight through moving day, you beg to stay, don't tell a soul you're moving. Your mother doesn't take you leaving well. She slips back into sickness like a leaf into a water well, snakes around the house listening to your phone calls, is convinced some days when you get home from walking that you've really been somewhere with older men who you see regularly. The accusations get to be too much and soon you and she stop talking.

So in front of her house getting ready to head out east, instead of talking to her you pick up Minoux and give all your attention to him, gladly ignore your mother standing behind you, looking old and angry, cold and gray, and thin.

Fat:

One fat contains 45 calories and 5 grams of fat.

So happy to be home again, you tell your dad that you've decided not to go back east with him. You're old enough to take the repercussions of your actions and your mind is made. You're moving back to Minnesota to your mother to finish eighth grade. Minoux's as good as dead, some injury in his ear smelling like road kill, more black now than red. The last week of June, your mother schedules an appointment for the vet. Meanwhile, you try to get in touch with teachers from your old school to see if you can visit and talk about enrollment for the fall. But your computer's been collecting dust since the year your mother busted all the hardware thinking she'd found a hidden camera there, and you can't get it to work at all.

Luckily you know a technology wiz from where your father used to work. He's an engineer from India going for his America-recognized bachelors. You've known him for forever, and when you explain the situation he's happy to let you come to work with him and use his computer. It only takes a minute but he insists on treating you to lunch. The college cafeteria staff think it's cute to see a little girl for once, and bake you special fries especially, the shape of smiley faces. You try to eat them daintily, so take most of them to go.
But the next day, your teacher tells you to eat lunch with her. She asks what your favorite subject is, math, if you have any pets, one dog and my cat. Soon the conversation dies away and she admits what she really wants is to say that she's heard what happened, that it must hurt to have a mother who cannot stand to live even for her children. Suddenly, the turkey sandwich you're eating doesn't taste right. You can't take another bite of it, say you're sick, and bee-line to the bathroom. As your stomach lurches towards your throat she knocks and says, "Yoo-hoo, are you okay?"

"I'm fine." You say, "I have the flu. Please go away."

Milk:

One serving of milk contains 90 calories and 30 percent daily calcium.

There's a surprise waiting when your mother picks you up from school. A fat Himalayan lunges at you from the top of a wooden stool when you walk into the kitchen. It purrs and rubs its fur against your shins. "What's that?" you ask, startled, "Who's cat is that?"

"Her name's Sharma." Says your mother, with an odd, eager smile, "Her owner's on a trip, so she'll be staying here a while."

Something about Sharma doesn't seem right. She keeps you up all night rubbing against you under the covers. If you ignore her she starts moaning, and moans for hours. In the morning she only leaves you long enough to eat. As far as your favorite subject is, math, if you have any pets, one dog and my cat.

The problem is this is where Minoux, your cat, lives. Sometimes he doesn't leave for days, driven crazy by infections from fights or early age. You can't say. You live with your father except for the few hours after school and don't see Minoux often. But you know there's no good in sending Sharma his way, so you follow her downstairs. You hear your mother lock you in, and there, across the room Minoux sits staring at you intruders. He's uglier than ever. Something about Sharma doesn't seem right. He keeps you up all night rubbing against you under the covers. If you ignore her she starts moaning, and moans for hours. In the morning she only leaves you long enough to eat. As far as you can see she never sleeps.

In a week, your mother is going insane. She complains on the phone to her cat-owner friend, but there's no end to her torment. Finally at her wit's end, she picks up Sharma and throws her in the basement.

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Sharma gets low on the ground when she sees him and starts to growl. Soon Minoux is mimicking the sound. You're afraid Minoux might finish him. Something must be done; you run upstairs and pound on the door until your mother lets you out, bound to the kitchen and grab the milk and a bowl, then sprint back down, pour the milk until the dish is half-full and set it on the floor in front of Sharma. Pig of a cat, he goes for that. You pick up the bowl and back slowly back upstairs with it, Sharma following the milk closely.

Later that day, your mother announces that Sharma is nothing short of evil and should be put to sleep. She's taking her to the animal shelter. Sitting still in the basement, watching Minoux's breathing slow, you let her go.
elegant as the tangled moss over the head of the small stone lion near the back of the campus. Sex was in the Songs of Solomon, where woman's breasts were fruits and the nights were referred to as “sweet.” It was what Adam and Eve had in the Garden of Eden, amidst roaring waterfalls and cresting red birds. It was something men did a lot in Bible tents with their wives. It was never Playboy bunnies, hard vibrating contraptions, bursting busts, bronzed legs, wet tongues, never just an acheing will to be desired, but something more like the large cool glasses of water I would douse down during the long summer days. I had been taught not to think, as popular criticism would have it, that sex was shameful, but instead that it was something private and sacred. It was veiled in smoke, much like the olden temples we would read about in the Old Testament, the layers of rooms, in the heart room the Covenant where only the priests could enter.

In primary school I had a passionate argument with one of the boys in my class. He was scrawny and tanned, a foreigner—vulgar and American, his eyes bugging out of his face. When he got upset he would stick his arms down his shorts and dangle his hands out the leg holes while he spoke. Sex, I insisted, was sex, and it didn’t cause babies. God was the one that sent the babies. I remember knowing I was wrong even as I argued. His mother was a doctor, and doctors were the ones that knew the most things. The boy’s father, there was a rumor, had been a wild man that lived in Indonesian forests, only to be found, never by then, that, dealing with men was easier than dealing with ladies. I had learned, but instead that it was something private and sacred. It was veiled in smoke, much like the olden temples we would read about in the Old Testament, the layers of rooms, in the heart room the Covenant where only the priests could enter.

Later on, when I was about six or so, my mother bought my brother and I a membership to the Singaporean Science Discovery Center, one of the few productive things we could do in our tiny country besides go to the mega malls lining Suntech Plaza. Unlike in the north, there are no seasons to refer back to in our memory, the wet slush or the red leaves, we only had hot, hot summer sun, all year long, the sun that stuck in a wet film to your skin and left warmth glowing like another layer of blood beneath your skin. All I remember is, my mother and I standing outside a exhibit behind glass: a black room, a small chair with three teddy bears seated on it, and a silver mirror. There was a large red button, all the buttons were large there, on the panel, and when I pushed it the bears would suddenly disappear. One of the workers came up to me, a young man smelling harshly of strong cigarette smoke. I had learned, even by then, that, dealing with men was easier than dealing with ladies. I had already picked up on their fascination with my little round girl face, my tiny fluffy skirts, how to use a large pretty smile to inspire many favors from both uncles and male food vendors alike. When he went down on his haunches in front of me and touched my hair, I knew I had a new devotee. He asked me if I wanted to disappear like the teddy bears. I nodded and he led me off into a side corridor, waving to my concerned mother. Opening a door we entered a large...
The requirements of a fruit are as follows: one serving contains 60 calories and
fifteen grams of carbohydrates.

An hour outside of the Twin Cities, Minnesota farm country starts.
It really wasn't until I saw a penis that I realized that a man was truly armed. It was like Adam and Eve all over again, bare bodies covered in sweat and small pink lumps where the mosquitoes had bitten us. The boy had led me through his neighborhood, both of us walking in and out of yellow light pooling on the tarmac. I knew this area, it was a "bad" part of Toronto, Don Mills, the asphalt like the black wood of theatre, the night air like drawn curtains, there were gang fights here all the time. We walked hand in hand and I couldn't take my eyes off him, I thought he was too good to be true. We'd never spoken before at school, my type of friends were handing out brochures on Darfur, holding salsa sessions after school, coming to school high and meditating together during lunch in the bathroom stalls. I had met him through a friend during one of those woozy summer gatherings that happen spontaneously in the middle of the sidewalk, kids blocking off a section of road and beginning to break in the watery heat, me sitting with my knees up to my chin on the curb. He had been dancing, and I was enthralled by his body. His shirt clung with sweat to his chest and I could see the muscles contracting beneath his skin. A man's body, I remember thinking. Yet he'd been more than that to me in the next few months. Around him sudden underground springs of tears would lift up and I would begin to cry in the middle of those summer parties in dark basements, leaning on his shoulder and listening to the lull of his voice. We would talk for hours, his mouth open wide in the middle of summer, miming himself as a five year old, catching snowflakes on his tongue. Me leaning forwards to him so that our noses touched, saying something stupid like, "I'm wild, I'm wild, I'm wild." We explored the city together, by foot, cutting through back yards, stepping over tomato plants, swinging together on monkey bars already cold from the night air.

That night as the air began to thicken and stain a dark purple, never really black out here in the city, he led me down a path into the Don Valley ravine. There was a rope of water trailing at its heart, the ravine like an inverted mountain. The sides crawled steeply upwards on either side, pregnant with leaves and stalks and trees in that high summer way, when everything was so ripe it was rotting. The flowers smelled like morning sickness, the fat white petals falling from the stem at the slightest touch. I still remember the park bench, how I did not dare to say no. It was dark, the air so humid, mixed with our sweat, I felt as if I were drowning the closer he came, the farther we got. Once clothed in the dark, surrounded by greenery so thick that the sounds of crickets rung off hard palettes of leaves, he changed. I remember trying to make his face out in the dark, wondering if an animal had taken his place. Guys had been docile to me since then, getting wet eyes when it was over, trying tentative advances up my skirt, looking awkward with a box of chocolates, at worst sending me a stinging email afterwards. This was different, suddenly I
Satan bows his central head, while the right savages the left like a hungry dog. Frank, an old-age, modern-day Dante, who has had enough of kids. And has sold his soul to keep them off his lawn, his silent emerald companion, his one labor that has borne fruit. Now he blanches at the reek of cold vomit caked in greased fur as the devil extends one massive hand. With a syringe he used earlier to check his insulin, Frank pulls his soul, translucent and shivering, out of his body and offers it. "Not enough to fill a thimble!" Satan laughs and sloshes the soul above his head. "Just do it," says Frank Satan flaps his wings, snarls, "It is so." Frank slips back across the ice that Virgil who guides him back through Dis and its sinners writhing like loose power cables and displaying blackened tongues scrambling naked over dead grass in the ditches to grasp at his feet. He kicks at them, his boots connect with a noise like a cockroach being bitten in half.

Back up above, Frank sees that Lucifer has been true and his lawn lies beyond a miniature river of souls. Frank calls for the boatman, blind and crippled. He sees the damn neighbor kid crash his bike and thrash screaming in the shallows with souls dripping off him like ethereal sweat. "That'll teach you to piss in my bushes you little bastard.

On the other side of the river, his lawn is pristine, golf-course green grass, unscared by bike tracks or some toy long discarded. He passes another neighbor kid trapped with flatterers in a ditch full of human waste. He pulls up an Adirondack, stirs Metamucil into a glass of water, and looks out over his own private hell. Let consequences come later—he says to the lawn-wreckers of the world at large, "Come and get me now."

I realized that men and women were not like two different species, important in the way having horses and snails in the world was. They were like two armies, both having something the other party wanted desperately. I remember reading a poem by Ted Hughes, where a worm gets cut in two, one half attaching to the man, the other half burrowing up a woman. How from then on the worm was always trying to become whole again. That was how it seemed to me, a needy act. Worms struggling to be together. At around the same time I began to grow into more of a woman, so that homeless men by the side of the road would get up and tail me, yelling, their yellow teeth like kernels of corn rotting in their mouths. So that lonely business men, just beginning to fatten in their well tailored suits would begin to sit down by me in malls, rubbing their arms against mine, asking me my name. At parties, feelings would rise out of their trenches, people would pile on top of each other, twisting, the need now loosened by too many drinks. Girls crying about it later in the toilets, throwing up and sobbing, sobbing and throwing up. Every time I felt the same urge, or watched a boy begin to move in, I would remember the Hughes poem. I would remember that sweltering night in the Don Valley ravine, plastic Barbie bodies mashing together, men in dark exhibits smelling of cigarette smoke, and draw back, shuddering.

I wonder if Eros will shake his blind head at me, tell me I spent too much time with Thanatos and his deadly butterflies. That I savored my existence as a half a worm too much, and hid from the momentary chance of being a whole. I will remember how the anatomy of a male and female have always seemed to me. The man has to be willing, the woman does not. The man drives in, a thrusting violence, and the lady lays. The man pushes outwards and the woman has to take it in. In my mind, the act of love becomes a sort of dance of death and yielding, a sort of dangerous letting down of the guard. While Thanatos prepares me for pain, teaches me to be weathered and strong, Eros leaves me naked and needy, shaking with a desire that I would rather live without.
In seven days
at 4:30 p.m.
I will be eighteen years
and three months old—
So old,
So young.
My body growing older,
decaying despite my youth.
It's 1:40 in the morning
and I'm afraid someday
I will lift my left breast
to find a hole underneath,
the cavity of a purple bone cave
big enough to slide a hand into,
easy access to vital organs
instead of the beauty mark
that lies there now.
I'm afraid
no one will ever drag their fingers
across my skin there,
notice the dark brown dot,
briefly lay their lips on it.
Instead
they'll see the hole,
reach in and pull at
whatever their fingers
wrap themselves around—
a tired lung?
cracked bones?
the heart?
What is there but that?
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*It takes a village to raise a child!* – Hillary Clinton

P.s. So many many thanks to James for stepping in and showing us how to make our own fancy, and for just being really handsome.

In the desert
I saw a creature, naked, bestial,
Who, squatting upon the ground,
Held his heart in his hands,
And ate of it.
I said: "Is it good, friend?"
"It is bitter-bitter," he answered;
"But I like it
Because it is bitter,
And because it is my heart."
Stephen Crane

The Red Wheelbarrow
so much depends upon
a red wheel barrow
glazed with rain water
beside the white chickens.