

Marvelous, So Marvelous:
Essays, Instructions, Obituaries

A Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of Master of Fine Arts

with a

Major in Creative Writing

in the

College of Graduate Studies

University of Idaho

by

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May 2020

Authorization to Submit Thesis

This thesis of Sarah E. VanGundy, submitted for the degree of Master of Fine Arts with a Major in Creative Writing and titled "Marvelous, So Marvelous: Essays, Instructions, Obituaries" has been reviewed in final form. Permission, as indicated by the signatures and dates below, is now granted to submit final copies to the College of Graduate Studies for approval.

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Abstract

“Marvelous, So Marvelous: Essays, Instructions, Obituaries,” is a collection of creative nonfiction about leaking and exploding, birth and death, birds and art and monsters. The project implicates the reader through shifting subjectivities and generic indiscretion, engaging Freud and cat litter, Anne Carson and two-headed calves, Bukowski and the sublime, in an exploration of the inescapable porosity of humanness. The collection’s eight essays and one obituary invite conversation, disorientation, and identification around the indistinct edges that fail to fully separate life and death, the sacred and the profane, and the subject and the object.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the venues where essays from this collection first appeared: “Borrowed Division” in *Harvard Review*, “How to Shrink A Human Head” in [*PANK*], “Memento Mori” in *The Offing*, and “A Special Providence in the Fall of A Sparrow” in *Entropy*.

Many thanks to my committee, Kim Barnes, Jennifer Ladino, and Kelly Quinnett, for generously agreeing to read and engage with my work; I feel so fortunate to have such thoughtful and accomplished readers. I’d also like to thank Tobias Wray for his steadfast and cheerful assistance with the aspects of the program that required me to fill out forms correctly. Thanks to his help, I didn’t even cry.

I want to acknowledge the exceptional support, mentorship, friendship, wisdom, and guidance Kim Barnes has offered me throughout my time at the University of Idaho. Kim’s insight and enthusiasm helped me push my work closer to doing what it means to do and allowed me to begin to think myself a writer.

Also, though she wasn’t part of the writing part of writing this thesis, Kristine Zakarison’s curiosity and wisdom about embodied experience have been with me at every steady breath.

Thanks to my colleagues in the program and my many other partners in thinking and living. Kristin Henrich and Rochelle Smith have been with me since before the beginning, through all the hardest things. Lauren Westerfield has been my indefatigable partner in every aspect of writing, and I can’t imagine this thesis without her help at the line level and the wine level.

My husband, Ben Hunter, has been infinitely supportive, finding the music in my drafts and learning to recognize the difference between one of my writing fugues and an actual bad mood. I also want to acknowledge the support, kindness, and joy my family new and old, near and far have offered me in this process, so thank you to Jack & Laura & Cory & Jay & Seamus & Solveig! Finally, thank you to my mom, Denilyn Jordan, and my daughter, Chloe Manchester, my nesting dolls, familiars, ghosts, and muses, for all the words and just everything.

Dedication

To my dad.

Table of Contents

Authorization to Submit Thesis	ii
Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Dedication	vi
Marvelous, So Marvelous	1
A Foreign Body within Oneself, or Oneself as a Foreign Body	7
Borrowed Division	21
How to Shrink a Human Head	32
How to Be a Muse.....	42
A Special Providence in the Fall of a Sparrow	50
Here Is a Scene.....	65
Obituary	74
Memento Mori	76

Marvelous, So Marvelous

You are sixteen, little spoon. Stoned, you melt, your boyfriend behind you, legs tangled on the couch. Eddie Murphy's *Raw* is on the TV, and you watch the equalizer lights on the stereo, your heartbeat equalizing with the bass, your breath with his breath. Your grandma is in Ohio dying of cancer. It's hard to imagine, but this is clear: the edges of the body, your body, are the only way to feel edgeless, like you feel right now, limitless and loved. The anticipation of losing this feeling immediately follows your sudden discovery that it's there. Someday this body will be gone, a pang so delicious, so far away, it puts the warmth into peaked relief.

Decreation: to make something pass into the uncreated -Simone Weil

At night, you roll the number 2050 around in your mouth, clack it teeth to tongue. Penny, candy, stone. Scientists in Sweden unspool a timeline for the world's likely burning and melting and flooding and starving. The year 2050 is the tipping point. No day is named, but maybe it will be in August, just after the Perseid meteor shower, your 75th birthday, National Cherry Turnover Day in the United States. Tactile and sweet, cascading future tragedy written down. One thing follows another, and it all comes apart.

Destruction, to make something created pass into nothingness. -Weil

You are twenty-two, sweating, split open, bleeding, awake, naked, and screaming. You've pushed a person out into the world, but it doesn't breathe. Seconds pass and its skin starts to blue. An oxygen mask is placed over its tiny nose and mouth and the body pinks, naked and screaming. They give you a shot to stop your bleeding and they hand this bundle to you,

wrapped in a blanket, the most beautiful thing you have ever seen. You unwrap it, find it a girl. She has long spidery fingers and curling toes and you realize you could've lost her, yourself. Blood and breath and their absence are all in the room. Milk and blood and sweat.

This world is the closed door. It is a barrier. And at the same time it is the way through. -Weil

You dream of her floating away from you, stuck at the bottom of the sea, broken in a bucket, and you wake crying. Her head is small and soft, her brain protected by an eggshell and lint wisps of hair. In the days and months that follow, you keep her tied to your body. It is a craving like idolatry, but this urgency, this life that is not your life but is yours to maintain, also feels like a kind of death.

...for what is wonderful always goes together with a sense of dismay -Longinus

Fifteen years later, you come home from work and see: burns she's made on the soft skin inside her arms with a butter knife heated in the gas flames of the stove, shallow cuts sliced into her pale thigh. She calls you because she has swallowed pills. Every time, you take her to the hospital, every time, they send her home and you crawl in bed next to her, torn between wanting to absorb her back into you, to keep her safe, and wanting to push her away. Scabbed to skinless, could it be otherwise?

It is in the order of the world at this instant that we should be such as we are. -Weil

You read in *National Geographic* that a Tonkean macaque monkey ate the remains of her dead baby. A picture of the mother monkey shows her gazing mournfully into the distance with the corpse of her baby, her first ever and only baby, dead, dried, and held tightly but

upside down in her hand, pressed against her abdomen. Its hollow-eyed head is down in the position of a fetus about to crown. She grooms his body and licks him and carries him everywhere, even after he begins to harden and mummify, even when, after fourteen days, his head finally falls off. She is not a meat eater, usually subsisting on a diet of wild figs, tender leaves, flower stalks, and shoots and buds, but she eats his little body, part by part, taking him back where he was last safe.

for what is wonderful always goes together with a sense of dismay

You should have let her go? Blue and untouched baby, unrevived, before she woke up to what could happen. She could slip from you now. Not in a bucket or at the bottom of the ocean and not because you didn't watch out for her fontanelle, quickening inverted.

Your therapist says: *But if she died, would you still breathe?* Life is a gift and you have given it. Stop asking for it back. A cracking rattle of whatever comes just beyond love opens up between your shoulder blades, a soft knife levering a dull syrup ache between the frail cage, your ribs.

If you want to know why you cannot reach your own beautiful ideas.

If you reach instead the edge of the thinkable, which leaks. -Anne Carson

In 1975, the year you were born, Charles Bukowski wrote a poem called "One of the Hottest Ever." You read it in 1990, holding the worn beige softcover Black Sparrow Press edition of *Love is a Dog From Hell*, sitting on the linoleum in the 3rd floor stacks of the university library.

*(I'm fucking the grave, I thought, I'm
 bringing the dead back to life, marvelous
 so marvelous
 like eating cold olives at 3 am
 with half the town on fire.)*

Oh! the briny joy of the end of anything, the relief that comes when there is nothing left to save, but there is still time to wonder at the flames. You love those lines like a song. Not for the fucking, which is ordinary, but for the olives and the fire. The salt and burn feel attainable, inspirational, the opening of undoing. You take notes: ravenous to fuck and drink and think, keep your eyes on the fried eggs, empty lipsticked glasses, sweet and desperate gestures from strangers. The poem, the scene, a pinhole camera describing the edges of an aperture small enough to allow you to glimpse what is so big.

...bigness is always threatening to go out of control, to submerge and vanquish the soul that seeks to enjoy it. -Carson

You are married twice before you see your first tide pool. (You'll marry again, but when you meet the pulsing Pacific you don't know that yet). Anemones are a revelation. Sluggish, pendulous, under-rock carpets, their weak suck and sting numbs your finger in the icy water but every time you pull away, you want to feel it again. To the anemone, you are a protuberance. Saltwater, nudibranch, a man. Stinging tentacles, radial symmetry: a single

giant green anemone can eat a whole fat ochre star. At the tidepool you gnosticize, sweat a gospel: you and the grasping holes under the rocks share a poison, a hungry survival aim.

bigness is always threatening to go out of control

Sometimes, your heart just breaks, even now. An ache under your ribs, multiplying gravity, cramping all the way to the floor. Valve flaps suddenly non-autonomic. Think, flap, think, flap, think, flap. You see things and you cry. On the treadmill's small screen, Kurt Cobain sings candlelit, mourning and celebrating his own future death; in the living room, a spindling Christmas tree wilts, pulled straight from Idaho woods; in the supermarket, the face on the gingerbread boy is not human but calls dumbly to humanness, its round mouth just full of more dough. Unbearable. Skinless, you press to the floor. The tiny aperture gapes; the bigness is so big you can't see it, can't even know it is there.

reach instead the edge of the thinkable, which leaks.

The annihilated soul, you read, is one that has given up everything except God through love. It is a good thing, supposedly, maybe the only good thing. One thing happens and then another and then everything falls apart. You hold it in your mouth, this truth of your own end and that of the world. You have to get bigger to find a consolation here, look through an ever-smaller hole to see the blinking out of your life as a fiber in the pulse of the unspooling Earth, the planet a soul on the way to annihilation. Give up everything except God: that salt, that tooth-cracking sweet.

Trees warn each other of danger by sending electrical signals across an underground fungal network. -My horoscope, November 11, 2019.

I am trying to warn you. Feel through your feet roots, dig down naked toed in cold dirt and I will try to be as clear as I can. Fix your make up, fix a drink. Look everywhere for signs and you will see them. Fat wild hamsters eat candle wax in a British cemetery, you and your husband buy each other the same framed picture of birds playing poker for Christmas, the first comet from another star arrives and gets a name. Your daughter (satellite, moon) calls you from Seattle to tell you about the pierogi she ate. Your friends are still your friends. You tell secrets across tables and press shoulders on the walk home, edgeless. The next morning, the next day, you will read the newspaper like tea leaves, then let it all unspool. Drink your coffee, your water, your wine.

A Foreign Body within Oneself, or Oneself as a Foreign Body

It is April, and the worms are long and fat and fading purple-pink to brown, like lost intestines. I try to step over them on my way to work, but they insinuate lumpy strings of themselves onto sidewalks, underfoot. Eventually, I tire of vigilance and start to pretend they aren't there.

Nine years ago May 5, my dad died. I never remember the date is coming around again until it's too late and it feels like I'm being fed something that was formerly food and is now its opposite. His death and I are twin magnetic norths, pushed closer in integers that accord with the Earth's rotation around the sun until Cinco de Dad's Dead, when I confront the annual fact of it. Caught and repelled, spiraling away to do it again.

He died in the same hospital in Norman, Oklahoma where my daughter Chloe, age nine, had a piece of fencing wire removed from her foot, a procedure that made me so anxious the nurses gave me a Valium and a Mexican Coke they kept in their mini-fridge. The doctor called me "Mom." After x-rays and antiseptics, he took out a pair of sterile pliers and said, "You might want to look away for this part, Mom."

When I was pregnant, I always worried I was forgetting a detail, dropping the ball on making the baby. I couldn't believe the force of my worry wasn't required for each part to form: seeds of baby teeth, cochlea, iris, elbows, brain. I never thought to make her feet, but there they were, nine years later, dirty and skewered in the white hospital sheets. The uncanny, Freud suggests, "is that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and

had long been familiar.” Once her foot was repaired, we left the hospital and got ice cream at Braums. Chloe showed her friends the thick twist of bloodied wire, which the doctor had let her take home in a plastic bag.

When my dad died, I wasn't at the hospital. I was in New York, working as a librarian at a college in Westchester County. I hated my job and I hated living in New York, but I loved taking the train into the city. I loved the orange plastic seats on the New Haven line and the loudspeaker call: Larchmont, New Rochelle, Pelham, all the way to 125th-Harlem and then Manhattan. On the train, I belonged to the city. I could be part of the gentle crush of people moving together to the sound of the underground platform pipe-hiss at Grand Central Terminal, where the strange became familiar and intimate, a beaux-arts lover's mouth of Manhattan: happy hour beer at the Oyster Bar, the shop with good magazines and expensive water, glass bakery cases full of black and white cookies, and the domed interior of the main concourse, painted with mythologized constellations, arcing above the famous four-faced opal clock, a perfecting of the smog-obscured world outside.

A gray Saturday in March, the March before the May when my dad died, Chloe and I took the train into the city and walked to the Ripley's Believe It or Not! Odditorium in Times Square. She took a picture of me standing next to a mangy taxidermied two-headed calf in a glass case and another picture of me haloed by a quartet of shrunken heads. I took a picture of her holding her eleven-year-old hand up to a bronze cast of the World's Largest Hand and another picture of her next to a portrait of Abraham Lincoln made entirely out of pennies. We ate Two Boots pizza and rode the 5:15 train home.

At a curiosity shop in Seattle, closer to where I now live, another two-headed taxidermied calf greets visitors at the door. The owner of the shop buys shipments of old dolls wholesale and arranges their parts in bell jars. While I was paying for one particular broken-necked ballerina, he told me we humans are compelled and repulsed by dolls because their forward facing eyes give our deep minds pause, forcing us to rest a moment while we try to determine whether we are looking at a *who* or a *what*. We don't act until we know if we've met a mate or foe or tool or meal.

"Faces," research tells us, "are the observable icons of unobservable minds."¹ When we aren't sure about the presence or absence of mind, we have reason to be distressed. For instance, we are untroubled by the doll that is clearly a doll, or the face of a baby that we can tell could cry or smile, but when we can't quite tell doll from baby, we experience what the researchers call an "affective dip." Scientists performed studies, interrogating human neurological responses to real and artificial faces and the spectrum that lies in between. "We must be able to discriminate faces worthy of our thoughts, feelings, and actions from false alarms that are not actually faces. Otherwise we might regard clouds, cars, or houses as objects with a mental life." We find faces everywhere, but our twin vigilant impulse is always activated, keeping us from falling in love with houses or fighting clouds.

¹ Wheatley, Thalia, et al. "Mind Perception: Real but Not Artificial Faces Sustain Neural Activity beyond the N170/VPP." *PLoS ONE*, vol. 6, no. 3, 2011.

Toward the back of the curiosity shop, there are nautical antiques and a wall display of objects that were ambient, usual, in my childhood, but are now collector's items: Garbage Pail Kids trading cards, signed and framed airbrushed pictures of Kenny Rogers, Garfield the Cat milk glasses that were once free-with-purchase at Hardees. Along the other wall, tiny familiar scenes play out multiply in dioramas. A taxidermied mouse leans over a toilet next to a dollhouse bottle of Calvados, a preserved mouse sits on a settee next to a porcelain fireplace, reading a book, with mouse spectacles perched on its dead nose. Two mice, bipedal, mince on claws across a little net, clutching racquets, dressed in impeccable tennis whites.

When my dad was alive, my best moments with him were like this: he bought me a herd of rubber slugs from Archie McPhee's for my ninth birthday. I knit them little scarves and wrote plays for them, which I performed on stages built out of Kleenex boxes. Slugs were the only actors and my dad was the only audience. In our best times, he laughed at my slugs' jokes and explained to me why they were funny, and further, why such analysis is key. This slug-borne strangeness I shared with him was the thread that connected us when little else was there. He would write me emails with the subject heading "There's something nefarious afoot, by cracky!" I once mailed him a large plastic duck with a hidden motion sensor that quacked when you walked by. In our final email correspondence, just a few days before he died, I sent him an advertisement for squirrel underpants.

Freud begins his study of the uncanny with a linguistic exploration of the collapsing meanings of the German words *Heimlich*, which means something like domestic or homey, and its opposite, *unheimlich*, which becomes the uncanny. "*Heimlich*," he explains, "thus becomes

increasingly ambivalent, until it finally merges with its antonym *unheimlich*. The uncanny is in some way a species of the familiar.” Two north poles, doppelgangers, so familiar they find their own opposites in the mirror.

When my Dad was living, he was a university professor. He watched me closely sometimes, examining the finer points of slug theater dramaturgy, or my body, taking credit for me when I looked or thought like him. “You’ve got my sense of humor,” he would say, or, “Your height. That comes from my side of the family.” When I was twelve, my parents divorced, and when I was fifteen, my dad remarried and disappeared, his disembodied voice sometimes coming in late night calls made from pay phones at conferences. He was a pantomime of a married lover, my sister and I the lonely secretary eating ice cream in our sad bathrobes on the other end of the line. Sometimes I saw him in public with his new wife, at a restaurant or the mall. He would look at me and then look away. We recognized each other, of course, but in those moments, his face was not even a species of the familiar, no more home-like than a cloud.

“Essentially different from ‘uncanniness,’ more violent, too, abjection is elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin; nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory,” Julia Kristeva writes.² I was memory and its shadow for him, but he was the same for me. When I was in college, he divorced his wife and returned to me, in person, an eerie specter of what I wanted in the years he was gone, the barest outline of what I imagined I had been missing. We met for weekly lunches. My sister Laura had spaghetti dinners at his house, but I insisted

² Kristeva, Julia, and Leon S. Roudiez. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.

on lunch, out. I always got a salad and the kind of giant latte they served in pint glasses in Oklahoma in the 1990s. He told me about his work and the women he dated, and I told him, preening, guarded, and praise-seeking, about my small successes at school or work. The café served breadsticks that were sugary and covered with rosemary and salt. They were in a basket labeled “focaccia,” but I recognized then for what they were: a species of cake in savory disguise.

Around the time he retired, my dad smoked crack for the first time with some women the Merry Maids sent to scrub his beige tract house. Before he brought pipe to mouth, he was already sick with a variety of maladies, real and imagined: amorphous heart problems, chronic cystitis, wandering pains. And just like that, he was addicted before anyone knew what he was doing. I found out in October, the fall before I took library school comps. He had picked Chloe up from school while I was in class and when I went to get her, he seemed wrong. I called my sister, who called our second cousins, who had experience with such things. Laura asked my dad directly and he said yes, he’d smoked some cocaine. “Daddy,” she told me she told him, “you don’t smoke cocaine.” What you smoke, impossibly and of course, what *he* smoked, was crack.

I’d never before seen him unshaven, or dirty, or half-dressed during daylight hours. Our lunches stopped. I sent friends to get Chloe after school on his days, telling her he was sick, which was a species of the truth. Laura started spending the night on his couch to try to keep him from sneaking out to meet dealers. He looked gaunt and his skin turned papery. I didn’t

know how to see him, his face suddenly unfamiliar, as if my mind had moved it into the category of objects lacking a mental life, unworthy of attention.

Freud says we encounter the uncanny when what “was intended to remain secret, hidden away...has come into the open.” In his house, after he died, we found magazines in the bathtub, a handle of Everclear in the freezer, cigarette packages, porn, lettuce, and clothes with tags still on, ordered and hung in the closet, unworn.

He went to a luxury rehab center in Miami and came back still addicted, saying he wasn't. He told me he voted for Obama in 2008 and then told my sister he hadn't. He said he was going to take us to Hawaii and start a new business project. Crack didn't make him lie, but it took away any ability he had to imagine what we might believe. Or maybe he just believed it all himself. I called him from New York and asked how recovery was going. He told me it was GREAT! He was so recovered that when he found a crack rock by his big leather recliner, he smoked it just to SEE if he still wanted it, just to test himself. It turned out, he said, that he didn't even LIKE crack anymore!

“Aren't you proud of your Daddy?” he asked.

Dada artist Max Ernst had a bird-man persona named “Loplop, superior of birds,” who took many forms. Loplop was impresario, totem, mask, and metaphor. An alter-ego and witchy familiar, Loplop emerged as a spectral fetch, beaking over Ernst's collages and running rakishly down the streets of his surrealist novels. He was free as a bird, but for a German like

Ernst, born in Brühl, in the same region of Alsatian ambiguity as my dad's pre-immigrated forebears, a bird also meant the icy shadow of wings, the lonely flights of the unbeholden. *Vogelfrei* means unbound, free as a bird, but it is used to refer to a bandit, an outlaw, someone with a price on his head. The word collapses on itself, clutching freedom so close it becomes the promise of a cage.

Among planets in our solar system, only Venus lacks magnetism. When my dad died, the tension he held me in went suddenly slack. I reeled before I steadied. The unresolved stories I told myself about him all ended, finally, the same way.

On May 5, 2009, he went into the hospital for a heart valve replacement. He survived the surgery and the transfer to the ICU. I think: disjointed beak, single semi-palmate clutch-toed foot, curled dry like a keychain. Featherless. When he started bleeding, the doctor called Laura, who called my mom and stepdad. They went to the hospital. Laura called me, then my mom called me, and then my stepdad called me, then my mom, and then Laura again. She handed the phone to my mom and after that, he was dead. Cardiac dissection, insufficiency, a heart that wouldn't hold. I was sitting on the stairs and Chloe, woken by the calls, pressed her body into my side. The surgeon cried. Nobody had told him about the drugs, and there he was, with the pre-existing fault lines of my dad's heart exploding in his hands. I kept the surgeon's phone number taped to my computer monitor for weeks, imagining I would call him and absolve him, or demand an answer, but I never did and now I don't remember his name.

Chloe went back to bed and I spent all night on the phone with Laura. We parsed the particulars, what my dad said on his way into surgery (“We’re going to Hawaii, right?”), what he told her he left behind (a head of lettuce, half a bottle of wine), what he might have meant (this is your inheritance). We laughed, because what else could we do? What kind of story was this? I was shocked and relieved when the grief arrived, fully formed and irrefutable. The complication of him became unimportant in the face of the fact that he was gone.

Laura asked me if she had to look at his body. I told her that of course she didn’t, that she’d done enough. But I’d never thought about what it meant to look or not to look. Later, I asked my mom and stepdad if they saw his body. They’d offered to go and look but Laura insisted they stay in the waiting room with her. My stepdad said he’d brought a McDonald’s filet-o-fish to the hospital for my dad the day before the surgery, and my dad told him that he and my mom made a nice couple. My dad told my mom she was the best wife he’d ever had. And he’d had a few.

In the end, no one saw him the night he died except the people who worked in the ICU, people whose job it is to clean up when the inside parts of bodies come the surface and become waste, when the inevitable truth of death comes unburied. His body stayed an abstraction for us. That night, he must have still had a face, and I wish now I had seen it, for animal reasons: smells or to detect a certain absence that I think might quiet the heartbeat bacterial universe, my stomach, that composed emails to him for years.

By the time Chloe and I got to Oklahoma, his body had been moved to the Havenbrook Funeral Home. Laura had a new black dress and a tabbed binder full of documents relating to the administration of his death. We met with the funeral director in a room that looked like a church kitchen, with peeling linoleum and a coffee splattered microwave with a blinking display. We sat at a white table and talked about cremation. I don't remember anything about the conversation except the funeral director asking if our dad had a pacemaker because "those suckers will go off like a bomb." We fingered a laminated brochure showcasing urns. We had opinions about them; we decided on stainless steel, though I don't remember why. A determining purchase, like picking out wedding china. We planned to divide up the dust of him, some for all stakeholders in little "keepsake urns," some to be placed on his parents' graves in Ohio, and some to later be smuggled to Mexico where Laura and I would mix his ashes with hotel minibar wine and release the slurry to the tide in the uncombed scrub shore just outside the boundaries of our resort.

The funeral director asked if we wanted to see him, to say goodbye, but we didn't. I don't remember the inside of my head then, just that I could not, under any circumstances, stand up. "An uncanny effect often arises when the boundary between fantasy and reality is blurred, when we are faced with the reality of something that we have until now considered imaginary," Freud writes. Looking would have made real the imaginary prospect of my dad's dead body and the entire cascade of circumstances around it.

We laughed, nervous girls, and left as fast as we could, wild with relief in the car after. What would I have seen if I looked? Would I have touched him? Would he have been wrapped in plastic? Naked? A hospital gown? His own Orvis tracksuit? I was so afraid.

I don't know if there was an option to view the cremation and I don't know when, exactly, it happened. Havenbrook's cremations employ an industrial incinerator, known as a "retort." It is lined with special bricks that can be exposed to temperatures up to 2,000 degrees, a heat so intense it seems theoretical. There are websites now about how grief surrounding a sudden death is different from the grief following a death from old age or a long illness. The survivors may feel a sense of unreality. The websites suggest that seeing the body, no matter how disfigured, will help.

The crematorium would have washed the body and placed it inside some kind of flammable coffin, unembalmed. Inside the retort, the coffin catches fire and then the body. The steam of my dad would have escaped and then the thinned hair on his head and legs and the chest hair that hadn't been shaved for surgery would have burned. Then his skin, papery and sallow. His fat would melt and liquefy. The heat would cause his muscles to make last contractions. Then his organs (did the surgeon leave the parts of his heart in his chest or was that disposed of as medical waste?) and finally his small bones and large bones would harden and turn to calcium carbonate, and then fragments. Sifted out, gray and white and powdery with a few remaining chunks, what was left of him was handed back to us at the Havenbrook reception desk in an illicit-looking plastic bag, like a very boring drug deal.

When Chloe was born, I pushed her out, at home on a futon, with a midwife and no drugs. I felt like it was important to be there and awake for the whole thing, like the ensouling of her required my conscious attention. As we moved from one organism to two, things happened that I still don't understand, but I've never doubted that she is both mine and her own, as if a secret intelligence was at work engraving her new aliveness on my consciousness. Birth, maybe, is as strange as death, but I was awake for her's and it made a kind of limbic sense. I knew it was real. When my dad died, I wasn't even in the same state. I never smelled death on him, nor saw his body unanimated. His departure felt mysterious and inexact. If I'd stood next to him, breathing while he didn't, maybe I would believe that he died like all things die. Instead, I still expect him to call. For years, I sent him emails, asking where he'd gone. I dream him faint and half-alive, avoiding me because of a girlfriend, or turning himself into a subway rat or a body that just waits, outside a room in the back of my mind.

In 2017, Lucky, the longest-lived two-headed calf on record, died in Kentucky at 108 days old. His longevity made the news; I read about it in *The Washington Post*. It is rare, but not vanishingly so, for a calf to be born with polycephaly, the condition of having two heads. Most live no more than a few days, but Lucky, with four eyes, two noses, and two mouths, became a pet. Her family, who lived on a farm in Taylor County, raised money for her medical care and potential surgical interventions. She died though, before the veterinarians had a chance to try to separate her, save her. Lucky's family held a funeral and buried her on the banks of a creek on their farm.

According to Max Ernst, “The collage technique is the systematic exploitation of the accidentally or artificially provoked encounter of two or more foreign realities on a seemingly incongruous level – and the spark of poetry that leaps across the gap as these two realities are brought together.” I wrote an obituary for the newspaper and an eulogy, which I read on the funeral home’s stage to an audience of his former colleagues, friends of my mom, my sister, and me, two of my past husbands, some ladies I didn’t know, and my dad’s second youngest brother. After, we all got drunk on champagne and whisky around my Colombian best friend’s big table, then we moved to my mom’s house and crowded into the living room to eat lentil soup and oatmeal bread.

My dad’s dead house was all that was left of him to see. As we picked through the remains, my mom wore rubber gloves, but she helped. His shoes went to my ex-husband, my mom took the frozen shrimp out of his freezer, Chloe picked a matted and framed map off his office wall. I made a list of furniture and paintings I wanted put in storage for me, but the only thing I took home was a pale blue Charles Thrywitt dress shirt that hung in his closet. I flew away fatherless, *vogelfrei*, back to New York and I wore the shirt under my coat and over my clothes.

Two years later, when the parts of my life had shifted but not settled, my house was robbed early on a Saturday morning while I watched Chloe compete in a swim meet. I had left the back door unlocked and someone stole my old TV, a new floral Ikea pillowcase that matched my duvet, Chloe’s costume jewelry, and the cloisonné box that sat on my bookshelf holding the stainless-steel miniature urn of my dad’s ashes. They left my camera, my computer, and

everything else. I don't know why they took what they took, especially the box, which sat next to a jar of change on the shelf. Maybe they thought it was filled with cash or drugs? The police suggested I'd brought it on myself, leaving the back door unlocked. They asked me if I had any enemies. Later, when the police were gone and I was alone, I imagined the thief was a woman, and I imaged she took the urn and crouched somewhere in the bushes, snorting what I had left of my dad into her nose or cooking him into smokable rocks with a long-necked lighter she held under a blackened spoon.

Borrowed Division

There is a power in the forms and other power in the inarticulate area, margins, confused lines, and beyond the external boundaries. Mary Douglas

Imagine, for a moment, that the edges of you can relax until they blur. Imagine you blur until you are not you and it is not now. Imagine you are my mother.

It is December 1974, and you are in Europe for the first time. London. Your hair is long and shiny, honey blonde. You wash it in beer and egg yolks and brush it with a boar-bristle brush that was a gift from your mother-in-law. You are twenty-nine years old, in your last year of coursework for a Ph.D. in Psychology at The Ohio State University, where your new husband is also finishing a Ph.D. You are a better student, but you edit his papers and praise his arguments, take his side in department politics.

You wear leather stacked heel clogs that beat out an uneven tempo on the sidewalk and a navy polyester maxi-skirt with wooden buttons all the way down. You have been on every diet: cabbage, bacon, grapefruit; pineapple, Scarsdale, cookie. You have a theory that tanning and dieting are complementary activities: the smaller you get, the darker your skin. You can become a concentrate of yourself, un-reconstituted, like the orange juice in the cans you sleep on, empty, to curl your hair.

The streets in London look like the sets of movies. You double majored in Literature and History and you can recite the succession of the crown. You walk out of London Heathrow

with your blue hard-shell Samsonite that was a gift from your parents, incredulous at finding yourself here with your tall handsome husband of two years and your bickering in-laws, who are paying for the trip. The air smells like transit diesel and wet dirt, gray and green. With each breath you exchange Ohio for this unfamiliar air. You metabolize the newness, London, which must now account for you.

In that moment, you are jet lagged but your vision sparks with the clear edges of unfamiliarity and potential. You are living the life you meant to live, it feels like it can all work; your experience and desire suddenly settle and click into the schema you've been curating. Your in-laws still seem charmingly strange, like Salinger's Glass family, your husband's dark moods still seem like marks of intelligence and mercurial sensitivity. You know that he needs you. And you? You surprise yourself just by being there. Your own parents are schoolteachers, one generation off the farm in rural northern Indiana. Your family vacations were spent camping in National Parks with coolers full of home canned pickles. Your parents told you that food tastes better out of doors. Now here you are, in Europe, visiting London, Paris, and Rome. About to eat *snails*. It is just a package tour, but the "just" part won't occur to you until later.

You check in to your London hotel, where you are supposed to sleep off your jetlag. Your father-in-law is a doctor and he has a method for negotiating time zones, tricking the rhythms of the body into adapting. You are supposed to take a nap, but you and your husband are too excited for sleep, a little hysterical with exhaustion. He tells jokes about the furniture, makes you laugh until you cry. He first seduced you while you were studying for an exam by lurking

in the doorway near your desk, making up fake Latin roots for the words you were memorizing. You don't remember much about the hotel room, just that the bed was huge, and you couldn't stop laughing. You make love with your husband, still laughing, before you finally sleep.

While you are sleeping, the biological processes of my becoming are already taking place. It's a funny time. I imagine that the pairing of sperm and egg was confident, secure, direct, and fated. Because what else can I think? If it was hesitant, side swiped, a close call with nothingness, then what? This face, all I have to show for myself, would never have appeared.

In London, you visit all the monuments and buy a cream-colored cashmere sweater at Harrods. In Paris, you eat snails and drink champagne. In Rome, the bread tastes better than any you've ever had, but your cigarettes, Winston Lights, lose their appeal. There is a picture of you in the airport before the flight home, looking nauseous and exhausted, smoking a cigarette, your legs crossed, your hair still bouncing long and shiny. You go back to Ohio carrying a bottle of Duty-Free Chanel No. 5 that is so precious it gets saved on top of your dresser until the scent turns. You go back to Ohio carrying me. By twenty weeks of gestation, I will have six to seven million eggs of my own, my lifetime supply. Matryoshka, nesting doll born of a nesting doll, this line grows inside you.

Dr. Greentree, your OBGYN, tells you to eat organ meat for iron. He suggests that you try not to smoke more than one pack a day. You take notes and do research; you couldn't have known then what has taken science forty years to discover, but while you worried and

planned, my cells were crossing over the permeable structures that contained me, fanning out, colonists with plans for your resources, forming their own dynasties, successions of cellular shifting, building me and changing you, forever.

You wear smocked cotton maternity dresses embroidered with flowers and switch from stacked heel clogs to desert boots. You eat liver and quit smoking, for the baby. For me. Scientists call the process in which my little cells sidle up and settle with unavoidable magnetism next to yours *fetomaternal microchimerism* or *fetal chimerism*. You make yourself drink sludgy mixtures of brewer's yeast and egg yolks while you study for your comprehensive exams. Your husband is excited, terribly excited, awaiting the arrival of himself, but perfected.

In genetics, the term *chimera* refers to a single organism with genetically distinct cells, a hybrid. Your husband jokes that you should name the baby "Doctor" to save me the eventual trouble of graduate school. You don't find out the sex of the fetus. In *The Iliad*, a chimera is a particular monster, "a thing of immortal make, not human, lion-fronted and snake behind, a goat in the middle, and snorting out the breath of the terrible flame of bright fire." This nesting, leaking, crossing over, and bleeding through, me inside you, is as daunting as it is magical.

We arrive like this, with our boundaries already blurred, always-already not entirely ourselves. Cells from older siblings, miscarriages, abortions, cross the placenta and become

part of a growing fetus, just as cells from a growing fetus transgress placental walls to become permanent parts of their mother.

Now, imagine this is easy, a quotidian confusion of selves, because maybe it is. Imagine you can easily cross the threshold of your skin and mine. Imagine you are me.

It is August 1997, and you have recently come back to the University of Oklahoma after backpacking around India with your boyfriend, a man twenty-two years your senior, old enough to be your father. At the end of the month you will turn twenty-two years old. Your boyfriend is a naturopathic doctor and he looks so much like David Bowie that people do double takes on the street. Red-brown hair and sharp cheekbones and dark blue eyes. He employs techniques of natural medicine with a flourish, like magic tricks, adjusting your hip to fix the turn-out of your right foot and projecting your chance of thyroid dysfunction by measuring the curve of your ankle with his eyes. You believe him when he talks about optimal health, that there is an ideal and with just a little more effort you could get there. Of course, you want to be ideal.

You've recovered from the dysentery you had in India, but not from the shrill joy of emptiness it offered you. Now you are so thin your period skips its rounds, impish, frightened maybe of your lost hunger, or maybe delighted to be set free of the monthliness of its work. The fat pads on the bottoms of your feet have disappeared. It hurts a little to walk barefoot on the wood floors of your apartment, but this contact of bones on wood feels clear and pure, like a locked door or an open window.

You lie on your back on your futon bed, naked in the afternoon heat, admiring the concave space between your hipbones, the empty bowl of skin across your stomach. Your boyfriend is in the kitchen chopping vegetables; after you returned from India together, he sold his naturopathic practice and moved to Oklahoma, moved in with you. You suspect yourself of a strong magic to draw a grown man this way, though already you also suspect that your magic, in this case, is nothing more than your young body and the magnetism of its unpoliced thresholds.

Your apartment is on the third floor of a run-down yellow Victorian house near campus, and the August sun streams hot through the high windows into your angle-ceilinged bedroom. Classes won't start for another week. You are an English major, but you focus on cultural studies, not literature. You learn that all culture is blurred, its lineages twisted. The world you want to know and the ways you have of knowing it are beyond untangling. You read Benjamin and Deleuze and Guattari, Derrida and Foucault. The things you thought were finite, about society and art and self, are really moving and shifting amalgams of acts, thoughts, practices, ideas. When you read, you feel a vertiginous freedom, a spaciousness that is both seductive and terrifying. Still, you hope the body, your body, doesn't work this way. You hope for an exception, some loophole that allows you to open and close your borders at will. You are proud of what you don't let in, wary of what you do.

Years later, you read Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger* in graduate school. "Purity is the enemy of change," Douglas writes. "It is part of our human condition to long for hard lines

and clear concepts. When we have them we have to either face the fact that some realities elude them, or else blind ourselves to the inadequacy of the concepts.”

You call to your boyfriend and he walks into the room, shirtless, spectrally pale. He runs his hands over your body until you are dizzy, and you make love with the windows open.

Usually, he pulls out, but not this time. You both think it's the wrong time of the month for you to get pregnant, that you are too thin, that it's probably safe. He tells you getting pregnant is harder than you think. He tells you not to worry. He tells you, anyway, to imagine what a beautiful baby you would make.

You sleep fitfully in the heat that night, waking up before midnight, sure that there is someone in the closet or maybe the other room. Your boyfriend goes to check, but no one is there.

You go back to sleep, one foot slipped under the sheet because the covering makes you feel safe, even in the heat. You don't know it yet, but already it is happening inside you, with shifted time and place and particulars, the microscopic processes of your daughter's beginning, a chimera, always-already not entirely me or you. Later, you wonder if the sound of an imagined intruder in the apartment was the sound of your daughter announcing herself to you. Or you announcing yourself to her. Or just a vertiginous echo. You wonder if it was the way you sensed her first arrival in your body, your life. Didn't there have to be a moment of arrival? A sliver of a time, a threshold, between now and the time before? A fallow pause, imperceptible but crucial, like the moment after an exhalation, before the inhalation creeps in.

You start classes: Modern Poetry, Feminist Film Theory, Philosophy of Logic. You go back to your student job at the university library. You start seeing a midwife, who lets you listen to the fetal heartbeat through an ultrasound stethoscope and the hummingbird sound touches and surprises you into tears. You eat and eat and eat. You would eat even if the midwife hadn't told you to gain weight. You have never been so hungry. You are a vegetarian, but you can't stop thinking about meat. You imagine eating it raw and bloody, with your hands, feeling the ghost of its metallic tang on the back of your tongue. You start craving the hearts of things. You drive through Carl's Jr. for Famous Star Burgers. Your boyfriend tells you the beef will be too hard to digest, that you won't have the right enzymes, but you eat them anyway; they make you feel strong and light, like you are made of the earth's molten core and peacock feathers.

The baby grows. You grow. By twenty weeks, you start to show, and she has six to seven million eggs of her own, all she will ever have. She passes bits of herself into you and you pass yourself into her, lion-fronted and snake behind. You want to protect her, from the world, but especially from the leitmotif of yourself, her inheritance. You want to create a brand-new person, free from the historical hungers and imagined orders that you are passing to her right now through your blood. You want her to have an ease with the world and its messiness that you have never managed. You want this body growing with you, through you, to know it is always already whole and finished, not a project to perfect.

By now, you may feel like me. You may not be sure where the boundaries of yourself are marked. It may be easy, even familiar, to imagine that you are my daughter.

You, my daughter, are now in Paris with your mother, me. You are staying in a single room on the top floor of a hostel in Montmartre. The small room is dirty and un-air-conditioned, and Europe is in the middle of a heatwave, but you can see the spires of Sacré-Cœur from the small window. It is June 2014. You are sixteen years and six weeks old. You are almost six feet tall and you have your father's Bowie cheekbones and an inherited habit of talking with your hands. It is your second time in the city. The first time you were with your mother and your grandfather and you were only eight; you remember looking at your red Velcro tennis shoes as you climbed the openwork metal stairs in the Eiffel Tower and seeing all the way down to the cement, your fingers hooked tightly through the belt loops in your mother's jeans, her shifting weight your only bulwark against gravity.

This time, you walk to the Eiffel Tower from the Montparnasse cemetery where you and your mother searched for Sartre's grave, but only found Serge Gainsbourg's. There is construction, or maybe a heightened terrorist threat, and they aren't letting people climb the stairs. If you want to go up, you have to buy a ticket and wait your turn. You decide you don't want to wait. Instead, you each get a gelato, scooped into the shape of a rose, and keep walking. Today, you've eaten half a croissant from the hostel breakfast table, some strawberries, and now this flower ice cream. You are keeping track. You like your sharp edges, worth the vigilance it takes to maintain them. The women in Paris are so thin. Their nipples press braless through their artfully draped shirts, only partially hidden by the scarves they wear. You study them. You study your mother studying them.

You shaved your head a month ago, and it is now covered with the softest new dark blond hair. You have a habit of picking at your skin, awake and asleep, catching your fingernails on tiny bumps, real or imagined, until they bleed, until your upper arms and your slender calves are covered in scabs that you never leave alone long enough for them to close. As Parisian souvenirs, your mom bought you pink-rimmed sunglasses at Carrefour and a long cotton skirt with blue and white flowers that goes all the way down to your ankles, covering the wounds. You tower over the people on the street, birdlike and exotic. You love Paris, but it overwhelms you. You feel your mother's impatience with your panics, your self-conscious discomfort. You hold her hand once on the street when you get scared and a man smoking at a café table asks in broken English if you are mother and daughter or girlfriends. Paris presses into you both, even into how you know yourselves and each other. Tunisian men hiss at you in Pigalle and strangers pass anonymous hands over your hips while you jostle through the crowds, out of the Metro and into the Louvre.

The World Cup is underway and the games happen late into the night. The bars and cafes on the street under your hostel stay open, spilling tables out on to the streets, and it all comes up through the window into the room you and your mother share. The French smoking, the English swearing, Brazilians playing samba music, cars full of Argentinians driving slowly, pressing on their horns. The noise and heat keep you both awake. You stand on a chair and lean out the window.

Sacré-Cœur is illuminated. It glows into the darkness, bleaching the black spaces between the stars gray. I am splayed on one of the narrow cots in the room, drifting in the hypnagogic gray

before sleep. You tell me you wish you believed in God. I open my eyes and ask you to get away from the window. You are scaring me. I feel little rushes of your dizziness, your reaching to fall.

You lean further out, into the street and the night. You tell me you want to believe in the Sacré-Cœur kind of God, a God that draws the lines around you, shoring you up, nesting you back in the syncopated certainty you left when you left the meter of my heartbeat and hip sway, the certainty I left when I left the borrowed division of the rhythms of my own mother, taken from the frugal signature of her mother. The certainty of the last moments before your skin started to matter so much in the shocking first brace of air.

You wish you could believe in just one thing enough that you absolutely knew it was true, you tell me, but you don't, you can't. I tell you I can't either. I reach for your arm. You pull away from the window, away from me, as though you could separate yourself from our irresistible interpellation. We breathe in the diesel from the street mixed with something else, something ozonic and sky-given. This night, like all nights, eventually we sleep, always-already nested together, part of the same particular monster.

How to Shrink a Human Head

Our first Christmas together, my boyfriend gave me a simulated shrunken head. It came in a plain brown cardboard box, just the size of a head, shrunken. There was no marketing, no explanatory text. I think she is female, maybe because I am female and my co-feeling for her simulated, captured, and reduced head is so strong and immediate. Or maybe just because of her long yellow-white hair, so fine it's almost frothy. She has white, furred eyebrows arching over her eyelids, which are sewn shut with jute cords that hang from each side. Matching mouth cords stitch her dry lips closed.

When I opened the box, I stood in his kitchen and had a feeling of vertigo. It was so easy to imagine myself captured and preserved in the place of this head, my soul stitched in tight. It was as if I had been given back myself, but frozen, less anxious, less permeable, and now suitable for display.

A shrunken head is “a severed and specially prepared human head that is used for trophy, ritual, or trade purposes.” Though heads have been hunted and cut off by all kinds of people all over the world, the practice of headshrinking has only been documented in the northwestern region of the Amazon rain forest, and the only tribes known to have shrunken human heads are the Jivaroan tribes of Ecuador and Peru, among whom the Shuar people are perhaps best known. The common transliteration of the Shuar word for shrunken heads is *tsantsas*.

I saw my first tsantsas as a teenager at the Wool-a-roc Museum & Ranch in Bartlesville, Oklahoma. There were seven heads, each mounted on an individual post in a glass case. They represented a demographic spectrum: an elder head with long curly yellowing white-gray hair; a child's head, chin tilted up, long ropy faded black hair cascading down to the platform, a peacock-colored feathered headband resting above its tiny stitched eyes and unstitched nose; some middle-aged heads in between.

I wanted to look forever. Contemplating the fringed lashes of their unlooking eyes and their upturned noses in the glass case, every muscle in my body relaxed. It was an involuntary and very physical mechanism I can't untangle, like the chill bumps I get on my forearms when I finally eat after getting too hungry. A sensation of completion and relief, momentarily having enough and being enough. I forgot my museum-tired feet and the historic Civil War weapons in the next case and stood, suspended in time and space, there with the heads. There was nothing to do and nothing to be done.

The Shuar gave up making ceremonial shrunken heads long ago, but it is still the attribute for which they are best known to the outside world. What is less known is that the Shuar and other Jivaroan people have a long history of being exceptionally difficult to colonize. Their gold-rich territory attracted a steady stream of unwelcome conquerors, missionaries, and business interests, including two Inca emperors, Spanish explorers, and Jesuit, Franciscan, and Protestant missionaries, all of whom were resisted and mostly eventually expelled. The Jivaroans stared back at the powers that came to tell them what and how to see. These days,

colonization has dropped the missionizing pretense and the Shuar find themselves in ongoing land battles with international mining and oil companies.

I understand that looking and having are acts rooted in structures of power and that my hungry gaze and fingers itchy to touch strangeness are shot through with the darkest instincts of capitalism and cruelty. When I think about shrunken heads, I tell myself that I am on their side, and yet the uneasy paradox remains that I walk around with my still-moist and full-sized head, speaking with unstitched lips, looking, wanting, touching while the heads are a one-way transmission, giving me an image while they themselves are denied faculties of perception. Examining my obsession with shrunken heads feels risky, fraught with potential for misstep. What if my smudgy fingerprints on the glass case at the Wool-a-roc Museum make me complicit? What if Googling images of shrunken heads while I eat carrots at my desk implicates me in the murky subtexts of possessive surveillance I claim to disavow? What if my creepy pleasure in looking is inseparable from the making of shrunken heads and the exploitation of the makers?

Ripley's Believe It or Not!, the TV show, aired from 1982-1986 and was hosted by a selection of Palances (Jack, Holly), an Osmond (Marie), and most notably, Superman (actor Dean Cain). It played on Sunday nights, after *Walt Disney's Wonderful World of Color*, and it contained multitudes: the Elephant Man, the Bermuda Triangle, feral children raised by wild animals, female contortionists who could wrap their legs around their heads, a man who ate an entire car bolt by bolt, and yes, shrunken heads. As a child, I was a big fan. I imagined joining the celebrities who acted as liaisons between the strangeness onscreen and the TV audience at

home, or better, having some quality so shocking and special that I would be featured among the unbelievable. I didn't know what my freakish quality or skill might be, but I was sure it was there, latent. Maybe it would emerge at puberty, like breasts and armpit hair? I wanted to take the burdensome specificity of having a body and make it something worth seeing.

I didn't see Tod Browning's 1932 film *Freaks* –in which a Bearded Lady and Human Skeleton and Stork Woman and Human Torso honor the eventually-duplicitous full-sized trapeze artist Cleopatra with the chant: “We accept her, we accept her! One of us! One of us!”– until much later, but when I watched *Ripley's Believe It or Not!*, I wanted to be one of them. I wanted to take the embarrassing state of corporeality and make it glamorous; I felt stuck here, in the position of being a human, right alongside the car-eaters and contortionists, the boneless and obscure. Oddity seemed like an answer. I was mesmerized by the clean lines of transactionality that just relaxing into being an actual exhibit, an exhibit of strangeness, seemed to offer. You wouldn't have to try, you could just *be* if it was your very unacceptability that gave you value. Who wouldn't want to get paid for the strangeness they were already sure made them unbearable? What I didn't consider then was that the symmetrical and famous hosts were the only ones on the show who could really count on getting paid. Maybe, like in the movie, the freaks always end up betrayed. Or maybe the line between the looker and looked-at isn't so distinct.

My father was, among other things, a hypochondriac, a compulsive shopper, and a fan of pornography. A collector and a looker-at of bodies par-excellence, which meant I had an almost overwhelming cache of ambient bodies-as-text at home. In my memory, he always

wore rectangular horn-rimmed glasses and brown slacks and pale blue short-sleeved dress shirts, even on the weekends. He kept a beige pen with blue ink in his shirt pocket and a little spiral bound notebook for writing down his thoughts. He was a social scientist, not a real scientist, but he loved collecting data, rounding up the physical world into measurable categories. He spoke to me often about the importance of developing a critical eye. His critical eye was everywhere and maybe inside of me still. He turned this eye on himself and on the bodies, the clothes, and the manicures of the women he encountered, in his office, at the mall, and on TV.

I imagined him plotting ladies on axes that divided graphs into quadrants of basic attractiveness, intelligence, femininity, and some ineffable sense of presentation, something like the word “poise,” which he offered me as a form of praise. I imagined he had a scoring system, like the Miss America pageants on TV that he never missed. When I went with him to his office at the University, together we looked at his secretary. We noticed her red nails and long clumpy black eyelashes and sour-sweet lily perfume and the Oreos in her desk drawer. But we also noticed she was not a professor and that her orange pumps were misshapen around a bunion on her foot and she quietly listened to the country music radio station all day at her desk. It was a sexual look, this critical eye, but it was also plainly regulatory, and it applied to everything. My father watched his own body too, applying different standards, plotting himself on lines of professional success, health, disease, and the having-of desirable things and people. He watched me too: my half-way status, him but not him, gave me a place on both charts.

He supported his looking with documentation, and source material was all over the house.

While my family watched nature specials on PBS, I memorized the soft-focus underwear ads in the Sears catalog and scrutinized advertisements for jock straps and catheters, examining the contours and bulges of the sexless, but very sexy, mannequins. The real visual bounty of bodies, however, was found in my father's home office, where he wrote books and graded papers surrounded by exotic but mundane artifacts like Iranian teapots, cloisonné ring boxes, and African statues carved out of dark wood. In the evenings, while he was in the living room watching *The Love Boat* and *The Benny Hill Show* on the couch, I lolled on the goldenrod shag carpeting to study the stack of *Playboy* magazines he kept in a steamer-trunk coffee table and pore over his brand new hard-cover first edition of the *American Medical Association Family Medical Guide* (1982), which I loved above all else. My favorite parts were...all of it...the sections on gestation, cancer, human sexual development and, particularly, dysfunction, disorders of the digestive system, and the color plates in the center, showcasing real people's real skin rashes and tumors and undescended testicles and swollen limbs.

I studied the pictures of rosacea and psoriasis and skin cancer and hiked up my blue Garfield nightgown to draw ball-point pen picture-frame squares around the moles on my thigh so they would look like the pictures in the pages of the book, considered, labeled, and diagnosed by professionals and regarded with horror and compassion by other people, people like me.

"Severe Advanced Mole," I would caption the frames.

After first considering repurposing a Plexiglas baseball display cube, I decided to keep the Christmas tsantsa in a glass bell jar with a natural cork base I found on sale at a craft supply

store. Right now, it sits on the long low vintage wooden coffee table shaped like a surfboard in my living room, between the candles and magazines, though I shift it often to make room for eating or working. She's awkward to move in the bell jar: slick glass, no handles. Her hair and cords are really too long to rest comfortably without a platform, and they pool around her, crowding her, but also providing a pillow.

I take a picture of her in the bell jar, positioned on a woven placemat under a lamp, and post it on Facebook. It's not a very good picture because you can see the crumbs on my table and the light glares off the glass. There is an off-center reflection of the lightbulb sharing the visual field co-equally with the head. I caption the photo: "Shrunken head simulation in a bell jar: too awesome for a decorative accent, or just awesome enough? I am, um, asking for a friend." I'm nervous about posting it to the critical eye of my Facebook audience, but my desire to expose my fascination and myself outweighs my fear that they'll think I'm weird or bestial or racist. And maybe I also want to share the responsibility, to not be the only one to look and approve of this more-than-an-object that I'm going to keep in my living room.

The reaction is small and mixed. There are enthusiastically supportive comments from the murky mostly-silent corners of my friend list: a woman with whom I studied for comps, who now lives in England, said it would be "Perfect for the office," the ex-best friend of a college boyfriend, who is a bouncer and paramedic in Portland, weighed in, "Keeper." A retired librarian, who was the first to comment, mused: "Can't help but wondering what the head's original owner would've thought." I tell her I suspect the head's original owner was a Naugahyde factory and she chirped back: "Whew! Well, enjoy!" The consensus seems to be

that keeping a fake shrunken head in a bell jar in your living room is okay, or close enough, but no one wants to think too much about it. I, on the other hand, can't stop: thinking and looking, moving her from shelf to table, bedroom to hall, as though this talisman, this a head with the barest suggestion of a face, might somehow be more intelligible, make more sense, further from a window, or closer to the floor.

The meanings tsantsas held for the Shaur people of Ecuador are dynamic and have been multiply revised by anthropologists pushing the pieces of what they observed on their expeditions into existing ontologies; it may be there is no translation for the in-context cocktail of power and divinity and respect and violence these objects carried, and more generally, there may be no way for ethnography, or any of the sciences-of-looking-to-know, to be about anything besides the fear, language, and desire of the lookers.

It is not particularly groundbreaking for a woman to muse about the power politics of exhibition, ownership, and the gaze, and of course I read my fascination with shrunken heads through this lens, but included in the layers of wondering, and perhaps just as pressingly, I am curious if I might also be longing for a way of collapsing the space between looking and being looked at, containing the danger that flows both directions. I want to look back at the mystery of the head, the self, the other, the distances and edges, to trap it and cut it to down to size, making humanness bite-sized and somehow manageable; I want the head to act as a camera obscura, pricking a pinhole small enough, right here in my living room, that I can see through to what was too dangerous to contemplate before.

My father was always showing me things I couldn't see, like how to use perspective in drawings, the arc of the handle of the Big Dipper, a scissor-tailed flycatcher in a tree, a deer at the saltlick in my grandparents' backyard, math. When I had chicken pox he pointed at his forehead, telling me not to scratch because I'd end up with a scar like him. I looked and looked, searching his forehead for a warning, but I just saw his face. So, I scratched and picked my own scar, near the corner of my left eye. Now, more than thirty years later, it's mapped through with lines that make it hard to identify, but I know it's still there.

Orion's belt was the one constellation my father finally taught me to recognize. He told me that Orion is important because it is far enough from Earth that it will still be recognizable after the stars that make up the closer constellations spread into obscurity. Eventually there will be nothing left, he said, of what we can now see. I remember lying next to him as the three bright stars, Zeta, Epsilon, and Delta, came into a pattern, the chaos of the sky shaping up when he told me what to see.

Looking is learned, but it's an infinite skill, imperceptibly and always changing the world we see. My vision shifts, advancing and retreating. Anything can make everything look different, but the contours of my looking are especially apt to arrange themselves to accommodate being looked at. When people ask what superpower I wish I had, I tell them it's close to invisibility, but different. I don't just wish that I could decide not to be seen, I wish I that everyone else, just for a few minutes, couldn't see or move or speak or think. I want some power that would let me freeze the world, to make everyone else stop and give me a chance to just look, without their looking-back eyes. When I was a teenager I dreamed of freezing

parties so I could walk between people, touching the fabric of their skirts and checking the labels of their jackets, touching their cheeks and smelling their faces to see whether they used Coty loose powder or Cover Girl liquid foundation, getting close enough to notice the texture of the skin on the raw necks of boys. A world that keeps moving can never, finally, be seen.

In the months I've had the tsantsa in my living room, I've become so habituated to her shape and her silence that most of the time I no longer see her there among the Jesus candles and old issues of *The Atlantic*. Even the cat slinks around her, unbothered. But sometimes she comes into focus again, as she is now, under a glass dome that accumulates smudges and dust. I see her there in a way that is more like feeling her, like feeling her look back and see me.

How to Be a Muse

An essay inspired by <https://www.wikihow.com/Be-a-Muse>

Step 1: Spend time with artists. Find out where the writers, artists, and musicians in your town spend time and become a regular there.

You can't inspire them if they can't find you. Consider, perhaps, attending all the openings at the art school. If you are nineteen, you might wish to wear exceptionally unflattering clothes – overalls under giant thrift store slips, etc.– to put a fine point on the fact it doesn't matter what you wear. You might shave your head or keep your hair and make a nest of it, in which you arrange false birds, small pieces of paper, plastic forks, and toothpicks. Artists need texture.

Stand near the food table, perhaps making towers out of bright orange cubes of cheese. Muses do not spend time mooning around, waiting to be noticed. You can look back to antiquity and see that muses are always busy, doing things like dancing, holding flutes and lyres, gazing at scrolls...building edifices with cheese.

While I played with cheese, I hoped an art professor who sometimes flirted with me in the library would get me a glass of the boxed white wine they were serving, but instead, a boy who looked like a foreign film and smelled like old cooked rice walked up and asked if I liked cheeses or sausages better. He asked if I liked it when dogs visited me. He asked if I was the one with the blond hair (I was). He told me he came from Brazil, but he was really Polish (but really he was Brazilian), and in a few more steps, which I'll elide for concision, he was

waking me up at 3 a.m. to take photographs of me crouching naked in his closet (because the light was interesting) and squeezing blood from my finger onto celluloid, which was later shown as film at an art installation where a naked man named Craig nailed a chicken carcass to the wall and screamed, "IT'S A CIVIL WAR, MAN!" I cut my finger opening a can of black beans while the filmmaker was at the kitchen table scratching celluloid with stickpins. I had been making a version of quick feijoada I had adapted from his mom, who every month sent him chocolates and soccer magazines in Portuguese and called him pet names that all sounded like "Missy," and called me something in Portuguese that translated to "the girl." Later, shortly before we broke up for reasons I can't remember, he made a film that he said was about me, in which a yellow-haired Salvation Army doll in a tattered dress was washed down a meager stream, catching in roots and getting free again, until finally she hit a rock she never got past.

Step 2: Be uninhibited. A muse helps the artist think beyond the confines of everyday life.

Think about Edie Sedgwick and Yoko Ono. Think about Dora Maar. Think about yourself, perhaps licking a painting, crawling under desks to listen to footstep echoes at parties, or sliding down into empty drainage ditches to touch the moss that grows on just one side of the underbridge near the park. If you are newly divorced, you may be in a tent with your four-year-old daughter at a music festival in South Texas. You may emerge from the tent, just twenty-six-years-old with your tiny daughter clinging to you, both of you dressed for a party on some other planet, to find a folk singer/songwriter from Boston sitting in a camp chair. You may know he is a little famous, but you pretend you do not, because artists are intrigued

by their own anonymity. Instead of recognizing him, instead of introducing yourself, you could ask him to make you a gin and tonic with ice cubes from a cooler and pocket-knife-cut limes. Artists are inspired by being treated like the help. You might subsequently find it is most expedient to spend a day at the Guadalupe River, cataloging for the musician the textures of slick rocks that he thinks are all just undeviating viridescent slime. You will introduce a revelatory universe of laurel frondescence, density, scum, and pockmarks. You could meet unexpected underground ledges that suck the height out from under you. You may lounge then, on flat rocks, while he amuses your daughter in the water and you can be quiet for a moment, finally, and think.

After the folk festival, this folksinger flew from Boston to Oklahoma to visit me for a weekend in my little house while my daughter was with her father. We performed minor sex acts that seemed to require an inordinate amount of labor on my part. Then, I made scones while he played the guitar.

A few exhausting phone calls and emails later, there was a song about me. He wrote: "She'll touch you where you want to break." Reflecting on this, I realize that a surprising number of artists want you to touch them where they want to break. And the thing a surprising number of artists want broken is their penis, or what their penis stands for, and if they don't want you to break it, not exactly, they at least want to be able to blame you when it doesn't work.

Step 3: Be sexual. Sexual arousal can help spur creativity, since it lowers inhibitions and charges the body and brain with erotic energy.

You may find you have painted your bedroom walls a particularly vaginal pink to make your ex-husband move out. You may have decoupage 1950s recipes, Loteria cards, and typed dictionary definitions to your dresser, which serves also as an altar and, to a lesser extent, a bedside table. You may send your daughter to her grandmother's early on a Saturday afternoon, so you have plenty of time to hypnotize yourself. You might put sandalwood and rose oil on your thighs and brush aster and frangipani dust into your hair. You may want to concentrate yourself, let everything slide away except your hot pulsing core so, for the next few hours, you are a single purpose, one shivering thought. These ablutions may be in advance of a date with a new media poet who has just accepted a teaching job in Australia. He might smell like Winston's and Listerine strips. You might find this, in addition to his height, mesmerizing, but it won't matter because you are drunk on your own skin.

This poet walked into my house with orange juice and flowers and an envelope filled with five \$100 bills. He handed me the flowers and put the orange juice in the refrigerator. When I tried to refuse the money, he left it in the freezer with the spilled bags of frozen peas. I pretended I didn't see the envelope go from his hand to the freezer, that I didn't know it was there. It sat there, getting colder, for several days before I took it out and put it in the bank, where it came to room temperature, blending with my other money to pay bills and buy new shoes.

That night, though, I sat on the edge of the kitchen counter, sliding my skirt up my thighs, and drew him between my legs, twining calf and arch around his legs, taking his measure with the

skin inside my anklebones. It was easy then, melting the border between our bodies and pulsing him in. We never went on the date he'd asked me on, and instead spent all night in my pink bedroom, which he didn't notice was pink until the next morning when finally, raw and dehydrated, we woke up and went to The Diner to eat oatmeal and toast and display our sense of shared genius for having discovered we could fuck like that. He gave me his car, which I drove until just last year, and a few weeks later he moved to Australia. He sent me birds of paradise and jealous emails and wrote a poem about me that began, "Her purpose is akin to paper."

He made a video of himself masturbating in Australia and staring into the camera and sent it to me. He sent me another video in which he detailed, again from Australia, and again to the camera, my shortcomings. After not many more days, a few hundred dollars in landline calls, and a cancelled plane ticket, this too was over, though I've dreamed about meeting him in a haunted house several times in the years that have passed.

Step 4: Have original style. An artist's muse is not just a model or mannequin, but a source of original energy and life.

You do not need to be lithe or angular, though it helps, but you must look interesting, like you are covered in physical and metaphorical gossamer, cauls, and veils that most likely sheath the very ephemeral and absent thing the artist is sure he requires to be whole. He may suspect he sees his mother's love nestled in your solar plexus, or his child-joy in your sternal notch. You may find he taps out the hologram of the more generous chambers of his own heart

between your breasts, or infers his father's approval from a subluxation in your spine. The essential thing about your covering is that it conceal the plain fact that only your living body rustles underneath.

I returned to the art school gallery in my late 20s, this time wearing a black faux-fur-trimmed off-the-shoulder sweater that was a gift from a friend in Brooklyn, who found it being sold on the street near her apartment and bought one for each of us. I wore it with a skirt so short I had to give myself a pep talk to leave the house.

You can add fishnets, or tights in a shade of vermillion or silver. Whatever is on your legs, your boots should be black and tight and to your knees, at least. They don't have to be expensive. You will find that, though you are older, you are still young enough that when your legs are checked, it is not for authentic leather or quality stitching.

I felt like the Cold War, like a spy, clicking around the gallery floor on a Sunday evening, old enough to collect my own free wine. My best friend was an art student and she had painted a large format picture of me, faceless and shirtless, wearing a long gray skirt and lying in my pink bedroom with Sylvia Plath's words painted across what she imagined was the old brag of my heart: "I am I am I am."

I stood near the painting with her, listening to professors ask her questions about process and influence, and I wondered if they recognized me prostrate on the canvas. A printmaking and digital art professor with an ex-smoker's voice and shaky hands touched my arm and said,

“I’ve seen you around.” He said, “Are you an artist, or what?” He put air quotes around “around” and “artist” and winked Tourette-ishly. He scratched my phone number on his hand in blue pen and, in a few more steps, which I will elide for concision, we were engaged, and I was writing his tenure portfolio.

A few steps after that, he may have threatened to kill you and your family if you left his house. He may even have stood in the doorway and pushed you to the floor when you reached for the doorknob. He grabbed your arm and shook you, telling you that it is because he loves you so much that he acts like this. You might have chosen to try again to leave, right then.

You might, but I didn’t. Instead, I took his face in softly in my hands and said that I was sorry. I led him to his bedroom and lowered my body over his until he came. When I was sure he was asleep, I left through the front door.

If you are still there in the house, you should find a way out too. You might have your car outside, or you may walk all the way home carrying your shoes with your damp underwear in the pocket of your jacket. You may find that you feel not only relieved, but elated, bursting with invincibility. You may have found your art.

Step 5: Make your own art. When you’re intimately familiar with how creativity ebbs and flows you can help someone else who is struggling.

The best muses seem to have something else going on, a project, a sense that they are there, but life is elsewhere. You can look at examples all the way back to mythology and all the way up to the poor, forever-defenestrating wives of modern art's avant-garde. They are too busy for you; in your hands, but just out of your grasp.

Me? I eventually lost my appetite. For artists, and for the galleries of their images of me. Suddenly, my face had collected enough years to be its own costume and further, I no longer cared to have it drawn, photographed, or painted. These days, I sometimes forget I have a face at all. In flat shoes and glasses, I write notes to myself in ink that becomes less invisible as it multiplies, fading in reverse until I turn inside out, telling the stories I didn't realize I knew were all around me.

A Special Providence in the Fall of a Sparrow

We defy augury. There's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come. If it be not to come, it will be now. -Hamlet

When I was a fifteen, my family had a large unshaded backyard, a self-propelled gas lawnmower, and no men. The mower was an old Lawn Boy: greasy and green, with a primer button to push and a cord you had to pull over and over again to make it start. Once it started, a lever on the handle could be squeezed into position and the mower would just *move*. I put on my bikini and sunglasses, positioned the mower and myself in the lower left corner of the yard, placed one finger of each hand lightly on the handle, and followed it. “Jesus, take the wheel!” as they said in Oklahoma, though not in my family. We were not religious, at least not the kind of religious that talked about Jesus like a brother you could boss around.

To my mom, I said that the patterns I left behind —stripes and trapezoids of bull nettle and cheat grass, sprangletop and foxtail— were augury, art dictated through a delicate compromise I’d brokered between domestication and wildness, nature and machine. Like a sculptor, I told her, I used the mower to tap into secrets the yard wanted to tell. Yes, I was lazy, but I also loved the idea of receiving dictation from forces beyond myself. I still do.

I’m forty-three and I live in Idaho now. A few months ago, I moved into the house my boyfriend bought after his divorce. His name is Ben and we are engaged to be married. We are no longer young: ours will be his second wedding and my third. He has two children, a girl and a boy, both school age, and then there is my daughter, neither adult nor child, but grown anyway. The house we share was built in 1923, on a one-acre corner lot in a small

town that is home to the university where we both work. We have his kids every other week. No one who sees us through the window can tell they are not mine.

Right after I moved in, the morning before the blood moon of October, Ben had an early meeting and I was going to take the kids to school for the first time. We already had our shoes and backpacks on when we heard a *thunk* sound in the dining room: a cedar waxwing flew into the glass door. Ben's son heard it hit and recognized the lemon-yellow tail and sealing wax-red tips of its wings from studying birds in school. We saw it fall to the deck, its passerine feet unperched and its silver belly turned to the sky. The beak opened and closed three times. Ben's daughter said, "I think it's biting something," but it wasn't. Those last beakings were silent through the glass and then the bird was still. The translucent nictitating membrane unrolled over its tiny eye. Milo, the orange cat, watched the body of the bird through the glass.

If a bird flies into your window, into your house, into your car, etc. this behavior signifies an intense or urgent message. Watch what the bird does carefully. Observe its movements and sounds. Is it trying to escape? Is it comfortable in its environment? All of these behaviors could play into the message.

I wanted it to be a sign. It felt like a sign. I've read Nabokov. In *Pale Fire*, John Shade's poem begins: "I was the shadow of the waxwing slain / By the false azure of the window pane." And there I was, for any imagined judge to see, a mother impersonating a mother, through the window of a house I didn't buy, a dead waxwing on the deck.

My daughter was born while I was still in Oklahoma, still in college, not too many years after my backyard augury. I was young and unprepared, but when I got pregnant it felt like a sign, a wholly impractical wonder working through me, letting me know I could stop thinking about whether I should apply to graduate school or the Peace Corps. I was grateful to the baby's multiplying cells and the wash of hormones that dictated what I ate and even the actual shape of my body. She was born and my adult life unfolded around the contours of keeping her alive, fed, and supplied with dental and vision benefits.

Before I moved into Ben's house, I lived alone in an apartment for three years. I had no yard, no glass doors, no leaves to rake. I made pour-over coffee for one in the mornings and stood stork-footed in the light of the open refrigerator door at night, always finding the exact number of carrots, bottles of beer, and containers of yogurt I left inside. I slept with an open window, even in the snow, because there was no one except me to get cold. Every morning, I weighed myself and wrote the number down in my notebook and then drew a card from *The Wild Unknown* tarot deck, recording its message in my notebook too. Now, living here, I never know when someone else may have eaten the last banana. I wake up early or wait for the shower. I don't know what I weigh; my mornings' fortunes go untold.

In ancient Rome, augurs divined the will of the gods by interpreting the flight of birds. Taking the auspices. The interpretation was complicated. Signs could be *impetrative*, requested or sought by the augur, or *oblative*, offered, appearing spontaneously like the waxwing's window-smack. The birds were consulted before any action was taken that might affect the

city's *pax, fortuna, or salus*. Moving in with Ben and out of my own feral circulations, I felt my peace, fortune, and well-being at a precipice. I request a sign, from the gods, myself, anywhere, that this is right, that it's okay.

I have a book of collected surrealist games that includes instructions for automatic writing and the practice seems just right —archaic and modern, intuitive and inexact— for unearthing impetrative wisdom. Automatic writers fall into two camps: the surrealists and the psychic mediums, but the process is the same whether you are making art or contacting the beyond. Try to lose control. Or give control away. Relinquish the choice of words to your spirit guide, your guardian angel, a ghost, your own unconscious mind, or universal energy. Your fingers write but you don't use the part of yourself that *chooses things*, the part that does or does not feed the pets, go to the gym, have a drink.

Andre Breton's *First Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924) contains instructions for “written surrealist composition, or first and last draft.” He writes:

Put yourself in the most passive, or receptive state you can. Forget about your genius, your talents, and those of others. Tell yourself repeatedly that literature is one of the saddest roads leading to everything. Write swiftly with no preconceived subject, swiftly enough that you cannot retain it, and are not tempted to reread. Continue for as long as you wish. Trust in the inexhaustible nature of that murmuring. If silence threatens to establish itself, if you have committed an error: an error, let us say, of inattention, break off without hesitation with a more than obvious blank line.

The first time I try it, Ben is vacuuming the bedroom carpet. I sit on the couch in my gym clothes, the thin winter light filtering through the living room windows. The couch is too soft, and my spine accommodates it —rickrack curve, teacup handle, letter s— my laptop balanced on my folded legs. I close my eyes and try to position my fingers, arched and loose, but ready. I start with a blank document. I breathe deeply and uncurl my chest, imagining I can inhale little currents of energy that I send to animate my fingers. The hairs of my arms start to prickle and stand like antennae, like when I get too hungry and finally eat, which I take as a good sign.

I write in four shorts bursts. When I stray, I stop, breathe, hit the space bar, and start again. When I finish, I put the laptop away without reading what I've written, like the instructions say. My fingers are wired, invisibly electric, like that trick where you press your hands into a doorframe and then step out to a magic rising in your arms. I feel hot and cold, shivery, a somatization of pressing hard on closed eyelids until stars come. I'm surprised by how *physical* it is.

pubble, stratified vacation cow, box of choy, purn. breathe it in and then breathe it out frog or rock with it like a soup bowl baby rock with it like the last days of your mom rock and sway and you can get into it if you breathe and you can get under her and into her and you can get through it all we'll find it that way.

The day the waxwing flew into the door, I left work early and found it was still where it landed. Milo lost interest, but the black dogs stood whining by the door. I took two layered grocery bags and picked up the bird body, shaking it a little to make sure it was really dead, though I don't know what I would have done if it wasn't. *Hey, little guy, I'm sorry about your accident.* The claws rasped the plastic; each foot had three stiff toes and a contracted hallux, curled around no branch. I didn't want the dogs to get it, but I wasn't sure—hygienically or morally—about putting a dead animal in the trash, so I put the bird and the makeshift shroud in the center of the deck table where we eat grilled corn in other seasons.

I read an article about existential therapy, which contends that all human problems can be “reduced to the same four essential issues: death, meaninglessness, isolation, and freedom.” Freedom is the only one that's not inevitable, I think, and somehow that makes it the worst.

The surrealists practiced automatic writing with pen and paper, so I try it that way, forming each letter with my fingers. I sit at the kitchen table with white printer paper and a black ballpoint pen. I tell Alexa to set the timer for fifteen minutes. To my right is the end of a glass of merlot and another glass of water, both left from dinner. To my left is the burning end of a blue candle in a jar. Today is practice and experiment. Ben is playing the piano in the living room: Bach, Chopin, Glass. I want to know if the pen, the music, the wine will make a difference on the page. I do the breathing and then start, covering the front and back of a blank sheet of paper.

father felt fortune penny will take us all. Out we'll have it and then verdict range inside of stagecoach fringe

Down-sloping loops and nests of ink. Ben turns on the metronome and I switch back to my laptop. My hands feel light again, but I don't shiver like yesterday. Is it the wine? Or the metronome? I write until the timer sounds.

and the babies come out and they keep crawling back. there are so many and I'm never done with them. I'm always pushing them out, pulling them back in, rocking their hunger, trying to show them the art on the walls. where it stands and there is not standing without art. I try to tell them their tiny toes and noses and their nasal passages so delicate and barely haired not full of the spikes and horns of adulthood. they are all soft, the smells of them and they are like turkish delights, like little rosewater skins and I devour them and you'll push past this and that isn't the point.

Breton describes surrealists as artists, "...who are free from any attempt to filter, who in our works have made ourselves silent receptacles filled with echoes, modest recording instruments who are not hypnotized by the designs we trace, perhaps we serve a yet nobler cause." What a relief to be a silent receptacle. Free of the unbearable freedom of the blank page, the unrolling life full of choices to be made well or badly. I want to be a radio, intercepting waves and converting them into tiny alternating currents, participating in an electromagnetic almost-magic: the ability to silence the heart while it still beats, to minimize internal interference with incoming signals.

When Ben came home the afternoon of the October blood moon, I told him where I put the body. He took the little package and put it in the back of the truck with the raked oak leaves and dead branches. Before it snows, he will take the bird and all the branches and leaves away. Yard waste. I am still learning this house, getting used to having a yard, a basement, an upstairs, a kitchen with a full-size oven. My movements are trained to the economy of a smaller space, but I adjust out in concentric circles from where I sleep, colonizing surfaces with books and hair ties, learning play the piano and yell at Alexa to turn on the lights.

Cedar waxwing pairs look for nest sites together, though the females make the final decision about which fork or vine tangle of pine, cedar, apple, pear, or bur oak to call home. She weaves a twig cup to line with fine roots, grasses, and pine needles. She decorates the outside with fruiting grasses or oak and hickory catkins. I burn incense and hang pictures. Ben uses a yardstick and level and marks where nails should go with a pencil. Centered. I move my hands over the walls, dowsing, hanging erratic clouds of framed postcards, a tin winged heart mirror from Mexico, and a grim and jowly oil painting of my German fourth great-grandmother.

It is hard to type with your eyes closed and most of what I write is indecipherable. But certain words stand out, crop circles: babies, mothers, eating, rocking, walls, and skin. Reading them together feels like receiving a communique from the inexhaustible murmuring, news to me from myself.

they are all soft, the smells of them and they are like Turkish delights, like little rosewater skins and I devour them.

A few weeks ago, I sent a vial of my spit to Ancestry.com to have my DNA analyzed and I got on their website to make a family tree. I discover I am the 11th great-granddaughter of Leah Sara Levy of Moselle, France, who died in 1632. I find more than one woman with the given name Kunigunda, as well as a Walpurga, a Tryphena, a Diadema, and two Apollonias. There are Weisgerbers, Birkelbachs, Birds, Clicks, Reussers, Stuckis, Steins, Werths, Paynes, Olmsteads, and Fullers, winding back from the small places in Indiana and Ohio where my parents' families lived for generations to Bern and Baden Baden, Devon and Basel and Strasbourg. If I pay the monthly fee, I'll be able to look at the supporting evidence, the ship manifests, the church records, the birth certificates, but even without the records or the DNA results, the names and places answer me. What am I like? Why am I like this? New names appear every time the browser refreshes, all the way back to the Reformation. The crooked toe on my right foot, my melancholy, all started elsewhere else and ended up here, in the confluence of my body. A vestigial and useless palmaris longus muscle ropes up the translucent skin of my inner wrist every time I turn my hand.

When I looked up cedar waxwings, I found that the literature on the lives of birds is overwhelming. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service offers an atlas for unraveling the synecdoche of a found feather. There are encyclopedias of bird songs and maps to document the persistence of specific wild species in the face of the melting world. "Judy's Angels and Ancestors" tells what it means if the cedar waxwing is your spirit animal (lessons about

sociability, cooperation). I learn that they love berries: juniper, mountain ash, cedar, dogwood, serviceberry, wild cherry. Animals that feed on fruit are frugivorous (rhymes with “deliver us”) and cedar waxwings are among the most frugivorous species in North America.

When my daughter Chloe was five, I got pregnant under inauspicious circumstances. The specifics are not important, just that I was, or was not, I don’t know which, acting of my own free will when it happened. I took the morning after pill and then one too-early pregnancy test, which came back negative. In the week I waited to take the test again, Chloe and I read a swollen library paperback copy of *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*, chapter by chapter at bedtime.

If you remember, the White Witch uses enchanted Turkish delight to lure and capture Edmund, who is so intoxicated by the exotic sweet he’ll do anything to get more. I found a recipe online, borrowed my mom’s candy thermometer, and we made it in our kitchen. Rosewater, lemon juice, cream of tartar, cornstarch, sugar. The candies turned out misshapen and pockmarked by congealed lumps of cornstarch. I added too much rosewater and the powdered sugar topping was too thick. They were bitter with perfume, chewy little sugared grandmas. Chloe wouldn’t eat them, but the rosewater was expensive so, over the course of the afternoon and evening, I ate the whole recipe myself. All night, while this fertilized egg was implanting in the perversely welcoming lining of my uterus, I was throwing up bits of pink and green Turkish delight. Rosewater and shards of gelatin and stomach acid.

Cedar waxwings are known to gorge themselves in late summer, gulping fermented berries down whole until they are drunk. Vernacular backyard wine. They get reckless, or maybe just hopeful, too trusting of their own eyes. Sometimes they think they see berries reflected in a window and swoop into the glass, getting knocked out cold with the expectation of sweetness still in their beaks. Other times they fly toward the glass in friendship, seeing possible mates in their own reflections.

After the two weeks the clinic made me wait, after I dropped my daughter at kindergarten, and before I drove to the abortionist, I had a last talk with the rosewater mass of cells, still smaller than one of the cornstarch lumps in the candies, to say goodbye. Zygote, morula, blastocyst, sailing along my uterine horn. I'd already politely asked her to leave, told her I loved her, and I knew it wasn't her fault. Maybe later, I suggested. But she stayed, rooting into me, turning me heaving out of bed in the morning, making my breasts swell.

The abortionist counseled me alone in his office before the procedure. The walls were decorated with those 1970s paintings of women with huge flat eyes and new country radio played softly. A nurse weighed me and gave me a pregnancy confirmation test before leaving me there with him. "The doctor just needs to talk with you first." He asked me questions about "the father" and sighed and shook his head. Finally, he told me he hoped I'd get married and keep myself out of trouble.

In the operating room, a different nurse held my hand and they put a mask over my mouth and nose and told me to breathe in deeply. Twilight sleep. I couldn't feel anything, but I could

hear the doctor humming along to the radio. When I woke up, it was over. The nurse led me to a cot in a small dark room and handed me a paper cup of Sprite. I cried. The nurse said, “Now is not the time for crying.” So I stopped. I left and got some coffee and went to pick up Chloe.

A group of cedar waxwings is called an “ear-full” or a “museum.” In Germany, they are called Seidenschwänze, which means silky tails. The species displays only modest sexual dimorphism, though males have a darker chin-patch and in breeding season, the female is slightly heavier than the male. In courtship, the male brings a berry to the female. If she is interested, she takes it, hops away, and then hops back, returning it to the male’s beak. *No, really, you eat it.* He passes it back to her and they repeat this up to a dozen times before the female eats the berry, like Persephone and the pomegranate, and after that they are a pair, at least for the season. It’s called courtship hopping.

I want to know more about the baby I did not have, who came slyly back to me on blank pages as *Turkish delight, noses, tongues*, a sign both requested and offered. I don’t want to channel her directly. I don’t really believe in that, and even if I did, it seems rude, making her leave and then calling her back sixteen years later just because I’m curious. I’m also scared. I don’t believe she is some discrete vengeful wisp that could take me over, but still, what if she’s mad?

I breathe and close my eyes. I feel caught in the space between thoughts of the things and their names. I see or feel things in the back-left corner of my head. Parts of a girl, or maybe a

woman. Narrow bare feet in red dirt and long dark hair. I think of the color of bricks, but I don't see buildings. I think of the words cistern and topaz and then I stop.

brown and red. clay dirt maybe. did you come back? cistern there and bricks. a tangle of darkness from which we've both emerged and where it will always still be. blue quartz or topaz center and pink and feet that are long and narrow.

I start googling what happens to the spirit of a fetus after an abortion, carefully choosing keywords. I add "new age" to my search. There are almost as many websites about spirit babies as there are about birds. Spirit babies lost to miscarriage, stillbirth, abortion all have free will. They choose their parents before conception. If they choose parents who can't have them, they have likely done this on purpose. Their lessons are learned quickly, before birth, so they don't need to incarnate, slipping away sometimes before they have spines and hearts. There are claims of spirits returning to parents in new bodies, as new children with memories of the time when they were "only four inches long" or "went away because they were born with misshapen hands." But what if you have an abortion and you never have another baby, like me? The spirit baby, revenant cyst, hovers near your spirit until you die. This explanation seems too conveniently reverse-engineered, unsupportable, but it makes a kind of sense. Every pregnancy, no matter how it ends, alters the mother's DNA. Why should the spirit be different? No essence is impermeable.

Two clutches of four or five waxwings eggs are born to a mated pair each season. They hatch weak, naked, and blind. Their parents watch over them, feeding them insects and cleaning

their fecal sacs until they grow strong and feathered enough to fly, though they don't reach full maturity for a year. About two days before fledging, the nestlings start exercising their wings by perching on the edge of the nest and flapping. The female eats the empty eggshells her babies leave behind.

When Chloe was in preschool, we went to a Waldorf-inspired playgroup where the children made grubby bread and pastel drawings on paper with rounded corners and used small terrifying versions of real saws and hammers to build fairy houses out of sticks and scraps of wood. There was "fairy dust" made of flour, glitter, and rainbow sprinkles, which the children were supposed to sprinkle around to attract fairies. Chloe was enchanted. For months, when she saw a runny white splatter of bird shit, she would gasp, "MOM! Fairy dust!" I asked, "Do you think this could be bird poop, though?" But she did not, and we found fairies in driveways and ditches until she forgot.

I did not name the rosewater embryo, when I was pregnant or after. My survival paradigm was too wolfish then to conjure a name. But that was sixteen years ago, and I have more space now, more safety. I can afford to taunt my edges, contacting spirits in the dining room, imagining the narrow feet of a person who never walked. She was with me for 5 weeks in late winter 2003, long enough to eat a batch of Turkish delight and grow to about the size of an apple seed.

In the house where I live with Ben and two dogs and three cats and two part-time children, there is a backyard prune tree that started to bear late summer fruit just as I was moving in.

Growing up in Oklahoma, fruit was not something you could expect to just appear, and this feral bounty entrances me. The peels are a little astringent, but the yellow green flesh is heavy and sweet and falls easily off the stone. I strip them off the low branches and eat them standing in the garden. For the ones I can't reach, I send the children up ladders with grocery bags. They are enthusiastic climbers, but when I eat the fruit unwashed off the tree, they get nervous at the proof of my wildness, like I might eat the fat bruise-purple heads off the poppies too.

After we pick as many plums as we can, we sort out the worm-eaten ones and rotten ones and the ones that are too hard to eat. I put aside the good fruit to take inside. One of the discards has a wormhole, centered like a nose in its ovoid face. The children take twigs and give it arms and legs, gouges for eyes, and an acorn hat. They name it Bob. They make another one and named her Bob-arina. They keep going and soon there are plum-bodied Bobs and Bob-arinas lodged in all the low forks of the tree and balanced on the bird feeder. We left them there, in the back corner of the yard, and went inside. Now, in January, they are there still, wizened brown-black and juiceless, but standing on their twig legs, held by the arms of the tree.

Here Is a Scene

My father and I sit at a table, an open bottle of wine, better than I can afford, sits between us. He pours me a full glass, not just a taste. It's red because he always drinks red. He says it is genetic, the love of red wine, black coffee, bitter chocolate. We share a plate of veined cheese, a bowl of tiny translucent grapes, a tray of herbed crackers.

He apologizes. For leaving. For being worse when he was there than when he was gone. For lying. For not paying child support to my mother. For not paying for college. For throwing away my stuffed cats and penguins because his new wife didn't like them. For taking money he didn't need out of my savings account. For offering to pay my ex-husband's legal bills. For training me into a bonsai of a woman, natural and unnatural, wire bent to stay.

He is wearing the navy-blue Orvis tracksuit he bought to do his mall-walking. It swishes and crinkles when he moves, but now he's still. Glasses, gold watch, L.L.Bean slippers. I am wearing no makeup, hair pulled back, Levi's. He tells me he loves me and that I don't have to deserve it. He says he doesn't even notice what I wear, he doesn't think about how I look in the eyes of men, much less his own. He hopes I am comfortable, happy.

The windows are open, but he doesn't sneeze or complain. There is an easiness, inside, outside, all the same. An egret is at the edge of the water, one with the weeds. My father settles back in his chair and asks if I will forgive him.

Of course, I forgive him. My head aches with light. He moves to me and puts his arms around me. They are solid and comforting. Human. Safe. He is just a man, a father, and not at all a long and dangerous contraption, all elbows and doorknobs.

Of course, this never happened. It is true that he often wore a navy track suit and it is true that he liked to tell me I'd inherited from him anything he thought was good, but the rest is a story I couldn't even make up until he was ten years dead.

*

I am sixteen, bird-boned, at the Lovelight restaurant counter, waiting to order my lunch: side salad with honey mustard dressing and a single wheat germ roll, extra butter. I have on black Doc Martens three-hole oxfords with yellow stitching, bare legs, a black cotton baby doll dress from Express at the mall, collarbones and twisted ankles and eyeliner. My tiny leather purse hangs across my chest, holding four wadded up dollar bills, black honey lipstick in a silver tube, three quarters, and a key to my mother's house.

My father is here with his new wife, a chemistry professor. I know her name is Donna, though we've never met. He wears beige, pleated, easy-care slacks, maroon mock turtleneck, Cole Haan loafers. His wife is small, navy pantsuit, cream silk blouse, black hair curled and set, expensively but anachronistically, made up doll face. I catch his eye and my skin pricks and chills. I stand up very straight and imagine a string pulling up the top of my head. Posture. He shakes his head ever so slightly. No, he means, I am not to recognize him; today his face, so

like my own, is to remain as anonymous to me as a sidewalk, a wall, a cloud. He gestures, almost imperceptibly, toward his wife. I freeze the muscles in my face, but my lined eyes water and I blink and I blink and I blink.

*

It 11:30 on a September morning in the late 1990s. I am twenty-two years old and five weeks pregnant, sitting across a round table from my father, who is now divorced. We meet for lunch once a week at this café near the campus where I am a student and he is a professor. I have the salad with sweet fat-free vinaigrette and three greasy rosemary focaccia bread sticks. He has pesto pasta salad, tabbouleh, mixed fruit. I get a non-fat decaf latte, which they serve in pint glasses and to which I add honey. He has iced tea. We are near the door and sun streams in over the dark wood. The espresso machine grinds and hisses. We are in the midst of other round tables, two tops and four tops, faculty and administrators, women with Dooney & Bourke handbags having lunch before shopping for other handbags at Harold's next door.

I say, "I have some news. I'm pregnant." He says, "REALLY?" and "This is such wonderful news!" as though it were just wonderful news. As though I am not twenty-two, uninsured, and just...unsure. He is the only person I tell, though, who doesn't wince: at my pregnancy, my poverty, my youth. He will be a grandfather; I will be a mother. And a daughter. I let myself be hugged, elbows and doorknobs, real presence if not real comfort.

*

It is a Wednesday in 2007, late afternoon, and my father is at home. His house is beige, his crinkly tracksuit is navy. He sits at his glass-topped kitchen table. There are white dining chairs with upholstered seats in mixed pastels, cream-colored vinyl placemats, a white bud vase with fake flowers in autumn colors year-round. The top shelf in his pantry holds: Cinnamon Toast Crunch, Honey Nut Cheerios, Crispix, Rice Chex, Wheaties, Alpen Muesli, Grape-Nuts, and Total. A wine rack cradles nine bottles of wine, all cudgel strong red from Australia or California. Ravenswood, Gnarly Head, Beringer.

Since he partially retired from the university, on Mondays he walks at the mall, on Thursdays he picks up his granddaughter from school, on Saturdays he has spaghetti, Newman's Own marinara from the jar, dried basil shaken into the sauce as it heats in a Revere Ware saucepan. When he is at home, he moves with economy between the dining room, the navy leather recliner in the living room, his office, his bedroom. Each room has a TV, a computer. He corresponds with women he meets on Match.com, he watches TV, he watches porn. He files and re-files and color-codes his file cabinets. When he goes out, he flirts with college girls at the Starbucks counter, he flirts with women stocking soup cans at Walmart, he flirts with tellers at the bank. On Wednesdays, like today, the cleaning service comes: Merry Maids, the women who flank him now, one on either side of the captain's chair from which he steers his glass-topped table.

He sets three wine glasses on each of three cream-colored vinyl placemats (easy to wipe clean!). He is staging a tasting. One cab, one red zin, one Syrah. He is going to instruct them. The woman on his right has long bleached hair in a ponytail, bangs, bleached jeans, and a

pink sweatshirt that reads PINK across the front. The woman on his left has brown curly hair, a Merry Maids t-shirt, and one leg that stops at the knee, jeans leg tied in a knot below the stump. Crutches lean against the wall. The house is clean, Lysol and Glade Plug-Ins sealed in, the creek, the wind, the night, sealed out.

They taste the wine and he shows them how to suck air into their mouths to release the flavors. He tells them if they were *really* tasting it, they would spit it out. Instead, they drink it all. Then they open the bourbon in upper cabinet that my father kept for his own father, now a few years dead, the only hard liquor in the house. They mix it in their wine glasses with Diet Coke and ice cubes. The women tease my father. The one with two legs sits on his lap. The other one gets her purse from the back of her chair. She pulls out a zippered pink and green striped plastic makeup bag and, from inside that bag, she takes a crumpled plastic sandwich bag, corner twisted around yellow-white rocks. Crack cocaine and a pipe. I later find out that crack pipes are everyday objects, little glass tubes sold at convenience stores, holding silk roses. My father takes it when it is passed to him. The smoke smells like burning plastic, melting rubber, like a nail salon.

I imagine him, breathing it all in, the women, the Plug-In, the ecstatic poison of the drug. I freeze this picture and study it, looking for signs. At first, I see only the strangeness, but after a while, I begin to recognize myself in the droop of his eyes, the expectancy, the doomed hopefulness. We both want to feel something and we don't know how.

Here is a scene. It is April, tornado season in Oklahoma, but the sky is just gray and not green. My father sits in a canvas lawn chair on his back patio and I sit in a mud-splashed white plastic bucket chair beside him. I live in New York now, but I've come back for a long weekend. His heart valve replacement surgery was scheduled for today, but it has been postponed until next week. His backyard slopes into a creek and two leggy trees grow, still thin and staked against the wind. Green living sounds come from the tall grass around the creek and a singularly graceful cattle egret fishes on storkish legs.

I left a CVS bag for him on the kitchen counter, full of things he asked for: catheter tubes, medical lubricant, antiseptic wipes, gum. His skin is sallow, and his big horsey teeth are brown and crumbling. Two years, three trips to rehab. His hair is gray and, sitting on the bare patio in the wind of the empty yard, he looks bleached like a bone, nearly patio himself, dry blemish on the concrete slab. He is wearing his tracksuit; I am wearing a gray record store t-shirt with the outline of a bright orange couch on the chest. I wear clogs, he wears Prufrock slippers. No need to roll his trousers, which are already gathered to the skin and bones of his ankle by an elastic band.

Non-biological mitral valve replacement surgery has an 89.6% thirty-day survival rate. So, he says, surgery today or next week, not a big deal. Today, we make do with the heart he has. He tells me he is getting the roof replaced. I ask if he's thought about moving into an apartment, one of those assisted living situations where they leave you alone until you really need it.

“No,” he says, “This is my house.” He is getting new carpet too.

“Are you scared, Daddy?”

“I trust my doctors. They say I could live for a long time.”

“Good. Good. It sounds like everything will be fine.”

I’m frustrated, bored.

“I want to get better so I can take you girls to Hawaii next summer. How would you like that?” (*Love me.*)

“That would be wonderful,” I say, “The beach for my sister, volcanoes for me.” (*Love me.*)

I tell him I have to go, I’m meeting my friends. And I leave.

If he was clean when I visited him that day, it hadn’t been long. A handle of vodka was in the freezer; he’d never really been a drinker, but I guess vodka makes a good chaser for crack. I did not argue with him when he said he wasn’t scared or when he talked about Hawaii.

Writing about it now, it seems like I was offering him a kindness, letting him have his fantasy, but really, I was too furious, too disgusted to call him out. I refused him sickness and pity and almost everything (save this one wan and short visit) because I thought he brought this vertiginous emptiness on himself.

*

Here is a scene. I start my mom’s silver Honda Civic in his driveway, 428 Laws Drive, but I change my mind. I decide not to go downtown. I pull the parking brake and go back to the door, matted leaves rotting on the step. I ring the bell and then I knock. I have a key, but it

doesn't seem right to use it. I wait and wait. Eventually he comes to the door and tells me he was in the bathroom. I ask him if I can come in. If it would be okay if I made us dinner? "I thought you were going to meet your friends. I don't know what I have in the kitchen. I was planning on one of the Amy's TV dinners. You could have one of those, too, but I know they aren't good enough for you." I know he wants to push away my kindness before I take it away, to protect himself. So, I say, "I'll find something to make. I am resourceful."

It's true. In the pantry there is no cereal, just a box of Carnation instant breakfast, some cans of Ensure. The end of a red box of Minute Rice. A Warhol can of Campbell's tomato soup. An onion sprouting green shoots at the head and rotten at the bottom. An opened bag of Bertolli capellini pasta. I say, "Remember at Olive Garden when you used to say 'CAPELLINI POMODORO!' like it was a hilarious joke? And the waiters would always think you were crazy." Of course, he remembers.

I get the stainless-steel pasta pot out from under the counter and fill it with water, put it on the electric burner. I salt the pot because salt makes everything more delicious. I smell the olive oil; it is going off, it smells like crayons rather than grass, but I put it in a skillet anyway and take an iceberg of baby peas out of the freezer, melting them in the pan, salting, adding dry basil, pre-chopped garlic from a little jar in his refrigerator. I don't time the pasta, but I know when it's done. I drain it in the sink, move it to a stoneware bowl and mix in the peas, the garlic, the oil. I add more oil, more salt. There are fewer plates than I remember, like he's been using his Pfaltzgraff as Chinette, throwing it out instead of washing. I wipe the plastic placemats with a Clorox wipe, set out folded paper towels for napkins. Forks and large spoons

for twirling the pasta. My father always twirls his pasta. He says it's what the Italians do. I put out his pepper grinder, which only works sometimes, and a saltshaker. Wine glasses that I fill with Diet Coke. I bring the pasta to the table, where he's already sitting, and then find the green plastic container of Kraft parmesan granules in the fridge. After dinner, I put three soft Oreos on a folded paper towel for each of us. I ask him if he wants coffee, but he doesn't. I tell him I am sorry he is sick, and I am sorry he is alone. I tell him I love him. I reach out and hold his ringless hand.

*

And then what? Because of course I didn't make him dinner. I didn't hold his hand. What was true that night, and what is still true, is that I drove away. I went away and I drank beer on a yellow couch in the back of a record store, listening to rough turquoise-sounding guitar. I sat close enough to the speaker to let the sound vibrate me, skin first, edges into center. Sound-suffused, thoughtless, and humming, it is true that I did not forgive him. We looked toward each other that night, and though love was there, it was not what either one of us recognized in the other's face.

Obituary

Originally published in *The Norman (Oklahoma) Transcript*, May 8, 2009.

Dr. Arthur “Andy” Boice VanGundy, Jr., who died Tuesday night of complications following heart surgery, was known for his variously wry and absurd sense of humor. Students in his classes in the Department of Communication at the University of Oklahoma, from which he retired as Professor Emeritus in May 2008, had to watch out for flying nerf balls, goofy puns, and often bizarre pop culture references. Dr. VanGundy devoted his career, and much of his life, to the study of creative problem solving and innovation research, publishing sixteen books and numerous articles on the subject.

He was born May 24, 1946 in Lancaster, Ohio to Dr. Arthur Boice and Sara Jane (Sally) VanGundy, both now deceased. He was the oldest of four boys, and is survived by his brothers Dr. Gregory VanGundy, Ralph VanGundy, and Christopher VanGundy. Chocolate syrup on the velvet couch and a crib-launched escape from an open window are only two of the many adventures the four boys had growing up in the house on the hill in Lancaster.

Andy graduated from high school in Lancaster and went on to earn a B.A. in Psychology from Ohio Wesleyan University in 1968, an M.S. in Personnel Counseling from Miami University (Ohio) in 1970, and a Ph.D. in Higher Education Administration from The Ohio State University in 1975. In 1976, he moved to Norman, Oklahoma where he was hired as an Assistant Professor of Human Relations at the University of Oklahoma, becoming Associate Professor in 1982, and Full Professor in 1987, after moving to the Department of Communication, where he worked until his retirement in May 2008.

While at The Ohio State University, Andy met and married Denilyn Wilson, who moved with him to Norman. The couple had two daughters together, Sarah and Laura, as well as some hilarious and not so hilarious moments before divorcing in 1988.

Andy loved language and was known for wordplay and a love of clear writing. He also enjoyed wine, travel, and correcting the grammar of his family and colleagues. In his later years, one of his main joys was spending time with his granddaughter Chloe, who knew him as “Bumpa.” He liked teaching her bits of Algebra and preparing Boca Burgers for her, which were so exquisite she subsequently refused to eat those made by her mother.

He was deeply loved by his family and will be missed always.

A public memorial service will be held at 2 pm on Tuesday, May 12th at the Havenbrook Funeral Home in Norman. In lieu of flowers, the family requests that mourners wishing to donate something in his name make contributions to Creative Oklahoma, Inc
<http://www.stateofcreativity.com/index.php?id=6>

Memento Mori

Remember to die, remember death, remember you must die

Find a patch of soft green grass, or sharp brown grass, or a bit of carpet that is freshly vacuumed or a bit of carpet that is full of shards of the raw oats you ate in bed last night when you couldn't sleep. Or find an expansive space on a gleaming golden waxed hardwood floor or a cramped spot in the corner of a bathroom hall on a patch of pale and peeling laminate covered by a fine dust of cat litter. Find it and lie down. All the way down. Lay your hairs down and your heels down and the grabbing fast twitch fingers on your hands, lay them down. Be still enough to feel the cells falling off, the skin sliding back to collect closer to the floor until it becomes the floor. The creases near your eyes will consider unbecoming. Your breasts will disperse centrifugally and you'll notice their urgency to reclaim nothingness, nipples to nowhere, an urgency that's built for years, since they were last sucked by someone who was hungry.

When you decompose, your fluids become a comedy. Think of it this way: on the one hand, you could wake up every day. On the other, you could decompose. In one scenario, you sleep and wake up, you drink spring water or boxed wine or Pinot Noir from a good year or bathwater-warm Diet 7-Up or iced tea from a gas station. You drink Miller Genuine Draft, the champagne of beers, five in a bucket on karaoke night at Bill & Dee's or brass monkey in a bathtub in a house on a cul-de-sac. And no matter what it is you drink, you'll have to wake up again the next day.

But at the moment you start decomposing, when you are serious, really serious and no longer pretending, the blood and eggs and pee and synovial fluid and mucous and aqueous humor and lymph and bile and cerebrospinal fluid and interstitial fluid you have at that very moment, the moment of your closing incipience, that fluid becomes the whole sum of fluid you will ever have. Nothing more and nothing less.

Hold a wide bottomed stemless glass or a flute or a jelly jar for chardonnay leftover from your boyfriend's uncle's wake. Hold a Campbell's Kids soup mug bought in 1979 with box tops or a blue ceramic mug made to look like a tin enamel cup commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Oklahoma Library Association or a wavy green artisan-made shot glass that that you brought back from Guatemala in your luggage only to find its twin at the Dollar Tree. Pick a holder and hold it. Sit on a bar stool with three long legs and one short leg or at a brown table in a breakfast nook or cross-legged at a craftsman style table in a divorced dining room. Just find a place. Take the wine bag out of the box and milk it into the glass with your own formerly square hands or hold your glass stable at the base for the waiter's deft twisting pour or nudge your glass like the snout of a lonely dog against the bottle-holding hand of a friend or a stranger. Or sit like a woman for once and wait.

What you do next is particularly insignificant, so lick the face of your boyfriend or the neck of your husband or smoke a cigarette on the spongy black tiles of a playground. Or eat the vitreous amber bath beads on the back of the toilet in a guest bathroom. (If you eat them, do it one at a time because it's all about the surprise of the pop followed by the sexual soapy ooze.) Cry in the shower or make a new friend on the street of a city that isn't your own. Your new

friend may have named himself and he may show you the hand tattoos he got in memory of the now dead mother who brought him here when he was a baby, to escape war. Say the tattoos are beautiful or the mother is beautiful or think for a minute you see the beating hopeful pulse of something exactly like you in the pupils of his eyes. Or get your arms caught in the sleeves of your shirt on a roof that makes you want to be shirtless or stand on your bare toes to mouth the pink and white eyelash-flowers of the mimosa tree like you never learned it was a weed. Or give regrettable head, in a car or a truck that is parked by a dumpster or the Rio Grande or a wheat field or the ocean.

Then, just open the door of the moving taxi on the Tappan Zee bridge because you think you need to spit out a little of that last cocktail or curl on a bathmat while a fat man pees a stream of PBR over your body. Or feel for the grocery bags next to the bed or lean over the porch railing or take off your clothes and kiss someone and crawl to the bathroom. Just throw up and do it again. Until you are empty. Until all the animals in the house purr or whine or moan in concern or disgust around the toilet, until there is nothing left, and you are shaking and sweating and empty and your teeth chatter and your arms are sore and you can't remember why.

Then go to sleep. On a sofa under a tablecloth and over a man you think you recognize from class or the alley near the dumpster where the roses grow. Or sleep in your own flannel bed or the bed of a lover or a hotel or your mother, or the bed of a pickup truck lined with sleeping bags. When you wake up, your only job will be eating burnt toast and honey or swallowing ibuprofen or the cum of a grateful man who can be gentle enough not to gag you. Your day

will be reduced to the careful execution of a few of the finite number of anatomical movements of which the human body is capable. Dorsiflexion or plantar flexion or pronation or supination. Elevation or depression or opposition. Circumduction, movement in a circular manner, can be avoided. Today you just go straight ahead in an arrowy manner, from morning, to squinting white sun, to night, when you eat a raccoon's pot of cold rice and sleep, finally, because you are just an animal.

Start a study of salt. Remember that this is a study, not a meal, a taste not a swallow. So put your tongue on the cartilaginous ridge of someone's nostril and find that the outside edges of insides have a peculiar saline chill. Or put your mouth on the slick sex of a woman to discover that it has no taste of its own, just the flavor of the woman who wears it. Slip behind stanchions and ropes and press the tip of your tongue to a painting for a quick taste of a rough cerulean impasto ocean. You might feel a twinge of guilt, like you are lapping away at the future, selfishly eroding what your daughter's daughters might someday slip past their own ropes to taste, but remember that if a woman is your daughter's daughter, she will understand what propels you and besides, what she calls salt may not be cobalt or peacock or even blue at all.

Top up the forty teaspoons of sodium chloride in your roughly average adult human body and then add more. There is a time for delicacy and an artist's hand and a different time, now, to let the salt burn past taste and flush your blood up to the edges of your skin, to remind you that you have edges but they can be minerally transgressed. Salt yourself like you are the tail of a bird hoping for a cage. Salt yourself like milk or shoes to keep the witches away. Salt

yourself like Lot's Wife, who had a name, after all, something like Edith. And who probably really walked away just fine from God's impotent curse or died of some ordinary thing like dehydration or grief.

Listen, because this is your chance to hear. Listen to Mozart's Requiem or the first Suzuki lessons played on a child-sized cello. Listen to the twang and pull of stand-up bass played by a wall-eyed friend at Oklahoma's first smoke-free honky-tonk or the movement of trees outside a sleeping window or the hum of lights in your office that might be the hum of the printer in the office next door. Listen to the echo of breath and heartbeat when your head is under a pillow for fear or comfort or just to disappear.

It doesn't matter if you like the sound. Just find a frequency that will animate you autonomically, to remind you that you are a shuddery puppet to the paravertebral ganglia of the sympathetic chain. To remind you that you are an instrument yourself, of the vibration that surrounds you. Try to listen to the sound of your own ossicles (malleus, incus, stapes) and get lost in your cochlear labyrinth, freeing what you find at the center, because that monster is no more or less you than all the other noise and silence.

If you move, don't call it dancing (that specter of agency). Let yourself *be* moved. By standing too close to the freight train that runs through your hometown at 10:32 on summer nights or putting your iliac crest juts in the hands of a stranger in Puerto Rico and forgetting your feet or letting the need of another body, for love or comfort or release, rock your own. You are all ligament and fragile fascia to this vibration, maybe marrow but no bone.

Walk until walking itself is homeostatic, swing and stance, on the burning painted cement next to the pool or up a sweaty foothill to see a shrine to a weathered Mary at a monastery in wine country. Walk echo-footed on the flickery greenlit hospital tile or down blocks of stores selling machine-enabled services you don't understand in a language you don't speak for number amounts in a currency you carry but can't count. Displacement, distance, velocity, acceleration, time, and speed. The law of conservation is just a suggestion, you will be moved anyway, your inertial reference frame the frame of breath and motion, right up until it isn't. Let the sound and the motion use you right up because this is your chance.

Now remember Hiroshima or 9/11 or the Alamo or the Maine. Remember Pearl Harbor or Columbine or the time when Timothy McVeigh, who looked just like the man who painted your mother's house, bombed the Murrah Federal Building, so close you heard the bang. Or remember the ticking of the Doomsday Clock, now set to the after-dinner hour, when you are sleepy or restless or craving something sweet. Remember lymphoma or carcinoma or hairy cell leukemia. Remember Alzheimer's or Ebola or ataxia. Remember the melting world, burning into frog soup like a lullaby, so slowly we hardly know we are not just falling asleep.

Remember there will be a last time you will write a grocery list or bring in the paper or strain the webbing of a lawn chair on your barren back patio and tell your daughter that you feel like you've lived a good enough life. There will be a last time you take a step with your funny hitched walk or sniff and crack your neck at the same time. There will be a last time you seem like yourself and a last time you are yourself, at least this self.

There may be a single star, a multifoliate rose, or just a recession of breath and heartbeat, synapse and stillness, until you are pulsed again into that something or nothing where this idea of you started, not with a bang or a whimper, but with a final soft ebb for which there is no sound. Remember this and as you do, feel for the soft grass or the stray stones of cat litter or the beige carpet or the cool spring park-dirt that is just the dry side of mud. Press yourself to the ground until you can't feel where you begin or where the earth stops but know that this not-knowing is a symptom of the fact that you have begun.

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