2020

Taking Inventory

Constance Owens
University of Central Florida

TAKING INVENTORY

by

CONSTANCE CAMILLE OWENS
B.A. University of Central Florida, 2017

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing
in the Department of English
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Fall Term 2020

Major Professor: Rochelle Hurt

ABSTRACT

Taking Inventory is a biography about my mother, whose life spanned decades filled with hope, heartbreak, loneliness, and adversity. Weaving together micro-essay and prose poetry set at the merger of her adulthood and my childhood, this mixed genre collection examines the many ways her life influenced mine. The triptych structure of the book moves backwards in time, exploring the relationship between my mother and the world she navigated, beginning with the final stages of her life, moving through a turbulent mid-life, and ending with the young woman affected by a world war, an alcoholic father, and a devoutly religious mother. In the essay "Late Night Ap·o·lo·gi·a," regret and justification are intertwined to explore an imagined confessional, while another key piece, "A Daughter's Nondisclosure Agreement," allows my teenage persona to put my mother's indiscretions on full display. "When I Kissed Her Today, She Smelled Like Coconut" and "I Was Someone's Daughter Once" highlight the redemptive qualities that created the foundation of the mother-daughter alliance that is evident in "Ice Cream." "Bumper-to-Bumper Bravado" and "whiteboard reality" relate the struggles of navigating the final stages of her life. At some point, you realize your mother is not who you thought she was, but someone separate from what you made her out to be. My mother didn't have the solutions, nor the answers to her problems—or her daughter's. In many ways, *Taking Inventory* stands in judgement regarding the why, how, and what if in her role both as a mother and as a woman. It's full of questions about motherhood, womanhood, and daughterhood—and ultimately about forgiveness.

every time I say “I,” it refers to you

~ Louise Glück

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Notes on Aging
Living with Macular Degeneration in Your Eighties

For My Mother

You're old when MD strikes, a film of gray matter clouds your line of sight, leaving only your peripheral vision and distorting what's in between. It'll be hard to maneuver the world seeing only the left side and right, the world separated with a hairline part.

You're old when the car is parked, keys hanging in the kitchen, idle on the hook. You'll realize this is only the beginning of losing your independence. Your passengers gasp in fear when you run a stop sign or hit the brakes too close to the bumper of another car. They'll betray you to your children. *Mema scared me today. Should she be driving?* You won't pick up your granddaughter from dance any more or have your afternoon visits with her at McDonald's. You won't drive to Winn Dixie to get a late-night snack of ice cream. Your new wheels will become a red aluminum walker and the senior citizen's van. You'll need to make an appointment with someone else any time you want to go anywhere.

With macular degeneration, you won't watch television, you'll listen to it like when you listened to the radio as a child. You'll choose reruns of Andy Griffith, Perry Mason, and Matlock because you already know the voices and the characters. Family Feud will be a nightly ritual because you can play along with only the sound. These are your shows from your time. You're in nobody's time anymore.

You won't be able to discern black from navy or white from beige. People won't tell you your clothes don't match because they're embarrassed for you. You'll try to figure out ways to get around this visual deficiency. In the early stages, you'll get someone to iron patches into the collars of your clothes, color coding them with the first letter of the appropriate color. Then, you'll arrange the clothes in the closet by color—white, black, red, green, pink, yellow, orange, navy, and beige—careful not to put similar colors together. You'll arrange shoes and purses in the same fashion. Because it is very important to you to dress fashionably every day, you'll need to memorize the order and hope no one moves the clothes around. However, this strategy is only effective if you can still rely on your memory. A simple task you've done a million times changes from a chore to an ordeal. You'll struggle to maintain the order and finally rely on someone to help you put your laundry away. Eventually, you won't care. Choosing colors becomes too difficult.

Walking becomes a minefield. Steps must be felt, handrails grabbed. Uneven sidewalks are treacherous. You'll put up a front, ignore caution. You'll wear that stubborn shield, until you fall and end up in the emergency room. You'll be angry with yourself, and at others when they say, I told you so. You'll decide the bumps and bruises, the risk of broken bones, are not worth it. The walker you banished to the corner will become appealing. You're safer to stay inside and walk on the carpet. You'll learn to feel your way around and create a familiar routine—back of the chair to the closet to the bathroom to the sink and back. Furniture and walls become a tour guide.

You'll take your fork and poke around, tasting small bits of the food to determine what you're eating. You'll get tired of doing that and resort to asking others what's on your plate. When your hands get unsteady and the fork shakes uncontrollably, dropping the food in your lap, you'll run your hands on the surface of the table looking for the food. You won't realize the fork is empty when you put it into your mouth. Your cheeks will redden and you'll stutter apologies for your poor table manners. You would've admonished your children for such behaviors. But you'll get used to it. You'll sheepishly ask your daughter to make you a bib from dish towels and wear them like a baby.

You'll depend on others to give you the news, to entertain your intellectual senses. Your new love, a lonely gentleman needing companionship like you, will read the newspaper to you. You'll do the comic page Jumble in your head while he reads the scrambled letters and clues aloud, the letters and phrases scrolling across your mind like a ticker tape. It'll become a standing daily appointment. Books that cluttered your nightstand are no longer there. Books-on-tape are a tangle of characters and dialogue. He'll read all of Jane Austen's books to you on his daily afternoon visits. You'll miss reading books, something you would do in the idleness of old age.

You'll give away all your painting supplies, the expensive brushes and oil paints you purchased to indulge in retirement activities—one of things you always wanted to do, but never had the time. MD will rob you of self-indulgences. You'll become a shadow of who you wanted to be at eighty, forced to give up reading and crocheting and sewing and cooking and painting and

shopping. Going to the movies or the college basketball games with friends becomes a thing of the past.

You won't be able to see the arms ticking off the time or press the tiny buttons to set an alarm. A talking watch and alarm clock will be your best friends. You won't have to worry about the time, they will broadcast it like the loudspeaker at the airport announcing flights. The time is 10:00 a.m. Time for your medicine. The time is 5:15 p.m. Time to walk to the dining room for dinner. It will cease to matter eventually. Even if you can't tell the time, it will continue to advance until it arrives at your door.

You'll become adept at compensating for your lost vision, pretending not to mind. You'll hide the embarrassment and heartbreak when your daughter laughs and says, Mama, you've got your clown face on this morning. You'll frown at this image. She'll remove the eyebrows you drew into your hairline and the lipstick line under your nose. She'll wipe the pale blue eyeshadow from your silver eyebrows and put more on your lids. You'll giggle about it all, feeling grateful for her honesty and acting like it doesn't matter to you, but wonder how many days you've looked like Bozo and no one said anything. You'll be stripped of your rank. Throughout your womanhood, you wore your vanity like a metal on your chest.

The faces of your children won't age. Your daughter will remain in her forties. You'll try to imagine what she looks like each time she visits. Most often, you'll envision her as a child. You'll laugh along with your grandson when he proclaims his son looks just like him. You've never seen your great-grandson's face. You never will.

I. INDEPENDENT WALKER

Post-Game Interview

I miss her, I say to Jack.

I know you do. I miss her too, you know. Everyone is worried about me. Jan keeps coming to check on me. She doesn't say that's what she's doing, but I know it is. I'm fine by myself. I don't mind the solitude . . . I'm not depressed. Really, I'm not . . . I've got everything I need right here beside my chair . . . This is not my first rodeo, you know. I've done this before. Twice . . . Your mother was a lovely woman and I enjoyed her company so much. I miss reading to her . . . The other day while watching football, I reached for the phone. You know, like I always did to give her the score. I wanted to tell her what was happening . . . That's how we watched the games together. Me here. Her there. I'd give her a call about every twenty minutes or so, give her a play-by-play. She listened to it on the television. But I called her anyway. She liked that . . . I miss sharing the games with her . . . I loved her, you know. She was a good companion for me—in a different way from Dot. That was my wife, you know . . . I'm going to be alright. I don't like all this fuss.

I Was Someone's Daughter Once—

Someone who held my hand when I crossed the street. *Look both ways before you cross.*

Someone who left work and drove her car to the pool to confront a bully who slapped me in the locker room. I'd said to that girl, *go ahead, slap the other cheek*—like in the Bible that someone taught me. *I'm proud that you wanted to do what Jesus said, but don't do that again.*

Someone who reminded me to bow my head for the blessing at the dinner table. *Humble our hearts, O Lord, for these and all other blessings.*

Someone who taught me to cook perfect rice. *Always rinse the rice to wash off the starch, before and after it cooks, so it won't be sticky*.

Someone who stayed on the phone with me until I figured out how to sew a collar into a shirt, carefully instructing me through the process. *Match up your notches and trim your seams before you turn the collar. Don't hesitate to tear it out and start over if it doesn't come out right.*

Someone who quit her job to stay at the hospital with me when I stayed under an oxygen tent for three months. *It was a very difficult time, having a baby so sick, and not knowing what was wrong with it.*

Someone who sat on the other side of a chain-linked fence to watch six-year-old me take my first high-dive plunge at swimming lessons, wearing the rainbow striped bikini she created from a

Simplicity pattern and sailcloth. *Go ahead, I'm watching*, clapping as I swam to the side of the pool.

Someone who bought me a used bicycle from a co-worker, because she couldn't afford a new one, and stood in our driveway until I got the hang of keeping it upright. *That's it, you've got it, now.*

Someone who gave me the keys to her car and let me drive up and down our long driveway in order to master the art of forward and reverse. *Just make sure you don't back up past the end of the driveway into the street.*

Someone who brushed my golden locks while I squirmed and whined, pulling tangles from the thick, straight strands, and twisting my hair into ponytails on each side of my head. *Hold still or I'll have to do these all over again.*

Someone who telephoned me in the middle of the night, shaky fingers dialing the hospital phone, to tell me my father lay still on the bed beside her, his chest no longer rising and falling. *He's gone. I looked up and he wasn't breathing. He drifted off to sleep, after the pain medicine took effect, and he didn't wake up again.*

Someone who carried me into the doctor's office, limp in her arms, and helped to hold me down when I fought the nurse trying to give me a penicillin shot. *You have to be still so Miss Doris can give you this shot to make you better.*

Someone who forbade me to drive with my left foot resting on the brake—like she did. *I can't help it. It's a terrible habit—but you don't need to do it.*

Someone who piled quilts on top of me so I would sweat off a 104-degree fever. *I know it's hot, but you have to stay under the covers until the fever breaks.*

Someone who made a special trip to Cotton's Hardware and selected child-sized gardening tools, and helped me to cultivate a small garden next to the house where I grew a row of Silver Queen corn, some carrots, and a few hills of butter beans. *Would you look at that corn!*

Someone who took me to the library next to her office in the summers where I spent hours reading and combing the aisles for new books for the summer reading program. *You have finished that stack of books already? Well, I'll take you to get some more.* Turning to my daddy, *she's such a good reader.*

Someone who spent long nights and weekends at the sewing machine making shorts sets and sundresses for my summer wardrobe because money was tight. *I'll let you pick out the fabric and patterns for your outfits. Do you want rick rack around the edge of the dress? I'll let you choose the colors.*

Someone who feared losing me before I was twelve, like the doctor suggested, which caused her to spoil me, knowing she shouldn't, but couldn't help herself. *Get up and let her have the rocking chair.*

Someone who didn't take photos of her youngest child as she was growing up. *You were so sick, and it cost so much for your medicine and formula. We didn't have money for things like film and developing pictures.*

Someone who touched her hands to my hot head as I barked from the Whooping Cough and called the doctor to me in the middle of the night, rocking me in her arms until he arrived. *I don't like the sound of that. I know it's late, but I don't think I can wait until the morning to call Dr. Jimmy.*

Someone who sat outside my door the whole twelve hours I worked to bring my son into the world. *I never realized what a miracle birth is even though I had three of my own. It's different when it's not you—when it's your daughter.*

Maybe There is Life on the Other Side of Death

I was asleep on my bed, in this very apartment. It was the middle of the night. The phone by my bed rang and I struggled to answer it, not knowing if I was dreaming or awake. It rang several times as I fumbled around in confusion. Of course, any time the phone rings in the middle of the night, it is startling. You always think the worst. I finally found the receiver and said 'hello.' A voice came over the line, 'Jack, it's me Hazel.' Just like she always did, you know. She always had to announce herself as if you wouldn't know who was on the line by her voice [chuckle]. I sat up on the side of the bed in disbelief. I said 'Hazel, is that you? Where are you?' She replied, 'I'm here.' I then said, 'How is it there? And how in the world are you calling me?' She laughed and said, It's nice here. I like it. All we have to do is think about it, and it's done. I didn't dial a phone or anything. I just thought about calling you.' I asked her, 'How are you?' to which she said, 'I'm fine, Jack. I'm really okay. It's so beautiful here. We don't have to worry about anything. Everything is so peaceful.' I was so stunned at the prospect of talking to her, trying to understand if this was real, I couldn't think of anything to say. I think I finally stammered out something like 'I'm glad you called.' Then, she said, 'You take care of yourself. I'm alright.' Then she was gone. And I woke up holding the phone in my hand.

Carmex in the Casket

When she dies, we'll put a tub of Carmex in the casket with her. We can't have her lips dry on her way to heaven, now can we?

At times we had to laugh, or we would cry.

My siblings and I gathered beside her casket. I pried open one of her hands resting on her stomach and placed a tub of Carmex inside. As I curled her fingers around it, I swear she smiled.

Taking Inventory

in the drawer of the end table beside your white wicker recliner

hairbrush	with strands of pewter hair woven through the bristles. you refused to cover the gray of your thick hair, full of ocean waves. at seventy, the strands were completely silver. *I hope that I have my mother's hair when I am old.* this is what I tell everyone. it took me a long time to pull the hairs from the brush and throw away pieces of you.
black comb	the teeth bent on one end. now I tease my hair with this comb and think about how I used it to tease the crown of yours. in my teens, I had to blow dry and style your hair before you went out on the weekends. at first, I enjoyed it. then, you demanded it—the role of weekend hairdresser no longer a choice. naturally, resented it. that changed when you were dying. I loved combing your hair then.

Death is An Orphan Factory

I sat in a chair at the foot of the bed where my dead mother lay—a clothing store dummy—arms positioned loosely across her abdomen, a patchwork quilt pulled up to her waist. The color scheme of the quilt was purple, a detail of the moment that I remember as much as my deceased mother. Her head drooped to one side, her cheeks were craters in her face, and the cheekbones mountains under her eyes, the portrait of her struggle to let go. She had been dead about an hour by the time of the viewing. Her limbs were already stiff, her mouth formed into an O like an open drain, and her complexion was pallid. Like objects after they are unearthed, her color had begun to fade and vanish over the last days and had settled into a pasty hue.

The room was still, with only the sound of the air conditioner humming in the background. After the nurse checked to make sure my mother no longer had a pulse—like it was any other day—she officially, and seemingly nonchalantly, but with the solemn demeanor required of the job, declared the time of death as September 15, 2015 at 1:10 p.m. The hospice staff went to work "laying her out," the custom of preparing her body for viewing by the family. I sat outside the closed door and imagined what it was like for the staff to wash her body, dress her in a fresh gown, brush her hair—those last rites that only they experienced. I longed to be present—a desire to impart this ritual myself—for *my* hands to dip the cloth into the basin and slowly move it down her arm. I wondered while I waited. Did they cry behind the closed doors as they performed their duty? Did the emotional weight of their job take over, or did they stoically slam the door shut on their emotions in order to move on to the next one in line? Did they go about it mechanically or with the tenderness I would have? The process was part of a factory assembly

line—one patient expires, the room is stripped—devoid of the life who had occupied it—and the next dying patient arrives within a day or two.

When she was ready, my brother and I gathered around her corpse and stared at the woman who gave us life and loved us, though she upheld her maternal responsibilities with disinterest. I touched her hand—it was cold—I lifted my eyes across her body to my brother, the strong one—*We are orphans now. Nothing will ever be the same again.* I hadn't yet shaped my lips around the words.

The day's events had not been what I expected. She exited without making a fuss, which certainly was not her usual style. It had been so different when my father died—more like a strange, hypnotic vision moving in slow motion. The nurses surrounded his bed, moving in and out of the door, blood came up—and went back in—the fear in his eyes palpable. Later, my legs turned to jelly as I swooned from the words, *your daddy died*. A robotic numbness followed that lasted for weeks.

I prepared for her death for six months, riding an emotional roller coaster as she dipped and rolled, threatening to leave, then demanding one more turn around the course. I felt a sense of peace as her eyes opened wide staring at something beyond me, sucking in one last rattled breath. She fell silent, her face relaxed but frozen in the moment, eyes expressionless.

The lines from Louise Glück's poem *Nocturne* stumbled around in my head.
How alone I am, no mother, no father—my brain seems so empty without them.

I sat quietly in a metal chair—the cold hard surface preventing me from floating away while I committed this moment to memory—and watched reruns of my childhood.

Keeping Score

It's really sweet that Jack calls me like that when he's watching the game. You know I really don't care anything about sports, and I don't need him to call me every twenty minutes. But it's important to him. That's a little something I can do for him—he does so much for me.

How tiresome, this dying, not at once,

you think, *but incrementally, as year*

by year—or, as of late, every few months:

this spate of thefts by those who leave us here . . .

Nevertheless, you think, *Just one more try.*

~Rhina P. Espaillat

I've Got It Covered, Thanks Though

My mother fought death like she was in a boxing match. She would tell me she was ready to die; that she knew where she was going, and she looked forward to what lay ahead. We had multiple conversations about her death and funeral. Together, we prepared a handwritten, unofficial Will dividing up all her jewelry. She planned her funeral in detail, the songs to sing, the preacher, the location, and the burial. But every time her body tried to give up, her strong will rebelled, and she could not let go. One occasion when it seemed she only had a few days at the most, I whispered in her ear that it was okay to go, that we would be fine. She opened her eyes and stared at me. *I have to do this my own way, in my own time*. My siblings and I joked about her stubbornness, such a huge part of her personality. And even in death, she needed to maintain control. She wanted to decide when to go—not even God was going to make that decision for her.

Ice Cream

I sat side saddle on the bed beside my mother peeling the lid off a tub of ice cream. Her eyes had followed my movement from the door to the bed when I came in, seeing only a dark shadow. She hadn't seen my face for ten years, the macular degeneration putting a cloudy wall between her and others, only allowing the periphery into her world. I observed her without her awareness. Resting in a reclining position on her hospital bed, she remained a picture of beauty even as she inched toward death. Dying had not stolen that from her yet. Blue-gray eyes gazed back at me, so striking against the pewter hair that framed the hollow craters in her cheeks.

Guess what we're having for lunch today? She had rejected her lunch earlier, pushing the plate away almost as soon as the aide put it on the table. She paused to ponder the question. Then, she chuckled and gave me a devilish look. *Ice Cream*. She flashed a smile of genuine delight—an expression I had not seen in months.

Moments like this plunged me into my childhood. Before hospice care, my mother loved ice cream. I remembered the days as a little girl we drove to the Dairy Queen for a Sunday afternoon treat—a Dilly Bar for her, a chocolate dipped cone for me. She got a kick out of giving a vanilla sundae to our little Chihuahua, who stood on the dashboard shivering, licking the cup clean. We sat in the car eating our ice cream, pushing the dog's cup back when it scooted too close to the edge.

Our days were spent keeping her comfortable. If she experienced pain, she received a pill. If her skin itched, I rubbed lotion on her. If she felt a chill, I pulled up the cover. If she slept, I sat by her bed. One day folded into the next while we waited for the inevitable.

She hadn't been eating well and her strength was slipping away, unable at times to feed herself. Between her hands shaking and her poor vision, getting the food from the plate to her mouth was a struggle. For this reason, I visited with her at mealtimes so I could feed her. In fact, I enjoyed these times—this turn of the tables, a child feeding her mother instead of the other way around.

She brought bags of Reese Cups and Snickers Bars to hospice and put them in the nightstand by her bed. When I expressed concern over her eating sweets instead of meat and potatoes, the nurse looked at me knowingly. *Don't worry about it. Let her have whatever she wants when she wants it.* I settled back into these words and conceded—it didn't matter at that point.

I bought little tubs of vanilla ice cream—the kind she used to buy for me at Mr. Carson's grocery store when I was a child, the ones with the paper lid that pulled back and the tiny wooden spoon attached. I kept them in the freezer in the hospice kitchen down the hall. In the afternoons when she awoke from a nap, I padded to the kitchen for her treat. It became our daily ritual.

After snapping a bib around her neck, I scooped the spoon into the rich cream and paused. I needed to forewarn her. *Here it comes*. She opened her mouth and waited. She sensed the spoon when it touched her lips and closed down on it, smiling at the taste of the sweet, cold confection. Like a baby bird, she opened her mouth for another.

Taking Inventory

on the end table beside your white wicker recliner

magnifying glass	to enlarge the items held in your hands, lifted close to your face in hopes of making out what you wanted to see, then casting it away in frustration until your fingers grope for it another time, the clatter of its landing breaking the silence
white telephone with gigantic numbers	the numbers peering from behind a film of grime you couldn't see, the ones you pressed by touch because of the years you spent typing and calculating. it jangled constantly during baseball and football season—Jack calling with updates on the Braves and Wildcats games.
Valdosta Daily Times	folded to the Jumble—Jack read out the cartoon clue and scrambled words, gave you the number of letters for each word, and you solved the puzzle—visualizing it in your head. More often than not, you were correct.

Roller Coaster Ride

She hadn't been conscious for several days. She had drifted off into that space between life and death, the place we don't understand unless we've been there. The nurse manager wrote "death is imminent" in her chart once again. Her pulse had slowed, her breathing measured and irregular. She had not lapsed into the hard, raspy breathing that usually occurred before death, but the staff felt she was slipping. *It's really up to her—to decide when she wants to stop fighting.* The aide came in and out, patting her leg, smoothing the covers, giving me long, solemn looks—she had experienced this before.

The outline of her hips protruded through her clothing, only thin skin stretching over bone, and her hands rested neatly on her abdomen, her nails painted coral. The aide had brushed her hair and changed her gown. She didn't look like she was dying—not really. She wasn't in pain. I sat in the recliner next to the bed, watching her chest rise and fall, counting the seconds between her breaths.

A storm was brewing outside—a contrast to the serenity inside her room. A flash of light illuminated the trees outside the window, allowing me to catch a glimpse of their movement as a strong wind whipped the branches back and forth. The sensation of something on the horizon overcame me and I suddenly needed to be next to her.

I stood, kicking off my shoes, and climbed into the bed beside her, laying my head next to hers on the pillow. She had no medical devices attached to her—no oxygen or IV lines or heart monitors. Nothing impeded me from putting my arm across her body and snuggling into her

withered curves. I closed my eyes and focused on the sounds in the room. Breaths—the steady hum of the air conditioner—faint footsteps in the hall—muffled sounds of a radio playing low in the room next door. Eventually, our breathing was in sync with one another, and we established a rhythm, with me taking an extra breath or two between hers. I felt the soft beat of her heart under my body and wondered if this was how it felt when I was in her womb.

I ached to comfort her. I wanted her to know I was there—like she had done for me so many times when I was sick. How many nights had she lain with me listening to my wheezing? How many times had she wrapped her arms around me as I struggled to breathe? I wonder who was comforting whom tonight. When the time came, there would be no heroics. No machines. No resuscitation.

I told her I loved her— my cheek so close to hers that my tears wet her skin. Sometime after midnight, the aide urged me to go home, to get a good night's sleep in my own bed. She'd call me if anything changed. I finally relented, hesitantly easing out the door, and into the rain.

I returned to her bedside early the next morning expecting to find her in the same condition as when I left the night before. Instead, she was sitting up in bed spooning grits into her mouth, her breakfast tray on the table in front of her. *Where've you been? You're running late this morning.*

Inheritance

Obstinance is My Middle Name

And my mother's—and my grandmother's. They both had a reputation for inflexibility—a refusal to bend to anyone's will—a dogged determination not to change their attitude or position on something. While this trait is the ugly side of perseverance, it also attributed to my characteristics of decisiveness, conviction, and my ability to stand my ground—which are all leadership qualities that have taken me far in life. Unfortunately, unlike my forebearers, at times I can be influenced and swayed, which has gotten me into trouble on numerous occasions.

Be Patient

I didn't inherit my mother's methodical and thorough approach to a task—never rushing to completion, making sure whatever she was doing was neat and accurate. Her mother was the same way, having a very particular way of making up a bed or preparing a meal. She would rather do it herself than have someone do it differently. I'm not like either of them. I work rapidly—making errors on tests, counting crochet stitches incorrectly, missing details—I'm in a constant state of revision. *You were born impatient.* A month premature, and after only three contractions, I was born breach in a hospital room with no nurses or doctors in attendance.

Err on the Side of Caution

Which was my mother's philosophy over all. She took it to the extreme when navigating a vehicle—maintaining the speed limit, easing through stop streets, nervous around curves, breaking unnecessarily, lagging behind at least one to two car lengths—unlike me, who speeds, brakes suddenly, turns corners fast, and follows close. I'm easily distracted while driving,

drifting over the center line or running up behind a car at a red light, missing exits and turns. We constantly argued over our driving when we traveled together. I must be more like my grandmother. She wasn't much of a driver. She told me she drove a model T into a store once and never drove again.

Padlocked

I did not inherit my mother and my grandmother's stoic manner. They could be stern when the occasion called for it, but both of them refrained from emotional displays of anger. No lashing out or raising of their voice. They kept a lock on their emotions and revealing their feelings did not come naturally to either of them. My grandmother had a gentle spirit and a soft voice that people strained to hear. She seemed unapproachable to outsiders because of her solemn expression. *Just because I'm not smiling doesn't mean I'm not happy.* It was their nature to bear pain and hardship with a "stiff upper lip." My emotions, on the other hand, are always just below the surface, waiting to brim over. I rise to anger in a flash, but it subsides quickly. I'm like them in one way, though. It takes a lot to make me cry.

One-Woman Dance Party in the Middle of Nowhere

She was restless that day, babbling incoherently while I sat in the recliner beside her bed absorbed in Harper Lee's *Go Set a Watchman*. The sound of her voice droned like a television in the background. I finally looked up from my book when the room dimmed, the late afternoon clouds outside had moved across the sun forcing me to strain over the words.

My mother was in another time. Her hands, poised in the air in front of her, were busy stitching a hem. The fingers on one hand made the movements of a needle puncturing fabric. Then she pulled the thread through, extending her arm out to pull the thread tight. Her eyes were fixed and concentrated on her task.

As I watched her, I returned to the months before my wedding, the satin fabric of my gown spread across her lap, cascading to the worn carpet hiding her feet within the folds. Her hands moved to this same rhythm, illuminated by the light from the lamp presiding over her work. She sewed seed pearls into the middle of flower appliques, pinned and scattered over the skirt of my gown, which was in the final stages and nearly complete. I had arrived home drained from an afternoon with my boyfriend and sat down beside her on the sofa. I was seventeen, and he was twenty-one, and we had argued about where we were going to live after we married. I wanted to buy an old house and move it out to his farm. He didn't want to invest in a house that needed work, but he had no idea where we were going to live. He had a tobacco crop to harvest, which left him little time to devote to wedding plans and finding a house. Adulthood was creeping up on both of us. The thought that maybe I was rushing things entered my mind for the first time

since we had decided to marry. I fingered the fabric and quickly squelched the idea. So much time and effort had gone into its creation.

She dropped her hands and sat straight up in the bed, alarmed. *Who are those men over there?* Her outburst pulled me back into the room. I wondered who she was talking about as my eyes scanned the room. *What men, Mama?* She gave me a stern look and pointed towards the adjoining sunroom where the French doors stood open revealing a rattan sofa and chair in the shadows. *There's a bunch of men over there. In the sunroom. They're smoking cigarettes. I-don't-like-that.* Her words authoritative and bossy. Then it changed to a plea, a child's whine. *Please tell them to stop.*

Another memory jumped to the forefront, an image of a handful of men sitting near a casket—muffled voices, a cough, and cigarette embers glowing in the dark. People from her past had been coming and going lately. A laughing child chased a ball in her room, a little girl, and a barking dog nipped at her feet; Aunt Alma and Uncle A.C., long dead, had stopped by to say hello; and her sister Pat, who died the previous year, came by frequently to check on her. She once mentioned talking to her Aunt Jenny. Someone told me once that when the veil between heaven and earth drops, people cross from the other side to assist the dying. If that is so, she had a lot of help. I found comfort in this knowledge.

I rose from the recliner, stiff from the long vigil. After stretching and placing the book on the seat, I took the few steps to the doors and paused on the threshold. I directed my gaze to the

floral cushions of the sofa and issued a command on her behalf. *You fellas go on out of here, now*. *Mama doesn't like ya'll smoking*. She relaxed back down on the bed and resumed her sewing, satisfied the men were gone.

Taking Inventory

on the end table beside your white wicker chair

pair of tweezers	for plucking those aggravating chin hairs, by running your finger over your chin you found the lone coarse strand, sprouted. you kept a finger on the hair, the tip of the tweezers touching your finger. no way to know if you got it, until you repeated the process—feeling if the hair was still intact. it didn't matter where you were located—doctor's office, dinner table, a restaurant—the need to pluck had to be met. you always had tweezers handy inside your purse, just in case.
small hand mirror	not sure why it was there, you couldn't see your reflection—unless—had you been tricking us the whole time?
half-empty Styrofoam cup of lemon water	a hospital straw jutting from the liquid, a smudge of coral lipstick on the end—you took a sip before you left the apartment the last time—right before the EMT transport arrived.

Domino Effect

She wanted to attend nursing school—got married—had a baby instead. Kept her dream alive—grilled doctors and nurses in charge of her care—her brain a clock—knew dispense time—pressed call button if tardy—happened a lot—not from negligence—patient load—didn't matter—her right—demanded punctuality. Internalized medication names—competently recited—Percocet, Ativan, Coumadin—to anyone who listened—diagnosis—dosage—side effects—prognosis—showed off her prowess—wanted to impress. Spit out medical data—hospitalizations, surgeries—treatments, medications—like a computerized health record—amazing detail—eighty-five-years old—didn't need interpreter—didn't want one—firewall on the Percocet—afraid of addiction accusations—denied vehemently—vital for fibromyalgia—doctor diagnosis—*possible*—caveated *likely age*—narcotic justified—refused to accept—aging body—domino of ailments—pain of walking—discomfort of sitting—due to inactivity—result of macular degeneration.

One Woman Dance Party to Nowhere

My brother stopped at the front desk of the hospice facility to chat with the volunteer on duty. After signing the register, he turned toward the corridor that led to my mother's room at the end of the hall and observed the door to her room was closed. He became immediately suspicious since her baths were in the mornings, and unless something was wrong, or an aid was changing her, the door should be open.

Like a naughty child, and for reasons we were unable to determine, she had been sneaking out of bed and closing her door. She had fallen and gashed her head on the night stand recently trying to walk to the bathroom. He walked past the nurse's station to the pod of rooms in view from the desk, and heard the aide talking loudly to Miss Rose in the room next door. He paused at my mother's door to listen, and hearing nothing, he pushed it open.

She stood in the middle of the room, naked, except for the adult diaper hanging by a piece of tape clinging to her hip, her gown tossed on the floor. Agitated, her hands jerked in the air, her expression unhinged. Standing on bone-thin legs, she wobbled, the muscles weak and atrophied from lack of use. She had not taken more than a step or two for months.

Come on, Mama. He took her gently by the arm and directed her back towards the bed. Her eyes wide and unknowing, she followed his lead, mumbling as her feet shuffled to their destination. She sat down on the side of the bed, feet dangling, while he covered her with a blanket and pressed the call button.

Ode to Carmex

Even before she arose each morning, my mother reached for the night stand, her hand fumbling, knocking things to the floor, searching for you, a three-inch tube of butter-colored lanolin—nothing capped off the morning like a swipe of Carmex.

She mourned her home, and the box of you stuffed under her bed. I set you aside and eased you into the drawer at hospice. I found you lingering in her jewelry box too, yellow medallions among necklaces and earrings. You had a post beside her favorite chair, another in the side pocket of her purse—loyal to the end, never far away. She held your round container in her hand, dipped her finger into the glow, to spread soft morning light upon her lips—her Balm of Gilead.

Now, her withered body no longer allows her to lift her fingers to her lips. I dip mine into your butter and soothe her lips. Even though she no longer reaches for you, I place you at your post, and like a good soldier, you stand at attention.

Taking Inventory

on the end table beside your white wicker recliner

two round tubs of Carmex	a small crater carved into the middle where your index finger moved from the tub to your lips, gliding left to right on the bottom lip, right to left on the top, back to dip again—repeat—put your lips together.
three-legged rustic iron table lamp with copper verdigris patina finish	how many times did your fingers twist the knob to illuminate the area around your chair? to study a piece of mail, squinting, trying to make out the words, moving your head this way and that, in order for the letters to appear in your periphery. And huff with frustration, fumbling around the tabletop, searching for the handle of the one thing that might help—and realizing no amount of light could make you see what was written on that page.
a box of Kleenex	for wiping off your finger every time you smooth Carmex on your lips.

Pinky Promise

I promised not to get rid of any of her stuff. I don't remember if I winked when I said I wouldn't. Did I cross my fingers behind my back?

I unloaded all of it—the furniture, the boxes of clothes and shoes, the toiletries, the linens—everything that left the apartment at Langdale Place went into my garage. Her presence filled my house—her recliner in my living room, the lamps, the bed, and chest of drawers in my guest bedroom. I even used her bedspread and throw pillows. I put her dresser in my bedroom—the nightstands too. The small amount of groceries went into my pantry. I tucked her Bible in a drawer.

Slowly, over the next six months, I took the clothes, shoes, and purses to Goodwill—some of the sheets and towels too. I waited until her body was emaciated, certain her days were numbered. I wanted to ensure she could not call me out on it, or ask *Where's my red Jones of New York blouse?* I needed to make sure.

How many minutes have I left, to still be beautiful?

Even when she was dying my mother wanted to be beautiful. I think her beauty was such a part of her identity, the desire to dress every day and put on makeup never left, her vanity very much alive even though her body betrayed her.

My sister and I shopped at Walmart for colorful housedresses that zipped up the front to make dressing easier. *I don't want to hang around in my nightclothes every day*. In keeping with my mother's affinity for shoes, we supplied her with slipper socks to match—the kind with padding on the bottom to prevent slippage. A bright coral-colored housedress with white piping around the collar and sleeves became her new favorite. The nurses and staff showered her with compliments each time she wore it.

Her hairdresser, Whitney, who worked in the salon at Langdale Place, shifted her schedule to visit my mother in hospice. She had taken care of my mother's hair for many years, cutting and styling it, and giving her manicures.

Before my mother became bedridden, Whitney and the nurse pushed my mother in the wheelchair to the "beauty station" down the hall, which was no more than a closet with a shampoo bowl and a large mirror. She rolled the wheelchair up to the bowl and my mother leaned her head into the lip of the sink to shampoo her hair. After cutting and styling my mother's hair, Whitney gave her a manicure and polished her nails.

It didn’t matter if her nails were polished. The staff did not need to see her nails to determine if she was oxygen deprived. They wouldn’t do anything about it anyway. It’s called palliative care. No intervention. No resuscitation. So, Whitney painted her nails *Coral Reef.*

whiteboard reality

Upon her arrival at Langdale Hospice, my mother ordered me around like a drill sergeant while her fingers fumbled around the hospital tray table next to her, looking for her tub of Carmex. *Put a box of Kleenex here. I'll need a cup of water with lemon and a straw—one of those bent kinds, not a straight one. Make sure you tell'em a bent straw. And put the TV remote on my lap. I might not can see it, but I listen to it.* Everything had to be at arm's length.

When we talked with her about the need for hospice care, the anguish of the decision appeared on her face as she contemplated the prospect of leaving her small space, where she knew every inch—the number of steps to the toilet, the contents of every drawer by heart, and recognized the knocks of the individuals who came and went on a daily basis. Then she got to the heart of the matter. *Can Jack come see me?* We reassured her that he could visit as often as they liked, every day if they wished.

Am I dying of cancer and you haven't told me? She didn't understand hospice had a permanent wing for long-term dying— as long as they were in the active stage—and it didn't take more than two years. My brother had skillfully talked about the health issues she was facing, without mentioning the financial burden of keeping her at home during hospice care. She had to come to the conclusion on her own or she would resist. *Do you think it is better for me to go there? The care will be better?* Unable to speak, we had bobbed our heads up and down, all of us full of emotion at this monumental decision. We held hands and recited the Lord's Prayer with her to give her some comfort.

While she issued commands, she dipped her index finger into the Carmex, sliding the slick mixture over her lips. She carefully put it back on the tray table, scanning the edge with her fingertips, mentally calculating the size. In ten minutes, she reached for the Carmex again, moving her hands across the table, searching. When she didn't find it, she patted around on the bed. She huffed in frustration. I reached over and gently moved it toward her fingers so she would find it.

I tried to reassure her, knowing her diminished vision only complicated an already stressful transition. *You'll get used to things in a few days, Mama*. *I'll put everything you need within easy reach.* My words were little comfort to her. Ritual is what soothed her, opening and closing the tub of Carmex and sliding her fingers across her lips.

In the 1960s, her comfort care was Vaseline and Stanback headache powders. She opened the little wax paper sleeve, tipped her head back, and let the white dust drop into her throat. She washed it down with water, opened the Vaseline, and smoothed the grease over her lips—in that order.

Her anxiety heightened as she dropped the tub and searched for the call bell tied to the bed rail. *Where's my buzzer? They're going to have to put that buzzer where I can reach it—in case I need somebody*. Once again, she patted the bed looking for the Carmex. I picked it up and put it on the table beside her. She sensed the movement. *Where did you put my Carmex? You know, I can't see it.* I moved her hand to touch the container. She jerked her hand back and pointed her finger

at me. *Make sure you tell them I can't see. I need everything a certain way.* She grabbed the yellow-capped tub and opened it one more time.

Taking Inventory

behind the armchair

one-half gallon bottle of red Gallo wine	almost empty, which means you had been indulging in a nightly glass of wine—or two. You drink a lot of red wine, claiming it's because of the macular degeneration. According to an internet search, regular consumption of red wine, in moderation, plays a protective role against age-related macular degeneration—something to do with resveratrol, an ingredient found in the skin of red grapes. *My doctor at Shands said for me to drink a glass of red wine every day.* So, it's the Gospel.
a bottle of Chardonnay	a spare—for when the red ran out

A Bad Habit She Thought Had Gone Unnoticed

My brother called her doctor, who happened to be a good friend, and discussed his concerns over her wine drinking. They concocted an approach they hoped would prevent her from embarrassment or feeling like a delinquent child.

Proposed plan: Once the doctor entered the exam room, my brother would fabricate the need to make an urgent phone call to his office, leaving her alone with the doctor. In the course of the appointment, the doctor would broach the subject of the drinking by asking a series of questions that included how often she drank. If she admitted her indulgence, he would proceed to advise her against it—doctor to patient.

Plan implemented: The visit went as expected. The doctor cautioned the drinking could be affecting her balance problem, bringing up the seriousness of her last couple of falls. She could have been tipsy when she fell. He cautioned her on the dangers of mixing alcohol with medications, particularly narcotics.

Result: She listened to his gentle reprimand and claimed to understand the consequences of her actions, but argued that she needed to drink red wine for the macular degeneration because a specialist at Shands Hospital told her to drink it. She continued to do as she pleased.

Conclusion: *What the hell? She's eighty-three. Let her have her red wine.*

Independent Walker

I find it ironic that in the months before she died, my mother yearned for her walker. She couldn't stand to part with it and begged the nurse manager at the hospice to let her keep it in her room so she could walk down the hall when she felt better. Her inability to admit her situation baffled me. The idea that she would go back to her apartment at Langdale Place and start her life over again, as if she would miraculously recover from kidney failure, was never far from her mind—nor her lips. That walker, the one she so despised in the beginning, the symbol of her dependence, turned into her mode of independence.

Long before she gave in, the shiny red walker gathered dust in the corner of her apartment. In an effort to encourage my mother to use one, my brother bought her a fancy walker with hand and foot breaks and a seat in the middle that also served as a compartment. He personally delivered it to her, enthusiastically carrying on about it and how it offered her stability, the risk of accidents would be less. To placate him, she tried it out a few times, then gently but firmly rejected it. *I'll use it when I need to, but not until then*. She parked the walker in the corner, where it stood as a constant reminder of the days ahead—an object of dependence. In many ways, I understood her resistance—her vanity—her strong-willed and independent nature—her nothing-is-going-to-take-me-down attitude. I understood it because I inherited those traits from her.

My mother's walker sat in my garage for the six months while she lingered in hospice care. I pushed it to the corner where I had stacked all her worldly possessions. At night when I returned from sitting with her all day, the headlights illuminated the walker like a spotlight on an actor in

a play. It sat alone, unmoving, unused—like my mother. They were kindred spirits, this walker and my mother.

Bumper-to-Bumper Bravado

I glanced over at the bruised and battered woman on the seat next to me. I could not remember an occasion when my mother looked so vulnerable, her powdered skin dull in the morning light, looking pallid and unnatural, the purple blotches covering the left side of her face, leaking into the hairline. She had insisted on make up before we left the house in an attempt to hide the bruises. She couldn't do it any other way. Her vanity is what got her into trouble in the first place—that and her strong will. I refrained from any reproach. She refused chastisement. *Don't get on to me. I feel bad enough*. She knew what she had done and didn't want to be scolded like a child.

The night before, I'd received a phone call from my brother, his voice direct and matter-of-fact. Our mother was in the emergency room. She had fallen at a restaurant in a nearby town. He had driven her there a few days before to spend the week with her best friend. She was going to be okay, but one of us needed to drive the 42 miles to get her and bring her home.

She and her friend had dined at a local restaurant and as they were walking from the parking lot, my mother's foot caught on an uneven crack of the sidewalk and she pitched face-forward onto the pavement. She lost consciousness briefly and received a gash to her head. The EMTs transported her to the hospital and the doctor kept her several hours for observation, running tests, and tending to her head wound. After talking with my mother, I had reluctantly agreed to wait until morning to make the drive.

Riding along to the rhythm of the windshield wipers, I observed her bruised hands, laced with broken skin. She rode the passenger seat like a chariot, the foliage passing by in a blur as the tires hissed on the blackened pavement. The swoosh of the cars passing in the rain penetrated the silence. A sad clown-like expression on her eighty-year-old face, my mother reached up and pulled on the shawl draped across her shoulders. She winced in pain. I caught a whiff of her perfume, Giorgio's Red, and glanced sideways at her. The smell of my mother was comforting. It meant she was still the same, even if only in body—but her spirit? She sent off smoke signals of brokenness. She drifted off, a sleep-like trance taking over her, uninterested in her surroundings—she couldn't see it even if she wanted to.

The x-rays did not show a fracture or concussion. No internal bleeding either. We were lucky. My mother received monthly coumadin injections, a blood thinner for a blood clot she had in her lungs. Any kind of fall or bodily injury could result in internal bleeding, possibly death. A simple cut could result in her bleeding out. She walked with a cane and needed constant assistance when outside of her familiar environment.

When we departed her friend's house, the walk out to the car was a difficult one, fraught with stiff legs and slow feet, a few steps at the time as the pain of moving her body sprinted through her muscles. *Where are you hurting?* I received stiff answers to my questions. Her pride hurt as much as her body. *Everywhere. All over my body*. She grimaced with every step, pushing the walker she despised and had banished to the corner of her living room. She was chained to it now, whether she wanted to be or not. We both knew today marked another phase in the loss of her independence.

Pondering the Relationship Between History and the Individual

I called my mother at a time she would be sleeping or near going to bed. I lived overseas, so my early morning calls were bedtime for her. We talked for a long time, and after a while, I realized she had been ready for bed when the phone rang. She had been sitting up on the side of the bed while we talked. I apologized for my lack of consideration. *Don't worry about that. I'm just glad you called. I'm tired though. I'm so sorry that I need to hang up*. I cannot remember if I called because I needed to talk to her about a specific matter, or if I was homesick. Probably the latter. When I was a teenager, I would have given anything for this kind of availability from my mother.

A Daughter's Nondisclosure Agreement

I vow to tell everyone about the summers your niece spent with us, and how you sewed summer outfits for her, and brought home clothes from the welfare office so she would have school clothes in the fall, and how you taught her girlie things and took up time with her, all the while removing her from a difficult home environment.

If ever questioned by the police, I will refuse to reveal the times you colluded with my best friend to allow her estranged father to call our house on a Saturday morning so he could talk to his daughter, and how you abhorred the idea that her inability to know her real father was contrived and enforced by her mother and stepfather.

If prospective gentlemen friends should ever ask me about you, I will not tell them about the time you got angry with the man who came to visit when you weren't home and started flirting with me, a teenager, and how you told him where to go, even though you didn't know I overheard you talking about it.

I pledge to remember, to anyone who will listen, the way you took your sister and her children in to your home, multiple times, in order for them to escape an alcoholic husband and father, how you offered to help her leave the situation, find jobs and housing, and provided for her, and her children, even when you were struggling financially yourself. I'll recount the sacrifices you made for others with no hesitation.

If you should ever become a celebrity, I promise not to write one of those tell all books like *Mommy Dearest* written by Joan Crawford‘s daughter, but I’ll quietly publish a biography, probably after you have died, and get off my chest all the things that have been bothering me for the last forty years.

Taking Inventory

in the corner beside your closet

walker	a red steel Rollator, with a padded seat and backrest, so if you became tired you could sit down. the seat, complete with a hinged lid, also doubled as a nifty basket for carrying your purse, a deck of cards on canasta days, mail, a hairbrush, and snacks. it included hand brakes for lock and release, designed to prevent the walker from rolling out from under you—if you remembered to lock it. this happened once in the cafeteria when you stumbled and it scooted away, dragging you along as you fiercely held on to the handle. the walker, an object of scorn in the beginning, became a life line in the end.
three-pronged cane	discarded when you graduated to the walker, languishing against the wall, kept around to remind you of the good old days when you were less dependent. An ugly object that failed as an accessory to your dapper appearance—an aluminum stalk with little rubber shoes that screamed medical device.

I'll Keep My Fingers & Toes Crossed for You

Your first toe curled over your big toe on the right foot. Hammer toes. This was a problem for several reasons.

1. You loved shoes. And buying shoes was already difficult enough without the pain wearing them caused you. Your feet were long and thin with a heel that looked like skin stretched over a chicken bone. Wearing a quad-A width shoe had been a lifelong challenge. When you found shoes you liked, you bought them in multiple colors.

2. You had to give away the shoes in your closet—after the podiatrist advised you to quit wearing closed toe shoes and wear orthopedic sandals. You detested the unstylish, clunky construction, but they were comfortable and provided relief from the pressure on your toes.

3. Surgery, which involved putting pins in your toes to straighten them, was the best solution to correct the problem. However, the risks were too high because of the blood thinner you took for the clot in your lung.

4. Toe removal was the only viable option and would most likely affect your balance and stability, which was already a hazard.

Did removing your toe mean that you could no longer make promises and not keep them?

It's a Shame, So Many Opportunities Squandered

As my mother got older, she became more difficult to be around. Her demeanor changed. She snapped more, complained about the food at the cafeteria, and bossed us around when we went to visit her. My brother went to eat lunch with her once a week. He told me tales of a frustrated son trying to do the best he could for his mother and the ungrateful person who had waltzed in and taken over her body.

Come up to my room with me. I have some mail I need you to read for me. She would shove off with her walker leaving him to follow along behind her like a duckling.

She would hand him the envelope and start telling him what the letter inside said. *Mama, if you already know what it says, then why do you need me to read it?*

I just do. Her chin would jut out as she sat back in her rattan recliner, her thumb running in a back and forth motion across the bamboo, an annoying habit she had developed in her old age.

She wanted his attention.

Something We Can All Count On

You had a prickly personality, hard-headed and bossy, but your lack of independence and the loss of your vision exacerbated those personality traits. Your demeanor changed. You snapped at people more, complained about the food in the cafeteria, and bossed me around when I visited you. As your frustration grew, my patience with you thinned. Our visits turned into argumentative banter, with me firing back: *Why do you have to speak so sharp*? *Do you have to make that doctor's appointment at that particular time? Can't you go when it's more convenient for me?*

My brother advised me to stop arguing with you. *You don't have to respond to everything she says*. He was a better person than me. I could not stop firing back at you when you put your self-absorption on display. Maybe I resisted because I was older, and felt I could stand up to you, or maybe it was because I felt empowered since you were old and frail. For whichever reason, and maybe it was both, the overwhelming need to prove myself with you took over. The simplest things turned into a fight that I wanted to win.

For instance, when we arrived at Langdale Place, I instructed you to remain in the car until I came around with the walker. When I slammed the trunk lid, I found you pulling yourself up by the door handle into an upright position. When I wasn't fast enough to prevent it, you tried to take a step on legs so weak that you weaved back and forth. I scolded you when you defied sensibility in order to prove your independence. *I'm just standing up. I can stand up if I want to. I'm not going anywhere. I wish you would just leave me alone. I can get out of the car if I want to.* Your indomitable vanity exited the car with you. You jerked the walker away from me and

motored on through the automatic doors, leaving me standing in the driveway, your purse dangling from my hand.

Taking Inventory

nightstand beside your bed

talking clock	that announced the time on the hour. in the beginning, you liked hearing the time frequently. after a while, it became annoying. I wish that thing would shut up. You pressed it each morning to see what time you woke up. the time is 8:00 a.m**.**

on the bookshelves

framed photographs	each shelf designated to one of your children and their children—some grandchildren you barely knew. never was much for making the effort to stay involved in their lives. if their parents initiated it, or asked you to stay with them, you did it. but you were not one to call up and ask to spend time with them, or to call to chat because you wanted to know who they were. you reserved a shelf for your niece and her children—she was like a daughter to you—in a way.

Road Map

Her stomach looked like a road map—twisted with railroad track scar tissue—raised red and spider-like—battle scars from the six surgeries that required incisions on the soft flesh around her waist. Over the years, her body bore the brunt of her stress and struggles. It did not matter how much armor she wore, she was never fully protected on the inside.

Like Mother, Like Daughter

Years after my father's death I finally mustered the courage to ask my mother the question I'd longed to know. *Do you think Daddy ever ran around on you?* Knowing the talk that went around our small town, it was so obvious to me that he had. After having spent many years in a marriage plagued with infidelity and eventually divorcing, I knew from my own experience that a woman often knows. It's a feeling more than anything—well before the evidence or a confession—woman's intuition some would say. How a woman handles it depends on whether she pays attention to it, ignores it, or lies to herself about its existence—and I've done all three—and that affects how long the marriage lasts under the circumstances.

Essentially, I was digging for answers to my own dilemma without revealing the truth of my marriage to her. I went to great lengths to cover up my marital problems. Despite being a confessor, I took after my mother in this regard and remained silent on the matter. Frankly, I was embarrassed by it and saw it as a failure. If I didn't say it out loud, then maybe there was a chance it wasn't true. And if I didn't confront it, then maybe I could preserve the marriage for the sake of my children. *And maybe,* it was a way to bury the pain, to cover the rusted parts of me and start forming the patina that only comes from age and brokenness.

No . . . no, I don't . . . I'm certain of it. She spoke with such conviction, I believed that she didn't know. I could have confessed what I knew to be the truth, but I chose not to on the chance that she truly believed her response. Why inflict unnecessary pain on her? Like iron, she looks sturdy on the surface, but is weaker than she seems, susceptible to corrosion from outside elements. What good would come from exposing him?

Most likely, she didn't. By not admitting it—by acting ignorant—she could keep his image intact, and protect me from whatever pain she imagined might accompany that knowledge. She also didn't ask me why I would ask such a question, and the pauses in her denial revealed a hesitation—like there was something more. Nondisclosure of painful information, factual or not, defined our relationship. Keeping unpleasant and hurtful memories to herself allowed her to maintain the emotional distance to which I was familiar—a pattern of behavior I carried into my own relationships.

Mother Map

After Jamaica Kincaid

think before you speak; don't brag in front of others who are less fortunate; things are not always as they seem; people are often carrying burdens you know nothing about; the grass is *not* greener on the other side; don't wear white before Easter and after September; treat others like you want to be treated; I have more white clients on welfare, than black; don't eat in front of someone without offering them some too; don't expect others to have the same standards as you do—and don't judge them for it when they don't; practice if you want to be good at something; here's how to crotchet a potholder; don't be sloppy, keep your stitches straight and even; it's not ladylike to use foul language; don't slouch in church—sit up and pay attention to the preacher—you might learn something; try to do your part; showing cleavage sends off the wrong signals; here's how to make good gravy; let the boys do the calling; keep your thoughts to yourself, everyone doesn't have to know what you are thinking; make Divinity on a cool day—best if it's not raining; when you come home from a date, don't hang out in the driveway, it looks bad; this is how to sew on a button; don't put anything in writing you don't want others to know; you'll singe your hair if you stand too close to the heater; fried food is what makes your face break out; you shouldn't take the Lord's name in vain; your pants are too tight—it gets the wrong kind of attention; you have to follow the rules, even when you don't like it; wear pantyhose with a dress; if you lie to me, I will eventually find out; don't smack—or chew with your mouth full; if someone hits you, hit them back; a boy should pick you up for a date and come inside to meet your parents; a man holds the door for a lady and allows her to enter first; befriend the one no one wants to be friends with; don't smoke—it's a bad habit that's hard to break; I won't keep

that a secret from your daddy; sit like a lady—cross your legs when you sit down or keep your knees together; this is how to set the dinner table; you can be friends with the black children at school, but you can't have them over to the house to play; the man always pays the bill; wear clean underwear—you never know when you might be in an accident; don't talk back to your elders; when you fail the first time, keep trying; this is how to hem a dress; it's a man's world; don't fill your mouth so full; you talk too much.

sgraf·fi·to

/zgräˈfētō/

A technique where the top layer is scratched off to reveal the layer underneath. It tends to work best when light paint covers dark areas, like burnt umber or a mix of burnt sienna or Plato blues to establish shadows.

A revitalization project, really, kind of like the kintsugi technique of reattaching broken pieces to an object, one that involves gold dust and resin or lacquer in order to put it back together; Jack sees only the gold dust that fills the cracks and crevices of my past—making them invisible to the naked eye—only a beautiful, new surface, one to hide the fracture—we rarely view our lives as a rare work of art, but there it is, a tapestry of sorts, hanging along an extensive hall, for all eyes to see, except for the slight imperfections that are so deftly covered, those misalignments, those inevitable fractures that need mending at the stress points, and that is how I found myself, in that situation, antiquated, worn in places, the places where the fingers of life had rubbed the enamel thin, and made it weak, unstable to hold, but Jack didn't see me that way, he only saw the specks of gold on the surface, which is exactly what I wanted him to see, not that I was trying to fool him, but only that I had put away whole sections of my existence, preventing the unearthing of narratives—my family narratives—the ones I no longer wished to acknowledge, blurring the imagery of my own life, making impressionistic strokes of my life more beautiful to the patron of my portraiture, and I think he realized there was nothing sugar-coated with me or I wasn't wrapped up in a pink heart-shaped bow, but I was equal parts of survival and ignorance, the same as him, and that there was no freedom in comparing the past and the present, but more of a self-interrogating artistry, and we were upending perspectives, by falling in love again in our

eighties, dancing a second waltz, feeling like we were open for curbside pickup, and not caring really, what anyone had to say about it, so, there's a lot to consider when discovering a new love—at any age, it's like throwing open the windows and doors and letting the house breathe again, the wind cartwheeling past our comfort zone, but inviting the entire palette of human emotion into our lives once again, could life be reverse-engineered, aren't we free to change costumes whenever the old one gets dirty or rent; then, why did I feel the need to issue an *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, when he gave me a ring, ask for my children's approval, when I knew accepting his proposal was the right thing to do, the only thing under the circumstances, another chance to feel alive again after lying dormant for twenty-two years, something I know my children found strange since I had sought the company of others during the time their daddy and I lived apart, so full of need to be adored, to feel beautiful, and now I had the chance again, before I die, a decision I had already made before I called them, a decision I made without them really, wanting to involve them, but not asking permission, because they were not curators of my collection, I needed to paint the ripple outward, to cover the burnt umber underpainting that established the shadows and values of me and fill it with light hues, wisps of happiness, new directional strokes of companionship with Jack, not bold lines of ardor, put soft brushstrokes of days with him reading to me, afternoons of solitude where we scraped a little of the layer off, using our palette knife, so that we could see the nice effect this gave us, neither of us needing to assay the influence of succeeding artists in our historical past; understanding our historical research within a broad perspective, what ease of workmanship, what freedom we possessed, to create something anew, no pressure to complete the preliminary drawings, realizing we only needed to scratch the surface to expose the underpainting, to make the impressions we wanted to make, not rewind the tape, but building on the surviving traces of pigment beneath, what

survived was concealed in the recesses, in reverently unvarnished detail, a shimmering Egyptian blue.

II. REEXAMINE EVERYTHING YOU'VE BEEN TOLD

You that have heard the heartbeat of the night / you that have heard, in the long, sleepless hours / a closing door / the rumble of distant wheels / a vague echo, a wandering sound from somewhere . . .

~Ruben Dario, "Nocturne"

Late Night Ap·o·lo·gi·a

What is it about the night that makes us walk into a confessional and cross our chests as if we will be protected from the darkness? "Father forgive me for I have sinned," What sins would those be? This is not a confession, but a late-night apologia— a nocturne of sorts. Not a timbre of regret will be uttered aloud, but whispered softly in a night prayer inside the recesses of my mind.

These hours before dawn—when sleep eludes me, a time when I let go of everything associated with the day, my mind loosened for contemplation so the darkest recessions can filter through the cracks— I examine my daily thoughts to see what they really mean.

first movement, pensive, dreamy mood, twilight, the blue hour

The burden of not being what I *might have been* haunted me and drove me to engage in selfish behavior. Frankly, I was tired of the burden of provision, both emotional and economical, but felt compelled to continue until my obligations came to an end. I suppose I must say in my defense that my reasons were not based wholly on requirement, and that I did indeed have some maternal instincts based on love for my child and the desire to nurture. But those qualities were waning and waxing, leaving me exhausted, and ready to resign from the post, pushing my fledgling from the nest too early, making her take on more responsibility than a teenager should.

second movement, in the absence of direct light, the witching hour

The truth of the matter is that I felt suppressed all those years, influenced heavily by my mother's religious views, her preacher papa directing traffic from her shoulder, and even more by the fact that she resided in my house and cast her shadow upon my floor. Embossed with this dull casing, I failed to break free—until I left the situation that kept me so encased. My own adolescent years, marred by a world war, a drunken father, and economic depressions, led me into a path I didn't foresee, nor wanted for myself. I had sacrificed. I felt it was time I enjoyed my life more.

After I leaving my marriage, I came under different influences. My friend Myrtle encouraged me to go out to clubs and meet men. She had been kind to me during a difficult time, so I felt obliged to go along with her—no I wanted to— especially after my best friend Vesta died in the house fire along with her husband, who was also my preacher. I couldn't bring myself to go back to that church, it was just not the same without them. These two occurrences led me to pursue a lifestyle vastly different, and with my mother living elsewhere because she couldn't bear the "comings and goings," I felt free to engage in my own pursuits, such as dancing, drinking, and dating. I deserved to live a little if I so desired. After all, I spent almost 28 years being a dutiful daughter, wife, provider, and mother.

third movement, a veil of light, nautical twilight

I am aware that my family found the change in my behavior shocking, and certainly judged me for my indulgences, and while I do regret, to some degree, my daughter finding me in a drunken

state, babbling on the phone with a man I met at a bar, I believe she handled it well and was mostly not affected by it in a negative way. Even though she was young in age, she possessed a maturity about it, refraining from any criticism, nor expressing any protest. I should mention though, there was a motive behind my actions. The stresses and the strains of carrying the load alone had deeply affected me and I simply wanted to be adored again.

fourth movement, twilight before sunrise, the magic hour

How can one know herself so thoroughly at the midpoint of her life, and know the subtle influences that molded her over the course of so many years, or all the thoughts and deeds that drove her to a particular moment? How am I supposed to remember my state of mind during such trying times? Only aging develops wisdom of that nature—only after looking in the rearview mirror would I manage to draw accurate conclusions and address the consequences. I shouldn't be held accountable for these decisions. I was driven to them by circumstances.

It Left Me in a Bit of a Free Fall [A Caesura Monologue]

I looked at you for a moment, a kind of caesura, one of those long pauses where time stopped, and the air became so thick I could cut it with a knife. I moved to the edge of my seat and calmly placed my hands in my lap. My teeth clenched. My lips pulled tight. I wanted to scream and run away from you. I told you that my husband had moved out of the house—no, let me correct that—I told him to move out of the house—a few days before. I told you he had been committing adultery for the last ten years of our marriage—my eighteen-year marriage had ended. Your first reaction? I mean—your very first reaction was not empathy for your daughter. No, you were most concerned about why I had not told you about our problems beforehand and how that made you feel. The conversation became about you. At a time, when my world was falling apart, that I was experiencing the worst emotional pain of my life, you chose to focus on your own feelings—of being left out of the loop. Yes, I realized later—after much self-reflection and hours of therapy—I should have leaned on my family and told you more about what had been happening over the years—how I had been coping with the pain of my husband's infidelity.

But that's not my style. That's your style—what I learned from you. Chin up. Keep your pain to yourself. But that day, your self-involvement caught me off guard. *I just told you that I am divorcing my husband and all you want to talk about is how you feel because you didn't* know *about it earlier?* That wasn't the way to help me.

Did you have any idea what I was going through? Of course, you did. You left my daddy after twenty-eight years of marriage. If you had only stopped to contemplate the situation, you would have realized what you needed to do in that moment. I needed you to tell me it was going to be

okay. I needed your arms wrapped around me. I needed to cry on your shoulder. My world had fallen apart, and I needed to know I was going to survive.

Instead, exasperated with your reaction, I walked out. I longed for your reassurance, your guidance, but at the same time, I beat myself up for even thinking you would respond otherwise. My expectations had been too high.

I eventually received those things from you, but not without pointing out to you that I needed them and that you hadn't provided them. Why couldn't you be there for me like I needed you to be? Like I would be for you. Now you know what's bothering me.

Perspective on a Fading Romance

Love changes over time. It starts out one way and develops into something else. Something stronger than you imagined it could be. My mother told me this once when we were discussing the nature of marital relationships, and even a little bit, sort of incognito, the nature of her own.

She didn't mention the stigma of divorce. Or that women didn't have alternatives. Or that people stay in marriages for the children. She left out the harsh realities she endured. And I was too dumb to realize it. I believed her.

My children were young, my body tired from work and motherhood, and the emotional strain of trying to have it all—the pressure, but also the privileges, the women's movement introduced in the seventies and eighties. I wanted to stay at home with my kids, but my husband needed me to work. The stigma of leaving children with a sitter had not yet evaporated so my insides were twisted in knots. We needed the health insurance and the income while he went back to school and operated the family farm.

She knew all about that—the husband needing her income. That need to provide financial stability for the family. She knew about the knots in the stomach too. She had so much anxiety a hole burned through her stomach.

When you meet and marry, you experience young love. The kind where you are besotted with your partner—a romantic love. You are more affectionate, want to be together all the time.

In her way, she was offering me advice without outing her own personal experiences. She never made this conversation about her own marital trials, most of which she kept carefully hidden from her children.

As you grow older, have children and go through the routine of life, it becomes about commitment and going through difficulties—together. Building a life together. It's a stronger kind of love.

I'll Take It

I came to the point of realizing my mother was not who I thought she was. She was something other than what I had made her out to be—an image I created in my own mind, the mother I wanted her to be. But she couldn't be my ideal of a mother. She was flawed when I got her.

I felt like my mother failed in her responsibility as a mother during my teenage years, which I thought should come before how she felt as a person. I felt forgotten, but at the same time I knew my mother loved me. But she needed something more than me, and I found that difficult to accept.

Broken down to the basics, motherhood is simply about feeding, clothing, educating, and nurturing a child after it comes into the world. It'll die if you do not take care of it. And my mother did all of that, never shirking her duty as a parent, but she lacked enthusiasm. I heard somewhere some children are 10-gallon child, requiring filling on a regular basis, but they may be paired with a pint mother, one who'll never be able to give ten gallons. That's how I felt about my mother. She was a pint person. At times, it felt like the bare minimum, but it was all she could give.

My mother was a human being—*not only my mother*—a woman who had hopes and dreams and fears and realities that she could not change. It was unfair to hold her hostage to my idea of motherhood, so I had to accept what happened and how she chose to mother me. Accepting the imperfections enabled me to let go of the past—to give up an illusion that my past could be any different if she had only mothered me better. It brought me to a place where I could love her

humanity and nurture her in the twilight years of her life with an open heart. I didn't exonerate her, but I pardoned her. And that was a gift I gave to myself.

Taking Inventory

on the end table beside your white wicker chair

television remote control	the channel numbers committed to memory, you punched the keys to your favorite shows: Perry Mason, Matlock, The Golden Girls, and The Andy Griffith Show, listening, rather than watching, these old, familiar shows were easy to follow because the characters were imprinted on your mind**.**

on the white wicker dresser

54” Samsung television	given to you by Jack as a birthday present—he thought a larger TV would help you see the screen better. *he doesn’t understand. it’s a nice gesture and all, but he doesn’t realize the size of the screen doesn’t make any difference.*

Mourning the Loss of What Could Have Been

Read

An avid reader of mysteries, romances, and biographies. She was never without a book beside the end table next to her recliner or her bed—and one always accompanied her to the bathroom when she had to sit for a while. She understood when I was so absorbed in a book that I didn't hear the call to dinner or when I spent the whole afternoon in the swing with a book in my hands. I spent many summer afternoons at the library next to her office. She would take me back to work with her and send me next door. I joined the summer reading club and checked out stacks of books that I finished in only a day or two. She understood inhabiting another world through words and encouraged my reading. Like mother, like daughter—we both loved literature.

When my children were little and she was retired, she sometimes stayed with them while I worked, and they were out of school. On one such occasion, she picked up a copy of John Grisham's *The Firm* off of my coffee table. When I returned home that evening, I found her stretched out on my sofa finishing the last pages of the novel. *She's been like that all day. Pretty much ignored us.*

In the seventies, she read Jacqueline Susann and Sidney Sheldon. I remember sneaking to read excerpts of *The Valley of the Dolls* when she wasn't around to stop me. She read James Michener's *Hawaii*, and Mario Puzo's *The Godfather*. While she loved to read historical romance novels, her favorites were Phyllis Whitney, Mary Stewart, Victoria Holt, and Mary Higgins Clark's mysteries, reading all their books. She passed these along to me when she finished.

Sew

Seated at a cabinet shoved into the corner of a room, usually a bedroom or maybe the dining room, I watched my mother cut and stitch, trim and press pieces of raw fabric together. She carefully measured seams against the guides carved into the thick metal of the fabric plate. I often sat nearby and watched her work. Words like “selvage,” “interface,” and “darts” were her second language. She basted pleats and zippers into dresses and skirts. She used terms like “cut on the bias” and “winding the bobbin” as she progressed from one stage to the next. She read patterns, teaching me how to find the long grain on the stamped tissue paper and place the edge on the fold of the fabric. She ran her hands across the pieces to smooth them out and secured them with straight pins I pulled from a pincushion and handed to her. She often clinched a wad of pins in her mouth as she worked and draped the measuring tape around her neck to keep it handy. Particular with her seams, she trimmed off the bulk, clipped and notched the curves of the seams. She was adamant about reinforcing corners with back stitching. She pushed them out with a sharp tool that looked like a chopstick before moving on to the next step. *No cutting corners.* Conscientious about her work, she ironed her seams flat, *before and after* she turned them. She top-stitched them with a single line, giving the garment a finished, professional look. I’m not exactly sure why, but she preferred Coats and Clark thread over Dual Duty. She studied the layout sheet in the pattern instructions. And sometimes she ironed the pattern to smooth out the creases before she began cutting. She had a firm rule about using 5/8” seams. She was methodical about her tasks. Snipped threads and discarded scraps of fabric littered the floor as she sewed into the night after work.

Crotchet

My mother could do anything with her hands. She went through fads, doing whatever was popular at the time. She crocheted colorful "Granny Square" afghans while watching TV at night. She created pink and blue baby blankets and booties for expectant mothers. She taught me to chain stitch so I could make potholders. I later graduated to the half-double crotchet and the triple crochet and made lopsided granny squares. I never managed to count my stitches correct so my afghans were uneven. My mother enjoyed the repetition of stitching and the methodical process of the craft.

Paint

In her retirement, she took up painting, something I learned she had longed to do for most of her

life. It's funny how I didn't know that—until I did. She gave away her work to friends and family, her work never as good as she imagined. My siblings and I used to joke about how much she admired her own work, not prone to humbleness. Like with anything else, she worked at it and improved with time. I have a still life she painted of a ginger jar she loved. I felt sorry for her when she quit taking lessons and gave away her tackle box of paints and brushes.

Drive

The loss of her independence was the hardest. She picked up my daughter from school on Thursday afternoons and took her to dance. They always made a McDonalds run before class started. It was their time each week. *Mema scared me today. She almost hit someone.* It took

some time for my mother to decide to give up driving after I expressed my concern and posed the idea of her giving it up. I knew she struggled with her eyesight, but she had done a good job of compensating, so I hadn't realized the extent of her vision loss. She readily admitted that she was missing things—like not seeing the stop sign until she was right on it or even running it. *Give me a few months to think about it.*

Cook

She eventually stopped cooking when she moved to the retirement home. She gave away her set of Pfaltzgraff dishes and her good cookware. *I don't want to cook in the apartment. I'll eat in the dining room.* She bought a meal plan. She never seemed to miss it, but I missed her chicken n' rice and spaghetti. Most of all, I missed going home and the comfort of eating my mama's cooking.

Self-Satisfied Silence

I waited in the cardiovascular surgeon's exam room with my mother for a follow up appointment after surgery to put stints in both carotid arteries. A few months before she had complained of dizziness, *something like a fog*, which turned out to be a lack of oxygen to the brain. The carotid arteries in her neck had filled with plaque, restricting the blood flow. At high risk of a stroke or an aneurysm, surgery had been her only option. I had read an article about vascular disease and the effects of smoking a few minutes before while sitting the waiting room. Curious, I queried her doctor. *Is this blockage a result of her smoking for so many years?*

I felt the need to point this out to my mother, in an indirect way, that her years of smoking had finally caught up with her. She quit smoking in the 1980's at 56 years old, some 45 years after she began. My two-year-old son repeatedly suffered from bronchial infections after spending a weekend at her house where she and my aunt and uncle spent hours inside chain smoking, windows and doors shut tight. After some resistance, she made a concerted effort to quit and succeeded with the help of the nicotine patch—although she claimed she never stopped wanting a cigarette.

As the doctor responded to my question, I noticed my mother's lips draw into a straight line, a sign of her annoyance with my meddling. *Definitely. Smoking directly contributes to carotid artery disease by damaging the smooth inner lining of arteries—all over the body.* I sat in self-satisfied silence while the doctor finished the exam.

Mother Map
[Things My Mother Never Said]

After Jamaica Kincaid

I remember too much about my father; slurred words and alcohol breath; your sister was embarrassed by us; I'm jealous of my sister's red hair, but not of her hundreds of freckles; this is how to love a man; your brother dislikes you because you took his place; I regret my mistakes; your daddy's sudden death left me lonely, but I didn't miss him; I missed the idea of having another person to come home to every day; the pain of my mother's death overwhelmed me; I regret not living up to my own promises; I had no backbone when it came to my own mother; even though I say I'm not afraid to die, I really am.

Taking Inventory

beside the white wicker recliner

white wicker garbage can	full of junk mail, candy wrappers, wads of used Kleenex, used dental picks, and used floss picks. there was as much trash on the floor as in the bin because you missed it and couldn't see the litter scattered on the floor.
white wicker magazine rack	AARP magazine and a couple of neatly folded newspapers—that would be Jack, after he read you the newspaper every day at 6:00 p.m. you became cross with me once when I tried to read it to you because I didn't read it in the same order as Jack. he started with the obituaries, then went to the headlines, then on to the sports page and comics, describing each cartoon in detail before he read the caption. you especially liked "on this day in history" which spurred long conversations between the two of you about the good old days.

Inheritance

Offkey

Thankfully, I didn't inherit my mother's singing voice—a flat alto which was always off pitch. I sat beside my grandmother in church and listened to her sing the same flat notes. My parents were fascinated with my natural ability to sing, since no one on either side could carry a tune.

Firm, Straight Baseline

I didn't inherit her handwriting. She penned her name with a light stroke, the small, perfectly aligned letters flowing straight up and down with precision. Handwriting analysis experts say a writer with a firm, straight, even baseline keeps her emotions in check, which is not a surprise. The small size is indicative of an introvert and her slow, methodical hand meant she was a cautious thinker. On the other hand, my handwriting is right-slanted of medium height and mixed with long lower loops and short upper-zone extensions, which means the writer is down-to-earth and practical but also has a strong will. That's not a surprise either.

Lost Ruby

My mother liked jewelry and collected a few nice pieces over the years, some of which I inherited. I wear the opal ring and necklace she left me when I want to dress up. And the diamond dinner ring Jack gave her brings me comfort on days of uncertainty. At times when I would ask for motherly advice, I wear it to feel close to her, and hope to channel some of her wisdom. I have some of her costume jewelry as well, but now it is so mixed up with mine that I cannot tell which pieces were hers. In her will, she bequeathed me an emerald-cut ruby ring that my father wore, which she wore for 30 years after he died. She gave it to me several years before

her death because she knew my father had promised it to me. It was stolen—or I lost it. I went to put on the ring and it wasn't there. It was only material connection with my father that I had left—I searched for it for years.

Portrait of a Disaster in Progress

My father died unexpectedly in 1983 at sixty-years-old. His death took us all by surprise. We had barely wrapped our heads around the fact that he had a terminal illness before he was gone. Widowed at fifty-three, my mother was stunned. She couldn't wait to clear out my father's things and close the door to the bedroom where he slept while he was sick. His little poodle, Jo-Jo, wandered the house looking for him, whining and scratching at the bedroom door. *My mother did then exactly what I did when she died.* She faced it stoically, pushing down the raw emotion and carrying on as if all was well. Three years later, almost to the day, my maternal grandmother died. One never knows what fears reside within our minds or what doubts have taken root. And they come out despite our best efforts to push them down.

In my mother's case, as it had always been, her reaction was a physical one manifested over time. Finally forced to succumb to the trauma of loss, she developed a familial tremor, which led to the panic attacks, which led to her not wanting to go out. She found herself crying at inappropriate times and drowning in depression. She managed to function, but barely.

She didn't tell me—or anyone in the family—about any of this until after she had been in therapy for six months. *People can keep emotion bottled up only so long. Eventually, the cork pops.* Had I known this, I would have visited more, offered my support. Instead, I carried on with my own life working and raising children oblivious to her suffering. The guilt crawled up my spine and stayed a while. *If I had only loved her enough, paid more attention*. How could I miss the fact my mother had faced so much loss in her life?

Pruning

On two occasions, my mother had calcification clusters removed from her breast after needle biopsy results raised suspicions. After the last surgery, her physician requested to speak with me. Even though it was not a cancerous lump and the pathologists believed the cluster was benign, he stressed the seriousness of the surgery. He cautioned me that breast cancer is hereditary. He explained that calcifications were typically benign, but that certain calcifications—like my mother's—known as tight clusters with irregular shapes and patterns, could indicate precancerous changes. *It's the easiest cancer to cure—you just remove the breast.* He recommended annual mammograms, starting immediately. I was 34 years old. I could prevent pruning my body like a tree.

What Do You Say?

He was dying, he would soon be dead—in less than three months to be exact. We just didn't know it at the time. Dr. Jimmy admitted my father to the hospital for some tests, his white cell blood count extremely high. He referred my father to Emory University in Atlanta where he later received a diagnosis—myelofibrosis of the bone marrow, a malignant blood disease. I stood at the end of the hospital bed listening to my Uncle Henry's nervous laugh and not-funny comments. He had a way of making light of a serious situation, which annoyed my mother. I supposed my mother had called him to let him know about my father's condition and he had scurried over from Bainbridge on this Sunday afternoon in June.

The light from the window illuminated my mother's face in the dim room and spilled dapples of light across the white bed linens. She wore an uncomfortable grimace, devoid of a smile, her lips a thin line stretched across her teeth. When I motioned to leave, she rose from her position and stood at the side of the hospital bed near my father's head, the empty chair kissing the back of her knees. My dad laughed at something his brother said, that deep, bellowing laugh that rings in my ears today. His eyes landed on me as I signaled my exit. I think I patted his foot, his untrimmed toenail pricking the white sheet.

I leaned over the bed rail and kissed my daddy's cheek. *I love you*. I turned away not expecting a response. I'd never heard him say it. I only saw it in his eyes—like I did moments before when he looked at me. It had always been enough.

What do you say? My mother's voice low—almost a whisper—demanding. A small silence enveloped the room as I turned back to look at him. He tilted his chin towards her. His eyes rolled to my mother and then back to me. She reached out and touched his shoulder, signaling him to respond. She watched him. I watched her watching him. I counted the seconds—one, two, three, four, five.

I love you, too. Not in the quiet, shy manner which one would expect. Not in the reluctant whisper of a man who didn't express his sentiments easily. The baritone of his words held a warmth in them. Something close to emotion dangled in the space between us.

My mother patted his arm and gently caressed it. The corners of her mouth inched upward in satisfaction.

Taking Inventory

in the chest of drawers

napkins, paper plates, straws and

Styrofoam cup

after moving to the assisted living wing, you no longer had a kitchen—keeping fruit and snacks handy in your apartment. you made lemon water every morning. no one had better touch your cup of water. thinking it was old, I threw one out once. you gave me a tongue-lashing. *leave my water alone. when I'm through with it, I'll throw it out.* after that, it could grow mold for all I cared.

Who Doubts Its Authenticity?

A few years after they officially divorced, my parents reunited. They didn't marry again, but resumed their relationship as husband and wife without the ceremony. I could try to go into the reasons my parents took so long to get divorced, but I suspect I would fall into a category of trying to explain the unexplainable. It took my mother three years to file for divorce and then she did it when my father had left Georgia. It would take even more explaining to understand why they got back together. They never really stopped being together, except while my father was away. When he returned, they picked back up and started over. I believe they truly loved each other. They both tried on other people and didn't find the satisfaction they sought in a relationship. So, they went back to what was comfortable.

There's one other thing that drew them back to one another. They were fiercely loyal individuals. After my father almost died from health issues while in Illinois, she was empathetic to his situation. I now understand my parent's motivations better and their refusal to give up on their marriage. Although I do not believe their relationship was ever the same, they enjoyed their last years together. They had their memories, their children, and grandchildren—they had their history. They remained loyal to that. Sometimes I think they were just tired. Tired of struggling to live alone on independent incomes, tired of chasing one another, and tired of the emotional baggage that comes with divorce.

A Daughter's Nondisclosure Agreement

I promise never to say anything bad about you to others, however, I can't promise not to roll my eyes, or click my tongue, talk behind your back, or take advantage of the fact that you cannot see me anymore and make faces to others or silently mouth my sentiments.

I swear not to reveal details about your finances, except for the time I paid a two-year-old bill from Folsom's Children Shop where you bought me a shirt for my twelfth birthday and charged it on your account, the $22 invoice I opened each month with the words PLEASE written in Mrs. Folsom's handwriting, and in the later ones, underlined twice, and how I grew tired of the please and paid for my own present from the money I earned working at a clothing store downtown.

Nor will I mention the $400 charge account at Jarmon's that went unpaid for months because we couldn't afford groceries, and how we resorted to buying only eggs, bacon, and bread to keep from running up the bill further, but we bought a $6.00 carton of Belair cigarettes each week so you could continue your pack-a-day habit.

Only under duress will I divulge the fact that you promised your son when he went off to college that you would make his car payments for him while he went to school, and that you only made one of the payments.

But I will tell your grandchildren how you bought special formula for me at the drugstore each week not knowing where the money was going to come from. The $25 a week would be the equivalent of $75 or $100 a week now.

Footprints in the Ash

During the winter of 1977 the flu spread through my high school and I fell ill. I remained confined to my bed in the back of our trailer, my Dachshund Nosy sleeping at my side. I didn't bathe or dress. I barely lifted my head to drink the glass of water my mother placed by my bed. I sat up only long enough to eat a bowl of chicken noodle soup at her encouragement.

I awoke from the stupor of illness in a grungy flannel nightgown, twisted sheets wreaking of sweat from fever, and a greasy head of hair. My throat felt like sandpaper. I wanted a cigarette. I walked to the bar in the living room and picked up a pack of Marlboros, tapped one out, and placed it between my lips while searching for my lighter. My mother was stretched out on the sofa watching television.

I wouldn't do that if I were you. I continued to look around for the lighter, spying it on the table next to an ashtray. Reaching for it, I gave her a questioning look. *You've gone all week without a cigarette because it hurt your throat to smoke.* I paused and withdrew my hand from the lighter.

You'd be crazy to pick one up again. I seriously thought about her words and knew she was right. I lowered the cigarette, slid it back into the package, and walked down the hall to take a shower.

Blind Spots

Blind spots lurked in the corners of your life: when you wrote down information during intake interviews and the words drifted over the center line; when reading books—or reading anything—you lifted the pages to your chest, tilting your head right and left, your hands acting as a magnifying glass; driving a car, hazardous without a sense of space and time; loss of depth perception hid curbs and steps.

I saw the way your empty fork moved, lifted from the rice mound to your mouth, not seeing the fallen food; not missing a beat when your lips trickled over the tines and there was no cud to chew; you nonchalantly returned the fork to the rice for another bite, as if it was a common occurrence to lose food.

Such a small thing, I thought as I watched you struggle, feeling your way through an ordinary moment, and so mundane, the routine of refueling—except when cataracts cloud the landscape. Even though I sat a foot to your right, you were unaware of my gaze, of me watching you try to keep the silverware in your line of sight. It was symbolic of how you related to adversity. Act normal. Don't mention it. Don't acknowledge weakness.

You didn't know it, but Daddy told me how you cried in the car, all those years ago, after the doctor told you there was nothing more he could do for your vision, and how surgery was the only option, or go blind.

You had other types of blind spots, too. Not seeing your daughter's seams unraveling—how my tectonic plate had shifted, and I was left with brief imaginary glints of our previous life. The curves of our land mass didn't fit neatly together as they once did. But then, maybe it never did, and the rocks slowly ground underneath the surface all along, out of range of vision.

I had blind spots of my own. I deliberately avoided looking at the corners of the room. I skirted the loneliness and moved around the feelings of abandonment. I shielded myself from the truth like I did when I blocked my eyes from the bright sun, deflecting the glare with my hand. I didn't want to see the pain behind the veil, that filter you placed between us to protect your child from the blight beyond.

There are always rooms we'll be standing in, not seeing what we should.

Taking Inventory

in the closet

terry cloth house slippers	the ones with the adjustable Velcro strap and memory foam footbed. I tried to wear them around my house, but they were way too big for me, sliding off my feet when I walked. I put them in a drawer in my guest room so if company to arrives without slippers, they can wear yours.
afghan	crocheted to coordinate with the blues and greens in your house found a place on the end of my bed. I don't use it—although I would like to—because the stitches are oversized and my toes poke through.
clothes	organized by color. I also marked the insides with large labels as to color, and as an added measure, I put tags on the hangers— "B" for beige, "W" for white, "N" for navy, "BK" for black. Dark and light colors were difficult to distinguish.

for the skeletal baby at the morgue

For the one not saved. For the one starved. For the foster girl brought home to clothe and feed. For the unloved. For the gun blast. For the three children in the backseat. For the terror. For the days in the hotel. For the waiting. For the cartoons on television. For the intake forms. For the hunger. For the food stamps. For all of the foster children. For the abandoned. For the women. For the children of alcoholics. For the alcoholics. For the abused. For silence. For the silenc*ed*. For the weekend phone calls. For incest. For child molestation. For home visits. For empty cupboards. For bare feet. For lice. For cold winters. For the clothes closet. For the fear. For tears shed on a couch. For the inability to provide. For the disabled wo*man* who cannot support his family. For that day a wo*man* asks for help. For that day a child begs with their eyes. For that day a family can turn the heat back on. For that day the family can eat. For that day a parent can go back to work. For making a difference.

The Scar Tissue in Her Life

I came home from school one afternoon and found my mother curled up on our sofa in tears. Instantly alarmed by this behavior, and thinking maybe a family member had died, I dropped to my knees and wrapped my arms around her. I had never seen my stoic mother reduced to uncontrollable sobbing. The Sheriff's office had called DFACS about a case and she went to the morgue to view a three-month-old baby that had starved to death.

Since she had recently switched from intake to child welfare, this was her first case of neglect that resulted in the death of a child. When she discovered other children in the family were healthy and well-fed, she was shaken to the core. The idea the parents would feed the other children in the family and not this baby was unimaginable. *They let it die—on purpose*. The image of that infant haunted her for years.

A couple of years later my mother received a weekend call from the Director of DFACS requesting her to sit with some children at a local hotel until family members could arrive and take custody of the children. Their father had walked up to their car at a rest stop on I-75 and shot their mother in the head while the three of them sat in the backseat. He then turned the gun on himself.

She and the director rotated staying with the children for several days because the family members had to travel from Illinois. My mother took coloring books and a few toys to entertain them. *They watched television a lot. They were in shock.*

She resigned from her position in child welfare not long after and went back to intake. *I can't handle the children*. This is when my daddy told me when she first started working as a social worker back in 1963—and he chuckled at the thought—she wanted to take all the children home with her. *She eventually developed a tough skin.*

The Treachery of Images

In my daydreams my mother was perfect like Mrs. Phillips down the street or Mrs. Smith across town, one of those nice ladies at First Baptist Church who taught Vacation Bible School in the summer; the ones with the perfectly coiffed beehive hairdos wearing an expensive dress and a strand of pearls around their neck, a pretty apron tied at the waist, dappled with flour smudges. The ones who had a plate of cookies baked and a glass of milk poured, sitting front and center on the Formica kitchen table after school each day, a red padded Naugahyde chair pulled out ready and waiting. The mother who sat down at the table while her daughter ate those cookies and asked about her day. One who cooked dinner while I worked on homework at the kitchen table. I dreamed of a domestic mother who didn't work outside the home, who swept the kitchen each evening and did the dishes in the sink and insisted I help her clean up each night after dinner. I imagined spending time with my mother as she taught me to cook, so I could make my future family's favorite meals when I grew up. I imagined a mother who read to me at bedtime each night and tucked me in tight under the sheets, so tight I couldn't move, like my friend Laura's mother did when I spent the night at her house.

In my imagination I lived in a brick ranch house on Bear Creek Road with shag carpet, a different color in every room, and had cloth sofas and bookcases filled with books and pink chiffon ruffles lining canopy beds. I had a white French Provincial furniture in my room with baby dolls sitting on the bed cooing, eyes fluttering open and closed. My brother had twin beds with a nightstand nestled between them, a sack of marbles resting upon it and metal cars lying around on the floor. My mother drove a Chevrolet Country Squire station wagon with wood grain paneling running down the sides and filled it with my friends in after school carpools. In my dreams my mother was

a room mother that brought cake and ice cream to school on Valentine's Day and chaperoned school trips to the county library. She played bridge in the afternoons with her friends and was an active member of the Woman's Club.

Instead, my mother worked while my grandmother took care of the house and kids. She smoked Belair cigarettes and poured Goody powders down her throat. And after her divorce, she abandoned church to drink bourbon at honkytonks, where she danced with strange men *sowing her wild oats,* as my disapproving grandmother said. She wasn't home in the afternoons after school, and during my teenage years, nights or weekends. She chose to spend her free time with strangers in bars and other not-so-strange people who saw nothing wrong with her leaving her daughter at home to cook the meals, clean the house, and wash the clothes. My mother left her daughter to roam around town on school nights, driving the car from one deserted spot to another searching for other lonely teenagers. She left her to get into trouble and make friends with the wrong people. My mother stripped down as soon as she walked into the house at the end of the workday and put on her pink nylon quilted bathrobe so she could kick back in the orange vinyl recliner for the rest of the evening. Book on her lap, she engaged briefly with those around her, and then lost herself in the pages until bedtime—unless a television show she liked was on, then she got a bag of potato chips or a bowl of ice cream to eat while she watched TV. My mother didn't cook dinner or clean up the kitchen. She might, but not every night, make sure the children got their bath. I trotted off to bed each night and snuggled up to my grandmother's back until I fell asleep. I have a few memories of my mother going with me to the bedroom, pulling the covers over my body, and kissing the top of my forehead goodnight—usually when my grandmother was off visiting relatives.

Dancing in a Minefield

Late nights in the honkytonks were routine. Your life revolved around a particular one called the Moose Lodge and the people you met there. If you weren't dancing at the Lodge, you were having a barbeque at someone's house. Alcohol and dirty jokes were plentiful at either place. I found you at the kitchen table around midnight, home earlier than usual, with your head down on folded arms, heaving with sobs. At first, I thought you might be sick, or that someone had died. You sat up when I touched your shoulder and turned to face me, your left eye swollen with a black ring forming around it. *Your daddy hit me*.

He had started going to the Moose Lodge on Saturday nights, too, even dating a woman he met there. I supposed he was trying to find a way to be around you, or at least that's what he said. Lately, he had been on a mission to win you back, complaining to me about your late-night activities. But more than likely, he wanted to know what you were up to. For some reason, on this particular night, he became jealous over the way you were dancing with a man.

You were supposedly an incredible dance duo, but I don't remember ever seeing you dance together. It was all hearsay. You went to the Toy Dance every year at the local V.F.W. and afterward told me stories of dancing the jitterbug together, the crowd pulling back to watch you. It was hard for me to imagine you in this way—like you were telling me about strangers.

This, too, felt unreal—like someone other than my parents. I never learned the details or what particular incident sparked the fight; neither one of you told me the whole story. But I knew you had both been drinking, and I had my own ideas about what really happened.

I was shocked and embarrassed by my daddy's behavior. Yours's too. I met up with him a few days later. Our meeting was strained and uncomfortable, both of us ill-at-ease. *Daddy, I'm so disappointed in you.* He admitted shame and embarrassment, apologizing for his behavior, and assuring me it would never happen again. I pressed for details and wondered if he even had a clear recollection of the night since he had been drinking. I had mixed feelings surrounding your behavior, wondering what you had done to piss him off to the point he would hit you. He didn't have a violent temper. Then, I chastised myself for thinking you were at fault. He should've known better—men don't hit women. Or at least that's what he had taught me. And even if you were acting like a fool, he had no business punching you. As far as I knew, nothing like this had ever happened before. But so much had happened over the last few years that I didn't trust what I had once believed. He had always treated you with respect—unless his behavior had been different behind the scenes. I imagine this is why I hate excessive drinking. People do and say things they never would when under the influence of alcohol. It was a lot for me to handle at 17-years-old. Once again, I found myself forced to deal with adult issues when I was only a kid.

Daddy and I had an awkward moment as he ushered me out the door. He complimented me for the mature way I handled the situation, talking to him like an adult. *You've really grown up into a fine young woman.*

Footprints in the Ash

I smoked in front of my mother for the first time the summer of 1974. I had just turned fourteen and smoked Marlboro's daily. She knew it. I knew she knew it. We just didn't discuss it—until this particular morning. I worked as a waitress at Family World in Cecil that summer and she arose on the weekend mornings at 5:00 a.m. to drive me to work for the morning shift.

On the drive she casually mentioned to me that she knew I smoked. The cover of darkness often gives people the courage to bring up something they've longed to talk about. Like lovers in bed at night, telling all of their secrets, speaking about things they've avoided, acknowledging feelings they've kept hidden. Not having to look one another in the eye offers a sense of freedom to speak of forbidden topics.

It was a bad habit, she cautioned. She should know, she had been smoking since she was nine years old. She didn't come down on me. She didn't yell or point her finger. *I wish you wouldn't.* Before I had a chance to utter the words I had been saving up for this moment, she said, *I'm in no position to forbid you to smoke.*

I asked her when it would be appropriate for me to smoke in front of her. I quickly rescinded that with, *I mean, can I smoke in front of you?* I expected a hard no. Knowing it and seeing it were two different things.

To my surprise, she agreed. And I lit a cigarette, smug in my newfound adulthood. I saw her watching me out of the corner of her eye. She was silent as the car whizzed through the early

morning, only streetlights exposing the interior in quick flashes of light. She changed her focus to the road once she was satisfied that I really knew the mechanics, inhaling and blowing a plume of smoke into the car. She cracked a window and the cool air sucked it out into the darkness.

Taking Inventory

in the chest of drawers

Playtex bras and *Carole* underwear	you had a dozen size 36C bras in various shades of grayish-white. *I want a clean bra to wear every day.* you've been wearing *Carole* nylon panties as long as I remember. I used to go with you to W.B. Wilkes where the sales clerk selected a slim box from a display shelf on the wall and opened it on the glass countertop, laying a single high-waisted panty out for you to inspect and approve. no sexy underwear for you. you wore granny panties long before you were an old woman.
boxes of costume jewelry	lapel pins—a flag for July 4th, a wreath for Christmas, a Venetian mask, a souvenir from your trip to Venice. Matching black onyx necklace and earrings. I wear pieces of your jewelry on occasion, touching it throughout the day—a gentle reminder of you.

Layer-After-Layer of Discontent

My sister was a teenager when I was born and left home when I was six. Her teenage years were spent marching in parades, big tassels on her boots, and throwing a baton in the air. She had her own room. She didn't share a bed with our grandmother. She babysat and worked at a beauty shop washing hair. She drove a blue convertible Volkswagen nicknamed "The Blue Goose" and delighted in transporting her siblings around town standing up in the front seat beside her. I drove a Volkswagen when I was a teenager too—an orange VW station wagon that belonged to my mother—she shared it with me.

My brother went off to college the summer of 1974, the same year we moved to the trailer park. The memories he took with him were of a neat little house on the working-class side of town at 806 West Fifth Street, where he had a comfortable bedroom with an eight-track stereo tape player booming Eric Clapton and a baby blue 1969 Mustang Hatchback in the driveway. He kept a set of red pearl drums in the corner of his bedroom. He hunted quail and deer with his friends and kept a couple of hunting dogs in a pen in the backyard. His teenage world was vastly different from mine.

I slept in a double bed pushed up against the wall at the back of a trailer, a double closet and built-in vanity stretched across the paneled wall. I barely had room to turn around. I didn't have my own car nor a tape player. I spent many weeknights alone, preparing my own meals, doing laundry—and my mother's— and schoolwork. When my mother shared a ride with someone else and left the car for me, I often resorted to driving the car around town for entertainment. I drove to the Dairy Queen, around Hardee's, and across town to the tennis courts—the route every

teenager in Adel drove on Friday and Saturday nights. During the week the cars were minimal and the parking lots empty. I often parked and hoped someone I knew would come along and park beside me. In the fall on Thursday nights after a pep rally, I would have some company. Most nights I sat alone. Most kids were home with their families. Most kids were not allowed to ramble around town on a school night. Most parents were at home with them. The loneliness was the hardest part. I resented my mother's lack of attention and secretly wished she was strict.

My brother had memories of our mother stretched out in her orange vinyl recliner, pink bathrobe wrapped around her, and her gold Aladdin bedroom slippers propped up on the footrest—evenings spent watching television after dinner. I recalled the old green vinyl sofa resting on cardboard thin green carpet, the one where curled up crying over a dead baby. When someone knocked on our door, I looked out of a slender vertical window pane of a flimsy, beat up trailer door, at the backside of a white block building and the roof of our car parked the few feet between them. I cooked in a dark-paneled kitchen with avocado green appliances and particle board cabinets covered with grease splatters. The cheap veneer particle board table with four straight ladder-backed chairs, shoved in the corner of the room, had multiple uses—a dining table, homework station, and sewing table for my mother's sewing projects. My mother's sewing machine was squeezed into a space between the table and a paneled divider wall, topped with a decorative orange plastic panel of circles. Blue and green cornflower contact paper served as a backsplash. The ugly design of the vinyl paneling behind the cabinets disgusted me—reminded me of where I lived—but I couldn't afford to buy proper wallpaper. I saw the contact paper in the grocery store one day and decided I could use it to cover a small portion of the ugliness in my

life. I cut and pasted inaccurately measured pieces to hide the faded gold paneling. She didn't complain when she saw it nor comment on the mismatched seams.

I resented her not being there at night. I resented not having a car like my brother and sister. They received cars on their fifteenth birthday. I believed my parents were waiting until I turned sixteen. Even though I knew the financial situation, I still held out hope. After all, my daddy owned a used car lot. My sixteenth birthday came and went with no car. I smiled and never let on that it bothered me. I don't think my mother ever knew how badly I hurt. And not about the car so much as about the situation our family was in—the divorce, the lack of money, the move to a trailer park. She became so caught up in making a living and partying that she didn't have much time to notice my disappointments. She never knew how embarrassed I was about living in a mobile home at a trailer park, the same one where a Greyhound Bus stopped morning and night depositing and picking up strangers, the idling motor cutting into the sound of the television. The place that prevented my old friends from sleeping over and hanging out with me anymore.

In my teenage selfishness, I never stopped to consider that she might have been ashamed of where we lived too. She left the house on Fifth Street the same as I did—the home where she had spent years raising her children—not to mention paying the mortgage. If she felt embarrassed, she disguised it.

Cut to the Torrential Downpour

In 1975 my father simply disappeared. The house on Fifth Street stood empty, his car gone. He didn't show up at the car dealership as usual. Creditors began calling my mother looking for him. The bank took possession of the cars on the lot and sold them, writing off the losses. Eventually, he called saying that he would come back but he couldn't at that time. He offered very little explanation of his disappearance, leaving us to figure out why he left town.

I didn't even know where he was living. *It's better if you don't know.* My mother accepted all of this with little fanfare, as if she was not surprised. But I was upset—and surprised. I wanted to know where he was and why he left. *I'm sorry, but it has to be this way.* I eventually figured out where he was living by the sound of a dog barking in the background—my uncle's German Shepherd. He was living with his brother in Madison, Illinois.

He did not send money—he didn't have any to send. My mother was left on her own to pick up the pieces of what he left behind.

My mother appeared to take the changes in stride. Money was tight due to the financial difficulties associated with the car dealership, which led her to take a second job at nights and on weekends. She did what she had to do and swallowed her pride, anger, and pain, not letting anyone beyond the emotional shield she had built around her. She countered it with dancing and drinking. After a couple of years and paying off some debt, she quit the second job, which only allowed for more time to go out on a regular basis, often several nights a week.

I withdrew emotionally from my friends while I tried to act like nothing was wrong. The move to the trailer park embarrassed me. The trailer was used, the interior drab, the furniture worn, and the rooms tiny. I couldn't understand why my mother wouldn't rent an apartment instead of a rundown mobile home.

I felt the small-town judgement. Word gets around, especially about the lack of parental supervision. Friends I had known my whole life faded into the background, not allowed to come over and spend the night at a trailer park behind the greyhound bus station. I remained included in the extracurricular activities of my social group—still invited to sleepovers and parties, but no one came to my house anymore, with the exception of my best friend. I retreated into relationships with boyfriends, spending most of my free time with them. I experienced long stretches of loneliness—and shame for our living conditions and my lack of parental supervision. At first, I thought it was fun—I felt grown up—being so independent and doing what I wanted to do without answering to anyone. It was easier to do things my parents wouldn't approve of. How would they know?

Word gets around in a small town—especially about the lack of parental supervision. My mother technically did her job as a parent, ticked all the boxes by providing a roof over my head and making sure I went to school, but she was not there emotionally. She floated in and out.

Manure Flows Downhill

When my mother left my father, I have no memory of where we went on that day. Did we move to a motel? Did we stay with my aunt? Did we even leave that day? I mean, it would have been my mother, me, my brother, and my grandmother. Where did we go? But I vividly remember where we eventually landed.

My mother rented a used trailer in Boyette's Trailer Park, a dreary plot of land directly behind an old gas station on Highway 41 at the south end of Adel, Georgia, owned by Mr. Boyette, a nice old man who wore blue coveralls and drove a faded blue 1954 Chevrolet Bel-Air. The station long closed, Mr. Boyette ran the Greyhound Bus Station from the old filling station office. Nestled in the grove of pine trees, approximately twenty single wide trailers lined up in a semi-circle up to the back side of the station with just enough room between them to park a car. Railroad tracks resided directly behind the trailers where the engines strained to gain speed as they exited town loaded with lumber from Del-Cook Lumber Company, pulling their cargo-loaded boxcars, shaking the ground at all hours. When the trains were not blocking the view, a lumberyard loomed beyond the tracks where logs and planed wood were stacked high, awaiting transport. A small dirty pond butted against the tracks, which happened to be directly behind our trailer, where only a silver Airstream separated us from the water. A creepy old man, clad in boxer shorts and a muscle undershirt, sat in the doorway smoking cigarettes and drinking beer all day. I tried not to look out the window when I passed down our narrow hallway.

The move was a considerable step down. Even though our house at 806 West Fifth Street was a simple affair—a white frame surrounded by crepe myrtles, oaks, a pine, a cedar, and a fig tree,

all planted by our daddy's mother—the lot extended deep behind the house and we had plenty of room to spread out. The interior, which was nothing fancy, was decorated with a green and blue motif, a favorite of my mother's. Green sofa, blue and green rag rug, gold curtains, green cabinets, and green and white commercial grade tile. My parents covered up the shiplap walls and beadboard ceilings, and painted the wood floors, in an extensive remodel after my grandmother died. We had rugs, not carpet. Space heaters and window units, not central heat and air. One door was missing on the kitchen cabinet that housed our plates and glasses. The kitchen sink was an old-fashioned enamel affair, double sided and deep. We had a kitchen table in our small kitchen, where we ate most meals, and a larger dining table at one end of our living room, where we ate Sunday dinner. My mother "antiqued" it in "fruitwood" after my grandmother died, covering the natural wood beauty. They covered everything like they were trying to wipe out the past.

We had lived in a working-class neighborhood on the other side of the tracks, the dividing line between upper middle class and the factory workers and laborers. Moving to a trailer park on the edge of town took us a few more steps down the rung of the ladder.

hin(t)ərˌland/of unhappiness

My family moved into uncharted territory when my parents separated. They had done an excellent job of concealing their troubles from their children. I had never heard a cross word between them until the night I came home and found my household in utter chaos. I wouldn't have been any more surprised than if someone had slapped me. Actually, it felt like one—an emotional slap. One that I was totally unprepared to navigate.

My daddy sat in his favorite armchair smoking a cigarette, ashes dangling precariously from the end, his socked feet propped up on the ottoman. *Come on in, little'un*. I instantly knew something was amiss by the sinister laugh that followed. I realized he was drunk, and I had walked in on him raising hell. He and my mother argued in raised voices, something that had *never* occurred in our household. She instructed me to go to my brother's room.

I found him sitting in a chair backward with the door cracked, his shotgun propped on the back of the chair with the tip of the barrel resting in the open slit. For several hours, we listened as my daddy talked and laughed loudly, yelled insults, and berated my mother. At one point, I looked through the crack of the door and watched my grandmother exit her bedroom, which was immediately off the living room, wielding a baseball bat. *I dare you to hit her.* Not being able to see the entire living room, we assumed he had indicated he might be violent. My brother shifted in his chair and tightened his grip on the gun. Eventually, my daddy left the room and went to bed. The house fell silent. Occasionally, I heard a muffled voice and sounds of movement, like someone tiptoeing across the room. My brother and I finally relaxed. I went to my bedroom and fell into an exhausted sleep.

In the morning after everyone dressed for school and work as usual, while my daddy slept off the previous night's drunken episode, my mother and I huddled in the dining room next to the space heater, turning our hands as we talked. Her eyes were red from crying and she was visibly shaken as she applied her lipstick with the use of a compact mirror. She checked her face, adjusted her hair slightly, and popped the compact shut. The sound startled me.

I'm thinking about leaving your Daddy. I can't handle another night like last night. I can't live like this . . . again. Or was it *anymore?* The last word fell off into a whisper. I barely heard it. And I did not even remember it until years later. I could hear her, but her voice sounded like she was in a barrel. The clinking sounds of my grandmother cooking in the kitchen crawled over my body. I heard a choking sound. Had it been me or her? *Your daddy is drinking too much*.

I was still trying to process the events from the night before. *My* daddy didn't come home drunk and threaten his family like my friend Susan's dad. Her dad chased them with a butcher knife, and they had to lock themselves in a bedroom and crawl out a window to seek help from the neighbors. Would something like that happen with us? The idea of my brother aiming a gun at my daddy . . . the images of what could have happened were unimaginable—but yet I couldn't stop thinking about it.

She urged me to speak up. *What do you want to do? Do you want to live like this?* Of course, I didn't. But leaving meant walking into the hinterland, that expanse of unknown. I didn't know what leaving looked like. *Do you want to leave*?

There's Trouble in That House

That's what my friend's boyfriend said to her after he picked her up for a date from my house the summer before my father's drunken episode. He apparently knew my father from the VFW—he was considerably older. The foundation I thought I rested upon suddenly started to feel shaky.

Your daddy is running around on your mama. My best friend couldn't wait to tell me. She called one evening—possibly a few months before "the incident." I answered the call on my pale-yellow princess trimline telephone that I had stretched across the room to my bed. It was a Sunday and the late afternoon light trickled through my bedroom window in such a way that I could see the dust particles dancing in the air as I talked. The bedspread that I bought and paid for while working at Family World Restaurant over the summer had blocks of pale yellow, orange, and pink. I sat cross-legged on one side of my double-bed while I ingested the words. I found the news hard to believe so I questioned her about the source—how she knew the information, who told her, did she see it herself. *Carol saw him going into a room with a woman at the Motor Lodge. It was not your mama.* I suddenly felt the sting of people talking behind my back. She felt I should know. Why? What could I do about it? I couldn't—wouldn't tell my mother. Instead I carried this knowledge with me as I sat across the table from her, watched television with her, and rode in the passenger seat of the car beside her. I watched my daddy, carefully looking for any confirmation of what I had been told.

Taking Inventory

In the drawer of the end table beside your white wicker recliner

bottle of Visine Eye Drops	When I was a child, you kept a bottle in your purse, one on your nightstand, and one on the table beside your chair. some things never change.
black Holy Bible	print edition with your name engraved in gold on the cover. still new. your previous Bible was worn and full of underlined passages from the days you taught Sunday school at Cecil Baptist Church. you were pious then, living up to the family heritage of strong Christian women who lived by the word.
bag of bite-sized Snickers Bars	Jack bought you large bags of candy to satisfy your sweet tooth.
bag of dental picks with floss	teeth were an obsession. food particles lodged in the space between your teeth so dental picks became a necessary habit.

Skimming Stones

Long before the technology of surgery today, my mother had a kidney stone removed. Her incision went from her navel to the middle of her back. Essentially, the surgeon cut her in half to remove a kidney stone. She brought it home in a small glass bottle, about the size of a prescription bottle filled with a clear solution. The floating white stone, the size of the tip of her pinky finger, looked like a small pebble she had picked up at the river.

Segregated Space

Because a segregated society dictated the relationship between races and skin color, you told me that a man with brown skin at our door could not be invited into our house socially. You explained that you personally had no problem with it, but people would talk and see it as a bad thing. You cautioned me to be careful and try to understand that my reputation—my family's reputation—in this white world could easily be tainted by association with the man who stood at our door on that sunny Saturday morning. As soon as I saw who was at the door, I opened it wide and invited him inside—just like I would anyone else who knocked. I was eleven-years-old. The Jim Crow South was in the middle of integration. I gently protested. *But this is Mr. Mac.*

Mr. Mac stood at the bottom of our front steps in his overalls, hat in hand with one beat up brogan propped casually on the bottom step and politely declined the invitation. A tall, thin black man—with one leg crooked inward at the knee so it made him lean to the left a little and walk with a limp was a familiar figure. He worked at my father's car dealership washing cars and frequently drove them back and forth to the auto auctions in Albany, Georgia, and Orlando, Florida for my father. He could be found any day of the week sitting on the sofa of my father's office when he wasn't busy or tinkering outside the gas station next door. He was a gentle man, loyal to my father, and I saw only goodness when I encountered him. Accepting the hypocrisy of not being able to invite this man into our home, someone we all loved, was difficult for me.

You didn't know terms like "white privilege" or "microaggression." You had preached to me to accept others on their terms, and I saw how you treated others with respect and dignity. Long before integration, I watched you offer our black maid Minnie a seat beside you on the front seat

of the car, and saw how she refused, riding in the back seat where societal expectations dictated. I saw the kindnesses you extended to others without consideration of skin color, circumstances, or background. You felt forced to accept things that went against your personal beliefs and didn't push back for fear of what others would say and do. This type of marginalization was the reality of the world in which you lived.

I learned what you knew all along—what you taught me from your own experiences dealing with both races in a segregated society, both in your job and personally. You knew nothing about Critical Race Theory, but you knew our society refused to accept indiscrimination, despite the reformed laws and mandated integration. You knew it was about recognizing others as human rather than black or white or brown. You knew they also felt the same pain over divorce, the same abandonment when a spouse disappeared, the same struggle to find a job and pay bills, the same burden of providing food, clothing, and shelter for their family when money was tight and housing unaffordable, they had the same desire to protect their children, the same faith in God, and the same urges to wash away their troubles inside the recesses of a nightclub. And you saw all of this from your desk at the Department of Family and Children Services. You knew that humanity united us even if our society failed to recognize it.

When I Kissed Her Today, She Smelled Like Coconut

When I kissed her today, my mother smelled like coconut. She said her hair smelled like coconut from the shampoo she uses, or the lotion she rubs on her wrinkled hands. But I knew she ate a slice of Pepperidge Farm Coconut Cake, the evidence sprinkled on her chest. She can't eat dairy products, but indulges in cheese on occasion, and ice cream often—then pays for it later. She knows carnival rides make her sick, and her daughter suffers from motion sickness, too. That I need to ride in the front seat of the car, but I'll still go out on the ocean and vomit over the side of the boat just for the opportunity

to see what lies beneath the water. This woman, who hates sarcastic remarks, but can put you in your place in a hot minute, taught me to be polite, not to ask anyone how they voted—or how much money they earn—all the while sucking on a Belair cigarette, blowing smoke from her nostrils like she was dancing Swan Lake. She knows smoking isn't healthy, she said she refrained from it during all three pregnancies. She admits that *it was the nausea*, not the concern of her unborn child,

because women smoked while pregnant back then. Taught me ladylike gestures, to cross my legs, so roaming eyes wouldn't see places they weren't supposed to see. Taught me to respect my elders, to *always* address them with a title—never by their given name—to say "yes mam," "no mam," "please," "thank you," and "excuse me." Told me to stand up

straight, to stand up for myself. She knew I didn't listen to that either, and stood up for me when that girl slapped me in the locker room at the pool. Told me I should befriend the less fortunate,

the kid no one likes in class, the new kid, or someone who was down and out, even though it wouldn't be the most popular decision. I listened to that. Even if my daddy

spoiled me, she had limits. Her words could stop me in my tracks. Like the time my teenage self said to her, *well, get your panties in a wad, mama*, and she raised her hand to slap my face—but didn't. She nodded her head in agreement when my daddy said, *when you are told your child may die before she reaches twelve, you don't care what she's doing—you are just happy she's alive.*

You'll always be found out eventually if you lie. And I did. And I remember her words when I feel compelled to sit in untruths. I also know some aphorisms of my own—*when truth is replaced by silence, the silence is a lie.*

Told me *if you don't stop crying, I'll give you something to cry about* after spanking me for some offense that she decided warranted corporal punishment. Even though she drew a hard line, she once spent an afternoon consoling me, lying on my chenille bedspread beside me, stroking my hair, while I had a ten-year-old crying jag over nothing, and then orchestrated a few neighborhood friends to appear on our porch

asking for me to come out to play. I know she worked hard. She made sure a *Tiny Tears* doll went under the tree when money was scarce—the result of caring for a sick child. I also know she humbled herself to borrow money from a family friend when my sister needed a dress for the prom. And repeated that scenario fourteen years later, when I pitched a fit for an expensive prom dress, she couldn't afford. She doesn't have a funny bone,

but refuses to admit it, even though she will not watch “Mrs. Doubtfire” because she despises Robin Williams. She thinks he is too silly. She doesn’t drink tea or coffee. Doesn’t eat fish. Nor pasta. I discovered that when I took her to Venice, Italy, and she pouted because there was nothing on the menu she liked—except wine. She does like coral-colored

lipstick, frozen snicker bars, Country Cobbler Shoes—the only place she can find Size 8.5 with a Quad A heel. She loved my blonde hair, insisted on dying it when it started turning dark. And Daniel Green bedroom slippers. Reading used to be her pastime, took her out of this world. And she loves gospel hymns. Loves for me to sing them to her. From her, I learned that nothing is ever certain, that Baker’s coconut flakes are better than the Publix brand, and coconut cake is better made from scratch.

Taking Inventory

under the bed

a pair of gold Daniel Greene bedroom slippers

the ones with the tip of the toe curled up like Alibaba's shoes. as a little girl, I used to put these shoes on and dance around our kitchen, the heel slapping the commercial grade tile floor, pretending I was tap dancing like Sammy Davis, Jr. the noise didn't keep you from falling asleep in your recliner with the television blaring and all the lights on. when I finished dancing, I would return the shoes to your feet, without you stirring, and leave you there, mouth open, deep in slumber.

Footprints in the Ash

I grew up inside the smog of your Bel-Airs and Daddy's Camels. Ashtrays filled with lipstick-stained cigarette butts and ash hills were perched on armchairs and tables—round green and gold glass, triangular melamine avocado and orange-colored, square Anchor Hocking amber glass, milk glass trimmed in gold, plaid bean bags. Grayish ashes peppered the blue and green rug in the living room. Burned out cigarettes, gripped in the curves of ashtrays, were neglected and forgotten.

Cigarette burn marks blackened the arms of our Naugahyde furniture and wooden tables. My sister came in from majorette practice one evening to find you asleep on the couch with a cigarette smoldering on the arm, burning a hole in the material. You used to lay in bed smoking at night, embers glowing in the darkened room, because you needed one last drag before going off to sleep. I had to ask you to roll the window down when the cigarette smoke became thick inside the confined space of our car. Everything in our house smelled of stale cigarettes.

When I casually asked if you thought your smoking contributed to my frequent childhood respiratory infections, which often led to chronic bronchitis, you were indignant and denied the possibility. *Risk factors for repeated infections may include: Increased exposure to infectious organisms and secondhand smoke exposure.* The idea that you contributed to my childhood illness—the years of medical bills, sleepless nights, and long hospital stays—was unfathomable to you. You could not admit even the slightest responsibility. The genetic testing, the cystic fibrosis tests, and the enzymes added to my milk made it easier to point your finger outward. Even years later when medical research proved their theory wrong, it was easier to still believe

what the doctors suggested then, that my case was a spontaneous mutation of a mild form of cystic fibrosis. As a parent, that's a hard pill to swallow—even if it resulted from ignorance and the limitations of medicine at the time. The amount of physical and emotional suffering we all endured, along with the financial setbacks, took a toll on our family. And what happened as a result of my illness was something I caused—like the amount of attention the illness focused on me at the expense of my sibling's neglect. And the financial strain that my parents never fully recovered from until they were no longer responsible for me. She told me the stories, explained the sacrifice. Most of my life, I felt guilty that my whole family suffered because I was sick.

After I moved out of your house, the chronic infections finally subsided. An allergist confirmed the extent of my environmental allergens, which were aggravated by secondhand cigarette smoke. With immunotherapy and relocation to different geographical regions, my body finally developed the immunity to a large portion of the allergens that compromised my system.

We never moved beyond this conversation. Discussing it further seemed futile, even accusatory. You shut it down so quickly with your vehement response that I never broached the subject again.

Foster Girl

In the 1960's we lived directly across the street from the courthouse, and directly behind it was a long gray brick building that housed the public library and the Department of Family and Children Services, where my mother worked, first as a stenographer, and later in intake and child services. She walked to work each day, coming home for lunch to sit down at the kitchen table with my daddy and eat the midday meal prepared by my grandmother.

On one particular summer day around 1963, my teenage sister sat on the couch painting her fingernails while she waited for the city pool to open. She had planned to spend the afternoon swimming with her friends. The twelve o'clock whistle had already sounded and my mother had not arrived. Sometime later, the screen door slammed and she heard footsteps on the porch, too many to be one person. She looked up from her hands and saw a young girl, maybe 13-years-old, standing at the threshold of the door. My mother followed.

My sister remembered the girl looking unkempt. She described greasy blonde hair that fell to the girl's shoulders in fits and starts. Her ill-fitting clothes looked worn and faded, her feet bare—darkened from the soil—a trail of dust trickled up her leg like sifted flour. My mother invited her to sit in a nearby chair after calling out to my grandmother. When my grandmother entered the room, she introduced the girl and explained why she had arrived with this unknown child in tow. *She's going to stay with us for a few days. Let's look through your closet and see what we can find for her to wear.*

The child had been removed from her home and needed a place to stay until DFACS could work out her foster care. She slept in my sister's room for the duration. A few days later, my sister came home and the girl was gone. She sometimes saw her around town, but neither one acknowledged the other.

Downside of Having a Sick Child

is just that—you have a sick child, gagging on mucus and rushing to the doctor's office. Fever. Chills. Coughing. Over and over—year after year. The downside is the fear. Of not knowing what to do, even though you've raised two other children. That adrenaline rush that takes over as you snatch your child and run to the car. The downside is quitting a good job that pays well in order to stay at the hospital with a sick child for three months straight. The downside is watching her struggle to breathe in an oxygen tent. It's not having the money to pay for the special formula and the enzyme medicine because you quit your job. It's a one-income household now. The downside is not having the money to have her portrait taken at Olan Mills. The downside is rocking her for hours while you listen to the wheezing in her chest, the vaporizer spewing a menthol mist into the room. The downside is hearing hypotheses like cystic fibrosis and allergic reaction and she might not live. The downside is the enzymes that must go into the baby milk, and not knowing which one she is missing. It's letting her have a bottle until she is four years old because it's easier. The downside is watching the mercury rise in the thermometer while she stares back at you with feverish eyes. The downside is holding her down so the nurse can give her a penicillin shot. Or make her swallow the putrid tasting antibiotic, sometimes forcing the spoon in her mouth between clenched teeth. The downside is midnight house calls, your child rocking fervently in her little chair, fever at 105 degrees, and the doctor racing with her to the bathtub to cool her down. The downside is not having enough time to devote to the other children at home. It's projecting the middle-child-syndrome onto the child in the middle. The downside is not having the money to buy your oldest daughter a prom dress because you spent it all on medicine. It's your husband starting a used car business on your front lawn trying to make extra money. The downside is watching her grow up with chronic bronchitis. Watching her

suffer. The downside is having to move to a dumpy, old house that your doctor offered to rent to you because you lost the house you live in. The downside is spoiling her. Because you don't know how long you'll have her. It's the years of watching, waiting, and hoping.

Rust Removal

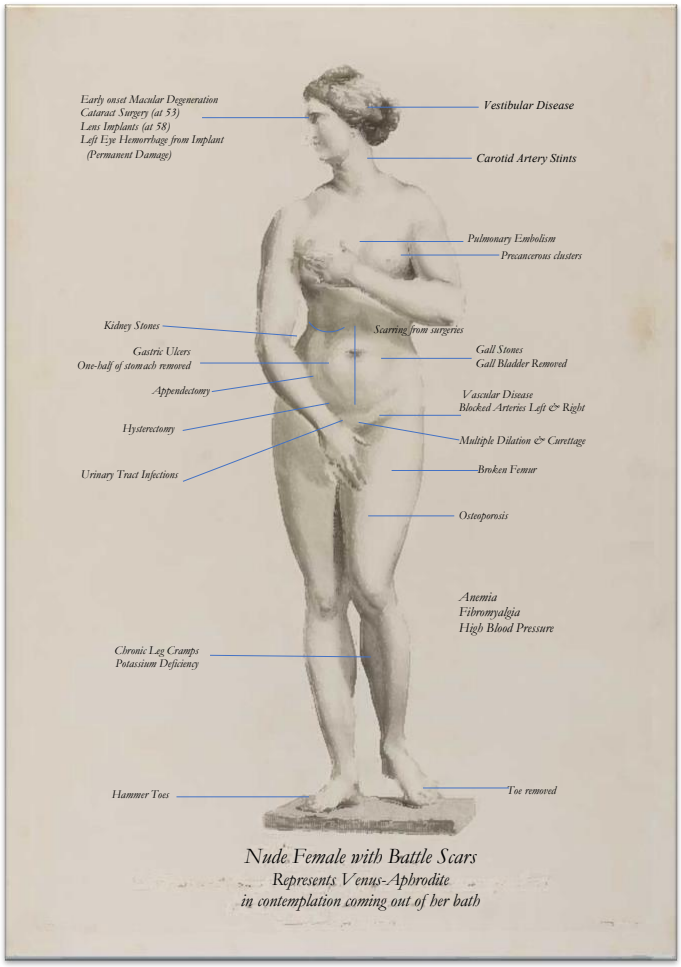
My father paced the small square of a waiting room at Pineview Hospital while one-half of my mother's stomach was removed due to a gastric ulcer. Dr. Fred Smith came through the double doors, wearing what looked like a hospital gown wrapped and tied over his surgical scrubs, face mask dangling on one side. I noticed a splatter of blood on his shoes. He delivered the news that my mother was in recovery and would be fine, grabbing my father by the shoulder and pumping his hand. My father's face flooded with relief. I know now what I didn't know then—the whispers in our house prior to the surgery—my parents were concerned about stomach cancer.

She had suffered from anemia from the bleeding ulcer and episodes of debilitating pain. A few years prior on one particularly lazy Sunday afternoon—one of those Spring days when the windows are opened to allow the fresh, clean air into the house, and the bed is an inviting place to read a book—the screams of my mother pierced the solitude in my bedroom. I followed the sound of voices to our bathroom where I found my father leaning over my mother, whose body was stretched out on the floor. He spoke to her in a steady, serious tone while holding her hand as she moaned and screamed intermittently when painful spasms overtook her. Frightened, I stood in the doorway, the light from a single double-paned window casting a halo over her body. Suppressed anxiety and stress had eroded her insides like rust eating through a metal pipe.

She was left with an iron deficiency and unable to consume dairy products because the portion removed was the part of the stomach that governed iron absorption. Because her diet was so limited after the surgery, my mother lost 40 to 50 pounds. After recovering, she bought new

clothes in a size six, celebrating the metamorphosis of shedding her rusty parts and adding another layer of patina.

Nude Female with Battle Scars



III. A PATINA OF SOFTLY TEXTURED RUST

Barbie & Ken

I have a sepia-colored photo of my parents taken some time during their courtship—before December 28, 1946. They are leaning against the fender of my daddy's Lincoln Zephyr—a real

1940's Barbie and Ken. They look like two movie stars captured during a break on a movie set. My sister drew a heart shape in blue pen above them when she was a little girl and scrawled their names above them in her child-like handwriting. In the photo, my daddy's wing-tipped feet are crossed and he holds something in his hands, elbows resting on the hood. He wears a light-colored Zoot Suit with the high-waist pleated pants with wide legs, so typical of the era. My mother sports a dark-colored A-line dress with wide padded shoulders cinched at the waist with a wide belt, creating a silhouette effect—broad shoulders, tiny waist, and full hips for an hourglass shape. The hemline falls a couple of inches below her knees and leads to a pair of clunky Mary Jane pumps. I've always cherished this photo of my parents and I now have it framed. It rests on my bookshelf, staring back at me reminding me of the people I once loved—a reminder of who they had been before I knew them.

My mother was a real beauty—Hollywood style. I grew up looking at a picture of her taken when she was seventeen. It's a vanity portrait—like the glamour shots of the thirties and forties—where an artist touches up the lips and enhances the eye color. Bright blue eyes stared at me amid a head of gorgeous chocolate locks styled like Katherine Hepburn, the deep waves grazing her shoulders. Pink full lips spread across her teeth in a shy smile and her high

cheekbones colored in a rosy glow. She wore a white sweater, buttoned to her neckline. I don't remember my mother ever being aware of her striking beauty—or at least she never mentioned her looks. She came from the era where outward appearance mattered, even if you were running to the corner store for a pack of cigarettes. She always dressed impeccably, wearing jewelry and carrying chic handbags and wearing matching shoes.

My father, as handsome as my mother was beautiful, loved her dearly. My daddy had a striking resemblance to the actor Tyrone Power, and in his mature years, I thought he looked like Dean Martin. He had a dashing, smoldering look, with dark brown eyes and bushy eyebrows. His complexion was dark, and he had a deep tan from working outdoors. He didn't smile for photos, but he had a huge smile, and an infectious, raucous laugh. That is the snapshot forever in my mind.

It's Not That Clear Cut

My mother was a feminist—and so was my father. My mother was a feminist in the sense that she had never been supported financially by a man—except during the years I was so sick and she quit work to be with me at the hospital. Her decision to be a stay-at-home mother was not one of choice or privilege, but of necessity. My father was not a domineering, I'm-the-man-of-the-house personality. He was comfortable with a smart wife who had a career, and never felt the need to throw his masculinity around. He was certainly not hen-pecked nor dominated by my mother's strong personality, but seemingly respected her beauty and abilities without being threatened by them.

I am not certain my mother held the same kind of respect for him. My father, a used car salesman, seemed to suffer one financial malady after the other and depended on her income for financial stability. If he ever felt emasculated by this, he never let on.

As a teenager, I noticed icy, cutting remarks rolling off my mother's tongue directed at my father. She appeared loyal to him, but she held some kind of contempt just below the surface for reasons I'll never know.

Inheritance

Hands

I have my mother's hands, average-size fingers with big knuckles, and blue veins popping out across visible tendons. And the need to stay busy with them. My mother had her Granny Futch's hands. Unlike, my mother's they were rough, working hands that came from years of dishwashing, clothes washing, and hauling well water. They were hardened with calluses from gardening and farm chores.

Stubbed Thumbs

Like her mother, she had a "stub thumb" on her right hand—both of her sister's thumbs were stubbed too. I didn't inherit this genetic trait. According to my mother, my father checked each child thoroughly as soon as he saw us, for fear we had her thumbs.

Big Toe

I did not inherit my mother's feet. My small, even-toed feet fit a size 7 shoe, while my mother's long, narrow 8.5-sized feet had stubby little toes—like her mother—and one very big toe.

La Petite

My five feet two inches frame came from my father's side of the family—his mother and sisters were all short, and none of the men were over five feet, nine inches tall. My mother took her height from her father, who was six feet tall. All of his sisters were tall and thin, too. She stood five inches over my grandmother's five foot frame. Everyone said I inherited my petite frame

from my grandmother, with my tiny wrists and narrow shoulders. Like her, a strong wind would blow me away.

Dark Eyes

I didn't inherit my dark brown eyes, heavy eyebrows, and prominent jawline from my mother. Those strong French features came from my father, who's ancestry is predominantly French. When I lived in Europe, hotel staff frequently addressed me in French before they knew I was American.

Luscious Locks

My hair was blonde and straight, unlike my mother's dark luscious locks, which was so thick that a brush struggled to comb through it. She inherited her hair from her daddy's side of the family. Everyone always said my mother resembled her Granny Futch, who wore her hair up in a tight bun each day, but when loose, deep curls cascaded to her waist.

What She Thought About While Taking Dictation 1

To whom it may concern:

Enclosed herewith please find

kisses last night passionate

signed deed to secure debt amount

fragrance aftershave Vitalis

$35K warranty deed executed

arms sliding around him

party of first part in keeping with

necking car whispers

terms agreement discussed

arms sliding around her

foregoing contract between

blouse unbuttoned lips throat

W.B. Wilkes & Sons Cowart & Folsom

fingers tangled hair

period party of the second part

hands breasts skirt

hereby agrees withdraw

unzipped

complaint as long as party

belt buckle undone

first part agrees sign tenant

hose slip garter belt

agreement for a period 10 years

bra bodies intertwined

annual payments not to exceed

undershirt muscles dog tags

sum $100 payable last day

beard rough lips soft

month contract expiration

panties between thighs

party of the first part consideration

---

1 mother first job a stenographer law office shorthand transcriber over 100 wpm. took dictation typed legal documents. 1963 worked Department of Family and Children Services next door to courthouse. no court reporter Superior Court called requested record court proceedings shorthand.

Taking Inventory

on the walls

two framed watercolor prints	front porch scenes in pastel colors that reminded you of the days when your family spent time gathered on the porch—the women talking or shelling peas, the men perched on the front steps smoking and talking about the tobacco auction in town.
sepia photos	a family portrait of you and your parents, and another one of you and your sister when she was nine years old and you were thirteen. no one looked happy in these photos.

The Mother Cord

When I look at the wide aisles of my childhood, I'm amazed at how narrow they really were—and how messy. My daddy told me how much he respected my grandmother and appreciated all that she had done for our family for so many years, and how she did it without complaint, keeping our household running smoothly, cooking, taking care of the children, but he had one thorn in his side about it. *I couldn't even take a drink in my own house because she didn't approve*. My daddy was not a controlling man, but clearly resented his perceived lack of control within his own borders.

Raised by a Primitive Baptist minister, who preached hell-fire and brimstone in rural South Georgia communities, and devoutly religious, my grandmother stood in judgement of others. She lived a righteous life and didn't approve of anyone living otherwise. She didn't believe in dancing or drinking, and rarely socialized outside of church activities. When my mother's lifestyle didn't conform—and anytime my grandmother was aware of it—she gave my mother the silent treatment. I'll never understand how my grandmother married an alcoholic.

Not outright demanding, but bossy, she was the glue that kept our moral fiber of our family together. We all knew what she expected of us, and we all tried to comply, knowing that she didn't just give lip service to her faith, she walked it every single day. Her unyielding presence in our house served as a protective coating against the erosion that eventually broke through and destroyed our family.

In an unusually revealing moment, my mother told me she regretted allowing her mother to have so much power in our household. *I should have stood up to her*. I could almost hear the sandpaper rasping against the metal, the particles of decrepitude floating in the air around us.

You Never Told Me About Your Father

You once mentioned that your mother and little sister came to live with you when my sister was four years old, which would have been in 1951. You claimed to have the physical characteristics of his mother—the dark hair, blue eyes—not like your sister with the Graddy Irish traits, the carrot-colored hair and freckles.

You said this:

1. *My daddy was an alcoholic.*
2. *He got his height from my daddy*. When my brother grew to a height of 6'1".
3. *He died from lung cancer.*

In your last days, when dementia roosted at the base of your brain, you ironed your daddy's shirts. They were white and crisp. His dead sisters, Aunt Alma and Aunt Jenny, visited you.

You never commented on how his alcoholism affected you. However, the morning after my own daddy had his one and only drunken outburst, you said, *I cannot live this way . . . again.*

I typed his name into a genealogy search engine and it appeared—IVEY NEWTON GRADDY. Born August 12, 1902. Died November 6, 1959. I learned from a relative that he was a grease monkey who wore a train conductor's cap when he worked. From another relative, I learned he used to call the local square dances and come home so drunk that he couldn't get out of the truck.

He slept it off in the cab of the truck for a couple of hours before going inside. I supposed he did this because your mother gave him a hard time about his drunken behavior. Drinking—and dancing—was totally against her religion. How she wound up with him, I do not understand.

According to the 1940 Census, 38-year-old Ivey Graddy lived at West 10th Street in Ocala, Florida, and worked as a mechanic at an auto dealership. Counted in the household was your mother, 35, and two female children, 11 and 4. A few years before you died, I learned he also worked at Adel Trading Company as a tractor mechanic. I only learned this bit of information because a woman who knew you as a little girl moved into Langdale Place. She had been the bookkeeper at Adel Trading Company. I once wrote a fictional story about you finding your daddy in the arms of this woman.

When he died, you were two months pregnant with me and had erased him from your life.

I have no memory of ever visiting his grave. You never went to put flowers on it nor even talked about the fact he was buried only a few miles from our house. You could stop by at any time. My sister, who would have been twelve when he died, has no memory of him at all. She didn't even know where he was buried until I took her there.

I was shocked when I found an unmarked grave—a *blank* concrete slab—no information about the person carved into the cement—a man forsaken, nothing permanent to mark his existence.

What if My Mother was a Chaucer Scholar at Harvard?

She would have a prodigious ambition to answer all major philosophical and theological questions.

She would have traveled to London's National Library of Wales and viewed *The Hengwrt Chaucer*, Geoffrey Chaucer's most important text, written in the fourteenth century. And she probably would have used her research at the library to write her dissertation entitled *Renaissance readers and Chaucerian scholarship.*

Although technically Harvard accepted women as early as 1920, her diploma would have been signed by Radcliffe's president, Harvard's sister school for females where she was required to reside, and she would have been part of the early years of the joint instruction program at Harvard Yard, where previously professors taught the males at Harvard and the more lower ranked professors walked across the commons and duplicated their lectures at Radcliffe Yard for the women.

Everyone in her circle would have understood why she christened her firstborn Criseyde after the female character in *Troilus and Criseyde* and tolerate, hopefully without eye-rolling, the less informed civilian attempts to pronounce the baby's name. Her daughter's name would eventually be shortened to Cris, and this would result in most people never knowing the origin of her name. This fact would make her sad when she dwelled upon it, and increased the chances of her

informing some unsuspecting individual, who clearly didn't get it, of the literary nature of her child's moniker.

A worn and tattered copy of *A Companion to Chaucer* would be found on her nightstand, a gift from a literature professor who thought rewarding his less fortunate female students, who relied on scholarship to get into Yale, with books from his own personal library, notated with his personal remarks in the margins, thinking it would palliate his sexual advances, making them seem less lurid, and lead his unsuspecting student straight to his bed.

She would name her only son Geoffrey, spelled with a "G", and repeatedly, throughout his life, correct others from spelling it with a "J". It would be, as expected from a Chaucerian, to be a bone of contention with his teachers, and others who were accustomed to a different spelling.

She would read Troubadour poems by Jean-Baptiste de La Curne de Sainte-Palaye.

Mother Map

After Jamaica Kincaid

dancing is vulgar; thank the Lord for your food before you eat; take a bath every day—you don't want to smell; prayer is powerful, it can move mountains; girls shouldn't go out to rough places like juke joints; everyone has their own burdens to bear; here's how to sweep a yard; if you have leftovers, eat them later or figure out how to make another meal from them; hang your sheets on the line this way—put your corners together and use one clothespin for both—saves time and less clothespins; never pour grease down a drain, pour it into your grease can while it's hot and make sure to strain the settlings; men shouldn't use foul language in front of a lady; gambling is sinful—and playing cards is akin to gambling; don't forget who raised you; here's how you make good gravy; rinse all your dishes before you put them in your dishwater; wash glasses first, while the water is clean—plates and silverware next; save pots and pans for last; dry all the dishes and put them away before going to bed at night; drinking is a sin; keep a slop pot under your bed so you won't have to go outside in the middle of the night; here's how to fold a fitted sheet; to prevent scorching, keep your iron moving and watch the heat; do-gooders don't always wind up in heaven; swearing is for the men, it's not proper for girls to talk vulgar; this is how to piece a quilt using scraps from old clothes; go pick me a switch; here's how to iron your daddy's shirts; wear a hat, long sleeves, and gloves when working in the fields—keeps your skin looking ladylike; all that face paint is for hussies; wear a hat to church on Sundays; women who smoke have loose morals; pants are for men; a woman maintains modesty in all situations; I don't love no dog*;* a child won't starve if you send him to bed without supper for misbehaving; I raised you better than this; wear an apron while cooking so you don't get splatter on your clothes; go to

church on Sunday even when you don't feel like it; start the vacuum on this side of the room, go up and down in a pattern, so you will end up on the other side; I don't mind suffering, He suffered for me; no matter how far people stray from their roots, they always come home.

Taking Inventory

on the walls

signed photograph of a pink tulip	taken by me at Keukenhof Gardens in Lisse, Netherlands.
acrylic painting of blue irises	painted by the director at Langdale Place. you gave her your tackle box of paints and brushes that you had stashed in the back of your closet when you could no longer see to paint. she painted the irises as a thank you gift.
still life oil painting of a ginger jar and fruit	painted by you in an art class a few years after retirement. it was the best painting that survived your artist endeavors. you pointed it out to anyone who would pay attention to it. you couldn't paint for the enjoyment of it, you needed to be good at it—and needed confirmation from others.
acrylic painting of yellow tulips	an attempt at painting flowers in the early days of art lessons**.**

The Right Material for a Daughter

Selecting the proper material for the type of garment you're making is important; my mother taught me to sew on a foot-operated, mechanical Singer sewing machine; it takes skill; and lots of practice.[1] use poplin, for skirts, trousers, and dresses because it's a strong fabric, easy to iron and wrinkles less;[2] it's milled wider, so it requires less yardage and saves on costs; gabardine's for suits, overcoats, and trousers, but requires special treatment when cleaning, generally carries a *dry cleaning only* label;[3] chambray's for shirts, collars, and cuffs; it's light weight with a fine weave; always line jackets; cover the raw seams;[4] no need to spend a lot of money for more expensive fabrics like silk; it's on the inside where nobody sees it; a thinner, synthetic nylon will do just fine;[5]wool blends, tweeds, corduroy and flannel are best for the winter; gingham and calico cotton for dresses and shorts in the summer; seersucker, with its puckered appearance is great for summer time; the weave allows the fabric to breath during our humid Georgia summers; taffeta is expensive and hard to work with; it's worth it, though for wedding and evening gowns;[6] it holds its shape denim is thick and cumbersome; it's difficult to sew; it breaks

1It takes the same to raise a daughter—and it's easier the second time around.

[2]Life is full of adversity. Learn how to be strong and stand your ground.

[3] Expect special treatment from a man; if you value yourself, you will not put up with anything less.

[4] Cover your pain too. Don't let anyone see you hurt. Put on a happy face.

[5] Don't worry about what other people think.

[6] If you don't have to work for something, then you can't see its value.

the needles;[7] learn which ones drape properly and hold their shape;[8]choosing the right fabric for what you're sewing makes all the difference in the world.

[7] Don't make things hard on yourself, think before you leap.

[8] Wait until the right person comes long; don't lower your standards.

A Patina of Softly Textured Rust

Mother: *We met in 1946 at the McCall Law Office located in the Sowega Building in downtown Adel. I was a stenographer. Your daddy came in to see Mr. McCall about Mr. Milton's estate, you know the man your grandma married, your Uncle Randall's father. He was a lot older than her so he died when she was a young woman, when your Uncle Randall was little. Your daddy was helping his mother out. He was always helping someone.*

By the time I grew to understand my mother as a woman, she had built a wall of steel around herself—— a protective coating to keep the pain from rusting through.

Grandmother: *He was so handsome. She was smitten, right away. She was only seventeen when they married, nearer eighteen, but no more than a teenager. He was twenty-four. They didn't wait long to get married, going to the preacher's house not quite a year later. And didn't waste no time in having a baby.*

The first signs of rust are tiny specks or spots. Left untreated, the spots get bigger and turn into bumpy-looking pustules. Eventually, these pustules break open and spread.

Aunt: *The war did something to him—like it did to all of them—he was different when he came back. He had a hard time with it.*

After some time, an object will start to hold onto its discoloration and the patina will work as a seal—and in

Mother: *Back then, we didn't have pills and such to prevent pregnancy. If you were fertile, a woman got pregnant pretty quick after marrying. We'd only been married two months when I got pregnant.*

Son: *He never took me hunting, even though he knew I loved to hunt. It was Uncle Jay who took me hunting and taught me how to use a gun. I asked him why once. He said he had done all the shooting he wanted to do.*

Mother: *I was an honor graduate in high school. I used to work algebra problems that filled the chalkboard, right there in the same school building where you go to school. Mr. Sessions used to call me up to the board because he thought I was the only one who could work the problem.*

Aunt: *I know how you feel. I grew up being the ugly duckling. It's hard having a sister as beautiful as your mother, and me looking like I do, curly red hair and freckles.*

Aunt: *Your daddy quit school in eighth grade to help your Grandma. He swept the floors at a grocery store for a dollar a week, helping her feed and clothe us. He had to help Mama. She divorced Daddy and he wasn't allowed to return to*

the meantime will have adorned with discolorations and stains.

My daddy had WWII inside him. He served as a gunner in the Pacific Islands for five years, long before he met my mother. Before he was 24 years old, he had searched dead bodies on battlegrounds and liberated concentration camps. It never showed outwardly, but it was there. Like so many others, he had left home a boy and returned a man.

With a normally formed patina layer, an object will become rustproof. A layer of patina does not make an object *completely* rustproof because it can be worn off through heavy use.

Georgia. After Papa Juhan committed suicide, Mama was in a bad way. We had no money and it was during the Depression. I felt bad that he couldn't go to school. But he got his GED later on, some time before he left for the Pacific.

Mother: *Don't ask your daddy questions about the war. He doesn't like to talk about it. If he brings something up, just listen. Don't ask for any details.*

"Nothing can destroy iron but its own corrosion."

~Ratan Naval Tata

Grandmother: *Your mother wanted to be a nurse. She applied to Emory University's nursing school up in Atlanta, but was denied. Said she was too young. School was only eleven years then, so she was only sixteen. She was a smart girl. But then she met your daddy and forgot all about school, I guess.*

Old Parisians know that the Eiffel tower has changed its color more than once.

Cousin: *Oooooweee, I thought your mama was something else when I was a little boy. She was the prettiest thing I'd ever seen. Fixed her hair and wore pretty dresses. She had graduated high school and worked at a business downtown there in Adel. I thought she was the smartest person in the world to be working at a law office.*

Aunt: *Me and Mama moved in with your mother and daddy when I was about thirteen. Shoot—your daddy taught me how to drive a car. Your Mama worked in town while Mama kept the house and did the cooking. She looked out after your sister, too. I don't know what we would have done if it wasn't for them taking us in.*

Because external influences can emerge in different ways, two exactly similar objects exposed to different circumstances, will produce different discolorations.

Grandmother: *Your granddaddy and I never got a divorce. We lived separate until he died. I left because he drank. I wasn't raised that way and I couldn't live with a drunk. It worked out good for me to live with ya'll. That way your mother could work—because she needed to—she's the one who provided things like insurance and a steady paycheck—and I could look out after all of you children in return.*

Well-known catalysts of patina are: woundedness, fear, trauma, and burdens and are often passed down from one generation to another.

Aunt: *I hated your daddy when I was a little girl. Lord, he made me get up at the crack of dawn every morning and milk the cow. He was sixteen—and running that turpentine farm for Mr. Milton because he was old and sick. I think back on what all he did for us—your daddy was the oldest boy, you know. Well, I don't know what we would have done without him. Such a huge responsibility for a young boy. Mama really depended on him.*

Cousin: *Oh, your mama was something else, all right. She helped me get a job at Moody Air Force Base right after I got back from the Korean War. Me and Bessie lived in a little place—we didn't have much. I'd been looking for a job. We were barely getting by. Your mama called me up one day, right out of the blue. Told me she knew about a job at Moody—that's where she worked—in civilian payroll. Said she thought I needed to apply because it was a good job. I did. And I got that job. She offered me a ride to work with her every day because I didn't have a car. Going from making nothing to $30 a week was a big deal back then. One of the first things I did after I saved some money for a while was go see your daddy at the car lot and buy me a car. I'll never forget that—her helping me that way.*

If one is aware of the existence of patina, they will know how to look through it and see the masterpiece hidden underneath.

What if My Mother was a Chaucer Scholar at Harvard?

Dating would be a challenge. She would intimidate the young men courting her with her attempts at a literary discussion. Even though they were aware of her position at the university, and even though she knew in advance that their literary prowess would be limited to reading Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* in ninth grade, they were mesmerized by her beauty and voluptuous figure, and she was mesmerized by the power of her position as a literary superior.

Most relationships would begin like this:

On a first date with a promising young man, whom she would later discard because of his lack of understanding regarding her dedication to her discipline, she would initiate a deeper conversation after the early pleasantries. After her date ordered coffee for the two of them, she sitting back in a more submissive fashion and letting him treat her like a lady, which he definitely should, even though submissiveness goes against the grain of her personality, she decided to initiate a not-so-romantic conversation with him. She considered her date boring after watching him squirm when she proposed a question. *Did you read "The Parliament of Fowles" by Chaucer?* When he remained silent, pondering the absurdity of the question, she remained speechless as well, allowing the silence to plume like the recent bomb on Hiroshima, and let him contemplate how little he really did know. Guessing that he had probably never, until that very moment, heard of *The Parliament of Fowles*, but might possibly have heard of *Canterbury Tales*, but she wondered about even that since he failed to immediately mention studying it in high school, *which is what most do*, she decided to give him a reprieve since he fought in the Battle of the Bulge in Belgium a few years ago and made it out alive. He should get some credit for that feat, which made him a hero of sorts in her eyes, but not one she wanted to spend countless lazy Sunday

afternoons with for the rest of her life or permanently in her bed, for that matter, if he didn't know literary-speak, or Chaucer-speak, to be more precise.

Marriage would seem to elude her, passing the old maid designation by a few years, but still young enough to have a family, which was deemed the only wholesome thing a young woman could do. Even after spending years in university, fending off her male professors who were really wolves in sheep's clothing going from one promising scholar to another, and occasionally marrying one of them, and her trying to pretend the world's expectation of her was anything less. It would be when she had given up hope and resigned to this status that she would encounter one of those masticating libertines in the library while reviewing some new textbooks for an upcoming class on "The Life & Writings of Geoffrey Chaucer," him personifying the classic absent-minded professor, patched-elbow sport jacket and all, and she, much to her dismay, personifying the smart, studious *graduate assistant* to which he was so accustomed to seducing, and not imaging the young attractive woman was, in fact, a Chaucerian professor at the university who happened to be on a six month sabbatical when he was recently hired. Over sandwiches at the student union, she forgave him for his narrow-minded assumptions about her, when he proposed a very scholarly question, of course thinking she'd never heard of it, and that he would enlighten her and dazzle her with his brilliance. *Have you read "Against Women Unconstant?"* A clever move that she had not anticipated, and a bold one she had reserved for herself—yes, he had beaten her at her own game. She fell madly in love with him, and he with her *because* she fell madly in love with him. She allowed that long gap of silence, to which she was so accustomed, to inhabit the space between them. *Yes, I have read it. What evidence do you think is the most crucial as proof of Chaucer's penmanship?* Again, she used a long pause to her

advantage. She continued without demureness or acquiescing to his male patriarchy, *I agree with Skeat and Robinson's theory about the mirror in Stanza 2,* and after learning her true position at Harvard, he found her more alluring than ever, which was quite contrary to his typical male-female arrangement. Her marriage to him, which would come about rather swiftly because she did not have any time to lose, would be predicated on the fact that he was a Chaucer consumer who had his own copy of *A Companion to Chaucer* resting next to his worn armchair, just as dogeared as hers, and even though she suspected he was as devious as the professor who gifted her copy to her, she no longer cared and was more than willing to put up with whatever followed in an effort to facilitate societal expectations, and those of her family, while enabling her to share her life with someone like-minded.

Taking Inventory

in the chest of drawers

container filled with ear bobs and lapel pins that belonged to your mother

you held onto the small memories of your mother, the same as I have held onto the little items you wore. she wore them to church on Sundays. the container resides in my drawer now—black marker scribbled on the lid in your handwriting *mother's ear bobs*.

pencil drawing of a 1940's woman, on faded yellow paper, deep creases from the folds. I surmise it was drawn in your teen years based on the clothing and hairstyle. the proportions are all wrong—very wide chest, tiny feet and head—and her face is in profile. the oddity of the drawing strikes me—the woman has no hands. are they hiding in the sleeves of her coat? or did you stop working on it before you drew the hands? the lines are heavy, drawn with skill, and the shading of the hair is remarkable—a freehanded drawing free of hands.

Union Road

My mother had a brother, delivered dead into a bucket at six months. My grandmother said her first born had blue eyes so bright, “you wouldn’t know he wasn’t alive.” And six years after my mother, her baby sister was born in their house on Union Road, nearly dying. And the birth nearly killed my grandmother. Miss June from across the road, my grandmother’s best friend, stood in the yard wringing her hands, waiting to tell my granddaddy the bad news. My fiery red-headed aunt had presented transverse. The doctor had to chloroform my grandmother, turn the baby, and pull—no forceps back then, just hands. Did my mother sit on the front porch that last day of May in 1935 as the limp body of my aunt exited my grandmother? Did old Dr. Oliphant pat her on the head, black bag in hand, as he stepped up on the porch, knowing he came to attend a mother and baby in distress—knowing they wouldn’t have called him unless she was on her deathbed?

Letter to Cecil, Georgia

You barely know me. I visited you many times when I was growing up, and in my teens, I attended Cecil Baptist Church because my mother longed to get back to her roots. But you knew my mother and my grandmother well—and my great-grandparents too. You met my mother in 1929 on March 22nd, six months before the infamous stock market crash. The Great Depression that followed hit your rural community hard.

Only .97 square miles and a population of around 275 people, you aren't any bigger now than when my mother and her parents lived in the house on Union Road, next door to Cecil Baptist Church. You, Ocala, Florida, and Adel, Georgia knew my mother long before I did.

She roamed freely along the railroad tracks and walked to the commissary—that I know. Did she skip along the railroad ties when they were empty of engines and cars? She played house in the dirt yard, tying string around sticks pushed into the ground to lay out the rooms. She had corn cob dolls, handmade by her Grandmother Hall. She helped her mother sweep the yard inside the slatted fence that bordered the property, my grandmother obsessed with tidiness even when it was dirt. I imagine she started in one corner and moved across the yard in a specific pattern, knocking the chickens out of the way—the ones that chased my mother and made her scream. She told me about smoking homemade cigarettes with her cousin Wyolene when they were only nine-years-old, hiding in the cattails by a pond, rolling Prince Albert in their long, flat leaves. (She couldn't afford the nickel pack of Happy Days Cigarettes.)

I bet she rode to Hahira's tobacco auction in the summertime in the bed of her daddy's 1930 Ford truck. She probably sat in it while he went inside to watch the auction and talk to his friends with his leg perched up on a sheet of cooked tobacco. Or maybe she wandered down the street to Spearman's grocery, kicking the dirt up as she skipped, with a nickel curled in the palm of her hand to buy a Coca-Cola. I wonder if her lush head of curls blew across her face as she dangled her feet off the tail of the truck. I wonder who brushed her hair and pulled it back in the barrettes she wore on each side.

I grew up riding to Cecil in the backseat of my mother's car on Sunday afternoons when she drove my grandmother to visit Miss June, who still lived on the same road. You sent us cool breezes on her screened porch and camellias to pick from her yard—and a carpet of Sycamore tree leaves in the fall. You know how we got there—we turned off 41 Highway, crossed the railroad tracks, and cruised down a dirt road past Mr. Elmo King's pecan grove, and curve left when we reached his house. There—on the right—Miss June lived in a little, white clapboard house, hedges to the windows, with a blue door.

You knew my mother's Aunt Jenny too—her favorite aunt—the one everyone said my mother resembled. She was her daddy's sister, unmarried, and lived in the house with them. And you knew about her scandalous affair with a married man—and about the boy she had by him. I imagine you knew where they met up and where this child was conceived. For certain you knew about the day he was killed in the saw mill a few blocks away, when he was only thirteen years old, my mother's childhood friend. You heard Jenny's screams as she ran down the road toward the saw mill when she heard it happen. My mother said Aunt Jenny knew, right then, before

anyone told her. She said they had to hold her back. It took three men to keep her from going inside that saw mill.

Truth is, I ride through Cecil from time to time, seeking a connection to my mother, remembering the way it looked when I was a child. I drive across the railroad tracks and turn onto what is now Union Street, but from a different road—the old one barricaded. The house is gone now. The church purchased the property and tore it down to construct a parking lot. I thought about retrieving a brick from the chimney after the demolition started. I never did. Someone from Cecil told me they had the fireplace mantle from the house—wanted to know if I wanted it.

I said yes. I think I would like to have a piece of Cecil, Georgia in my house one day.

EPILOGUE

Diminuendo

Why stay here for the suffering? I asked. *Why not?* answered my mother. I reclined in her weary bones and shushed her whimpers by singing favored hymns, her raspy breath strumming the tunes. I caressed the map of her coral-covered wrinkles, wrapped in angel-linen, and brushed the silver fire atop her crown. *You can go now.* With the pink and butter sky of her lips, she whispered, *Why?*

She had harnessed herself to this world, clinging to a ship that pulled both of us into its turbulent wake, heads bobbing above the frothy foam, fish fin legs treading the churning water, struggling against a riptide rush. *I want to go home,* she begged, her skin frail as the shadow of a sapphire. *You can't. Don't you remember?* She spoke of a rain-filled night where she searched for shelter and no one would give her sanctuary.

Will you stay with me? She wanted to know. *Yes,* I told her. *I'll walk you to the hand of God.* I tended her body, nourished it like a withered plant needing water to survive. A white-clothed siren sang as it floated past, beckoning to the linen-bed. *What can I do to make this journey easier for you?* I asked her, while a rant of ravens—hackles ruffled as they squawked a symphony of protest—flocked bedside, dead eyes vigilant, clawed talons covering the ground like a black silk cape. *I have to do this my own way. In my own time.*

Azrael arrived bearing a coda of light, slipping through an incipient crack in the ceiling, while dandelions turned and stared through the window—their wind-blown white cloaks atop the skinny chartreuse stalk floating away to the *diminuendo* of her heart.

APPENDIX
READING LIST

Reading List

Craft

A Field Guide to Prose Poetry	Rose Metal Press
A Memoirist Who Mistrusts Her Own Memories	Annie Ernaux
A Self Made of Words, Crafting a Distinctive Persona in Nonfiction	Carl H. Klaus
Family Resemblance: An Anthology of 8 Hybrid Literary Genres	Sulak & Kolosov
Tell It Slant	Brenda Miller & Suzanne Paola
The Poetry Gymnasium	Tom Hunley
The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Writing Flash Nonfiction	Rose Metal Press
The Shell Game	Kim Adrian, Editor

Creative Nonfiction

Crafting the Personal Essay	Dinty Moore
The Life of Images	Charles Simic
Modern Loss	Rebecca Soffer & Gabrielle Birkner

Creative Nonfiction Biography

A Twenty Minute Silence Followed by Applause	Shawn Wen
Fanny Says	Nikole Brown
When My Brother Was an Aztec	Natalie Diaz

Hybrid

Donkey Elegies	Nikole Brown
The UnRhymables: Collaborations in Prose	Julie M. Wade & Denise Duhamel
Love, An Index	Rebecca Lindenberg
Obit	Victoria Chang
Syzygy, Beauty	T Fleischmann
The Body an Essay	Jenny Boully

Memoir

A Girl's Story	Annie Ernaux
A Woman's Story	Annie Ernaux
All Over But the Shoutin'	Rick Bragg
Essays After Eighty	Donald Hall
Fierce Attachments	Vivian Gornick
Heating & Cooling: 52 Micro Memoirs	Beth Ann Fennelly
Just an Ordinary Woman Breathing	Julie Marie Wade
Not a Novel, A Memoir in Pieces	Jenny Erpenbeck
On the Road with Sean of the South	Sean Dietrich
Safekeeping	Abigail Thomas
The Balloonists	Eula Biss
The Bestiary	Lily Hoang
The Dead Mom's Club	Kate Spencer

The Memory Palace	Mira Bartok
The Orphan Factory, Essays & Memoirs	Charles Simic
The Riot Inside Me	Wanda Coleman
The Space Between: A Memoir of Mother-Daughter	Virginia Simpson
The Unemployed Fortune-Teller	Charles Simic
The Way We Weren't	Jill Talbot
The Year of Magical Thinking	Joan Didion
What My Mother & I Don't Talk About	Michele Filgate, Editor
When the Circle is Unbroken	Sean Dietrich
Wishbone	Julie Marie Wade

Poetry

Blood Dazzler	Patricia Smith
Braided Creek, A Conversation in Poetry	Jim Harrison & Ted Kooser
Bright Dead Things	Ada Limón
King Me	Roger Reeves
Mercurochrome	Wanda Coleman
Please	Jericho Brown
Short Talks	Anne Carson
The Rusted City	Rochelle Hurt

REFERENCES & NOTES

The following texts and authors are either directly quoted or paraphrased. In some cases, only an idea or snippets of words were plucked from text to spark my imagination, used to convey a similar idea—and often creating new context from the same words.

Brock-Broido, Lucie, "Currying the Fallow-Colored Horse." *Poetry Foundation*. April, 2013. www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/56168/currying-the-fallow-colored-horse.

Chaudhary, Vineet, "Top Inspirational Quotes by Ratan Tata." *Timesnext.* December 31, 2019. www.timesnext.com/top-10-inspirational-quotes-by-ratan-tata/.

Coulter, Lynn, "How to Treat Rust on Plants." *HGTV*, accessed September 17, 2020. www.hgtv.com/outdoors/gardens/planting-and-maintenance/how-to-treat-rust-on- plants.

Dario, Ruben, "Nocturne," All Poetry, accessed June 25, 2020. www.allpoetry.com/poem/85416541-Nocturne-by-Ruben-Dario.

Elderidge, Lynn, M. D., "Recurrent Respiratory Infections in Adults: Potential Causes and When to Be Concerned." *Very Well Heath.com*, accessed October 12, 2020. https://www.verywellhealth.com/recurrent-respiratory-infections-in-adults-4777146.

Espaillat, Rhina P., “How Tiresome.” *Rattle*. April 2, 2018. https://www.rattle.com/how-tiresome-by-rhina-p-espaillat/.

Glück, Louise, “Visitors from Abroad,” *The Poetry Foundation*. December, 2013. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/56625/visitors-from-abroad.

Knives and Tools.com, “What is Patina on a Knife?” accessed September 17, 2020. https://www.knivesandtools.com/en/ct/what-is-patina-on-a-knife.htm.

Ortega-Calvo, Manuel, et. al., “The Metaphor of Patina.” *Open Journal of Philosophy,* November, 2014.

Rabaté, Jean-Michel, “Rust,” Kindle ed., Bloomsbury Academic, New York, March 2018.

Schjeldahl, Peter, “Richard Serra, Gagosian.” *The New Yorker*, January 27, 2020, pg. 5.

Talbot, Jill, “The Rooms.” *The Paris Review*, March 20, 2020 https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2020/03/20/the-rooms/.

Wagner, Corinna, “Replicating Venus: Art, Anatomy, Wax Models, and Automata.” *Replicating Bodies in Nineteenth-Century Science and Culture*, Issue 24, May 11, 2017, pg.7. https://19.bbk.ac.uk/article/id/1525/.

Walsh, Collen, "Hard-earned Gains for Women at Harvard." *The Harvard Gazette,* April 26, 2012. www. news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2012/04/hard-earned-gains-for-women-at-harvard/

"When Did Each of the Ivy League Colleges Start Admitting Women?" *Quora*, accessed, July 9, 2020. www.quora.com/When-did-each-of-the-Ivy-League-colleges-start-admitting-women.

"Radcliffe College." Wikipedia, last modified, October 5, 2020. www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Radcliffe_College.

A Daughter's Nondisclosure Agreement is an imitation of Paul Rudnick's "All-Purpose Nondisclosure Agreement" published in *The New Yorker* October 29, 2018.

In **Blind Spots**, the line *there are always rooms we'll be standing in* is taken from Jill Talbot's "The Rooms."

Two years after I had written **Death is an Orphan Factory,** I discovered the writer Charles Simic and his book *The Orphan Factory.* His short essay by the same name inspired the title but not the concept. Immediately after my mother's death, I had thoughts of orphanhood and an assembly line.

I had to find a way to acknowledge the work my mother did as a social worker and the heavy emotional burdens she carried as a result. **for the skeletal baby at the morgue,** inspired by Nicole Stellon O'Donnell's "Each One, Every One," was a way to highlight that nurturing spirit, but at the same time show the irony of it.

The title of **How many minutes have I left, to still be beautiful?** is a line from Lucie Brock-Broido's poem "Currying the Fallow-Colored Horse."

Late Night ***Ap·o·lo·gi·a*** follows the style of John Henry Newman's "Apologia Pro Vita Sua," written in defense of his religious opinions and published in 1864, as a reply to a pamphlet entitled "What, Then, Does Dr. Newman Mean?" Apologias are often an oral or written defense to garner public sympathy over matters where the author feels he has been wrongly accused or publicly shamed over his opinions or actions.

After reading "Letter to Bourbon County, Kentucky," by Marisa Williams, I knew an epistolary form would work ideally to give certain facts about my mother's childhood even though I had limited information about it. **Letter to Cecil, Georgia** allowed me to speculate on the early years of her childhood and blend it with certain facts that I knew.

Notes on Aging: Living with Macular Degeneration in Your Eighties was inspired by poet Donald Hall's essay "Notes Nearing Ninety."

The illustration **Nude Female with Battle Scars** is a drawing of *Venus di Medici*, by Richard Dalton, after Simon Francois Ravenet, 1746, (Wellcome Library, London.). Wax figures of Venus were used to illustrate the female anatomy in a medical context.

The phrase **A Patina of Softly Textured Rust** came from a description of a particular piece of artwork created by sculptor Richard Serra in his New York show—"a 200-foot-long elongated piece of two-inch-thick weather-proof steel." This phrase reminded me so much of how I would describe my mother and serves as a metaphor of the book.

Archeologists have proven that the Greek and Roman statues in museums were originally colored by their sculptors, and not the pure white marble we see today. The New Yorker article "Color Blind," inspired so many ideas about the "traces of pigment" that survive in all of us and the many layers within that are only revealed after we scratch the surface. I imagined my mother in this way and incorporated concepts from this article in **sgraf·fi·to.**

What She Thought About While Taking Dictation was inspired by Megan Pillow Davis' "What Your Mother Thinks While Making the Bed."

When I Kissed Her Today, She Smelled Like Coconut was inspired by Caroline Blumer's "Oranges."