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BLUE HERON GOODBYE: A COLLECTION OF ESSAYS

by

Holly Rose Hansen

A thesis submitted to the faculty of

Brigham Young University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of English

Brigham Young University

August 2008

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

of a thesis submitted by

Holly Rose Hansen

This thesis has been read by each member of the following graduate committee and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

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BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

As chair of the candidate's graduate committee, I have read the thesis of Holly Rose Hansen in its final form and have found that (1) its format, citations, and bibliographical style are consistent and acceptable and fulfill university and department style requirements; (2) its illustrative materials including figures, tables, and charts are in place; and (3) the final manuscript is satisfactory to the graduate committee and is ready for submission to the university library.

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## ABSTRACT

### BLUE HERON GOODBYE: A COLLECTION OF ESSAYS

Holly Rose Hansen

Department of English

Master of Arts

As is typical to the way I write essays, I did not understand the goal of this collection until I wrote the last essay, “Blue Heron Goodbye.” Up until that point I was calling the collection “Why We Need Bloodhounds.” This title felt sufficiently representative to me of the goal of the collection because in this essay I use discussions canvassing the Bloodhounds’ strong sense of smell to focus my discussion about the world of the heart. However, when I wrote “Blue Heron Goodbye,” I realized I wasn’t only interested in the struggles of the human heart (a broad topic too heavy for any collection) but finding a place for my heart to live. What I mean by that, is that everyone has struggles and joys but what makes living feel worthwhile, to me, is that I can examine those emotions in a place of calm, away from the jarring pace of the whizzing world. In the essay, “Blue Heron Goodbye”, the heron is surrounded by man’s technology of speed—a concrete freeway and zipping cars—yet the heron finds solitude by her churning river. I find solitude in my essays. This collection’s goal is the heron’s goal: to find the hidden hope of self-examination in solitude amid chaos.

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I especially want to thank the members of my committee: Dr. Dean Hughes for inspiring me to write in the first place, and for his friendship; Dr. Stephen Tuttle for teaching me to see little stories; and for Dr. Madden for teaching me to write personal essays, and for his quiet encouragement of my writing. I would also like to thank all my teachers and those I have gotten to know during my master's program. These two years have turned on a light inside me, after living in the dark so long.

This collection is dedicated to Dad's Midnight Moneybags Taxi Service. I couldn't have done it without you all these years, and I might still need a couple of bucks down the road.

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## INTRODUCTION

## Critical Introduction

Sitting on the patio reading Phillip Lopate's, *The Art of the Personal Essay*, but enjoying the rush of wind, sun, and jasmine more, I felt I knew what it was to be an essayist: to savor life in snippets, but to be constantly interrupted by the need to capture life in words. The words I want to capture live in my backyard, surrounding the covered patio where I read and wait. The cool cement is the perfect place for waiting because this postage stamp in the desert is an oasis where stories are blown to bloom. Beyond the brick wall flows no well-water, but the territory I can see, approximately 28 yards by 26 yards, is home to soft grasses, a pool, tall cyprus and wispy mesquite. The birds have migrated to our water, flying between sagebrush and backyard havens. I watch a pair of mocking birds as they hop in and out of their cyprus tree home. I hear one of the birds screeching, and find her, tail up, aggressively attacking a crackle, a robin sized bird roughly her size. Her relentless dive bombs and jabs make me chuckle until my mother reminds me of something sobering: "The crackle steals the mocking bird's babies." I feel her words making a story within me. *These birds aren't trying to please me with their songs and beauty. I was laughing about a real battle for survival.* I know I have found a story worthy of essaying because it reminds me of mocking bird attacks I remember from my childhood: the sudden screeching and frightening graze of feathers and talons rushing through my hair. As I watch stories hop in and out of my gaze, I feel as I do during a birdy dive bomb attack, both exhilaration and sudden fright. The exhilaration comes from knowing I've found a story, the fright from knowing I must tell it well.



Some would consider a green patch in the desert too ordinary, too banal a place for gathering stories. But these simple stories feel alive to me the way grass does as it tickles my bare feet. The stories that form my essays, allow me to see marvel between the contrast in the world I would otherwise overlook, like the beauty in the contrast of gray desert and well-watered green. Phillip Lopate describes this idea of seeing home grown stories: “only the idle person is able to practice *seeing*—to perceive the little, uncommercial miracles of life. The essayist here aligns himself with what is traditionally considered a female perspective, in its appreciation of sentiment, dailiness, and the domestic” (Lopate xxxv). Had I only ever seen Las Vegas, and only heard the stories my own family told me, I would not consider my backyard as a garden fit for growing essays. But I have traveled and seen others’ exotic “backyards.” Chatting with a local of Kailua, Oahu, overlooking turquoise and turtle green water, cupped by the dark arms of ancient lava flow and jungle, I asked him how he kept his eyes on the narrow road as he drove. “You know, I forget to look at it most of the time,” he said to me. When he learned I was from Las Vegas he became enthralled. “Oh, I love Las Vegas, it’s so exciting!” I have found the exotic alluring and useful in adding spice to my writing, but the more ordinary, domestic aspects of life, whether at home or away, are where I find the seeds of essays. I can only find this tiny kernel as I practice the art of seeing what is just beyond my patio. As the essay is an exercise in seeing, I am provided a venue to see how words grow into stories, how stories grow into connections, how connections grow into meaning.

I’m not sure why we have stories, except that people seem to need them. Brian Doyle writes, “I see little stories everywhere and I like to catch them and show them to other people much as a child catches a moth and exhibits it with glee to friends and

passersby” (xv). The stories I have tried to capture are like the stories Doyle compares to a moth—small almost insignificant whisperings of a story. Like the moth or butterfly, stories feel organic to me, growing in a world outside my notice, then drifting into my view, but stories also feel delicate, are easily lost or overlooked in the hurry of busy life, and can come into view and leave my notice just as quickly. The kind of story I want to write begins simply, from memories I find in my own backyard, but can grow into something more complex changing like a butterfly within the chrysalis. I want to share my stories like Doyle suggests because that is how most stories come to me, by others sharing bits of themselves with me through stories. Here’s one: my mother told me a story about her father’s death. After he died, a butterfly sat by her for a while and she thought it was her dad’s spirit coming to say goodbye, and my mother told me that my grandmother also had the same experience. It would be difficult to say if this story made my grandfather’s passing easier for anyone, but I think of my grandfather whenever I see butterflies. This is a simple story, but I have come to see beauty and happiness in things I would have once overlooked.

Finding stories to write was not the greatest challenge I faced writing this collection of essays. The greatest challenge was knowing what stories to write. Because stories were (and still are) constantly blowing to my patio, I needed a sorting process. I cannot write everything: some stories may be interesting but lack depth; others too egocentric without general human appeal; and still others too salacious, pandering to baser human emotions. Another challenge I faced was knowing how to begin these stories. When I feel a story is appropriate for essaying and feel I’ve found a story I need to tell, I still rarely know what I am writing about until I’ve written it. In allowing essays

to grow as I write, I take risks with my time and energy because sometimes I've written essays only to find I am no longer interested in the stories by the end. Perhaps I'm guilty of narcissism, but if I don't feel the story is worth reading, I doubt anyone else would either. In short, the essay needs precise conditions in order to come to life—well-watered ground to planting these windblown stories before they will bloom.

Conventional writing wisdom suggests I will best find this fertile ground by waiting—waiting years and years before attempting the essay. Lopate suggests we let our stories age like wine, only writing once we have distance enough to look back on our life with some sort of mature perspective. “The personal essayist looks back at the choices that were made, the roads not taken, the limiting familial and historical circumstances, and what might be called the catastrophe of personality” (xxxvii). Lopate suggests this looking back can only take place after middle age; that the young cannot think deeply. He considers contemplation of the small uncommercial miracles incomprehensible to nearly everyone below forty-something. “While young people excel at lyrical poetry and mathematics, it is hard to think of anyone who made a mark on the personal essay form in his or her youth” (xxxvii) Lopate does concede that young essayists may “make their mark on the personal essay form in his or her youth,” namely James Baldwin and Joan Didion with their world-weary personae. Didion, at thirty-four, is given specific notoriety for her “trademark,” disenchantment.

I am conflicted by Lopate's age restriction because I agree with him that the essayists needs a certain soberness to “see” what most people overlook, but I disagree with Lopate that only middle aged people can learn to see as an essayist. In fact, having only thirty-one years of life, I'm decidedly against Lopate's age restriction. Hopefully

what Lopate is suggesting is that by middle age, people probably experience sobering events which, if they are willing, will help them see as the essayist must see. However, experience, in my mind, is a far better teacher than time alone in understanding what are our “limiting familial and historical circumstances,” and the meaning of the “catastrophe of personality.” My five years in a physically and emotionally abusive marriage certainly sobered me to the realities of life. Not only was my marriage failing, but my health as well. For two years I could not stand, sit, or sleep without major discomfort. I threw up regularly, was almost always nauseated, felt generally exhausted, and sometimes could not even swallow food. The doctors had no diagnosis for my mysterious symptoms, making me feel like a hypochondriac. My husband saw my illness as a severe inconvenience to his plans, refusing many times to take me to the hospital or doctor when I needed care. But probably the most debilitating aspect was that no matter what doctor I visited, no matter what I tried to appease and please my husband, nothing solved the problems, they only worsened. When I think back to those five years, it feels like the compression of twenty years of experience. Whether that is true or not is not verifiable, but I believe my loss of innocence gave me a perspective greater than five years in calm waters. I believe this ordeal also taught me to see the beauty in small things. I learned to take pleasure in a peaceful moment on the sofa as the breeze blew on my face from an open window, or how relaxing hand-washing dishes in hot soapy water can be. I learned to see happiness in things I had never noticed before. My marriage and divorce provided the catalyst to essaying, a process of seeing what rushed around me like wind and what rustled within me as a result.

Despite the perspective I gained, after my divorce I felt broken, and I needed to rebuild. This was not an easy task, and I needed an approach weighty enough to make a difference. As I began to write, I saw essaying as a way to make myself, to define my experience in order to understand. Montaigne, the father of the essay, understood the generative power of words, “I have no more made my book than my book has made me” (504). Lopate continues, explaining Montaigne’s words further: “Thus the writing of personal essays not only monitors the self but helps it gel. The essay is an enactment of the creation of the self” (xliv). After my husband left when I served him divorce papers, I felt I was left with only one word—*divorced*—and I became that word and not much else. It chimed in my head wherever I went—*divorced, divorced, divorced, divorced, divorced*. But I did not want to deny the experience of the past because what I learned I valued. Essays helped me surround the word *divorced* by words I felt and feel are reflective of the kind of person I was and wanted to be: woman, teacher, writer, friend. Essays are not clever words to me, but tangible building material.

*Blue Heron Goodbye* is a collection of essays peppered with the ugliness, shame, and hope I saw because of my divorce. During this time, my life felt completely chaotic and beyond my control, and because of this chaos I could not see significance in those painful experiences. It was difficult to see five years of my life turn to waste, and misery seemed the only constant in those years. This collection has become my attempt at clarifying for myself what I had experienced beyond the misery, an exercise in seeing clearly when I’m surrounded by what feels like senseless disorder. In “Blue Heron Goodbye,” the piece to close my collection, though the heron’s “muddy sanctuary” is hidden by man’s concrete push for forward movement, the heron retains her ability to

philosophize about her churning river, undisturbed in her “birding repose.” The heron’s hidden hope of self-examination in solitude amid chaos is one I claim for myself within this work.

I found more than solitude amid chaos in writing this collection. I learned that the essay is generative of the self, and that the process of writing essays is organic, growing and taking a shape of its own. Usually my essays begin within a kernel of what is happening in the present. As I have written previously, conventional wisdom in the genre of essays is to let our ideas mellow, and to look back, not to write what is immediately happening. However, there are several reasons why I put aside this advice in some parts of my essays. The first reason I write more new events is because I can follow my thoughts better as they develop throughout the essay, if I write them as honestly as I felt them. I am less honest about my feelings the longer I’ve had time to rationalize with my thinking mind. Even if I weren’t an essayist, I would still rationalize, however as I write, I must work against this tendency if I want to bring honesty to my work. “I work by Hemingway’s precept that a writer’s root charge is to distinguish what you really felt in the moment from the false sentiment of what you now believe you should have felt” (Wolff 26). I have been amazed when I read my writing journal. I think, *did I write that? I was so angry, or wow, I was sad.* We can forget how we felt as events change the meaning of other events. Time dulls the initial ugliness of the moment, which is good for mending hearts, but sometimes bad for essay writing. My heart knows something in that moment which is brutal and beautiful, and I try to preserve that for my readers.

Of course, I cannot write everything from the starting point of immediacy, nor would I want to. “Woman’s Washing” is primarily my memories of my mother. My

memories of childhood have been altered by time and experience: I would not have been capable as a child to comment sufficiently on the role of my mother in my life as I can now as an adult. In my essaying, I find a mixture of the very recent past and the long gone past the best way to convey the full range of emotions I am aiming for in a particular essay, or for the personal I'm trying to develop on paper. I am not alone in this approach, as I have read in the essays of other writers—Seneca's "On Noise" starts with a description of his current location—yet I feel compelled to discuss this approach because so much of writing theory only discusses the value and ethics of writing from our perspective of the long gone past. But there is one similarity for writing essays from present experience or the long gone past. Despite our best intention as writers to honestly portray insights into the human psyche, whether we write events five minutes past or 50 years gone, we are still filtering our essays through our own wonderfully biased minds.

No matter when I write, truth and honesty are tricky to handle because, "like an eel this essay creature is. It wriggles between narcissism and detachment, opinion, and fact. . ." (Kaplan 18). It is difficult to convey the truth because I know I remember how I want or believe things should or would be, even when I'm trying to remember them as they actually happened. Tracy Kidder warns, in "The Demands of the First Person Singular," that, "certainly some people are less likely to write honestly about themselves than about anyone else on earth." (27) I hope he wasn't speaking about me. During my intro to "Yellow Shirt Riddles," I turn the difficulty writer face with memory to my advantage. I begin, "The story I'm most curious to write is the one I forgot," and go on to explore how I reinterpreted myself because of my memory loss. While Mimi Schwartz's essay, "Memoir? Fiction? Where's the Line?" is dealing with being unsure about

memories, and in “Yellow Shirt Riddles,” I can’t remember a critical episode in my life, her essay is still helpful to me, because Schwartz discusses the problems of memory. She discusses the motivations authors may have to write events they “remember” happening but are not sure actually occurred according to the memory. “What a relief to memoir writers who want to explore the emotional truth of memory. It may be ‘murky terrain,’ you may cross the line into fiction and have to step back reluctantly into what happened” (340). In “Yellow Shirt Riddles” my question of memory revolves around actually forgetting a memory and how I’ve constructed the emotional truth for myself about how my mind forgot this trauma. A section from “Why We Need Bloodhounds,” deals with the same issue Schwartz is dealing with concerning emotional truth. Never before in my own life had the lines of fiction and reality crossed so close, and so I chose to write the following selection with those lines blurred.

That night on the sofa, I awoke, breathing heavily, heart leaping, scared to move, not knowing that I’d just woken up. Dallen had been behind my head and he’d reached slowly down my face, to hold my chin with one hand, and place the barrel of his pistol to my head. I felt the cold metal clunk against the back right side of my skull. How had he found out where I’d hidden it? Did he find the bullets too? I felt the room start to turn, like I do when I’m falling asleep, but faster. I blinked and breathed and tried to orient myself to what was happening. Dallen had gone. It had to have been a nightmare. But I could still feel the sensation of his gun against my head. Sometimes I feel it still.



People have asked me if it was a dream, or if he actually held the gun to my head, as if it was a writer's trick to withhold that information for dramatic effect. When I tell them I really don't know, I can see they are startled by this information. I have tried to look back at this incident to understand if it was dream or memory but I can't be for sure. I doubt my husband was actually behind my head with a gun, but the sensation of the gun was so real, I cannot be sure. His behavior during times I was awake was just as disturbing: his threatening cursing words toward me; his evil looks to me over simple questions or requests; his long unexplained absences; his own confession about illegal behavior; and the frightening story I learned from his friends about a previous failed attempt to kill a girl who refused his advances, all give me the sense that this "dream" or "memory" was close to the truth about his personality and allowed me to believe he was capable of doing something like this, even if he did not. Since I knew I could not clarify if the event actually happened, I wrote this section to clarify that I was confused about the event. That is all the truth I could ever hope for from this moment.

Another incident concerning the truthfulness of details in my own writing helped clarify some of my concerns about the problem of writing memories. After I wrote "Why We Need Bloodhounds," Pablo was looking over a section where he wrote that he loved me. He said I'd gotten the details wrong. "We were at Coral Pink when I wrote that. I remember. We were sitting by the fire." "No," I replied, "we were in my room, like I wrote." He still pressed the issue. My reply was Mimi Schwartz's reply, when she argued with her mother, over details in one of Schwartz's essays. "It was her memory against mine with no one else to ask, so I wasn't changing my story. It was true for me." (338). Pablo didn't like my answer; he wanted me to change it to suit his memory. But

what could I do? These were my memories not his, and in trying to find truth, I had to be true to what I remembered.

I find I can remember things more on the mark as I start from the present and work back. An incident in the present will trigger a memory, which will lead to another memory, and another, many of which I forgot ever happened. Setting the truth of these incidents aside, I work hard to remember the actual events because I feel this type of writing develops an intimacy to essays. The details in stories have the ring of truth to them, not like details forced to fit the theme an author is trying to develop.

I would qualify an intimate moment in essaying to be a time when the author shows himself as unguarded, a moment only a close friend would be permitted to see. The author could be exposing his or her fears, self doubt, a triumph, a private moment of happiness, or any number of thoughts and encounters the reader could only be privy to if the reader were a fly on the wall inside the author's brain. The following selection from Junichiro Tanizaki's "In Praise of Shadows," is a moment I would consider intimate. Tanizaki leads me into the private and beautiful world of the Japanese toilet. Such a place I never imagined to travel, but the essay reveals everything I never knew I wished I had in a toilet.

I love to listen from such a toilet to the sound of softly falling rain, especially if it is a toilet of the Kanto region, with its long, narrow windows at floor level; there one can listen with such a sense of intimacy to the raindrops falling from the eaves and the trees, seeping into the earth as they wash over the base of a stone lantern and freshen the moss about

the stepping stones [. . .] Here, I suspect, is where haiku poets over the ages have come by a great many of their ideas. (337)

I find Tanizaki's writing illuminating about the power essays have for creating intimacy with readers; a toilet, no matter how beautiful, would not normally be shared with another person. More importantly Tanizaki's observations could not be shared easily outside the essay, even if we were to squeeze next to him in his toilet because in the essay we are not actually experiencing Tanizaki's toilet, we are experiencing Tanizaki's feelings about the traditional Japanese toilet. Tanizaki's inclusion of such personal information about the joys of the lowly toilet, can be better appreciated in the light of Stephen Gould's ideas about essaying on personal experiences. "Why in heaven's name should I care about the travails of X or Y unless some clear generality about human life and nature emerges thereby?" (28). Tanizaki's handling of the subject matter of toilets removes the repugnancy of the toilet and makes the whole atmosphere feel poetic and inviting. Because of the intimacy of the moment, I consider his ideas about toilets that I would normally reject and in a way not possible without being there in that moment of dripping water and Tanizaki's unique perspective. As I have included many personal experiences in my essays, Tanizaki's example has been a useful guide.

The following selection from my essay, "Why We Need Bloodhounds," highlights my attempt at preserving the truth of the moment. The back story on this essay is that Pablo was my boyfriend at the time I wrote this section, and we knew that in April we both would be going our separate ways—he to Washington D.C. for an internship, I to teach English in Ethiopia.

Pablo is reading as I type my bloodhound essay. We're shoulder to shoulder with our laptops doing homework, propped against the headboard on my queen bed, the decorative mosquito netting making a little cocoon. I show him the section about himself and he feels compelled to type the following:

Yes, but Pablo loves Holly . . . .

I found his note again days later and almost erased it, but as a writer, words are sacred to me.

The ellipses at the end intrigues me. I think Pablo was saying, "I'm leaving end of April, so are you. I hope we keep longer than that. . . I don't want to say again we'll see each other in August and please don't abandon me for Ethiopia. I can't follow you that far."

I kept this section on Pablo's question about if I would be around in April, because when there are questions I cannot see the answers for, I tell stories. Usually the questions seem simpler than they are, like this dangerous one from Lisa Chavez: "What did it mean to be Indian?" My parents' Funk and Wagnall's dictionary reads: *A member of the aboriginal races of North America, South America, and the West Indies*. Chavez's essay, pages 30 to 36, feels more like an answer to me. "My entire life in Alaska has been shaped by the fact that people—both white and Native—think I am Athabascan or Yupik, Tlingit or Inupiat. I reaped the benefits of that [. . .] But I also reaped the pain" (35). I say more of *an* answer, because that is one part of her, the part of the persona she can wrangle onto the page, but she would have to write another essay, with perhaps a

slightly different persona, to answer all her questions for what it meant to her to be Indian.

Writing about her memories of Greece, Simone Poirier-Bures confronts her persona via letters she wrote as a college student. “They [the letters] were like apparitions—my own voice, my own thoughts from the past, a direct line to the person I had been 25 years before. . . . How to reconcile them to my present middle aged self? . . . Who and what was the real self?” (400). As Montaigne understood, Poirier-Bures realizes the self is constructed somewhere in that writing process. “I was making a manuscript, but I was also making a self.” This rebirth in writing is always painful for me. Tears are not uncommon. I experience something unique after I wrote “Allergic to Manna.” In the essay I describe my miraculous healing from not being able to eat wheat, to becoming again a wheat-ivore. One student in my master’s workshop didn’t believe me because her mother had celiac and she was convinced that a cure wasn’t possible. I was shocked. *But I’m telling the truth*, I’d explain, and I’d eat wheat in front of her. She’d known the wheat-allergic Holly. I couldn’t understand her questions: but how? that’s not possible. I’d push the essay back to her. *I just told you, it’s a miracle and I don’t understand it*. Part of the reason we are attracted to essays is that they give us open-ended questions with complex answers. This open format can allow the reader the space to look for answers in the same way the author did, even if their conclusions are differing. This search can create intimacy between reader and author.

However, not all readers will respond positively to unguarded intimacy on the page. My father blanched when he read this section about me and my date in a hammock from “Blue Heron Goodbye.” “The striped canvas suspends us together and we are quiet,

our belly skin touching accidentally as our shirts crinkle up. His skin feels hot, like the first time I touched it, soft like a woman's." My father looked up from the essay and said to me, "I might be old fashioned here, but I think it's a little racy to include your belly skin touching." My reply was short and sharp: "Yes, you are." But the conversation made me consider, what did this or any personal revelation achieve? Including intimate personal moments can be, as Alexander Smith wrote, for the sake "of hungry vanity," or as Brett Lott calls it "grandstanding of oneself" (Lott 313). Understanding the pitfall of ego we can fall into by writing about ourselves, is helpful to me in understanding why we write essays. The personal essay highlights the ideals and struggles of humanity, and the reader must feel connected intimately with the person or people they are reading about. Without personal connection in the personal essay there would be little beyond a peeping-tom curiosity in reading them. This intimacy is explained further by Lopate: "the spectacle of baring the naked soul is meant to awaken the sympathy of the reader, who is apt to forgive the essayist's self-absorption in return for the warmth of his or her candor." The personal essayist invites us to live where the author lives, amid the house of his mind, with all its messes, contradictions, beauties, and surprises. It is a human trait to crave the unique, that which is foreign to us, and we imbibe that strangeness through the cluttered mind of the essayist. Epstein gives further weight to creating a strong authorial presence in our essays. "Without that strong personal presence, the essay doesn't quite exist: it becomes an article, a piece, or some other indefinable verbal construction" (22).

As I write essays I am constantly monitoring the balance between "grandstanding" myself and creating a person on the page that readers can connect to. In workshop I asked my readers about my first draft of "Woman's Washing": "Does it feel

like I'm trying to say I had the perfect life? I had an idyllic childhood, but I want it to feel real." The essay must be firmly planted in the real, otherwise it might as well be fiction. I have no problems with fiction, but the essay is essential different in that it grapples with real events and real questions, and the plot is not one constructed by the author. The author is simply reporting how they see those events, and does not have the freedom of the fiction writer to jiggle with details to suit their themes or motivations. The essay must be based in my perception, even if I don't show myself directly in the essay because the reader knows what they are reading is real. They are not looking for a suspension of reality as in fiction, they are looking for a clarification of reality. I say the reader is seeking clarification but it would be more appropriate to speak of my own motivation as an essays: I take the risk of grandstanding myself in order to find what I realized in writing "Blue Heron Goodbye": the hidden hope of self-examination in solitude amid chaos.

Another way I see to balance "grandstanding" the self with intimacy is by reading other authors' essays who do this balancing act well. This advice, though widely accepted in the writing world can be more complex than at first glance. As a new essayist trying to see my own picture of the world and my own voice for essay writing, I find reading other authors extremely helpful, but at times their style and way of "seeing" too heavily influences my own writing, so I begin sounding like a poor imitation of them instead of a refined version of myself. My brother was looking for me yesterday, and I hollered, "I'm on your bed," and as an afterthought added, "in my nest of books." I find myself writing, surrounded either literally or figuratively by the words of other writers. I find I do best in reading, if I am looking for a specific trait I want to focus on, instead of

trying to consume their entire essay all at once. And what usually happens is that as I surround myself with other voices, the solution to the problem I'm working on in my own writing will jump out at me from other essays. Phrases stick in my mind, like pop lyrics. Lately it's been, Naomi Shihab Nye's, "I didn't want to tell them I ate dried apricots. I listened to their lineage of eggs" (135). I am tempted, like T.S. Eliot, to steal from Nye and other writers so that, "not only the best, but the most individual parts of [my] work may be those in which the dead poets, [my] ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously" (Eliot 111). Whether the writer is alive or dead, it is not their words I want, more the chime of them: the sound of, "their lineage of eggs," and that bright spot of color in the apricot. I agree with Annie Dillard in that "the range of rhythms in prose is larger and grander than that of poetry" (24). This "borrowing" of sounds and images might give the impression that I care more for how words look and sound than their meaning. This might be true at times, but more likely, as it is with food, it is not the meat, or the sauce, or the hunger that make a satisfying meal, but the combination. Dillard goes on to say, "[Rhythm] can handle discursive idea, and plain fact, as well as character and story" (24). Sounds of words can emphasize the subtleties of moods, thoughts, secret longings in a manner beyond the clumsy, black and white meaning of words, even at their best. When a writer strikes a chord with me, those words can elevate the subtleties of my own writing. While my idea for writing "Woman's Washing" came from an email my mother wrote, the essay has been greatly influenced by the dreamy yet clipped style of Naomi Shihab Nye and her dried apricots, and these three sentences from Yosef Komunyakaa: "The women there moved their hands in practiced synchrony, looping and winding color-coded wires with such graceful dexterity and



professionalism [. . .] Lily's eyes caught mine. I still hadn't told her I felt I'd left part of myself in her country" (92, 97). I am not sure why these lines have stayed with me, as Komunyakaa has written lines more lyrical or unique, but these two are nearly constant in the background of my hearing as I wrote "Woman's Washing."

Another technique I've developed in honing my craft is to let the story tell itself, instead of forcing myself to plod along where I think I want to take the essay. I allow myself on first drafts to wander, and if an idea or story strikes me I write it, despite its initial irrelevance. I try not to worry about non-sequiters in my first draft. I can edit those parts which don't fit, but I find I make better connections in my writing if I get it all out on paper first, and turn off the internal editor that says I've got to get it perfect the first time. Mimi Schwartz employs a similar technique, but her notion of what she can write on a first draft, swings a bit wide of the definition I like to maintain for essays. Schwartz allows herself to write the "emotional" truth of events, making up "lies" as she calls them, creating complete fabrications such as owning a piano book she only wished she has as a child. Schwartz writes these events in her first drafts to uncover her deeper longings for further writing, but I find it difficult to believe as Schwartz claims that she didn't realize she'd created these "lies" until she reread her draft. Schwartz's technique of turning off the internal editor is helpful, but I choose to stay on the side of actual events, not what I wished could have happened (338-343). As I have written before, this technique is useful to me, because oftentimes I don't know what I'm writing until I've written it. I also tend to write endings somewhere in the middle of the initial drafting process. I'll be writing along, unaware of anything but the line my mind is following, and the ending will suddenly be typed. I believe it is an unconscious organizational

technique. My brain realizes where it wants to go with this jumbled mess I'm trying to cobble together, and it's kind enough to mark the x on the treasure map of my essay. I wrote the ending in the middle of writing, "Why We Need Bloodhounds," "Pearle Jam," "Blue Heron Goodbye," and this critical introduction. The real work comes in going back to write the middle, untangling the mess my brain jumped over, under, and through. I share this because understanding how I write essays revealed something to me about why I write essays. I'm more interested in the journey of my mind with a subject, how it made the logical leaps, than with the end destination.

My free-write technique and my desire to allow the reader to learn to see small moments of understanding on their own terms, is why I find myself so often writing the segmented or patchwork essay. The segmented essay gives me the flexibility to write and think, jumping from thought to thought as my mind jumps. Having read others' segmented essays, I believe they also gives readers more flexibility for their minds to jump and make their own connections, which may or may not be similar to mine.

Kathleen Norris writes about the gap between what writers write and what readers read: "But always, and in glorious, mysterious ways that the author cannot control, it begins to belong to the reader" (29). Realizing the reader has this control allows me the hope that not only I can, but the reader can find in my essays solitude amid chaos. But it is not only the segmented essay which allows the reader this ability. The openness of the personal essay should allow readers their own room to think. "It gives back to the reader a thought, a memory, an emotion made richer by the experience of another" (Norris 29).

Countless essays have been written on what they essay is, and yet the definition feels elusive, like water trickling through cupped hands. When I tell people I write

essays, they get funny looks on their faces as if I've told them I enjoy root canals. I usually end up telling people I write stories, but that feel like an unsatisfactory definition because I'm not writing down details as they come to me, like a living typewriter. I'm attempting to focus or outline a shape, to see something as yet unknown. I prefer Montaigne's attempt to name his pattering on paper when he retired to his Bordeaux estate in 1570: *essai*, which means attempt, trial, or experiment. Every essay I write, every scribble, seems to be an experiment, a tottering balance of words. But an experiment into what? And why do I tinker with such endless, maddening joy? I must go back to my initial claim: the ability, like the blue heron, to philosophize in solitude amid chaos. Robert Louis Stevenson extols the virtues of idleness in "An Apology for Idlers." He portrays hard working souls as,

A sort of dead-alive, hackneyed people about, who are scarcely conscious of living except in the exercise of some conventional occupation. Bring these fellows into the country or set them aboard ship, and you will see how they pine for their desk or their study. They have no curiosity; they cannot give themselves to random provocations [. . .] (Lopate xxxiv)

The essayist begs idleness away from their desk or study to write, surrounded by the ocean, or the stirring of wind in the sycamore. However, to be true to reality, what writer can claim lazy introspection in drifting stillness? Seneca's words, coming to me from the dust of the year 30ish, were delightfully realistic; he made me laugh.

I cannot for the life of me see that quiet is as necessary to a person who has shut himself away to do some studying as it is usually thought to be. Here am I with a babble of noise going on all about me. I have lodging right over a public

bathroom. Now imagine to yourself every kind of sound that can make one weary of one's years [. . .] But on top of this some ball player comes along and starts shouting out the score, that's the end! Then add someone starting up a brawl, and someone else caught thieving, and the man who likes the sound of his voice in the bath, and the people who leap into the pool with a tremendous splash. Apart from those whose voices are, if nothing else, natural, think of the hair remover, continually giving vent to his shrill and penetrating cry [. . .] But I swear I no more notice all this roar of noise than I do the sound of waves or falling water [. . .] (5)

Seneca reminds me that even before the invention of annoying devices such as the leaf blower, life was rarely peaceful. Despite the inner calm we may claim or crave, our writerlyness gives us no magic recipe for solitude. No, we are harried creatures, weaving through the halls of universities or publishing houses, avoiding that annoying student or co-worker, slogging through piles of papers, pretending to listen to ladder-climbing machinations in the sheer drudgery of staff meetings, all the while our minds are writing, writing, writing. I understand the essayist's dream of idle time, having come to Las Vegas and my parents' home (a resort I call the Hansen Spa and Grill) for the purpose of hiding from my hectic life and finding the solitude to write. I'm penniless, but properly contemplative. I have read Lopate's "Introduction", and essay upon essay on the essay, al fresco, trying to forge a union of both leisure and a successful thesis defense. And while there is a certain serenity in writing, words are inherently dangerous creatures. Writing gives me ulcers. (At least my doctor says I'm getting one.)

The surgeon Richard Selzer shares my pain in the joy of words, “It is the search for some meaning, in the ritual surgery, which is at once murderous, painful, healing, and full of love.” I stated before, I write to understand what I’m writing, and therein lies the problem and again the question. What am I experimenting on? I believe I am searching for the human, the self, the heart that lies hidden from this chaotic world, living with the heron on a muddy river, a tantalizingly honest bird taught to speak through painful recitation. Seneca beautifully penned my ideas so many centuries ago. “For what is the good of having silence throughout the neighborhood if one’s emotions are in turmoil? [. . .] There is no such thing as ‘peaceful stillness’ except where reason has lulled it to rest” (6). This reason-lulled rest is where I too find solitude: in my attempt to risk a plunge into churning reality and extract something delicious, a flipping fish or a seared bit of my soul.

In the seventeenth century Alexander Smith wrote of my quest, even though he wasn’t aware he had. “A modest, truthful [wo]man, speaks better about [herself], than about anything else, and on that subject [her] speech is likely to be most profitable to [her] hearers [. . .]” (Lopate xxxii). Yet there is a problem inherent in this circular self examination of self. “If I am the explorer of my self as continent, what does my discovery matter [. . .] Am I deluding myself, inflicting an order that was and is now nowhere to be seen?” (Lott 314). Will we find at journey’s end something that looks at first glance to be nothing more than a toy silk parachute falling, “gracefully, lightly, as it floats back to you” (McPhee 120). Is it all only words? Or will we find in that parachute the embodiment of our mother. The frightening truth is that the answer can be yes and no simultaneously, for the simple reason that the journey of self is a solitary one, which the

essayist bares to the reader. Whether we are the reader or writer, we cannot understand the essay en masse, and the understanding's pace and route are set by the persistence with which we march. Selzer, in "The Exact Location of the Soul," proclaims, "such a quest is not without pain. Who can gaze on so much misery and feel no hurt?" (344). We may not be able to enunciate our understanding at the end of this journey and find, "that I knew and I could not say what that was" (Goldberg 96). The consolation for such perils and pain is that we have journeyed and arrived at something richer and newer about ourselves. Like Lopate and Lott, we may find Chinese Boxes, or Russian Dolls of ourselves that expand on opening, instead of contracting. We may find joy in our daily domestic routines: "the best of all possible breakfasts is a pear with a cup of ferocious coffee, taken near the ocean, rather later in the morning than earlier, preferably in the company of a small sleepy child still in her or his rumped and warm pajamas [. . . .]" (Doyle xi-xii). We may find sorrow in our families: "But I don't want to be thinking about this, a memory of ruin, of sorrow: this is everything I'm trying to get away from: the sorrowful mother, the ruined mother. I want to reach the desirable mother. The mother who is the site of pleasure" (Gordon 116-117). Or we may let the laughter of our families "change the flavor of our tears" (Madden 179). We may find whatever we seek, or we may find things we never knew existed.

I keep finding a bird, a heron beckoning me like a shadowy friend, to dip my toes in her cooling river, and stay awhile in solitude.

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## WOMAN'S WASHING

I remember my mother in the hot spring-like smell blowing from the exhaust of a running dryer. I have an image of my skinny sixth-grade self, stopping to smell that lightness wafting from my own home. The old ranch style rambler in Las Vegas had a shake roof, stucco walls, and an add-on laundry room, which put the exhaust at the front door. My mother camouflaged the ugly tin vent with a large potted plant, which repeatedly died from the double dry air; a combo of the desert and hot dryer venting. She stretched a nylon sock over the vent to keep lint off the green Astroturf square. Our front step looked like a putting green. And the door was 70's designing at its gaudiest: multi-colored diamonds of stained glass, the chunky kind you can't see through, inset in dark wood, faded and splintered a bit. The property was a serious fixer-upper, coated with ivy (my mom actually "found" a window hacking at the verge) that my parents fell in love with because of its sprawling backyard.

\* \* \*

My mother recently emailed me: she needed to do the washing even though it wasn't Monday, her normal day. I was startled—*Does my mother really wash on Monday, iron on Tuesday, and whatever comes after that? Nobody still lives like that, do they?* My mother is a mystery to me. My mother is my best friend. Before it was chic to give up your career (she would have been a nurse) and Martha Stuart about the house, my mother was home raising her youngest and at age sixty-one, she's home raising her youngest. Eighteen Christmas Eves ago, my father read to us about Mary's child and said our mom was going to have a baby; he might as well have said they were divorcing. I felt sick. You shouldn't mix holiness with the realities of the flesh, to the mind of a

twelve year old. My mother lay in bed for three months. She would swig antacid from a blue bottle on the nightstand. She would say it was a good day when she only threw up three times. She was struggling with being pregnant at 41, I knew that somehow. To my child's mind, her unhappiness was my fault. I felt I should be happy about my new brother, but I wasn't. Three was enough; we didn't need any more kids in this family. I tried to carry my mother's unhappiness. I tried to live for her in some small way, telling her what I saw and did that day. I scrubbed the counters, the layers of crust. I did my own laundry.

\* \* \*

We had so many trees; no one thinks of the desert that way. Palm trees; pine trees; peach, fig, plum, and olive trees; pomegranate bushes; grape arbors; and all the mocking birds, cockroaches, wild cats, neighbor kids, june bugs, and buzzing cicadas children need to grow up. The night called to us like a fairytale. We swam in water thick and cool glowing in blue light. We hid from police helicopters, their spot lights on us made us laugh. We ran guided by the beams of flashlights with mason jars under our arms to pull dewy blue cicadas off their amber chrysalis and feed their still wet bodies to the cat and dog. We could hear buzzing in their mouths, then a crunch, then silence. The neon of Las Vegas was far away, though we could see the lights from our tree house. We called our paradise Hansen Acres, even if it was only a half. Things seem bigger when you're small.

\* \* \*

I remember those days with baby Spencer, feeding him spaghetti after the flu, then holding him over the floor of TCBY Yogurt while he barfed it all out. The yogurt

girl pulled out her mop, and didn't seem to mind. I found I liked having an addition to the Hansen clan, even if he colored on the carpet with my lipstick. He was such a darling, calling me Nonnie because he couldn't say my name. People thought he was calling me mommy even though at thirteen, I looked like I was ten, straight legged and flat chested. For years people gave our family strange looks, as my older brother and I would swing Spencer between us. We were too young to have a toddler; my parents too old. Spencer grew, and so did the confusion. At six-year old soccer, one of Spencer's teammates told him his Grandma was here. My mother laughed.

\* \* \*

I never knew my mother was shy, until my junior high friends told me. I remember feeling surprised. I'd never considered until then, my mother beyond the confines of mother. I've tried since to see her as a woman, her own person. After eighteen years, this is a difficult thing to wrestle. She is so quiet, I never hear her when she walks, and she will slip from a room without anyone's notice. She works in the shadows, even when she must be center stage. I cannot believe she is my mother sometimes because we are so different. She works without speaking, where I must always jabber on. She knows everything about everyone because she listens and never forgets, and this is why people love her. But I think they would be surprised to see her at home with us.

"Stink-eye," says Spence as he walks in from his senior year. "Stink-eye," my mother says back to him, but it's friendly banter. The phrase comes from Hawaiian pidgin meaning dirty look, I think, but I'm not sure why we say it to each other. Probably the same reason Greg, my older brother, calls my mother and instead of saying

hello, makes noises like a pig and a braying donkey. My mother does it back. “How’d you do on your test?” my mother asks Spence. “Failed it.” he says back. Spence is a straight A student, and likes to say the ridiculous. Then the nagging begins. “Call Brother Newson about a job,” and Spence does his best to ignore her. She takes us to Zabas and we eat lime chips from a brown bag with grease spots. I think of this essay. I do not know what to write; my mother is a mystery to me.

\* \* \*

My mother has a southern friend who calls her funny nicknames like, “my precious tootsie roll,” and “my little cookie sheet.” If we were reincarnated, I think my mother would like to come back, not as a bear or a yogi, but as a cookie sheet. Everyone needs one but no one needs to talk to it.

\* \* \*

At Hansen Acres there was a seascape in our living room, a wallpaper nightmare. My mother peeled back the edges, and we pulled too, a pink Pepto Bismal wall beneath. The kitchen was overhauled: adding a bay window, tile to replace the cigarette burned linoleum, a new pantry, the old one knocked down. My mother hired a man to cut a channel in the cement floor to wire the snack bar with a stove. We thought all doors to the kitchen were sealed but dust powdered the house, making it a mini Vesuvius, the heavy dust turning to mud when we wiped. My brothers’ room was a hygienic mystery with its mosquito infested shag carpet reeking of urine, and doors with locks facing outside the room. My mother told me the previous owners probably locked their twin, diaper wearing toddlers inside. She remembers poop smears on the walls. She rewallpapered; I learned to find the big dipper with my brothers, sleeping out on the

trampoline until the room was finished. She peeled the BRIGHT yellow Ziggy wallpaper in my room and papered white with tiny pink hearts and bought me a dreamy pink canopy bed. The laundry room never changed, it was hot in the summer and cold in the winter, and filled with pies at Thanksgiving instead of laundry.

\*            \*            \*

My mother taught me to paint in that house. Nothing like Starry Night. I learned to take roller and brush to drab walls, made bright with Amalfi Red. A magic trick, the paint names like spells: Spun Twilight, Duchess Lilac, Calypso, Silver Chiffon, Blue Mesa. My first major painting project at eight years old, was not so dreamlike, painting our entire house in Vegas heat. Homes were not supposed to be pink stucco. I was delighted my parents let us pick the color, a sensible tan. My father paid us: my two brothers \$100, and me \$50 because I was so little. It felt like a fortune, but I think this is when I began dreaming in sleep I was a man, powerful and tall.

\*            \*            \*

My eight-year-old white-blonde hair was streaked slime green, our new swimming pool's treat. My mother searched for two summers: endless varieties of swimmer's shampoo, crushed aspirins dripped acrid slurry into my eyes and mouth. Still the green persisted; I felt like a mermaid's ugly step-sister. Then someone told her lemon juice. The long green in my hair turned back to white.

\*            \*            \*

My mom and I have emailed almost every day since email was invented and we learned how to use it—in my sophomore year of school when I flew to Hawaii and got a bad case a home sickness. It was slow, the dial-up whining and pinging. I've printed

almost all our emails and store them in tome-like three-ring binders. My mother taught me to write, even if she does hate Shakespeare. It was the stories she told me.

Lately our emails have become more scarce; she is Relief Society president and I'm trying to keep my head above water in my last semester of grad school. Her emails are usually nothing extraordinary, detailing that the dog turned over the trash again and buried the turkey carcass in the garden, that my dad has another jury trial (he's a lawyer, not a convict), that my "little" brother shaved his head with the volleyball team, or that two of her three grandkids came over to play.

Dear Nonnie,

Kate and Ethan are here this morning and I'm still in my jammies and so are they because they came so early. I had to call Donna and tell her I couldn't walk because of them coming over but the wind was hurricane force too. I gave them each a new pair of jammies that they immediately wanted to put on and Kate especially was so thrilled with her new jammies. I had bought them to show at RS for this Humanitarian project another ward was doing donating new pajama's for Child Haven but when they came I looked at them and saw they were exactly their sizes so gave them to them instead. They always want to "do moozic" which is me playing the piano and they play the bells and we sing primary songs, but this morning I played all the Disneys songs from the song book I had been looking for but finally found when I was de-junking your inheritance from the bedroom closets. It reminded me of the many times I'd played with you guys and sang, Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf, or We're Following the Leader or Some Day My Prince Will Come. Good memories. The only problem is that I can't

sing any more those high notes so it does sound dreadful, but Kate doesn't mind.

She always says that was beautiful grandma.

I remember that songbook, with the cardboard showing where the binding is falling apart and the bright yellow and gold tails of the Aristocats hanging from the piano benches. Christmases before I was born, when my brother Greg was too little to sing, my mother would play the songs, and my other brother Jonathan and my dad would sing. The next year Greg knew all the words to the Christmas songs—he'd been singing along in his head even though his mouth couldn't make the sounds.

\* \* \*

The family has moved, to a part of Vegas that didn't exist when I was growing up. It is beautiful, the backyard blowing with jasmine. My mother told me she drove past the old place. The new owners ripped out the sprawling Russian olive tree and cemented over those beautiful lawns where I used to lie in and watch the mocking birds dive bomb our cat. Bitty died in our new house, and my mother used her old nightgown for the cat's burial shroud, wrapping the dead thing in blue with white stars. Bitty's cat bones are beside the garden, next to the dead cocker she romped with at Hansen Acres. The cocker died the Thanksgiving before. My mom said he waited for all the kids to come home to say goodbye. My childhood feels like a list of dead things, but I think Hansen acres is still with me—the old address, 4975, is my garage door code.

\* \* \*

I'm home for the summer to write, and I can hear my mother walking back and forth behind me as I type in my father's den. "Only a mother would clean that



bathroom,” she says of Spence’s bathroom. “It’s true love!” she shouts, in a tone half serious, half teasing.

The first day I was home she showed me her garden, the growing basil, the strange artichokes tall and weedy, the pot of mint she uprooted last winter and kept inside, the nectarine tree loaded with green oblong fruit. One day she came in smiling. She had picked the first tomato, orangey and small as a marble. “The birds would eat it.”

\*            \*            \*

I see my mother’s grocery list and type it here, even though I am not sure why. Her handwriting is so neat, nothing like mine which looks like a boy’s.

Costco

Eggs  
 Strawberries  
 paper plates  
 Bathroom cups  
 celery  
 Bananas  
 Eggs (scratched out)  
 lettuce

She buys me organic meat and dairy. I want to have a baby if I ever find true love, but the hormones in food mess with me. She is making dinner and comes with a bit I think looks like dog food. “Taste this organic beef. I like the texture.” I do taste, and it is delicious especially the sauce clinging to it. She has made pasta e Fagioli soup and 4 loaves of whole wheat bread. She had to teach me to cut it, turning the bread on its side. She slices the knife down the bread falling away soft and spongy—“here,” she points, “look at the bottom to see how thick you are cutting.”

\*            \*            \*

A strange man used to call our house when I was very small and I would talk to him on the phone. I didn't know how to get off. My parents found out when he called, asking for Holly and they listened on the other line. Then we drove in our camper van, whispers drifted back from my parents. I knew something was bad. My insides felt like I'd done something wrong. I remembered telling the man we had to get some juice for the movie because that is what my dad said when the light bulb burned out on the super-8 projector: *we're outa juice*. My parents told me never to talk to him again. I thought I was in trouble. I have vague memories: not of conversations or looks, I only remember fear and whispers around me of a man driving past our house and watching it from a distance. But nothing happened. Not that I remember anyway.

\* \* \*

I remember running every day with my brothers to the park a block away, even though I know it cannot be that we went that often. We'd go barefoot in summer, running to stop burn our calloused feet on frying cement, avoiding amber and green glass bits and rhino-stickers from the tumbleweeds. On hot summer nights on the park lawn, which was so big then, we'd watch black and white Abbot and Costello, and Shirley Temple movies. The Teen-Center connected to the park put them on, renting a semitruck that opened from the side where they'd project the movie. I'd tag along as my brothers and friends caught lizards by the police station (also connected to the park), and I'd always like it when their tails would fall off and the lizards got away. The detached tails squiggle like worms, swishing back and forth. Sometimes, when one of us had a quarter, we'd brave the entrance of the police station to the old fashioned pop dispenser. I remember pulling the skinny glass door open with a puff of cold air, and pulling a hazy

glass bottle from the metal rack, and sharing sips around, usually of Orange Crush.

We'd play for hours in the park on the slide with a top I imagined was a spaceship; with the fat black and red ants we would bury; on the high flying swings; on the merry-go-round that made me sick; at the Teen-Center pyramid with its yellow skylight top; tumbling on mats at gymnastics inside; arts and crafts of macaroni necklaces. A blaze of summer and childhood, metal and motion; I knew it was special and loved it. But I didn't know that not all people were this happy. I didn't know I would grow, my memories becoming like home movies of someone else's child.

\*            \*            \*

"That is weird," I hear my mother say. She's been vacuuming with her dead mother's vacuum. "It smells like her. It has her dust in it." She goes on cleaning, the statement enough for her. I would have to write an essay about it.

\*            \*            \*

Our golden lab is blinking her aged white face at me from a shady corner of grass she's lying in. She watches the bird, she drinks from the pool, she comes to me, pushing her snout under my typing hands insistently. "Go away you dog. I'm not your mother," I say laughing, stroking the beautiful face she's poked through the armrest and the chair. She's imprinted on me, a transfer from my mother. Now she follows me around, always underfoot, making sticky licking sounds as she cleans her paws. I think the dog is neurotic the way she bites her nails. "She thinks I'm you," I complain to my mother.

"Good. You take care of her," my mother replies. "I saw a recipe with turmeric in it. They say it's so good for you, and tasty in things. I bought some."

"Who's they, and why is it so good for you?"

“I don’t know. The same people that say trace minerals are good for you. No one will tell me what trace minerals are.” She walks into the kitchen and I follow her, the dog following me. My mother opens the spice cupboard. “Ground turmeric.” She tastes it. “Tastes like ground up bricks,” she says offering me the jar of rust colored powder. I cannot take any for laughing. I finally get some on my finger and taste. “It does taste like ground up bricks,” I agree.

\* \* \*

I am startled many times when I look at my mother, so beautiful, her blonde hair not grey, her face with few wrinkles, her skin always a shade tanner than mine. People cannot tell us apart on the phone, and I think I look like her. She is gentle and quiet and a mystery to me. When she came to London to visit me, she said I was her surrogate Joel (my father), doing all the things she was afraid to do. I spoke to people for her. I negotiated the hotel rooms. I drove the rental car, even though it scared me to drive on the wrong side of the road, with the steering wheel on the wrong side of the car, shifting with the wrong hand and foot. She told me how: “the curb is always on your side of the car.” We fought if she sat in the front seat, because she’d clam up and wouldn’t give me good directions. Our neighbor came up front because she was the better navigator. My mother was too nervous and sat in the back. I cried when I found out we didn’t go to Cornwall because she thought I wanted to go somewhere else. I cried when she told me I didn’t bother her when we slept in the same bed. I thought I still thrashed about like a child and bothered her. “You don’t move. Sometimes I check to make sure you’re not dead.”

We took the night train to Edinburg and woke up with a castle above us. The heat didn't work in our compartment, our little beds like ice, but I was so happy to be on this adventure with her. We'd come to Edinburg for her. She wanted to see the Tattoo but tickets had been sold out since January. I prayed we'd get tickets, really prayed to God for my mother. "We need to go to the ticket office right now," I said as we were about to call my father from a payphone. She told me later she thought I was crazy. I stood in line; she shopped for a scarf. They had two tickets, the last two from returns that day; the woman standing behind me rubbing her good luck rock would not be going. The night was clear; the old castle seemed to float above us in red, blue, and purple lights. We were entranced by the bagpipe bands, motorcyclists, limbo dancers, Korean girls' marching band, the band on horseback with their tubas and base drums, the woman with the heavy make-up squashed next to us who became our friend for the night. "I can't believe we got tickets," my mother kept saying. "It was a little miracle."

\* \* \*

We stand in the dwarf apricot tree at the new house, me, my mother, and dad, water dripping on my glasses from the wet leaves. I leave the drops alone and pick the nearly ripe fruit, burnished sunset on fruity cheeks. We have to get the fruit before the birds do.

"I used to count them. One year one, the next eight, then sixteen," says my mother as she eats one.

Now we have a grocery sack full, and I'm afraid it will break as my father adds more fruit to the plastic bag. "So sweet," he says biting into one. My mother peels apart

the halves of a soft apricot, feeding it to me since both my hands are holding the heavy bag. *Like honey*, I think, the juice exploding as I bite.

## DARK STILL WATER

~1~

As a child I played many times in a natural hot spring pool once owned by Howard Hughes—a palm treed oasis in the gray desert outside Las Vegas. Snapping turtles hid in dark mossy corners, only coming out at night to swim in the dark still water. Breathing was the only noise they made—a soft sucking, rippling the calm dark water. My memories are so idyllic and peaceful I sometimes think I imagined it. I see myself standing in the dry midnight air with my father on the flagstone patio between the dilapidated mansion and that mysterious pool. After the exuberant daytime water-play, it was restful to watch the pair of dark turtles with flat shells and sharp heads that always swam near the rope swing, under the umbrella-like cotton wood tree. To my storybook mind, they were magical creations—both frightening and delightful. Swimming, I avoided the mossy turtle cave, deep in the water below the white cliff face. I knew the turtles could take a couple of toes if they dangled too close, or snap my hand from my wrist. I never saw them in the day, not once. But in the night, as I stood in my sunburn—the turtles were transformed. Glowing shadows rising unexpectedly to the surface, dancing like reflecting glass, their heads piercing up through the smooth water turning it to skeins of green translucent ribbons. Even to my childlike understanding, I knew these turtles were wild things, the substance of dreams, uncageable. I came back one fall, in high school to see only one turtle in the pool. The next year I saw none. I asked the caretaker what happened to the turtles. He said one was killed by a car while crossing the road. The other suffered a worse fate. It drowned. He had unknowingly

trapped it under the metal floodgate used to regulate the height of the pool waters. I still mourn that drowned turtle; trapped under a cage of its own liquid dreams.

~2~

Everyone was more excited than I was—I was nervously counting Q-tips. That is what thoughts of spending 2 months in London did to me—kept me up at night, sitting in my walk-in-closet on a small cherry wood stool, making extensive packing lists of minutia. I felt I was categorizing, organizing and packing up my life, not going to have the time of it. I had a page, over 40 items, of just toiletries. As if forgetting to bring an extra razor would ruin living in a city I dreamt about since watching Peter Pan in the movie theatres. But there they were—64 pink Q-tips (1 for every day I would spend in London), zipped up in a sandwich baggie. It looked like a pathetically small amount, so I chucked 5 or 6 more in the bag. A few more wouldn't put me over luggage weight (50 pounds of baggage was all the security I could drag with me), and what if someone needed to borrow one. Better be on the safe side.

~3~

To be diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder, you must have either obsessions or compulsions according to the DSM-IV-TR diagnostic criteria. Restrictions on an OCD sufferer's ability to perform their rituals, these compulsions and/or obsessions induces extreme forms of anxiety.

Some symptoms of OCD may include, some, all or perhaps none of the following obsessive and compulsive behaviors:

- Repeated hand washing.



- Repeated clearing of the throat.
- An obsession with numbers.
- Perfectly aligning objects at complete, absolute right angles.
- Having to "cancel out" bad thoughts with good thoughts.
- A need for both sides of the body to feel even.
- A fear of contamination (see Mysophobia).

There are many theories about the cause of obsessive-compulsive disorder. Some research has discovered a type of size abnormality in different brain structures. The majority of researchers believe there is some type of abnormality in the neurotransmitter serotonin, among other possible psychological or biological abnormalities; however, it is possible that this activity is the brain's response to OCD, and not its cause. The latest technology has allowed researchers to look at the brain through positron emission tomography (PET scans). These scans have shown that those with OCD tend to have brain activity that differs from those who do not have this disorder.

~4~

God taught the Jews to count. At least to 10 anyway. The 4<sup>th</sup> commandment is Remember the Sabbath, to keep it holy—and among Orthodox sects, they take these words very seriously. “And God blessed the 7<sup>th</sup> day, and sanctified it: because that in it he had rested from all his work which God created and made” (Genesis 2:3). Overly anxious about performing work on the Sabbath, Rabbinical rulers began constructing a hedge around the law using both the Talmud and the Mishneh, creating rules to prevent "work" or "activity" that must not be done, on pain of death. 39 broad prohibitions which regulated nearly innumerable activities, were set up to guard the Sabbath. There could be

no planting, plowing, reaping, binding of sheaves, selecting, grinding, sifting, kneading, baking, shearing of wool, dying, spinning, making two loops, separating two threads, tying, untying, tearing, trapping, igniting and extinguishing a fire, and transferring between domains—to name a few. This meant it was not wise take a bath on the Sabbath because if you spilled water, cleaning it up meant you would be washing the floor, therefore working on the Sabbath. You could not travel more than 3,000 feet from your house; so orthodox Jews began counting their steps. And these traditions weren't only for the Sabbath but for every day. Strict Kosher kitchen are set up to prevent contamination of food, such as mixing milk and meat. They contain 2 ovens, 2 dishwashers, 2 sets of dishes, 2 of everything—1 for milk and 1 for meat. There are rituals for the smallest of occurrences. Rituals for praying, for eating, for farming, for mourning, and for cleaning. There are even rituals on washing, whether it is your body or just your hands. Love of God and the Jew's rich tradition guides the Orthodox to this obsession with order. Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof* explains another reason for their strict ritualistic observance of the law. "I don't know. But it's a tradition. . .and because of our traditions. . .Every one of us knows who he is and what God expects him to do." Out of this strict order has sprung one of the most strong and influential peoples in the world.

~5~

The word "dominos" conjures up images of old pipe smoking South American men, sitting in their plazas drinking, and enjoying a friendly game. That's one version of dominos, but only for those without the knack for obsession with order on gigantic proportions.

Since 1986 the Netherlands has hosted an annual domino toppling festival. Domino Day's first prizewinner started out setting up 1,250,000 dominos, with only 755,836 stones actually falling. 20 years of domino stacking later, on November 17, 2006 teams of domino lovers set up 4,400,000 stones. 4,079,381 toppled, thus setting a new domino record. The design took nearly 1 year to complete and a team of 90 builders about 2 months to build. These teams used the theme "music in motion" building detailed domino pictures of Elvis, complete with guitar and his classic shaking leg; a Marilyn Monroe, skirt flying; and James Dean, flicking his finger and lifting his eyebrows. Blue colored dominos toppled to reveal in the fallen pattern jitter-bug dancers with saddle shoes and poodle skirts, dominos triggered an actual juke-box to play, and record singles toppled domino pictures of 50's diner patrons eating burgers and milkshakes. And that was only 1 of many spectacular displays—I won't even try to recount Helga the Horrible belting out Wagner, to topple her German Opera House. This year the competition plans on setting 4,500,000 in Leeuwarden, Netherlands, taking their counting obsession to even more dazzling affects.

~6~

1. "The strength of a man's virtue should not be measured by his special exertions, but by his habitual acts." ~Blaise Pascal
2. "Great wits are sure to madness near allied  
And thin partitions do their bounds divide." ~John Dryden
3. "Genius is one of the many forms of insanity." ~Cesare Lombroso

~7~

I read Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in 7<sup>th</sup> grade. My teacher Mr. Snell, a tall blonde man I did not like, told us how Shelly found the genesis of her book. Shelley saw in dream or vision the face of a yellow-eyed monster, and in to make that dream go away she wrote *Frankenstein*. Shelley was haunted by her monster, yet fascinated by him.

*Frankenstein* (the mad scientist, not the monster—this misnomer makes explaining the book very tricky) was likewise fascinated and haunted by his monster. Once his obsession—turned monster—was created, it terrorized the countryside and was the downfall of the *Frankenstein* family. But reading the book made me realize that *Frankenstein's* monster wasn't much of a monster. He was confused, longed to be with people, find a mate and live a quiet life. But the monster couldn't control its strength, like Lenny in *Mice and Men*, crushing to death those he loved. Instead of finding his place in the world, the monster was hunted down.

~8~

Howard Hughes, born 24 December 1905, suffered from the symptoms of social avoidance and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. These disorders were debilitating, distracting, and some say part of his genius. Driven by his obsessions both healthy and socially unacceptable, he lived his life in a way that both drove people away and attracted them to him. He set multiple air-speed records; took to engineering and math; ran a successful inherited drilling business; produced and directed a handful of successful and award winning movies (even winning an Academy Award for best director); built airplanes including the "Spruce Goose" which is one of the world's largest airplanes;

owned and expanded Trans World Airlines; founded the Howard Hughes Medical Institute in Maryland (the largest private foundation dedicated to biological and medical research); owned a string of Las Vegas Hotels (purchased from the mafia); and not surprisingly was one of the world's wealthiest people. Hughes was also a notorious lady's man, attracting the company of Katharine Hepburn, Bette Davis, and Ava Gardner, among others. He was also famous for his germophobia: never shaking hands, picking up objects with a paper towel, once burning all of the clothes and linen in his house, and in bad periods staying locked in dark rooms, and speaking with people only by phone. Hughes was never formally treated for his phobias although he did become addicted to illegal drugs and painkillers. He was also noted for his kindness and generosity. He died 5 April 1976—though 6'4" he weighed only 90lbs and was nearly unrecognizable.

~9~

Madam Maria Sklodowska-Curie, born November 7, 1867, was a pioneer in the field of radioactivity. Curie is the only scientist to be honored in 2 different scientific fields with the Nobel Prize; she was the first woman in France to complete a doctorate and became the first female professor at the Sorbonne, the historic University of Paris; she founded the Curie Institutes in Paris and Warsaw; she was the wife of fellow Nobel-Laureate Pierre Curie and mother of Irène Joliot-Curie also a Nobel Prize winner; she coined the word *radioactivity*; and she discovered the chemical elements polonium and radium. Even at a very young age Marie Curie would become obsessed with her work and was known to neglect food and even sleep to continue. Marie Curie died in 1934 almost certainly due to radiation exposure.

~10~

Two year old snapshots of my summer in London wander across my computer screen if I'm still long enough. Sometimes I don't type, just to see my memories. I have my favorites: Shawn and Spencer suspended mid jump, a swath of orange poppies behind them; a blurry Jamaican Royal Guard, his black skin and bright red uniform vivid against Hyde Park's washed green; rowing with Lauren and Hillary on the Thames, a few white swans flapping past. I picked up a knack for photography in London. I also picked up about 2500 photos, the select *few* to survive my rigorous deleting campaign. I could actually fill up the memory card in my camera (it holds 1500 pictures)—entirely full in 1 day of picture taking. Relentless deletion and minimal saving got me a few amazing pictures—and a mystery. Friends, and friends of friends began requesting copies of my pictures. When did I get good at this? I estimate I took between 12 and 14 thousand pictures in 2 months time. Doing something over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over again—might be called obsessing, or it might be called beautiful. Even still there are pictures I wish I took, but they only exist inside my head. Walking the Thames at night with Jeremy, white lights on St. James, Southwark beach drifting in music, tiki torches, globs of candles on giant sand castles and mermaids, my hair blowing across my eyes till the black water turned silver, missing London even though it was rippling through me. There are things no one can capture in a picture. I didn't take a picture of one particular thing—my baggie of pink Q-tips. I admit I didn't use them all. Perhaps in my photographic zeal, I lost my obsession with ear canal hygiene. It appears I only have enough obsessive genes to obsess about one thing at a

time. But I still obsess a little about my Q-tips, my London Q-tips anyway. I brought them home in the same sandwich baggie, and put them in the bathroom drawer. But I can't use them: they're special. They've been to London and back. They know what I know. Can you bronze Q-tips?

It's said creative minds tend towards obsessions, many towards madness. I feel a very fine line within myself. I'm a stable person, but have wandered in dark places, driven myself with too much work and little sleep. I feel a very fine line within myself. Obsession, genius, madness—are these varying shades of the same disease? Why are greatness and tragedy often found in one person, stemming seemingly from the same root? Is God obsessive, and when he touches a person with his gifts, when he marks a people, does he curse them as well? Can we cage our monsters but harness the energy of genius. In dreams I do. But that thin line within myself separating monster and genius, blessing and curse is sometimes impossible to see. Both exist simultaneously within—opposites that balance—fire and ice, or light and dark, and I cannot say I understand one without the other. These are the snap-shots no one should capture. These are wild things, the substance of dreams—ripples in our dark still water.

## YELLOW SHIRT RIDDLES

**Baby-yellow**

The story I'm most curious to write is the one I forgot. I know I forgot it, in its entirety, because Connie my ex-sister-in-law-more-like-a-sister, told me about it two years after it happened. During one of our all-night talkathons, where we cry but mostly laugh about the darkest moments in our lives, Connie started telling me a story I had no memory of. "Come, on," she said, "you remember when Dallen came to his parents' house after one of your blow-ups . . . ." She repeatedly recounted details, but not one stitch of that yarn belonged to me. At first I was frightened, realizing my brain had done something extraordinarily funky. Then I wanted to recall the moment for myself. I believed her, but I couldn't understand how or why I could block the memory out. Nutters, people on heavy medication, and victims of trauma lost their memories, not normal people like me. It was easier to believe the fight got lost somewhere in the chaos of those crying years, like children do at busy shopping malls, and if I got on the PA system, my little lost memory would surface from the crowd. But when I strain even now, the only memory I locate in the slot where that fight should be, is the image of an ordinary collared shirt which I wore to work a year after the divorce. This image baffles me. How did that shirt, without my permission replace the fight memory, and what message is my subconscious sending me? The shirt is the pale yellow of pre-ultrasound pregnancy, not a color I'd imagine connected to a silent fight I had with my husband in front of his family, which everyone heard anyway. The more I push this forgotten moment, the more my brain cloaks it with distracting riddles, as if to say, *don't go there, you're better off not knowing.*



Writing my silent fight in vivid details might be cathartic, bringing healing, but memory and meaning are lost. My pallet isn't empty though; I can paint pictures of things that matter least. Like the gold U-shaped 70's armchair I was probably sitting in when Dallen, my then-husband, opened the front door to his parents' house—because I can remember that chair. I'd seen it every Sunday for five years. Except I can't remember if I was in that chair or out in the back garden, sitting on the faded red picnic table, escaping Heber's summer heat amidst the corn and asparagus.

The bits of fight I do know, skinny Connie lent me—an interesting dilemma to examine my life only in the colors another's eyes have seen. I'm not sure I like it. While editing this, I called Connie to refresh my “memory” again because of my frustration trying to write true descriptions of things I can't remember. She told me I drove an hour from my house to Heber, to surprise Dallen with dinner; a make-up for the fight we had before he left on a backpacking trip with his dad and brother. Connie told me how my smiled stayed frozen on like nothing happened when I said, “Hi,” to Dallen as he walked by without saying a word or looking in my direction. But it was my eyes, she said, that gave me away, looking like a lost child. Those lost eyes watched as he ignored my greeting, grabbed his dinner and backpack, and drove off in my cherry Toyota pick-up, leaving me standing. . . I don't remember where, but Connie tells me I was there. I suppose I made my excuses for Dallen to his family, smiled that fake pin-up I'd been doing for the last 3 years, and drove myself home. I divorced him two years later. That I remember.

## Untying

Bill Kittredge said, “If you are not *risking* sentimentality, you are not close to your inner self.” I believe I’ve risked a great deal of sentimentality in writing the emotional death of my married, abused self.

Pink alpine glow was the last beautiful thing I saw. Spindrift rolled off the mountain in rising undulating clouds that poured into our eyes, mouth, down collars, into hoods. It was impossible to find camp and set up our tent inside the swirling white. I wasn’t even sure we were on the mountain anymore, and I was terrified of stepping off. We dug seats into the sheer sides, an almost ineffectual exercise with snow lifting and moving at once, filling in our small places of security. And night was impossibly long; sitting on coiled ropes in the dark, snow pricking our faces, munching frozen candy bars for warmth. I don’t remember slipping, but must have because waking found me alone, my eyes a stranger in the place they opened. I could see him somehow—alone in that crouched position, the rope clenching his harness, crampons crushing dry snow. He would try to look for me, once he realized I had gone, perhaps when the early light of morning revealed my absence. But he would never find me. *I* would not even know where to look. He did not hear above the slipping wind, the rustle of my body as I rolled away. It is strange I did not feel it, exhausted as I was. It was simple, really, why I fell into the night. We untied the short rope tethering us together. When had we taken it off? I couldn’t remember loosening the knot. But it happened I knew. How strange, it wasn’t the mountain that took me after all, but our own folly. It is an odd thing to know of ones own dying, to analyze it with detachment not regret. And what would he do? Would he see my end of the untied rope? He would come down the mountain, of course, because

that was the only thing to do. He would go, stomping the snow, digging his axe as he taught me, sometimes reaching instinctively to belay his disappeared partner. He would not return to this mountain, but certainly would go up others. Climbing them, he would think of me, only speaking my name when it was whipped from his lips and tossed incomprehensibly into the spindrift and perhaps the alpine glow.

### **Tying Quilts**

Mom and I were relieved—they weren't playing inane baby-shower games, like tasting and guessing contents of baby food from unlabeled jars. A baby quilt was set up instead. I was surprised I remembered how to do it, mostly. Pierce the fabric, push down hard, up again, needle slipping, under thick red yarn, feel fibers tug as you pull. Done already, move on, next marks waiting, cut the yarn when the row is done, pull tight knots, the baby will wind them in tiny fingers. I learned to tie quilts at girl's camp and church socials. Lujean Spencer, with white poodle-permed hair, was the authority. She taught me to stretch fabric on wooden frames, push big silver tacks, roll a tied section under to start another row. The quilt Lujean helped me make, cut from blue cloth reminding me of baby eyes, is folded unused at the top of my closet. The yarn is perfect, not frayed by any baby's hands.

These were the life skills they taught good girls at my church. When we weren't tying quilts for Kurdish refugees, or making hygiene kits for the homeless, our leaders were doing their best to convince us we could become saints. I can see my teacher, her perfectly manicured nails holding the thin white manual. The answers were simple and I knew them all. Read your scriptures, pray, beg forgiveness. Those answers haven't changed much. I still believe. But my manual is not white anymore. It's an 8 ½ x 5 blue

spiral notebook that I carry almost wherever I go, and scribble in: jotting down lines that run through my head at night; stories I'm working on; conversation scraps; bits of class lecture; song lyrics; prayers; secret notes to my best friend; anything that will help me tie up the loose ends that are running willy-nilly through my head. These pieces get terribly disorganized, almost frightfully so at times, until I believe I'll never straighten it all out. But I do somehow, shaping the scraps into a pattern. Simplicity is not an attribute I'd pin on my life, but I've come to prefer attempting to organize the chaos, rather than pretending it's not there.

### **Broken**

I made orange passion-fruit juice this morning in my glass pitcher that kind of looks like the kool-aid man. I have two of them, exactly the same. One I got for my wedding, the other I got five years later for my divorce, I guess you could say. I can't tell one from the other, so alike they seem to me. I'm happy to use them both, the juice tasting as good, pouring out as well, mixing as smoothly. Both were gifts from family members, wishing happiness, giving what the occasion and conscience demanded. The first pitcher I unwrapped in a white dress standing in a reception hall, the second gift I got outside my townhouse. I was walking to my door from the carport, when Dallen's sister's family appeared on the sidewalk, holding a wrapped gift and the new baby I'd never seen, now six months old. It was dark and Christmas cold, but they couldn't come in. They were tired, the night spent, excusing themselves with their two babies' bedtimes. Kjerston was strapped in her car-seat, so I kissed her there, my tears wetting her toddler face as she cooed out something sounding like Aunt Holly. I hugged Eldon, crying harder now, his big toothy grin revealed in the lamplight. And Laurisa, large

glasses glinting, awkward and fumbling with the baby, crying too, the dark past of the asphalt beneath our feet. Sniffling, wiping at the tears washing over my cheeks, no Kleenex, just brushing it on my jeans, asking about his siblings who wouldn't speak to me, hugging them, holding the baby, not knowing what to say. Smiling and crying and wondering what I was doing outside on a dark and cold Christmas night with people I used to call my family. I waved to them, wiping at my eyes as they drove, their headlights flashing, blinding me as they turned away. I went inside, and without turning on the light unwrapped the box, the cool beams of the streetlamp streaming through my gauzy curtains. *Another pitcher*, I thought, *just like the old one*. I don't think they knew they completed the pair; don't think they could have foreseen the irony when they picked it up at Lectors or Wal-mart as they dashed off to buy other things on their list. But I did as I put it in the cupboard next to its mate. There wouldn't have been space, not before he took his bowls and pie plates. It's a good pitcher, even though I have to put cling-wrap over it when put I inside the fridge to keep the juice from tasting like salsa and potatoes. I like that I can see swirls in the orange-pink juice, that it's heavy in my hand, solid as I pour, that the glass belly feels icy cupped in my palm. If I dropped it, the glass would shatter, forever broken on the hard floor, unfixable, to be swept up and put in the garbage can. Perhaps finding pieces, little shards months later as I sweep a forgotten corner, or while walking in the kitchen one morning wanting some juice, but instead pushing a hard sliver in my toe, the red drop of blood forming unexpectedly. But I do not drop it, I hold it carefully, wash it out, and put it safely in the cupboard with its other, their bases kissing, not knowing which one was the start and which one the gift of the end, and me not being able to tell which I like better, so alike they seem to me.

## ALLERGIC TO MANNA

*It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God. ~The Gospel of St. Matthew 4:4*

I cried today when I ate my toasted Subway sandwich—for the sheer joy of it, and for the worry weight of 1,000+ days pouring off me like a cloudburst in a parched land. I could eat wheat again. Three years earlier marked the beginning of my wheat famine, when vanity forced me to the doctor, erasing the denial I'd been slathering on my health problems: unexplainable weight loss, heart pains, the body aches of an octogenarian. My feet were like bread loaves in shoes, their puffy tops denting in like playdo. The diagnosis was a repugnant sounding word, Celiac Sprue, with an equally repulsive balm for my mysterious plague. The investigative endoscopy/ colonoscopy revealed I was allergic to gluten, the protein found in wheat, barley, and rye. Celiac experts told me I was so allergic that 1/16<sup>th</sup> of a piece of bread would make me ill for days. *No wonder I'd started hating sandwiches.*

Celiac disease can be fatal if left untreated. I felt like I was in the dark ages of medicine, for all the help modern science was to me now. The doctor didn't offer a quick fix, or any treatment beyond abstinence. There's no pill for easy digestion of gluten, no surgery, no transplant, no hope. There's only life without wheat. Being raised a Christian I've sometimes thought of the lepers healed by Christ, but now I ponder post-miracle, their mundane healed lives running off the pages of the Gospels. What did these healed lepers feel, suddenly clean? My own miraculous healing of the incurable gave me a

glimpse. I feel my whole self again, a center I'd forgotten. I'm not an outcast in social settings—I don't eat special food, I don't explain weird things I eat, I don't endure pitying looks while everyone gobbles brownies. Normal things taste amazing. (I called my mother to share the moment I ate half an English muffin). A bakery doesn't hurt like a break-up. Celebrating bread feels trivial to me, compared with Christ rejuvenating feted skin—but my joy feels that big. Healing rolled this great stone from my mind, opening a door medicine said was sealed forever. Healing baffles me. Healing is sweet, an everlasting gobstopper.

\* \* \*

People said funny things when they'd find out I was allergic to wheat. Like—"I would hate it if I couldn't eat wheat. I just love all that stuff." Or, "Yes, we have your gluten free meal. The caterer said their noodles are from white flour not wheat, so they'll be okay."

\* \* \*

Before the diagnosis, I was emaciated. Nausea was constant. I had a hard time swallowing. My skin was thin gray paper. The doctor knew it was serious—my red blood-cell count was nearly half the norm. "At worst its cancer; at best you're bleeding out of your guts." Tests were ordered, starting with my heart. The perfect thump-thumping from the ultrasound sensor on my bare chest was beautiful to me. Then on a tar-black morning, I almost crashed my car nearing the hospital, could have died before new life started, slipping through that red light on icy January roads. Dr. Bodily (a name I find laughably perfect for a GI doc) poked tubular cameras where they didn't belong, to find blood seeping from my intestines. (I'm glad they slipped me the medical version of

a forgetful date-rape pill and drugged me to sleep). He floated a snippet of the suspicious looking intestinal tissue on a cucumber chip for the lab. His nurse called, telling me to google Celiac Sprue and not to worry about the viral kind in Africa.

My family was skeptical of the diagnosis; I think they felt it was too horrific, like being allergic to sunlight. I accepted it immediately, strange as it was. When I cut out wheat, I stopped throwing up. But I hated being celiac. About a month being off wheat, I braved the normal grocery store and could smell the bread two aisles away. I nearly had a panic attack by the peanut butter. I felt like a prisoner in my own body, a true outcast from the world. *How can I not eat wheat anymore?* Wheat, wheat products, and gluten are in everything: bread, rolls, pizza, pasta, cakes, muffins, 99% of canned soups, sour cream (wheat is disguised here as modified food starch), honey roasted peanuts, orange soda (don't ask me why), almost every boxed cereal known to man, oatmeal (it almost always gets processed with wheat), cottage cheese, ice cream, cream of wheat, pretzels, crackers, bagels, licorice, rice crispy treats (malt has gluten, malt is also in everything), Butterfingers, Milky Way, Kit Kats, Lindorf chocolate, lots of European chocolate (again with the malt!), corn-bread, pancakes, waffles, French fries, chicken nuggets, hamburger buns (thank goodness for low-carb lettuce wraps), tomato paste, granola bars, tortillas, donuts (I don't really like those anyway, except for the cake kind), barbeque sauce, taco sauce, soy sauce, teriyaki sauce, egg rolls, everything at Panda Express including the orange chicken, refried beans, seasonings, salad dressing, gravy, cream sauces, curry sauces, some random French catsup (blé is French for wheat and the first word I learned in Paris), nearly everything in a package, nearly everything served at a restaurant, nearly everything people cook at their houses, nearly everything good.



\* \* \*

A swinging multi-stripe hammock was my only refuge from the weight in my belly, a grinding nausea from wheat contaminated French fries. I thought of my brother, Greg, with his gift of healing and asked for a blessing. I sat in a chair between my desk and bed; he stood behind, dropping olive oil in my hair, then hands on my head. My neck felt strained with the weight, kinking a bit but I resisted squirming. This is sacred to me, a thing of God, a mystery I want to be part of. I hoped for a reprieve from the nausea. Greg's voice is usually eloquent during these blessings, powerful, but this time he stumbled, halted. Then he said something like, "You will be healed from your celiac disease so you can live a more normal life. Continue going to your witch-doctor, listen to your body, but most importantly seek healing from your Heavenly Father." After the blessing I looked at him and said, "Did you just say what I think you said?" "I think so," he said, "I felt the words in my mind, but I thought, I'm not saying that. No way am I giving her false hope. I was afraid to say it."

\* \* \*

I dreamed of bread. I had nightmares of it too. I could taste it in my sleep, a thick slice of my mom's whole wheat bread, with milk and honey. Then I'd remember I'm not allowed, not even in dreams, and I'd start spitting, squeegeeing it out of my mouth and the bread kept coming, more and more, but I'd know I'd swallowed and it was too late. Wheat felt like two days of the flu, like gulping a bucket of cement. I'd wake up shaky from bread nightmares like I do when I dream I've gone to school naked.

\* \* \*

In the Gospel of St. John 6: 32-35, I find a passage with new meaning for me.

“Our fathers did eat manna in the desert as it is written, He gave them bread from heaven to eat. Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Moses gave you not that bread from heaven; but my Father giveth you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he which cometh down from heaven, and giveth life unto the world. Then said they unto him, Lord, evermore give us this bread. And Jesus said unto them, I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst.” Imagining eating bread with Christ, fed like a sparrow from the mark in his open palms, makes me hungry for the real wheat thing. And it makes me wonder, would I be allergic to manna too? If I snuck into heaven and plunked myself down at the marriage feast sans invitation, would my penalty be celiac-like reactions to the bread of life?

Why did God give me this horrible disease and then take it away. Was it to bring me to this moment of realization, so I would fear to sin? Does he curse me to bless me? I'd suffered for three unknowing years, and three years separate from those people living on the true wheat bread of life. Six years, in the perspective of a lifetime, is relatively short. And why heal only me? I know other celiac sufferers, and I haven't dared tell them. My healing would only inflict suffering on their own unclean insides. Don't all of God's children deserve a normal life? Did God give those lepers rotten skin, so they would seek his power, knowing his healing would be recorded for others to read? Why not give the medical world this knowledge, and let all Celiacs out of bondage? Does he leave us hungry so bread scriptures will drive us from the fleshpots of Egypt towards an

ever-sustaining bread? I cannot say. God only told me this miracle would make me normal. But I am baffled by the ways he chooses to succor his people.

\* \* \*

I've been visiting a chiropractor I affectionately called my "witch-doctor." He believes in holistic health. He believes yellow plastic sun-glasses balance the Chakra, or energy surrounding my colon, intestines and bowels. (There's a whole rainbow of glasses in his office.) He believes if I hold glass vials of things I am allergic to, he can undo those allergies by sparking tiny electric shocks on acupuncture pressure points on my body. He believes the handfuls of herbal supplements he prescribes will give my body the building blocks to restore itself. He believes adjusting my spine reopens energy flow to my body. He believes our emotions attract specific diseases and ailments to our bodies. He believes if mind, body and soul are balance, the body will heal itself. He believes my body tells him what it needs to find this balance. I did not believe, but stayed in the beginning because he was the only person in the medical field who gave me hope for a cure.

I began to slowly believe. I began seeing physical evidence that this doctor's unconventional methods might be working. First there was the muscle testing, where I lost all physical strength in certain limbs as he tested me against allergens or , and then gained strength when he adjusted my hip and I began to weep. It wasn't from physical pain, but something deeper, frightening me like a child. I was mortified but I couldn't stop the tears. *This is no ordinary chiropractor*, I thought.

Is this how God builds true faith, not fanaticism, by letting our hope lead us to see the physical truth our eyes were closed to before? Can faith be based on the physical,

albeit physical proof . Faith may precede the miracle, but certainly the God who parted the red sea understood his children's need to see and touch proof from this world that He exists in a world beyond our seeing. Being healed of celiac has made me a believer in miracles. I think before I believed like a child does in Santa Clause, not with the thinking mind of an adult and the feeling heart of a Christian believer. If God allows miracles what does he see as the point? It has to be more than spiritual magic tricks on a grand proportion. And what is my part, in any in my miraculous healing? Was my going to this witch doctor, like the faith of Moses leading his people to the red sea? Why does God make his children walk these distances? Is it only to show us his power, or was God trying to teach me something? What is God's purpose in teaching me how he creates a miracle? God only knows.

At home before slipping to sleep, I ritually tell my body to find and imbibe those perfect blueprints I cradle in my cells from which, in-embryo, sprang a working digestive tract. I talk to my stomach; voicing aloud how proud I am it kept me alive while I poisoned it.

Then my feet go into clear water with a small strange machine in it. After 20 minutes, a multi-colored scum has formed on the water, different every time. Those floaties are impurities pulled out of my body, but I have no idea how. I can see frothy blue from my liver; white, which means too much yeast; black globs of heavy metals; orange from joints; tiny green specks from my gallbladder, and brown from kidneys.

These pills are herbal, expensive, and make my pee bright yellow. I take drops for my ovaries. The doctor says my vital egg cups are radioactive, having picked up

Radium and Uranium somewhere. While that seems ludicrous I grew up in Las Vegas, a hop, skip, and an explosion away from the nuclear test site and Area 51.

\* \* \*

I was in my church's temple, in a white robe, my feet bare, my head uncovered. A woman I didn't know was saying words in a spiritual ritual cleansing like baptism, when I felt something inside my stomach change. A pressure came to the spot under my sternum that used to burn from wheat. What was that pressure I felt in the Temple like the marked palms of some unseen medic reviving me. Was it God's balm of Gilead, the cumulating effects of my mind, or the witch doctor? Was it all three; a peculiar trinity? I doubt that the God who said "let there be light!" and there was light, would need my puny help. Why then did Elisha command Naaman to dip himself seven times in the muddy Jordan? Was it only to teach him obedience? Was it to buy his spiritual allegiance? And why did John baptize Christ, the only perfect man, in the same river? Were those glass vials filled with the evaporated water from that muddy stream in Jordan that was rained down upon me in another land? God only knows.

\* \* \*

The shiny silver tray full of bread passed hand to hand down my row. I took a piece and looked, scared to eat it all. After I was diagnosed with celiac, I only nibbled the wheat bread, hoping a crumb would sustain my faith. In my hand was his broken body, but I didn't want the dead Christ in me, not his blood to wash away my sins. This day I needed his whole body, raised on the third day. I looked at the bread again, still scared. It's one thing to say: yes I believe Christ will save me and forgive my sins, and another to say: I believe so strongly, I'll do something medical science and my own

personal experience has taught me will make me sick for days. I wasn't sure I was ready for that kind of faith. I prayed for strength.

By now the trays were collected and the priest was beginning to bless the water. I had wavered long enough. Instead of nibbling a wisp of bread like usual, I put the whole terrible piece in my mouth, chewed, and swallowed. It was the scariest act of faith I've ever been part of. Nothing happened. I couldn't believe I'd been healed—*must have been a fluke*, I thought. It was a very small piece of bread. At dinner I was brave again and put stuffing on my plate. (I don't even like stuffing). "Bottom's up," I said, while Greg looking scared, snapped a picture. It's not a good one, but I'm not deleting it; I need physical proof I can see. Nothing happened again. So I ate half a roll with honey on it. I don't remember tasting, just chewing and thinking I've lost my everlovin' mind. I woke up in the morning surprised by the lack of cramping and nausea. I can get sick eating French fries cooked in the same oil where breaded chicken fingers are fried. With the amount of wheat I'd eaten, if I hadn't been healed I'd be horribly ill. Despite my good health, I was discounting the physical evidence of my own body.

Was my problem with faith or trusting a miracle whose sign is that nothing happens to me? I was normal—so what. Almost everyone can eat wheat. When I eat wheat now, I want to say to the server or my dining companions, "So, did you know I'm a walking miracle. Watch me eat this bread." Some people don't believe me, even friends that shouldn't doubt. God and his Son must understand what it's like not to be believed. When news of the resurrected Christ blew through Jerusalem, some of his own doubted. "It was Mary Magdalene, and Joanna, and Mary *the mother of James*, and other *women that were* with them, which told these things unto the apostles. And their words

seemed to them as idle tales, and they believed them not. . . And as [the disciples] thus spake, Jesus himself stood in the midst of them and saith unto them, Peace be unto you. But they were terrified, and affrighted, and supposed that they had seen a spirit. And he said unto them, Why are ye trouble? and why do thoughts arise in your hearts? Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself: handle me, and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have.” (St. Luke 24: 9-10 & 36-39). I still sometimes doubt my own healing, worried the celiac symptoms will return. Would I be like the disciples, doubting the evidence of the empty tomb, and the *idle* tales of the women who claimed to have seen him? Would his presence frighten me instead of confirm my belief in the miracle before me. Do I need to handle those marked hands, instead of feel their healing presence on my body, before I will fully believe?

\* \* \*

In the morning I had that I'm-exhausted-because-I've-worked-too-hard-eaten-too-little-and-slept-too-poorly-nausea all morning. I felt a slight panic. What if the celiac is coming back? What if I've imagined it all? By mid-afternoon I felt better, and at night I finally ate something: cornflakes, real ones with gluten-laden malt. I didn't think too much of it, shoveling the soggy mess in as I talked on the phone.

## WHY WE NEED BLOODHOUNDS

*Phantosmia is the phenomenon of smelling odors which are not present*

*~Anosmia Foundation*

*It's early but the snow is gone from red rock. Last night's light rain washed them red—I saw the familiar picture in his 6:45 am text. Nate shows up on the radar every now and then these days. Nate's a poet; he calls me "angel brains", "sweet freckles". I dread his texts. His poetry makes me remember:*

We played on the beach, digging a hole in the sand. Nate buried me, my pink striped swimming suit bold against the brown. We were ten. He was afraid to kiss me.

I hadn't seen Nate in years. My mother told me he'd been to Bowling Green and back, got his MFA in poetry. We chatted after the lecture, me cleaning up half empty cups, asking about his divorced sister, sweeping the crumbs idly. "Hold up," Nate shouted to his friends. "I'm trying to get a date." We both laughed. *Since when*, I thought. He asked for my number.

I was standing in my polka dot pajamas, outside my parents' house. It was late on Thanksgiving and Nate stopped by to chat. I hugged him goodbye; he held my face, brushed his lips on mine. I pulled back, afraid to kiss him.

"Sit down," I invited Nate. I was startled to see him at the restaurant. Danielle and I had been chatting about his wild behavior over curries and garlic naan. Nate hadn't taken the break-up well. He still wanted to be friends. "I can see this is a table for two,"



he said and left. He was waiting in the parking lot when we finished. We talked for hours; he tried to kiss me.

\* \* \*

Bloodhounds are the oldest scent hounds. Their keenest of all doggy noses can actually be deposited; their breeds' testimony in many states is admissible as evidence into a court of law. Their name probably comes from blooded, meaning papered, since noblemen as far back as the 7<sup>th</sup> century used and bred these dogs for their tracking abilities (general lore credits monk St. Hubert whose St. Hubert hounds are the fathers of our modern Bloodhound). A hound is classified by its special ability to track and chase prey. There are three types of hounds: the sighthound such as the Greyhound and the Whippet who are prized for their speed and agility in chasing and killing their prey; the scent hound such as the bloodhound and the lesser known Otterhound (yes, they were used to hunt otters) are known for endurance not speed, and the ability to track by scent; and the third grouping is not really a category at all but the equivalent of being ambidextrous in dog terms. These hounds, like the Rhodesian Ridgebacks, are equally good at tracking by sight and scent.

The Bloodhound's legendary ability to follow a scent trail over long and rugged distance makes them the quintessential scent hound. They are particularly notorious as "mantrackers," and have proven invaluable assets to law enforcement and search-and-rescue.

\* \* \*

Medical research has shown that people can hallucinate smells. I'm not sure what that means, but if I were to take a trip on a smell, I would go via an ex's cologne. Steve

always smelled of Abercrombie and Fitch cologne, the original version, and one whiff of that spicy manliness in a crowded room and I immediately want to kiss someone.

Despite Abercrombie's mass marketing, that is *his* cologne in my mind, and I have a Pavlovian response to it.

Steve not only smelled of Abercrombie, he belonged in their catalogs, his physical features so fine nearly anyone would want to make a baby with him. Representatives from sperm banks have approached him on the street, as he walked through campus, to be a donor. They leave their cards and ask him to think about it. Steve told me college girls would pass him slips of paper with their phone numbers, as he studied in the library. They'd smile and leave, usually never saying a word. I think both parties were asking the same question.

\* \* \*

Jennifer Fisher Wilson article on smell in the December 2001 issue of *The Scientist* startled me. I'd never considered that humans as well as dogs are significantly affected by the sense of smell. In the case of choosing a mate, smell, I thought had very little to do with the matter. I considered long-term attraction to be based on a list of characteristics I had sensibly outlined in my mind which went beyond that magical moment of chemistry. But new research suggests I am attracted first and foremost by smell, and that perhaps my nose is affecting my rational choices more than I realize. Research suggest that like dogs which track via sweat, humans smell each other's sweat and determine the suitability or unsuitability of potential mates. I've included two paragraphs from Wilson's article below.

True to legend, a bloodhound can track someone for miles just by keeping its nose to the ground; that proximity makes it all the easier to smell foot sweat. Akin to a molecular thumbprint, sweat is a cocktail of different odorants, and bloodhounds are particularly adept at discerning the unique mixture of isobutyric acid and isovaleric acid molecules. Their sensitive noses have olfactory acuity that is 100 to 1,000 times greater than humans.

New Research is exploring the role odor plays in mating and reproduction. Earlier studies suggest that a woman seeks a mate with complementary genetics to minimize her offspring's recessive mutations. The work shows that women are influenced more by a man's body odor than any other physical feature. She hypothesizes that women detect a man's genetic complementary makeup through his perspiration's unique molecular odor. Previous findings by other researchers that women are particularly acute at recognizing their mate's scent support this idea, she adds.

\* \* \*

Steve and I had talked about marriage, were planning on getting engaged in June.

But one night in January, he came to me with a confession.

“Where did you have sex with her?” I asked Steve. *You told me you loved me.*

“In the back of my car,” he said.

I had no idea how he'd squeezed his 6'4" frame into the back seat of his Nissan Maxima and then had room to maneuver. “I thought I should tell you,” Steve said. He'd

been with me that very night and all the nights before for months. I felt sick. I was ready to forgive him, but he left anyway.

Pablo pulled the car over when I asked him, onto the corner, onto the sidewalk by Taco Bell. I opened the car door, leaning into the dark florescent night and dry heaved. Nothing would come out. Finally a bit of brown liquid. He rubbed my back and held my belt loops so I wouldn't fall. He knew I was considering ending things, but he loved me anyway.

\* \* \*

Pablo is reading as I type my bloodhound essay. We're shoulder to shoulder with our laptops doing homework, propped against the headboard on my queen bed, the decorative mosquito netting making a little cocoon. I show him the section about himself and he feels compelled to type the following:

Yes, but Pablo loves Holly...

I found his note again days later and almost erased it, but as a writer, words are sacred to me. The ellipsis at the end intrigues me. I think Pablo was saying, "I'm leaving end of April, so are you. I hope we keep longer than that. . . I don't want to say again we'll see each other in August and please don't abandon me for Ethiopia. I can't follow you that far."

\* \* \*

My brother, Greg, told me about a PBS show on how abandoned bloodhounds are rescued from the pound and screened for possible police work. Greg and I are fighting at the moment, mostly over our love interests. He thinks I don't spend enough time with

him and that Pablo is a dork. I think he's insane to be dating a woman he openly admits he will never marry and wants to break up with. I think I need to get a dog to tell us what to do.

A stadium is filled with people on game day. A human tracking volunteer goes to a sport stadium and watches the scheduled game from one of the stadium seats. A day later, after the stadium has been cleaned—hound-handlers give the prospective dog a good whiff of something the volunteer was wearing. Then they release the hound to find the chair the volunteer sat in. I can't imagine how this is possible, even if their noses are designed with all that foldy skin to trap the miniscule scent particles. All those smells, from all those people crowded into one space, and then the eventual dissipation of those smells from wind and cleaning, and the dog is still able to find the exact chair. I sometimes can't find my chair, returning from a pit-stop during the seventh inning stretch.

\* \* \*

Phantosmia is the condition of smelling things that are not actually present. When I first learned of phantosmia I thought it so beyond bizarre, that real people couldn't be affected, only people living in demented fairytales. Or if phantosmiacs did exist, these people must be strung out on drugs, or completely abnormal in other ways. Searching the web for more information on phantosmia, I came along this posting, which reversed my thoughts about phantosmia sufferers. I hope the victim found some relief.

Sep 12, 2006 12:00AM

I have also been dealing for almost 6 weeks with smelling something that is not really there. Mine is the smell of smoke. I FINALLY found a name for what this

condition is: PHANTOSMIA - which are olfactory hallucinations. They seem to be connected to olfactory nerve damage which can result from viral infections, certain medications, and sometimes even epilepsy or brain tumors. Mine was the result of a viral infection which caused MASSIVE sinus infection and respiratory problems which were treated with Zithromax and Prednisone. The smoke smell is very stressful to deal with and have had to start taking anti-anxiety medications to deal with the stress. Vicks Vapo-rub helps somewhat to mask the smell in order to get to sleep - but this is getting really old. [Finished] a round of Cipro - but no improvement. Had a cat-scan - but no definitive results from that. Told by ENT specialist that this type of nerve damage can take months or up to a year to heal and perhaps never. Investigating possible surgical relief. Can contact me at: \*\*\*@\*\*\*\* to discuss further or if you have any helpful info. Thanks.

\* \* \*

Bryce wasn't wearing cologne but I liked the way he smelled—close on his neck, under his jaw. He kissed me, his tongue wide and soft.

\* \* \*

Pablo and I broke up today. We held hands and cried; when he left he kissed my cheek, holding the back of my head in his familiar way. I've blocked him on gmail so I won't see his name—Pablito—popping up in my contacts list. In a weak moment I read his facebook page and looked at his pictures. I recognized all his faces and what they meant. I hadn't realized I knew him that well. It made me sad all over again.

Perhaps I am imagining it, but I catch whiffs of Pablo in my clothes, on my pillow, in the blanket we'd snuggled in. Every time I smell the phantom Pablo, my stomach drops. We could have made it, lasted till we were 95 and bent up with age, yet we choose not to stay together because I couldn't commit enough of me fast enough. That's the nice way to put it. We broke up because of Bryce and his soft wide tongue. I was surprised how guiltless cheating felt. I don't know why I wasn't crazier about Pablo. I think attraction and maybe love have something to do with pheromones, but how much is in control of our hearts and heads, and how much is a reaction to what our nose smells about the person? I doubt I'll ever know, and even if I did, would that make it easier to find my match? My nose, whether by nature or nurture, is set in its ways. An orange still smells like a delicious orange, whether I know how my nose knows it or not.

\*                      \*                      \*

My brother and his girlfriend have been dating on and off for three years. Now that she's sure she wants to marry him, he can't seem to commit. She's beautiful, talented, and gentle but something keeps holding him back. He says he can't connect to her. I wonder what is really holding him back.

They were both equally intrigued by my research into smells and pointed out a recent article in the January 17, 2008 issue of *Time Magazine* on smells, ovulation, and attraction entitled *The Science of Romance: Why We Love*. I've included below small bits of author Jeffery Kluger's work.

One surprising study published last October in the journal *Evolution and Human Behavior* showed that strippers who are ovulating average \$70 in tips per hour; those who are menstruating make \$35; those who are not ovulating or

menstruating make \$50. Other studies suggest that men can react in more romantic ways to olfactory signals. In work conducted by Martie Haselton, an associate professor of psychology at UCLA, women report that when they're ovulating, their partners are more loving and attentive and, significantly, more jealous of other men. "The men are picking up on something in their partner's behavior that tells them to do more mate-guarding," Haselton says.

Scent not only tells males which females are primed to conceive, but it also lets both sexes narrow their choices of potential partners. Among the constellation of genes that control the immune system are those known as the major histocompatibility complex (MHC), which influence tissue rejection. Conceive a child with a person whose MHC is too similar to your own, and the risk increases that the womb will expel the fetus. Find a partner with sufficiently different MHC, and you're likelier to carry a baby to term.

In later work conducted at the University of Bern in Switzerland, human females were asked to smell T shirts worn by anonymous males and then pick which ones appealed to them. Time and again, they chose the ones worn by men with a safely different MHC. And if the smell of MHC isn't a deal maker or breaker, the taste is. Saliva also contains the compound, a fact that Haselton believes may partly explain the custom of kissing, particularly those protracted sessions that stop short of intercourse. "Kissing," she says simply, "might be a taste test."

Precise as the MHC-detection system is, it can be confounded. One thing that throws us off the scent is the birth-control pill. Women who are on the Pill--which



chemically simulates pregnancy--tend to choose wrong in the T-shirt test. When they discontinue the daily hormone dose, the protective smell mechanism kicks back in. "A colleague of mine wonders if the Pill may contribute to divorce," says Wysocki. "Women pick a husband when they're on birth control, then quit to have a baby and realize they've made a mistake."

\* \* \*

I'd undressed to my underwear and gone into the bathroom to get ready for bed. Ten minutes before, I'd run upstairs, hoping to leave our fight in the kitchen. But since I'd told Dallen, my then husband, he didn't want a wife but his mother and a whore, he wasn't ready to let it go. At his scariest, Dallen would go silent and when he did I felt physically ill. So when I heard his feet tramping up the stairs, not his angry voice, I realized what he was going to do. *You are not going to lock me out of my own bedroom.* Five years of living with a manipulative husband had given me a sick sixth sense. Running from the bathroom I saw the door whipping closed. I grabbed the handle, and jammed my knee in the open slot. Dallen slammed the door hard. He was trying to push my leg out. We were shouting, inches from each other.

"Let me in, Dallen."

"No."

He jerked the door back then slammed it again into my leg, nearly wrenching the handle from my grip. I held tight, enraged, and shoved against the door with my left side. I felt the door flex but it didn't move.

"I want my clothes, my pillow, and my alarm clock."

"Go away."

“I have to get up at 3 am. I can’t wake up without the alarm.”

“I don’t care, get another alarm.”

“They’re all in the bedroom, and I’m not going to the airport in my underwear.”

“Too bad.”

I’d had enough, and slammed my body against the door. He wasn’t expecting it, and I popped into the room. Dallen looked at me in surprise for a moment then pushed me hard. My right side hit the wall, my head cracking on the doorframe. I think he meant to push me out of the door, not into it, but I’ve never been angrier. I got into his face, standing on my tippy toes, nearly naked and said in clipped tones: “Don’t you ever touch me again.” I walked to the dresser to get my alarm clock.

“Bitch,” he said quietly.

“What did you call me?” I turned to face him.

“Bitch,” he said again this time looking at me, his face long, hawkish and ugly. I’d seen this face before during other fights, as if the mask he always wore slipped, to reveal something evil living beneath the skin.

Alarm clock in hand, pillow in the other I came up to him again. “I told you never to call me that again.”

“Fuck you.”

I don’t remember what happened then but I do remember my disgust.

That night on the sofa, I awoke, breathing heavily, heart leaping, scared to move, not knowing that I’d just woken up. Dallen had been behind my head and he’d reached slowly down my face, to hold my chin with one hand, and place the barrel of his pistol to my head. I felt the cold metal clunk against the back right side of my skull. How had he

found out where I'd hidden it? Did he find the bullets too? I felt the room start to turn, like I do when I'm falling asleep, but faster. I blinked and breathed and tried to orient myself to what was happening. Dallen had gone. It had to have been a nightmare. But I could still feel the sensation of his gun against my head. I can sometimes feel it still.

Four days later, I personally served him at REI, where he was working part-time, with the divorce papers my lawyer brother filed for me. On the rare occasions I've revisited the Salt Lake REI, Dallen's still standing with me, far to the right of the main sliding door, begging me not to do it. "It's already done," I say. He becomes angry over money, so I leave. As I get into the car, I look back and see him in his green work vest, clutching the manila envelope with the divorce papers. He never looks at me as I drive out of the parking lot.

\* \* \*

Why did I break up with Nate? So many things made sense about him. He was one of the few men who was my intellectual equal *and* didn't bore me to tears. He could always make me laugh. He's got a good teaching job, I know his family, he'd follow anywhere I'd want to get my PhD.

For my birthday, Nate mailed me a jar of Jiffy peanut butter (the only brand I eat—it's terrible for me, but I love the taste) and chocolate chips. Early in our relationship I told him I loved dipping out spoons full of PB, dotting it with chocolate chips, and chasing it with a swig of milk. I don't think my own family knows it's my favorite treat. I loved him for sending it, even though we'd broken up months before. I knew his secrets, the big ones anyway, which to me is better than thinking you know a man when you don't, even if the truth is unsettling. He'd gotten into drugs, sex, and rock

'n roll in high school, and our childhood friendship drifted away. But he slowly changed over the years. He found education, then religion, then poetry. He doesn't have the heart of an addict, and stopping was fairly easy.

These details don't bother me. It has been years since his wild days. I think I'm more afraid he wants to marry me. I fear men's chameleon-like ability to blend into what I want, changing back when they think I can't get away. Nate tried to pin our break-up on that fear alone, but it was more than that. I'd gotten this feeling, an unscalable wall stopping me from going forward. I couldn't explain the source of the feelings to myself, much less to him. He's still trying to change my mind about us.

\* \* \*

I've been mulling over my uncanny ability to attract irresponsible men. My theory: I don't ovulate; at least not often. I can remember only half a dozen times this has happened in the 16 or so years I've menstruated; at least I think its ovulation, according to the college campus doctor my roommates dragged me to when they found me panting, near delirious on the floor. This pain has worsened over the years—a bloaty cramping that curls me into a ball, and has me downing four Aleve at a time (three is the max in a 24-hour period), or a loritab if I'm desperate. So what does all this ovulating have to do with attracting irresponsible men? Half of my theory is explained by the following abstract from Behavioral Ecology.

It is a long held assumption that women have concealed ovulation, which means that men do not know when women's menstrual cycles are in their most fertile phase. Recent empirical results have provided evidence that ovulation may not be totally concealed from pair-bonded males, but the generality and the mechanisms

of the finding demand further study. To examine the possible adaptive value of the phenomenon, it is necessary to study whether the ability to detect ovulation is confined to males. We studied these question in an experiment in which male and female raters rated the sexual attractiveness and intensity of T-shirts' odors worn by 42 women using oral contraceptives (pill users) and by 39 women without oral contraceptives (nonusers). Males rated the sexual attractiveness of nonusers highest at midcycle. However, female raters showed only a nonsignificant trend for this relationship. Neither sex rated attractiveness of the odors of pill users according to their menstrual cycle. The results indicate that men can use olfactory cues to distinguish between ovulating and nonovulating women. Furthermore, the contrasting results between pill users and nonusers may indicate that oral contraceptive demolish the cycle of attractiveness of odors. Together, these findings give more basis for the study of the role of odors in human sexual behavior.

This article illuminates a theory I've come to think it as the life force. The human body has a drive to repopulate itself above almost any other drive, even beyond reason sometimes. It shouts—not to our ears—“Don't let the species die out, make more of us!” At least that's what it shouts to me.

The other half of my attracting-irresponsible-men theory is my nose can't tell the difference between how good guys smell and bad guys smell, so long as I won't produce genetically damaged offspring with them. Good men in my religious culture are bred to believe that if they mate with a woman, they'd better be prepared to take care of her and the offspring too. But bad boys want arm candy and days on the lake, not babies and sick

wives, and without knowing why, are attracted to a woman like me who can't make a baby. I might fit a responsible man's profile for a potential mate, but his nose will tell him not to be attracted to me if he wants a baby. This is all theory of course. I've only the science of my life to prove it.

I can't blame my nose for everything, I have my other four senses and my woman's intuition to set me straight, but before this essay I'd never considered smell to be important beyond the perfume counter. It is odd that I have attracted so many losers, who fall head over heels in love with me. I consider myself a well adjusted, capable and attractive woman, and find the lack of promising men a constant frustration to both head and heart.

\* \* \*

His name is Quidgy—a miniature greyhound who understands German and English, and after his prediction that my date would be a little more than weird, I wished he was mine. He came to my house for a visit with Connie and her daughters; but I'd been around him several times before and his disposition was inquisitive but serene. The entourage were having a weekend sleep-over at "Aunt Holly's" but I'd scheduled a blind-date before I knew they were coming, so Connie was going to enjoy a quiet evening (after she put her kids to bed), and I would try to keep the date short and sweet. The doorbell rang, and with baby Eleanor clad in only a diaper on my hip, I answered the door. As Alex came in, the dog immediately started barking at him and racing around the room. I was surprised, Alex was confused (at both the dog and the baby—he thought she was mine), and my attempts to introduce everyone were drowned out by Quidgy's frantic barking. Alex ventured further into the pandemonium, and as the dog approached him, in

what seemed a playful manner, Alex bent down to pet the hysterical greyhound. The dog went wild again, barking and lurching forward, then raced around the kitchen table and came back to do it all again. I was bewildered by Quidgy's erratic behavior. I'd never seen a dog (except Lassie) act like that, and certainly not this dog, normally so aloof. Once we left my house everything became calmer, but weirder and weirder. At dinner my date told me he was getting to know his dead relatives by not eating cheese; that he was making a statement by wearing bright blue shoes (they were Sesame-Street-blue suede tennis shoes!) and a black jacket; and that he'd like to dye his red hair the exact blue color of his shoes, if his family and friends weren't so closed minded. Driving me home, Alex proudly recounted the time he'd snatched a cell phone away from another one of his dates who texted her friend several times when he was watching a movie with her. Sitting in his car in front of my house, he told me he could read my paranoia and anger about my family as he gazed into the colors of my iris (he would have been closer to the truth if he'd said it was his paranoia and anger). He said he had special ocular powers to distinguish more colors than normal humans, revealing to him our deepest soul secrets. I left disturbed.

In the morning I was even more disturbed. Connie told me Quidgy hadn't settled down all evening. He kept "calling" Connie to where Alex stood, sniffing and barking at the spot, and then running up to circle and whine at the playpen and sofa where my three nieces slept. She wondered if my date was as weird as Quidgy was acting.

"I'm inviting Quidgy over the next time I go out," I said to Connie. "If Quidgy does anything weird, I'll tell my date he's failed the dog test, and to turn around and go home." I patted the dog and wished I knew how he knew.

\* \* \*

Loss of sight or hearing has always been horrifying to me, but I'd never considered the possibility of losing my sense of smell. Maybe it's because loss of the sense of smell might not be viewed as a true disability, however after reading the websites on Anosmia, I became obsessed with the notion. Perhaps it was the personal stories I found so compelling, or that without my sense of smell my life, and possibly my love life would change. The following excerpt is from the Anosmia Foundation.

Loss or lack of the sense of smell is defined as Anosmia; hyperosmia refers to an increased ability to smell. Anosmia is a little understood and little noticed disability, and is often viewed by the medical community as a trivial condition. Between 2 and 5 million American Adults suffer from disorders of taste and smell.

The following accounts are from Anosmia sufferers taken from Anosmia Foundation's Website.

I have put food in my toaster oven, forgotten about it, and turned around a few minutes later to see flames and a cloud of smoke in the room. Neighbors were knocking on my door because they smelled the smoke, but I was in the next room and had no idea there was a fire.

I once washed my face with nail polish remover, because the bottle looked like my face cleanser. It felt a little strong, so after a few minutes I checked the label.



Anyone with a normal sense of smell would have realized immediately that there was something wrong!

Helpful hint: I realized if you put clothes that are clean up to your dog, they won't smell them. If they are dirty - they will! One way to avoid one less daily embarrassment.

Resident Physician Kelly Sweeny, M.D. from the Department of Otolaryngology UTMB prepared an educational report in November of 1993 discussing in part the medical and social implication of Anosmia. Sections of that report are included below.

**A. Importance of Olfaction:**

1. First special sensory organ to develop embryologically.
4. It largely determines the flavor of the foods we eat and the beverages we drink.
6. It may be involved in human reproductivity via the presence of chemical pheromones (speculative).

**D. Aging:**

1. The total number of fibers in the olfactory bulb decreases at a rate of 1% per year.
3. Olfactory dysfunction seen early in the course of Alzheimer's Disease.

**G. Psychiatric Disorders:**

1. Schizophrenia: 15-30% of these patients will have olfactory hallucinations.
2. Temporal lobe epilepsy: usually perceive unpleasant extrinsic phantosmia [olfactory hallucinations] prior to the seizure activity.

3. Major Depression: may experience olfactory hallucinations. Olfactory reference syndrome— patient feels that he stinks and that everyone can smell his foul body odors. He reacts by excessive bathing and withdrawal from society.

\* \* \*

I am looking at a couple sitting on a sofa in an out-of-the-way lounge at my University's student center. She's leaning, eyes closed, against his chest while he reads. His chin and mouth rest softly against her head, as he looks down to peruse his notes, occasionally holding his hand on the side of her head and ear, brushing his hand gently down her hair. Sometimes he will stop reading to kiss the top of her head. They look so quietly in love, he in his grey sweater and short hair; she in a red coat, curled up with a look of contentment. Her eyes may be closed (it is hard to tell from where I sit spying), but as a woman I feel she is not asleep. She may doze in and out, but I don't know a woman who could sleep soundly through such adoration. They look like the kind of couple you'd find 50 years from now on that same sofa, curled up together, only with a few hundred more wrinkles. A question comes as I spy on their silent lounge love: when they first met, did their noses tell them in fifteen minutes what the relationship took months or years to define? More simply put: what do they smell like to each other?

\* \* \*

On the set-up date when I met my ex-husband, I noticed his distinct smell, a combination of his cologne and an undertone reminding me of my oldest brother. These undertone smells are not unpleasant body odors, nor their cologne, laundry soap, or deodorant, but the distinct, if vague, smell of a person's skin. I notice these smells on most men I date. Typically after we've snuggled and kissed more than briefly, I'll get

their smell on me, noticing it on my forearms and chest as I'm undressing for bed. I'll smell it, recognizing its foreignness to me, and that smell memory will make my belly do a happy flip-flop.

I can remember Dallen's smell distinctly, like starving people do dreaming of roasted meat. (Except that my dreams of Dallen are like a vegan visiting a steakhouse.) I've talked to Connie, his brother's wife, about his smell and we both agree he has an unusually strong one, smelling of snow, and mountains in the morning.

\* \* \*

*It's early but the snow is gone from red rock. Last night's light rain washed them red*— I remembered the familiar earthy smell in Nate's 6:45 am text. This is where Dallen proposed, on the red cliffs, snow clinging in the shadows. Nate's poetry reminds me of things I should forget.

## PEARLE JAM

I'm in the depths of the flu and want some of my grandma's strawberry freezer jam to mix with plain yogurt, but she is dead and will never make another batch. I've been trapped four days in a body too weak to stand, lending me time to reflect on what I'd rather not. I never asked her how to make it and even though I can read her recipe, she can't teach me her secrets. I asked my mother if she had Grandma's recipe and she pulled out an old, folded, black and white *MCP Pectin Jam & Jelly Directions* on glossy paper. "She used the one from the pectin box." It was nothing extraordinary, but a tiny treasure I want now; bits of her life I never gave notice.

## NO-COOK FREEZER JAM DIRECTIONS

**FRUIT NEEDED:** Start with approximately 2 quarts berries or 3 pounds fruit **at room temperature.** (*Grandma talked once about a fruit stand in Orem, around 1600 North. Did she go there, or was she not that fussy.*)

**TO PREPARE CONTAINERS:** Rinse clean plastic containers and lids with boiling water. (*Pearle's Jam was always in little glass jars in the freezer, the glass frosty.*)

**TO PREPARE FRUIT:**

**Berries and Grapes.** Wash fruit. Stem and seed, if necessary. Grind or crush thoroughly until reduced to a pulp. Sieve ½ of the pulp to remove some seeds, if desired. (*Did she sieve the seeds?*)

**Other Fruit:** Wash. Peel figs, kiwis or peaches. Pit, slice and grind or finely chop. (*When I was younger, Pearle lived in Washington with a raspberry bush in her backyard, and she made vats of the cooked jam. I remember picking berries for her once. Even clearer is my memory of the first time I ate her Raspberry jam, refusing, but being coaxed into it, mostly because my brothers were devouring it. I was perched on an enormously tall barstool, probably around 3 years old, and a half piece of toast appeared with red on top. I was shocked how delicious it tasted. But in her later years, after she moved to Utah, I only saw her strawberry freezer jam. I never asked her why she quit the Raspberry. I think freezer jam was easier for her than the raspberry cooked kind. But my mom says Pearle never stopped. "She made both."*)

**TO PREPARE JAM:**

**1. MEASURE** prepared fruit and lemon juice, if called for, into large bowl. Measure sugar into separate bowl. Set aside. Gradually stir 1 package **MCP® Pectin** into fruit; mix thoroughly. Set aside 30 minutes, stirring every 5 minutes to dissolve pectin thoroughly.

**2. POUR** corn syrup into fruit mixture; mix well. This prevents sugar crystallization during freezer storage.

**3. STIR** in sugar gradually. Continue stirring to dissolve completely.

**4. POUR** into containers to within ½ inch of tops. Wipe off edges of containers; cover with lids. Freeze.

According to the table for various fruits, strawberry jam requires: 3 ½ cup prepared fruit, ¼ cup lemon juice, 1 package MCP® Pectin, 1 cup light corn syrup, and 4 ½ cups sugar for a yield of 7, 8oz. containers.

If Pearle and I had made jam together, I wonder what efficient assembly system, second nature to her, she would have shown me: how to wash and crush the fruit, what size bowls to use, how to get jars out of boiling water, how much you really need to stir the pectin. But those things I can do without, my mother able to teaching me as well. What I mourn are the never-to-be-had-memories of our laughter, what silly thing she would have done. I'll have to be content with the memories I do have, like the time the aunts and I bought a walker at a garage sale, because her knees were getting bad. She laughed at us. *"How can I use the walker and carry anything?"* She took the walker and her white tea kettle and began fake shuffling around the kitchen. Someone said, *"Well, we could put a little basket on there."* She continued to hobble about. *"Oh sure, I'll be in here making dinner. Don't you worry,"* she motioned to the living room where we usually gathered. *"I'll have dinner ready soon. You just sit there."* We all laugh ourselves silly, at this red-headed lady shaming us. I'm sure she said something like she usually did, *"I'm changing the locks,"* or *"Everyone who comes in this house is hungry."* For all the laughter we had, I wish I'd had a little more.

There are so many things in death we regret, and I wonder why I never made the time to make jam with her. How was my frivolous life more important than time with a woman I adored as much as she? My cousins say she's the funniest lady we know. Pearle died when I was wandering in an ABC store in Maui, buying presents for a New Year's Eve party I would never go to. My aunt called on my cell phone, pestering me

about when our family was flying back. *Get to the point, Lana*, I thought. “Well, my mom just died seven minutes ago,” was all she said. “What!” was all I could say. I felt sick, searching for my mother, not answering her question of what was wrong. “It’s Lana.” I shook my hands no, and looked away from her questioning face. I suffered something new watching her—knowing something my mother should have known first. That night I watched my numb mother, her face stricken, framed by blowing palms, both helpless because there was nothing I could do for her. I have often dreaded this moment for myself, when my mother would be gone; now I had a preview.

As a child I wanted to die, so I could see heaven. I have never been afraid of death because I believe it is only a removal from one type of life to another. If you are good, then the next life is a good one, and as everyone I knew as a child was good, heaven seemed a much better than earth. Why didn’t we all die, and leave this sad world behind? That was before I knew what it was to die. Pearle’s husband, Grandpa Grant’s passing, made death an ugly thing to me. He died in a Las Vegas hotel room, his nose turning black as my grandma tried to revive him. I can see our last moments together the day previous, in the parking lot of the church by his blue Lincoln Continental. I turned back, seeing my own linen wrap-around skirt, and his face. Then he was gone, and I’ve missed him for thirteen years, at family events and random moments when I wanted him to be alive. But thirteen years made him a softly sad memory. This new death felt raw and fierce; I knew what I was losing this time. When the moment came again to see death again, to approach her casket, after the two remaining days in Hawaii, after the plane ride, after the six hour car trip home, after the frantic change into funeral black, after the icy ride to the church, I couldn’t bear to look at her dead body. I saw her classic

red curled “*set*” that she washed once a week “*whether it needed or not.*” My dad saw me paralyzed, and tried to help me to the casket but I rolled out of his embrace. No one was going to make me look at her. I stood with my back to the casket and cried, not accepting the moment. I wasn’t prepared to die. I knew it was my grandma in the casket, but I felt dead. The parts of my life only my grandma understood were dead, and I could never ask her how to make freezer jam.

I couldn’t stand there forever, not with my family watching me, so I approached her casket. Her neck didn’t look right, froggy and too wide, but other than that she was what I remembered. My mother and aunts came beside me. I wanted to lay my hand upon Pearle’s like my mother did, but the dead flesh felt cold and wrong and I yanked my hand back. I touched her red hair instead, frozen stiff by hairspray like she’d always done it, and said my goodbye.

As a child, I thought you died at death, but I’ve already started dying. My grandma took part of my life, our shared life when she died. Because she loved me, I let her hold parts of me, preserving them forever I thought, like jam. I do not begrudge Pearle, taking pieces of me, painful as this double death is. Death can be sweet for the dying because they take bits of those they love, as a comfort when they go.

Her name was Pearle Rose Orton, and she shared her name with me. She was born Maxine Rose, but when her father blessed her, a naming ritual in my church similar to christenings, he called her Pearl, because she was as precious to him as that sea-jewel. Her birth certificate was never changed, something doable back in 1923, and around her 70’s, she had to claim her own identity, and prove to the Government that she, Pearle Rose Orton existed. And it was like my grandma to add an “e” to the end of that Pearl,

because she liked it better that way. I am Holly Rose Hansen and am stubborn as she. I too claimed my name, reclaimed it from an abusive husband. My boyfriend, (similar to his predecessors), doesn't like that I refuse to consider changing it. I regard his desire to change me to Holly Rose Lopez very sensible and likewise romantic. I agree that if we married, we should share the same name. Everyone in my church would call us that name anyway. In a religious society where nearly all women take their husbands' last name, I would seem like my own children's step-mother, if I didn't take it. And yet I am stubborn still. The fact is I don't want to change my name. I fear my unabused self, will die into that whimpering apologetic girl again. I fear in assuming his name, I'll assume his needs for my personality. My solution: if my boyfriends want us to share a last name, they should change their name to Hansen. This idea never goes over very well. Their maleness, which I am so attracted to, won't admit such a possibility. They think me mad for wanting to preserve who I am in a name, even though they are repulsed at changing their own. My father thinks me equally silly, but my mother tells her friends proudly I don't want to change it again. Men consider it their male right to pass their sacred last name on, and they shake their heads when I salute the idea, and want the same for myself. But who am I, to want to share my family pride with my children, to pass on who I am to them in my last name? Who am I to claim such a right for myself? Who am I to be this stubborn? Who am I to want the dead to teach me to make freezer jam? I guess I want things that cannot be, but I want them still.

My grandma told me stories like good grandmothers do. She was plunked in a wheelbarrow, as per tradition, on her wedding day, and paraded around the streets of Emmet, Idaho, by her new husband. She told me she was embarrassed. She owned two



dresses growing up on the family's farm. She wore one to school, while the other dried from the night's washing. She told me her mother made 11 loaves of bread a day for the farm hands. She'd get the geese, when they wandered down by the crick and as soon as they'd see her, they'd turn around and go back home. She used to cut off rattlesnakes' heads with a shovel when they'd get in the yard. She bought new school shoes after her mother got the cherry check from the cherry harvest. She would go, into her watermelon fields with a salt shaker, drop the ripe melons to break them, then dig the heart out, salting that juicy bit and leaving the rest to rot in the field. She told me her mother used to take the cream off the top of the milk with her hand and plunk it down, "and that was our yogurt." She made a cake, but it fell and she was embarrassed to show her new husband. She wrapped it in a towel and hid it in the back of the cupboard, but when she came into the kitchen my grandfather was eating it. She said that man made her so mad, the way he would find everything out. She was the youngest of nine and after they all died of old age, she said she was an orphan. My grandma told me how to make lasagna as we leaned over the white snack-bar in her kitchen. She told me to make love to my husband all night.

My mother, Sharon Rose Hansen, is another rose in the line, a timid one stuck between her fiery mother and daughter. Pearle used to give my mother a note with the shopping list on it; she was too shy as a girl to talk to the grocer. I never knew she was shy, until I grew up, because in private, she, is the funniest lady I know. Like Pearle, she tells me stories.

*I got turned off to those grand opening sales, you know. I had you, at six am, in your little umbrella stroller and the scared man at the front door opened the latch*

*and leapt out of the way, everyone surged forward, taking you with them. “Stop, stop, they’ve got my baby.” The women went wild, swiping everything off tables; they weren’t even looking for size or color. They started yelling, “Anyone want a size 6? I’ll trade you for a size 4.” You know me, I’m afraid to ask a salesman for help. These women were like fiends. They were like salmon swimming upstream to spawn.*

(Note on jam making: it is hard to smash strawberries when you’re laughing so hard you can’t breathe.)

With my mother’s help, I finally made my own Pearle Jam. I bought my strawberries from Costco, the jars, pectin, and lemons from Walmart, and got the sugars from my mom’s pantry. She reread the directions, I cut berries, she juiced the lemons, I cut berries, she measured sugar and highlighted the section for strawberry freezer jam so we wouldn’t get mixed up, I mashed berries, she read me three pages of information from the internet on pectin because we were interested in how it is made, I cut berries, she washed the jars, I mashed berries. Mashing them was surprisingly hard, and I was glad my mother told me to smash in small batches. No wonder our grandmothers never went to 24hr Fitness. I’d had my arm work out for the week. My father came at the end of the jam making process, eating spoonfuls of the sweet jam straight. It grossed us out. “I thought you said she didn’t leave you the recipe,” he said looking at the glass jars glowing with red fruit, labeled Pearle Jam 2008. “She didn’t,” I said, “but she left me her daughter.”

There are many Roses left in the line, who know what Pearle knew. Some, like many of my cousins were left her name: Heather Rose, Amber Rose, Holly Rose, Kristen Rose, Alison Rose, Hailey Rose, Emma Rose. We are the new generation of Roses.

I look nothing like Pearle Rose, taller than she, blonde while she was red, my face young and like my mother's, her face old and like herself. But I wish I could be more like her. She married young and had four girls, 16 grandchildren, and 19 great-grandchildren by the time she died. I was divorced by 27, have no children, no grandchildren, and will probably never live to see my great grandchildren, if I'm ever so lucky to have some. But she told me one thing that makes us alike. She hardly showed her pregnancies: her doctor said her uterus was tucked deep in her body. My doctors tell me the same, and that I'd better like peeing a lot, if I ever get pregnant. Maybe what makes me a woman, which has never yet made me a woman, is what makes me like my grandma. I consider myself a real woman, able to make a mark on this world, without bearing offspring, but how will I fully understand these women who gave me life, without understanding what they understood? How will I know what my mother and grandma felt holding me, if I never hold a new life and know I made her body? Who will I teach to make Pearle's jam? Whose bits will I take as a comfort when I die?

## BLUE HERON GOODBYE

I see a blue heron on the bank of the Virgin watching the muddy river.

I see you leaning into my doorframe at 2am, that boyish grin crinkling your eyes.

“I hate goodbyes,” I say.

“Don’t say it then. Say, see ya.”

“See ya,” I say, but it feels like goodbye, even if we don’t say it.

You came to me suddenly—those blue-green eyes against your tan face—pulling my eye like the blue-gray shape on the river, tucked under the sheer cliff, nearly hidden by the flying concrete and asphalt above. *Is that a crane*, I thought driving into the gorge. You seemed like a woman standing in your S, watching the floating water, like a lover looking for what is lost. *Yes, it is a crane. No, perhaps a heron*. But we fly past, your birding repose unchanged. Perhaps you are there even now, looking for a fish, or philosophizing near that churning bank as the world speeds on, missing your light curve against the tall silver-green brush and dynamite blasted rock. But you have probably moved, as all things do, and I will never see your silvery shadow there again. “Are herons blue and tall?” I ask my mother as we drive. “Yes,” she says. “I saw one standing by the river.”

“You must be hapa, with those eyes,” I say.

Your eyes look surprised because I know what hapa is. “Yeah, my mom is haole. My dad’s Hawaiian. Have you lived in Hawaii?”

“I went to school there for a while. Long time ago now, but I remember the poly boys with white mamas,” I say.

I want to go back to that moment, but the gorge is made of forward falling lines. The striations of rock tumble sideways not horizontal, vertical scars of blast-tubes stretch up the sheered rock face.

“I can’t believe you’re going to leave for Cali,” I say.

“Just like you’re leaving for Vegas.”

I don’t want to think about the morning. I listen to the dark, smothering our hiding hammock, telling me I have this moment with him. The striped canvas suspends us together and we are quiet, our belly skin touching accidentally as our shirts crinkle up. His skin feels hot, like the first time I touched it, soft like a woman’s. I can see his face from the porch lights below our balcony. His eyes crinkle again. We laugh together; talk softly and he sounds proud to me. We are silent and I nuzzle into his neck, my hand touching the hard muscles of his belly. I think we are beautiful together, my blonde hair tumbling over his brown skin.

Concrete poured into your river, blue heron, inevitable towers to float the asphalt bridge above, making a secret of your muddy sanctuary, hiding you from my face. All for man to bend the road, a snake through that canyon of crushing lines. But not you, my blue heron, you are not a hard line, feminine in this male canyon, your contraposto standing out to me, if only in a flash, gone before I know you are a heron.

I still see a blue heron on the bank of the Virgin, watching the muddy river. I still see you, even though we didn’t say goodbye.