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In Post Memoriam: An Exploration of Family and Grieving

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IN POST MEMORIAM:
AN EXPLORATION OF FAMILY AND GRIEVING

By

Courtney Anne Mauck

THESIS

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SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

IN POST MEMORIAM: AN EXPLORATION OF FAMILY AND GRIEVING

This thesis by Courtney Anne Mauck is recommended for approval by the student's Thesis Committee and Department Head in the Department of English and by the Interim Director of Graduate Education.

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ABSTRACT

IN POST MEMORIAM:

AN EXPLORATION OF FAMILY AND GRIEVING

By

Courtney Anne Mauck

This collection of essays, poems, and fiction details the author's exploration of familial trauma and grief. The author wrestles with the concept of "postmemory" as theorized by Marianne Hirsch and questions what it means to have the experiences of someone else passed down through generations. The collection includes essays on the connection between eggs and ovarian cancer, the exploration of animal magnetism, as well as a fictional recreation of a familial story. By braiding several forms of writing together, the work aims to create an interwoven narrative that questions the very concept of memory.

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2017

DEDICATION

To my Nan, who never ceases to inspire me, even in death.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my friends and family who continue to encourage my creative endeavors even when I am filled with doubt. Specifically, I'd like to thank my husband who changed his life plans without question and moved from Pennsylvania to the Upper Peninsula to support me during this project.

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This thesis follows the format prescribed by the MLA Style Manual and the Department of English.

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INTRODUCTION

“The mind of the subject will desperately struggle
to create memories where none exist.”

–Rosalind Lutece

When my grandmother died in January 2011, I was still an adolescent who was not equipped with the proper resources to process the feelings. Her death was sudden, unexpected, and fell shortly after Christmas. In short, it was devastating to the entire family. As I grew older, graduating high school, then college, I realized the depth of the impact my grandmother had had on the lives of those around her, especially me. As a child, my grandmother helped raise me. I spent most of my formative years in her living room watching old movies and listening to her stories and life lessons. It took me a long time to realize how much I absorbed these things.

In her essay, “The Generation of Postmemory,” Marianne Hirsch explores the concept of collective memory and collective trauma and how those things can be passed down through generations. Specifically, she looks at the children of Holocaust survivors who, despite having been born after the horrific events, have a deep connection to the trauma that was experienced by their parents and thus effectively passed down to them.

In her essay, Hirsch defines it as such:

Postmemory describes the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they “remember” only by means of the

stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. (Hirsch 106-107)

Essentially, Hirsch seeks to examine the transmission of familial memory and the development of these “secondhand” memories, which she calls postmemory.

In essence, this is what my project wishes to explore. This collection of essays, poems, and fiction are a product of trying to understand the memories that have been passed down to me from my grandmother. The study of memories is endlessly complicated and the research on postmemory is often contested. The very idea of taking an experience or trauma that is not your own and calling it “memory” continues to be criticized and questioned. And though these theories go by many names, the first time I encountered this concept I did not have a name for it. In a literature class themed around gender, sexuality, and identity, the class was asked to create a memoir project that explored those themes. I found myself incapable of talking about those topics without also talking about the history of my grandmother.

At a young age, my grandmother shared stories with me about being raped, miscarrying a child, discovering the man who fathered her children was gay, experiencing porn and masturbation, and surviving ovarian cancer. At the time, I shrugged off the stories and their many retellings because I was a child and did not want to think too deeply about the implications of these things. However, as I developed into a writer, I realized their lasting influence on my relationship with my own body, sexuality, and overall identity. My realization, unfortunately, came well after the death of my

grandmother. Thus, the influence of these stories was reduced to memories of memories, which is exactly what this project is intended to grapple with.

For a while, I felt like what I was trying to do with this project did not make sense. Though I had the theories of postmemory at my fingertips, the fear of remembering something wrong consumed me. Many people obsess over the widespread cases of the Mandela Effect or false memories. Yet, my writing remained stuck between fiction and nonfiction. I felt the need to categorize the project as one or the other, but it seemed dishonest to label it either way. The writing is based almost entirely on true accounts, real stories that happened, but those stories rely on memories of stories told to me in childhood. Thankfully, the instructors I worked with during this project encouraged hybridization and blurring the lines between genres.

As I began writing, I was inspired by Maggie Nelson's *Jane: A Murder and The Red Parts: Autobiography of a Trial*. In *Jane*, Nelson explores the life of her Aunt Jane, an assumed victim of a brutal rape and murder near the University of Michigan in 1960, through a collection of poems, essays, and found writing from Jane's journal. The case remained unsolved until it was reopened in 2004. Out of the trial, Nelson birthed *The Red Parts*, which she categorizes as a memoir. Nelson's work proved to me that on some level, what I was trying to create made sense and was possible. Nelson never met her Aunt Jane, but instead told the story of her through research and stories that other's told her. At the beginning of *The Red Parts*, Nelson writes "This book is a memoir, which is to say that it relies on my memory and consists primarily of my personal interpretations of events and, where indicated, my imaginative recreation of them" (Nelson). This spoke

directly to my fears in working on this project, and reminded me that the fallibility of memory is not a hindrance, but an underlying element of the project as a whole.

In the later stages of this project, I drew inspiration from authors like Leslie Marmon Silko and Pam Houston. Silko, in her novel *Almanac for the Dead*, weaves together the stories of several characters that take place across time in a nonlinear format. This is something that interested me because often times the ways in which things are remembered is nonlinear. Houston, in her essay “How to Talk to a Hunter,” expanded my understanding of what the second person perspective is capable of doing for an essay. This inspired the creation of “How to Mend,” an essay that I never anticipated writing for this project. I also relied on the brutal honesty and realism on Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* and the structural threads found in Elena Passarello’s *Animals Strike Curious Poses*.

The biggest challenge with this project was the actual exploration into family history and genetics. Putting these memories and events down on paper felt like, in some way, a betrayal of family. Though my grandmother is dead, many people who care about her, as well as other people mentioned in this project, are still very much alive. At first, this indicated to me that I needed to tread carefully with this project. I feared misrepresenting or offending someone simply through the way I remembered them. It became very hard to put experiences into words when I was constantly questioning if someone who had shared the experience remembered it differently. I rewrote “Broken Eggs” several times because of this problem. The essay features my grandmother, my mother, and my husband as characters—all of which I initially wrote in as the second person “you” out of fear of naming them separately. I figured if no one could distinguish *exactly* who I was talking about, then it was fair game. It was not until after a lengthy

workshop discussion about the truth in memory that I realized this was not the way to go about this project. There is truth in how I remember something and there is truth in how someone else remembers something, but those truths did not have to be mutually exclusive. This realization opened up the project to a whole new realm of possibilities.

Ultimately, this collection of essays, poems, and stories was never wholly about one thing or one person, but about the underlying threads that connect them all together. This project, overall, is about memory and grief. However, in the grand scheme of things, it feels like so much more than that. It's about Harambe, factory farms, and Pennsylvania winters. It's about family and trauma, animal magnetism, and the human experience. This project became so much more than I ever thought possible, but deep down at the very core, it will always be about my grandmother.

IN (POST) MEMORIAM

My body has been possessed by traumas it has never experienced.

This is to say: When my grandmother told me she was raped by her first fiancé, I imagined her fear in every hand gripped too tightly on my forearm.

Judith Anne Newberry-Englert, 69, of Lock Haven, passed away on January 22nd, 2011, in McElhattan.

Statistically, one out of six women has been victim of an attempted or completed rape in her lifetime. This feels like a morbid game of “eeny meeny miney mo” on the train to Chicago or late at night next to Lake Superior. Statistically, it feels like a probability, like something just lying in wait. Genetically, it is something my body has been prepared for, like the way my ovaries are likely to contract the cancer from the BRCA1 and BRCA2 passed down in familial cells.

Visitation will be from 6:00 PM to 8:00 PM at Donald G. Walker Funeral Home. This won't matter, though, because you will spend the entire two hours by the door, hugging people you have never met before.

The concept of a funeral or a burial ritual has existed since at least 60,000 BC. Often, people buried their loved ones with their own hands. They dug up the dirt, built the coffin, and decorated their grave. Now, funerals are commercialized. On average,

families spend close to \$10,000 on funeral services because no one wants to say “give me the cheapest thing you’ve got.”

Funeral services will be held 9:00AM Thursday, January 27th at Donald G. Walker Funeral Home with your cousin Sgt. Hilty officiating. He will stutter the entire time as he reads overused passages from the Bible about ashes and dust. He will preach to the audience about the power of Jesus Christ and will say very little about the power of your grandmother. The burial will follow but no one will go because it is January and the ground is frozen and the air is bitter. When you see the globules of mud against the harsh white snow you will vomit until nothing but the aching emptiness is left. Arrangements are by Donald G. Walker.

I was the last person to see my grandmother alive, but I wasn’t the last person to touch her knees. Years later, my mom will tell me that she regrets the funeral. That she regrets all the makeup and staging artists that are meant to make the corpse look less dead. She will tell me, “I wish she had looked more like herself.” I won’t tell her that it’s impossible for a corpse to look like anything other than death. I won’t tell her my regrets.

KNEES

When I was five you sat me on your knee—
frail and wobbling from
all those years at the car factory—
and you said, “Sweetie, you better
marry young because I won’t make it to seventy.”

And I laughed because it didn’t
make much sense. But when you sat
me down again, ten years later,
your knees too weak to hold me,
your skunked hair pulled in its ponytail,
I cried because how could someone

who survived so much be so willing to die?
But now I know that after what he did to you
you would never let another man make a decision for you
not even God.

He knocked you down on your knees,
laughing in your face
as he ripped your un-ripened petals
one by one. You tossed him out
the way he so easily tossed
your commitment—
but you were already wilted.

When you died on your 69th birthday
I helped them cover your knees
with your favorite duvet.
And I didn’t laugh or even cry
because I knew
you were right again.

THINGS I BLAME YOU FOR NOW THAT YOU'RE GONE

I try to write a poem about your knees but people tell me I can't come right out and say that you were raped. *Why are her knees so important?* They tell me I have to hide the facts behind images of funeral flowers.

You used to sit me on your knees and bounce me. Your knees were a private roller coaster. That is my earliest memory of you. Your boney knees between my legs, your swollen and veiny hands tucked gently in my armpits as you jiggle me up and down. That was before your knees became too weak to hold me after all those years working at Champion Parts rebuilding fuel systems. There, your hands held carburetors and turbochargers and moved them along rollercoasters of conveyor belts and deafening machines. You remanufactured, reconstructed, rebuilt. You put back together what came to you broken but your hands couldn't mend the trace he left on your bones.

I blame you for a lot of things once you are dead. The white sheet in the closet that I'll never fold and the broken glass on your front porch and the fine china that I'll never use.

They tear down McGhee elementary the year after you die. The headline reads: "McGhee Elementary put to rest." They wouldn't let us recover the brick with your

name carved neatly on the surface. On the day the school opens, the principal places it there, brick against brick, as the bellows of your accordion oscillate under the promise of fame. Of *something*. But it's gone now. Proof of your existence turns from brick to dust.

I stop pretending that I believe in the sort of God who doesn't let children say goodbye.

You visit me in a dream, lying on your faded blue and white couch, wearing a striped pastel night gown that falls just past your knees. In the fog of the dream, I still know you are dead, but you are not quite a corpse yet. Your knees look thinner than before, more knobby and frail. They curve, ever so gently resting against the back of the couch. I rouse you from your apparent slumber and you tell me it's not my fault. I couldn't have known that was the last night you had. I couldn't have sensed with my eyes that your organs were failing. You whisper, "Never let me go."

I paint those words between my shoulders.

Only later do I find out that it is just a line from your favorite Elvis song. The song that crooned from the funeral home speakers as they ushered us out for mourning too long. A comforting hand placed on weak shoulders. *The next family is waiting*. It was never a message meant for me.

I never heard you play the accordion.

After you're gone, my mom never stops thinking I'm going to kill myself. I taste the weight of her thoughts in soggy cereal and feel the burden in the way she watches me put knives in the dishwasher. I start seeing a therapist to make things easier for her. She drives me to Dr. Newburg once a week and we sit on beige couches in the waiting room and pretend we aren't thinking of you. She always pulls some silly supernatural romance novel from her ugly purple purse, and I always make fun of her for it until they call my name. I think, maybe, this routine—me and her pretending you're not dead—makes things easier.

I think that people grieve in different colors.

You light a fire under my dormant daddy issues. You tell me my *real* dad is better, my *real* dad is an artist, my *real* dad wrote stories just like me. I didn't know any better. You are the only reason I have images of my biological father in my head. You remind me of our connection by saying "you have *his* ass" whenever you hem my pants. So, I hate my stepdad just for you. When you are gone, I tell him I love him for the first time.

I can't stop writing about the sheet that covered your knees as the paramedics took you away.

I tell Dr. Newburg about my dream. She tells me it'd be easier to cope with your loss if I just believed in God. I want to tell her she's wrong, to tell her to fuck off, to tell her that prayers to God don't fix warped and forgotten accordions in the corners of attics. But I

don't. Instead, I nod. Instead, I stare at the wooden ducks on the table as I take the *Signs You Have Depression* test. Instead, I make eye contact with the mallard as I circle wrong answers for each question.

I wonder if I only married a musician because of you.

You take me to the last company picnic before Champion Parts closes. A man in a Santa suit skydives while crowds of people watch. The newspaper publishes a blurry photo: "Skydiving Santa makes his annual stop." No one in the crowd knows this is the last time we'll celebrate Christmas in July. 7UP in hand, you sing along with the band and tell me that it could've been you on that stage. The sun is too bright for anyone to look up long. The clouds are absent today. I tell you I don't believe in Santa anymore but you make me take a picture anyway.

I see death in the pebbles I crush beneath my boots, in the soup bowls in my kitchen cabinet.

You tell me, "Sweetie, you better marry young 'cause I won't make it to seventy." I find your bones in the clouds on my wedding day. We light a candle for you but it's not enough. You die on your 69th birthday. The clouds hold no rain. The candle burns longer than it should.

I listen for your heartbeat in the strum of his guitar, but hear only sirens.

Your kids qualify your absence by the meals you'll never make. Five missing pumpkin pies on Thanksgiving. Four missing gallons of eggnog on Christmas. We try to replicate recipes so we can feel your memory on our tongues. We try, but the nutmeg is all wrong so we throw the pie in the trash.

No one notices when I stop eating again. I play with food on apple-patterned plates, I talk, I redirect, I feed it to the dog. I stop going to therapy.

I don't know what the headlines say on the day that you die. I never read your obituary and I stop listening to "Hey Jude."

We move your piano into our house. I sit on the creaky black bench and pick at the peeling paint with my thumb. You painted everything black, even me. Your laugh is the music of my breathing. I press on out of tune keys. Fingers to imitation ivory. *Dust*. Three notes form the only song that you taught me. I feel the hum of the sound in red and blue lights flashing.

ON GENEALOGY

When I was five our kindergarten teacher had us create family trees as presents for our parents. I made branches for our nuclear family: Mom, Dad, Sister, Brother. Above Mom, I drew lines for You and Pap. Above Dad, Grandma and Pop. I drew in the tire swing that hung from our chestnut tree in the backyard. I drew in Sammy, our black lab.

You were always obsessed with family trees, and I never knew why. To me, it was as simple as these crude branches I made out of construction paper and crayons.

On the website for Ancestry.com, they tempt me with the phrase: “Discover what makes you uniquely you.” They boldly claim that they can help me uncover my “ethnic mix” and “distant relatives.” But I wonder, can they tell me what percent chance I have of developing the cancerous cells you passed on to me? Can they tell me if I’ll miscarry or find a lump in my breast? Can they tell me how much of my DNA is uniquely you?

This is all I have left of family trees. The place in our family book where you wrote my name. The parts of you that are also parts of me.

When I was eleven I found a picture in your desk drawer of my mom with a man I didn’t recognize. I was in the picture, smiling a gap-tooth grin, maybe three or four. It

was impossible to fathom a memory that I couldn't remember. I didn't know I was doing something wrong. Digging up things that were meant to be kept away.

That night, my mother explained that the man in the photos was my biological father. My "real" dad. The man I had been calling dad for six years was actually my stepfather. My mother explained that my "real" dad had wanted her to get an abortion. That he disappeared a few years after I was born.

When you are dead, we watch old Christmas videos on VHS tapes to hear your voice. In the video, both my "dads" are present. I call my biological father "dad" and my stepfather "Jim." I have no recollection of this. Freud would say I repressed these childhood memories.

After I write my first story, you let me know that my real dad was creative too. He wrote poems and painted murals in New York City. You tell me that I must get this from him. That this part of him is also part of me. But I can't even remember what he looks like. Can someone be a part of you if you wouldn't recognize them on the street? But that is what genealogy is, you tell me. Finding out every trace that someone may have left on you in hopes that it gives you some answers.

I wonder if I search my own DNA what it will tell me. I wonder if my genome can tell me why you never woke up that day. I wonder if my blood or skin cells or bone marrow can still detect a trace of what made you happy. If any air inside my lungs was every close enough to touch you.

I realize in Albuquerque that I could meet my biological father and never know it. When I am twenty-two, I move out of our tiny town in Pennsylvania and leave behind the

house that you lived in for an apartment in Michigan. I travel like you always wanted to before you couldn't walk. I realize that on the streets of Savannah I could have passed a half-brother or half-sister that shares my DNA. A branch in my family tree that I would never recognize. I think that this should mean something to me. That I could be one of those viral posts on Facebook: "Like and Share this post so I can find my family." My mom doesn't know where he ended up, but she tells me that she will look for him if it will make me happy. I imagine what I might say to him if I saw him. Nothing comes to mind. These are the branches of a tree that should not be climbed.

When you are hemming my pants for me, your face down near my ankles, you tell me that I have my father's ass. You say it as a compliment: "He had a nice ass, a real bubble butt, just like yours." I don't know what to make of it. I am fourteen and uncomfortably aware of my body. "You might have those Newberry hips, but that's definitely not a Newberry ass."

For the first time, I am aware of my unbelonging. That my brother is only my half-brother, a product of my mother and stepfather. I am aware that you wish that my real dad was still around and I want to make you happy. I tell you that my stepdad is a jerk, that he yells, and throws things, and spansks me when I'm bad. You think me an angel and paint him as a monster. I let you. I sit on your couch and I listen to stories of first dates and Easter when my dad was still around. I start to believe that my stepdad is a monster. I manifest daddy issues in my adolescents based on the stories you tell me. I try to create memories where none exist.

When you are dead, I tell my mother about the stories you told me. I tell her about the Easter that my dad was supposed to be there and ask her why she wouldn't let him come visit me. I ask her why she tried so hard to keep my father out of my life. She tells me that he wrecked his car on the day he was supposed to pick me up for our Easter date. She tells me that he never called her back when she said she would drive me, if he wanted to see me. She tells me that she never heard from him again until the court dates and custody papers.

For the first time, I remember you clearly.

THE NEWBERRY GIRL

The Susquehanna Fanny Float was an annual event that brought people from all over the county, sometimes even from neighboring counties, to the little town of Lock Haven. Though Lock Haven was small, it was split down the middle by the Susquehanna River, which brought to it a charm few other towns had to offer. Each year, people gathered at the edge of town with inner tubes and floating coolers, prepared to spend the day floating the length of the river. The float always ended with music, food, and celebration in Riverside Park. Judy had lived in Lock Haven her entire life, and so had her parents and grandparents. Among the Newberrys, the Fanny Float had become a rite of passage. Though the event was open to all ages, only those of legal age could imbibe in the beer tents that were floating along the way. Children and teens of Lock Haven anxiously awaited the year when they were old enough to partake. Judy had turned twenty-one in January, and though she drank occasionally on nights spent at the river lot with her best friend Barb, the float would be her first major adult outing.

The Newberry family was well-known in Lock Haven. Judy's father owned Newberry's Market, a small shop on Main St, and her grandfather had been a pastor. And while there were perks to being well-known, Judy sometimes felt like the town was always watching her.

As she walked down Main St. towards her father's shop, she waved at the people she passed. She stopped outside Addie's, the jewelers, to peak at the rings that were on

display. Her wedding ring was in there somewhere, but Ed, her fiancé, wouldn't tell her which one. He wanted it to be a surprise, but Judy was impatient. She pressed her face a little closer to the glass and sighed. Taped next to her face was a flyer: *Float Your Fanny Down the Susquehanny*. She brushed her fingers over the words. Though the float was still weeks away, she could feel the excitement tingling in her toes. She kept walking, but now with a little pep in her step.

As she entered her father's shop, she saw Ed, waiting for her by the counter. He was in a deep argument with her father about football, but as she approached they seemed to call a truce.

"I can't believe I'm letting my little girl marry a Steelers man," her dad said, shaking his head. "Maybe we need to reconsider this whole ordeal.."

Their wedding was still almost a year away, but Judy knew her dad meant well. He and Ed often spent time together, working on cars or at the shop. Ed's father was a longtime friend of the Newberry family, so the engagement announcement in the Express came as a surprise to no one but Judy.

"Don't worry, daddy," Judy said, placing a hand on Ed's arm. "I'll always be an Eagles girl at heart."

Ed scoffed.

"There won't be any talk like that in *my* house."

The men both laughed as Judy crossed her arms defiantly.

"Oh, hush. Now let's go, we've got errands to run."

The couple left the store after Judy gave her father a swift kiss on the cheek. They headed for Ed's little red pickup that was parked on the corner.

“So what are we checking off the list today?” he said.

“We’ve got a showing at the pavilion,” she said. “I think it’d be the perfect place for our wedding, with the river in the back?”

“Of course,” he said. “Whatever you want.”

~

At the pavilion, Judy saw nothing but river and trees. After their meeting, Judy and Ed decided to sit at the riverside. The Susquehanna was alive with excitement—boats, swimmers, jetskis. Judy could see across the water and watch people walk the dike-levee, despite the width. She watched as runners sprinted past mile-markers and children swam at the makeshift beach. She watched as the foamy waves from boats licked the rocky water’s edge. She watched, and for a moment it was just the river and her.

Ed stirred beside her, picking at the grass with his calloused hands. His father had helped build the dike that kept their town safe from floods. It had finally been built after the river wiped out Market Street several times. There was a fine line between livelihood and atrocity.

Judy pictured the two of them, floating side-by-side, hand-in-hand, down the river.

~

That night, Judy decided to cook dinner for Ed in their new house. Well, what would be their new house after they were married. Ed had been living in the small farmhouse right outside of town by himself for a few months. Occasionally, Judy would come over to clean or paint in the mornings, or sometimes they would eat dinner and

watch some programs at night. She always left before it got too late though. She was a firm believer that couples shouldn't sleep together until they were married. There weren't a lot of things that stuck in her brain from Bible Camp or Sundays at church with her grandpa, but this was one of them. It was most definitely a sin.

After dinner, Judy stood at the sink scrubbing furiously at the grease that had burnt to the bottom of her pan. Ed was in the other room sipping a Yuengling that he held close to his chest.

"Hey, Jude, why don't you leave the mess for later?" he called into the kitchen. "Why not play the piano instead? I'll sing for ya."

Judy smiled, allowing the pan to fall forgotten in the soapy water. She had realized she loved Ed the first time he sang with her while she played the piano. She had been learning piano since she was a little girl, and Ed was the first person to really notice her talent. He told her, once, that she could go to college and become a music teacher. She had dreamt of this for a long time, learning instrument after instrument. She had even learned to play the accordion with ease, a feat no one else in the town had accomplished. They invited her to the grand opening of the Roxy Theater, where she had played excitedly for a small crowd. The thought seemed silly now, as she sat on the warped bench preparing to play. She would never be famous for her music, or be a music teacher. In this town, it was bad to be a working woman, especially if you were married. Instead, she would teach her own kids music, and fill the house with hymns.

She brought fingers to fake ivory and sighed into the rhythm. Ed perched behind her, sipping at his beer before he sang.

Will the circle be unbroken

By and by, by and by?

In a better home awaiting

In the sky, in the sky?

“You know,” he whispered, placing a tender hand on her shoulder and pulling her back into his chest. “Since we’re going to get married anyway, I don’t see any reason why we couldn’t take things to the next level a little early.”

In the joyous days of childhood,

Oft they told of wondrous love,

Pointed to the dying Saviour;

Now they dwell with Him above.

She laughed, using her shoulders to push his body away from hers as she continued to fiddle with the keys.

“Very funny,” she said. “But it’s still not very proper, even if you get married afterwards.”

He kissed her head.

“I know, baby, I know. But you’re such a tease.”

“At least I’m *your* tease.”

She closed the piano and walked into the next room, so as to end the conversation. Ed had been very understanding of her beliefs in the early stages of their relationship. He never questioned her or pushed her too far. But as the wedding loomed ahead of them, it seemed his patience was occasionally wearing thin.

“Where ya goin’?” Ed called after her.

“Barb wants to have us ‘round at the river lot next week. A little fun before the float.”

“You know you can’t keep me waiting forever,” he said sternly.

“I’m not,” she said, clutching at her dress. All she could hear were hymns. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

~

“Did you see the Express today?” Barb asked, looking up from the puzzle in front of her to meet Judy’s eyes.

The two girls were lounging in the basement of Barb’s parent’s house. This had been their prime hangout spot when they were teens, and occasionally they returned here to relax when they had time.

“No, why?” Judy asked, placing a puzzle piece on the table in front of her. She was focused on completing the picture of cats in bathing suits.

“It’s one of the Klein girls,” Barb said, pausing for dramatic effect. “Some sort of domestic dispute, apparently. Front page news.”

“Again?” Judy finally looked up from the puzzle. “This town is going to get a bad reputation if it keeps putting stuff like that on the front page.”

“Well, she probably deserved it anyway,” Barb said with smirk.

“Barb!” Judy squealed. “That’s awful.”

“Well!” Barb bit back. “What do you expect when you pop out three kids and then quit putting out?”

Judy’s eyes fell back to the table in silence. Barb had always been more of a free-spirit than Judy. She had taken up smoking at sixteen and all of the boys had always

thought that made her cool. She had never had much of an attachment to her virginity; she always claimed she was just trying to have fun.

“That’s what Marla from down the street told me, anyway,” Barb continued. “Said Lou had been drinking a lot since the kids and Karen was always getting in his way.”

“That doesn’t mean she deserved to be roughed up,” Judy said defensively. “I mean, do you think Ed should rough me up?”

“Oh, don’t be stupid. Of course not. But that doesn’t mean I don’t think he shouldn’t be getting some!”

Barb’s laughter filled the air, but Judy was unamused. Her friend nudged her with her elbow. Judy had heard these jokes and jabs for a long time, but they got worse the older she got. People talked in this little town, and everyone always knew Barb had been a bit of trouble. As soon as they found out that Judy Newberry, better known as the quiet girl tagging along with Barb, wasn’t any fun, the snide remarks had started. She only hoped people shut up about it after she was married. But she had a feeling Barb would never stop. Between occasionally laughs, Barb continued to nudge and wink at Judy while she sat deep in thought.

“C’mon, Jude the prude, I’m only joking you.”

~

A week later, as the humidity of July turned into the heat of August, Judy and Ed found themselves at Barb’s river lot. Barb had invited them, as well as Thomas, her boyfriend, for a little pre-float fun. Judy and Ed had spent many summer nights at Barb’s river lot. Barb and Judy had been friends since diapers; their mothers had been church

pals until Barb's mom had a stroke last April. Barb was still recovering, but Judy thought that her frequent trips to the bar seemed to be helping.

The four of them were sat around a bonfire. The flames were high enough to lick at the branches of pine trees, but no one seemed to mind. Judy poked at the fire with a branch, mesmerized by the flames as they engulfed its tip. The heat burnt her cheeks, but it was soothing. Everyone was a little bit tipsy from the beer and the wine. Maybe the heat in her cheeks wasn't just from the fire.

"Do you want to hear a funny thing I heard today?" Barb said, her hands swishing through the air with her words.

"Sure, Nance," Thomas said. Barb was the kind of person who wouldn't tell a story unless you seemed like you really wanted to hear it.

"Someone said, you know what someone said? In Britain, or England, or whatever, our Fanny Float would mean something quite different."

She couldn't keep herself from laughing. Judy chuckled a little.

"Oh, Barb, that's crude!"

"Can you imagine what *that* kind of fanny float might entail?"

Everyone laughed a little bit harder at this; the boys gulped at their beers between guffaws.

"At least maybe then you'd get a little action, eh Eddy-boy?"

Thomas smacked at Ed's arm playfully and Ed grimaced.

"When are you gonna give it up, Jude the prude?" Barb teased.

"Knock it off," Judy begged. "All of you."

“Oh, don’t get butt hurt, Jude,” Barb cooed. “Thomas and I have been doing it forever, it’s no big deal.”

“You’re supposed to be married.”

“We *will* be married a year from now,” Ed chimed in, pulling at Judy’s hands.

“Sooner rather than later never hurt nobody.”

Judy ran towards Barb’s camper, needing to be away from these people at this moment. She could feel the Earth spinning around her. She climbed the creaking metal stairs and threw herself down onto the sofa-bed. Barb followed her, calling after her, feigning concern. She placed a comforting arm around Judy, but something wasn’t right about it. Judy felt an intensity in Barb’s grip, but she was a little too dizzy to fight it. Barb pushed her down, laughing menacingly and the sound hovered around Judy like a fog. Judy thought she heard someone say “I’ll hold her down!” but she wasn’t sure. She couldn’t feel her toes. Her body felt like needles. Or was it bees? She felt someone climb on top of her, and it hurt, oh did it hurt. She held her breath, hoping to pass out, but all she heard were hymns.

~

The next day, at the Fanny Float, Judy floated alone. It was just her and the river and the crowds of people gathered for miles on the dike-levee to watch. She felt alien in her own skin. It no longer seemed to fit her right. She pinched at her forearms and thighs, hoping to find the hidden zipper that would release her. She submerged her head in the cold water, just long enough to feel the rushing pressure in her ears, just long enough to leave her gasping for breath. She continued the rhythm. Dip. *Gasp*. Dip. *Gasp!* Each time, she held her breath a little bit longer, as she floated along the Susquehanna. Each

time she held it longer and longer, and she wondered what the Express might say tomorrow about that Newberry girl.

GOD'S GUTTER BALL

When I came to your bedside
that night, my lip quivering
in a premature panic you
taught me a secret.
“Just count the seconds between
the thunder and the strike,”
so I did—one, two, three.

“God is just bowling,”
you said with a cup of tea
in your hand
coaxing me into bed
and hushing my tears.

When the thunder barrels
down the clouded lanes
illuminating the somber
sky with God's strikes
I think only of you in your silk nightgown
On that Wednesday night.

And as the storm moves closer
I am not frightened by it.
I count the seconds,
one, two, three.
You have gone so far
I cannot count the distance.

The thought hits me like
a perfect strike to the chest
for God has no gutter balls—
I am frightened
only of losing
you.

NEVER LET ME GO

I stepped out of the shower, goose bumps automatically forming on my damp skin. I tightened the fraying towel around my chest as I scrunched my toes in the rug. I placed a hand on the bathroom door, glancing briefly at the steamed mirror, unable to see my reflection. I opened the door slowly, fearing the cold rush of air as I walked towards my bedroom. I hurried across the hall and shut my door behind me. I dropped my towel on the floor, feeling safe within the confines of my room. I stood in front of my full length mirror. I examined my body, squeezing my breasts, running my hands over my less than flat stomach. I hope that tonight would be the night that he would see my body for the first time. We were going to his niece's first birthday party together, which made me feel dirty for even thinking it. But all I could think about was the after. When it would be just him and I spending the night at his house. For the first time, I would wake up with someone at my side.

It was January 22nd, so in the small central Pennsylvanian town of Lock Haven, that meant that thick, wet snow still covered the ground. I opened my dresser to search for the kind of outfit that would make him want me but was still appropriate for a one-year-old's party. There was a rapid knock on my door and my heart jumped in to my throat. I grabbed my towel, quickly covering up my body.

“What?” I said nastily as I opened my door with one hand, holding the towel in place with the other.

My younger brother stood before me, tears pouring from his eyes. His red hair was still mussed from bed, sticking out Alfalfa-style all over. I was instantly softened by this display.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, assuming that my father had yelled at him again.

“Mom went down to check on Nan—” he stammered, rubbing the tears from his eyes. “She won’t wake up. Nan won’t wake up.”

My entire body went numb. I shut the door, unsure of how else to react. I heard my brother’s sobs carry downstairs as I collapsed onto my bed, the towel falling away. I had an absence of emotion. My lungs felt like they could no longer take in air. I reached for my phone without looking. I could do nothing but stare at the door which had been the bearer of the worst news of my life. I dialed Torrin. The rings lasted for what seemed like a lifetime. He finally answered, sounding only half awake.

“I can’t go to Emma’s birthday party anymore,” I said.

“Why not?” he asked with a yawn. “Everyone is expecting you.”

“My nan,” I said, the need to scream welling up inside of me. Tears came to me now, the reality of what I was about to say sinking in.

“Connor said my nan won’t wake up.”

“Courtney,” he said softly. It was meant to comfort me.

I cried into the phone, curling into the fetal position on my bed, unaware that I was still naked.

“I’m sorry,” he said with the same sickeningly sympathetic tone.

“Can you come over?” I asked.

“Right now?”

“Please.”

“I’ll be there,” he said. “I love you.”

I hung up the phone without responding.

I could see the flash of ambulance lights outside my window. Why was the world moving forward without me? As the lights continued to flash, I sense of hope sprung up inside of me. I was suddenly positive that the paramedics would solve everything. They could revive her or take her to the hospital. She was okay. My brother had just overreacted. It was all going to be okay.

I put some sweatpants and a t-shirt on before walking back over to the bathroom. If I looked through the small window in there, I would get a clearer view of my Nan’s house. I climbed onto the edge of the bathtub to peak through. What I saw would haunt my dreams for many nights to come. I watched as they wheeled my Nan out on a stretcher, her familiar form barely visible from the white sheet that covered her. Just like that my budding hope was crushed by the heavy foot of reality.

I darted back to my room and launched myself into my bed. I pulled the covers up over my head and trembled. I lay there motionless for as long as I can remember, unable to comprehend that something like this could happen in my senior year of high school. At some point Torrin entered the room and crawled into bed with me. I cried into his chest, allowing his thin cotton shirt to mop up my tears. She wouldn't be there for senior ball, to see me in the dress I always needed her approval on. She wouldn't be there for graduation, the first major milestone in my lifetime. But more importantly, she wouldn't be there for my wedding—the one thing she said she wanted to live to see.

I had failed her.

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I was positive that I could have prevented my Nan's death. The previous night I had passed on the opportunity to walk the short distance from our porch to hers in order to visit her. She had wanted to see the new clothes that I had bought, but the sidewalk was too icy for her to walk to our house. I had promised earlier that day, before I went to school, that I would be down to visit that night. After the exhausting school day and backpack full of homework I had to do, I decided I was too tired to walk down and visit her. *She can wait until tomorrow*, I had thought. I was wrong.

I did not know how to explain to anyone that it was my fault she was gone. Had I been there with her, I could have called 911. I could have detected the inner workings of her organs just by being present, sensed their urgency to fail. I could have given her CPR, restarted her heart. I knew that no one would believe me. I did not want them to tell me that there was nothing we could've done, that she just went peacefully in her sleep. So I

kept it inside of me, allowing the feeling to eat up my insides, to burn my throat and lungs. I knew, deep inside, that she may never forgive me.

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At the funeral I tried my hardest to stay in the room farthest away from her body. The funeral home was designed like a house, with uncomfortably vibrant floral patterns plastering the inside. I knew this was a tactic of deception. If we pretend that everything is okay inside this house of death, maybe people will actually start to believe it. I stayed by the door, acting as an impromptu greeter. As people I had never seen before walked in to look at my Nan's body, I hugged them or shook their hand. Oftentimes they would hold me, tears in their eyes, and assure me, "Your Nan loved you so much. You were her little girl." I always nodded, but this unsettled me. Did they think I would forget that she loved me after only two days? Did they not understand that I loved her too?

When the funeral began, I sat in the second row so that my uncles could have a better view. Torrin sat on my right side, tightly gripping my hand as I stared at my Nan's lifeless hands posed on her chest. My family took turns speaking. First my mom, then Uncle Kevin, then Uncle Keith. It was hard to focus on what they were saying with all the crying and the flower arrangements surrounding them. My cousin, a pastor, was asked to speak on behalf on my Nan. I didn't like that. He talked about Jesus more than he talked about my Nan. This bothered me more than anything that day. As the pastor stuttered over his Bible, mentioning Jesus over and over again, I wanted to scream. *This is Judith Anne Newberry-Englert's funeral, you fucking moron, not Jesus's.* But I sat there silently, the mandatory tears sliding quietly down my cheeks.

After everyone was done talking, the owner of the funeral home came up to the podium to announce the reception and tell everyone to leave. He walked up to us, my family, with his fake sadness painted on. He told us we could have our last goodbyes before they took her away to put her in the ground. I couldn't understand being in the business of death. How could he tell a family they had a time limit on their last goodbyes? He was getting paid for our family's sorrow. My mom decided it would be appropriate for us to take turns saying goodbye. That way we could each have a moment alone with her, while everyone watched us from a distance.

My dad walked up with my brother who, at twelve, was still too little to fully grasp everything that was happening. I decided to go last. As I walked towards her casket, I heard the music from her viewing playing. It was her favorite song by the love of her life, Elvis Presley.

Love me tender,

love me sweet,

never let me go.

You have made my life complete,

and I love you so.

This, more than anything, represented my Nan. Not Jesus, or that stupid thing about ashes and dust. I approached her slowly, as if I might startle her. I placed my hand on her cold one, giving a one sided squeeze. I leaned in and kissed her forehead, ignoring the scent of makeup. My tears dripped on to her skin as I apologized to her.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. “I’m sorry that I let this happen to you. Please forgive me some day. I love you so much, and I wish you could be there for everything that you wanted to be there for. I hate myself for letting this happen to you, and I will never forgive myself. I’m so sorry. I love you.”

I gave her hand one last squeeze as I turned to walk away. Torrin met me half way down the aisle and caught me as I collapsed. I sobbed gently into his chest, wishing more than ever that time was something that could be purchased because at that moment I would have given all the money in the world to hear my Nan say that she loved me too.

///

I walked into the living room and saw my Nan sleeping motionless on the couch. I knew she was gone. What was she doing there on the couch? I approached her, placing a gentle hand on her shoulder to shake her awake. She sat up calmly, as if she had never really been asleep. She looked at me sadly, tears welling up in her eyes.

I love you so much, *she said*. You’re my little girl.

She embraced me in one of her famous bear hugs, and I felt something stir inside me.

I forgive you, *she said*, kissing me on the forehead. Don’t ever blame yourself for what happened.

I became aware that this wasn’t really happening. That my Nan was still dead. We had buried her yesterday. This wasn’t real. So what was it?

Just remember that I love you, *she said*. Never let me go.

As I tried to respond, I woke suddenly from my dream. Torrin stirred next to me, his hand resting limply on the curve of my back.

HOW TO MEND

When you are twenty-two a man will say hello at the Weis Supermarket and it will take you a moment to realize he's talking to you because you still feel damaged. When you pause before responding he will introduce himself as a banker and smile. He saw you from over the cantaloupes, he'll say, and couldn't help but notice your eyes. It's January, and the Pennsylvania winters are harsh, so you are dressed modestly in a thick coat and scarves. You will wonder what he sees in you, but when he asks you on a date standing next to cans of peas and carrots, you will still say yes.

By February you will be in love with him, but you won't want to be. You will spend every spare moment with him without wondering if he loves you too. It will snow nonstop for five days and then it will thaw. The temperatures will drop and he will ask you if you want to go ice skating. You'll go even though you hate the cold and would rather not embarrass yourself in this way. After you fall a few times, he will ask you if you want to get some hot cocoa and he'll get you extra marshmallows without asking. He'll wrap you in a tartan blanket while you sip on the warmth and next to the fire you will expect him to kiss your lips or try to touch your breast. When he kisses your icy hand, you will know that he is the one.

He will pull you out of your comfort zone by taking you to bars like The Old Corner and the Fire Hall. You won't want to drink, but the feeling of his hand on your hip

and the smooth way he says “Scotch, neat,” will make you give in. You’ll let him order you drinks that taste too strong, that smell like cleaning products, and you’ll pretend that you like the feeling of being tipsy. When he calls you *his* girl, you’ll think that it means something. You’ll hope. He will ask you to dance and the alcohol will make you say yes. The lights will shine copper against the walls and the room will feel like static. He will pet your hair and twirl you. He will tell you that you’re the most beautiful woman he’s ever seen and you will believe him. You’ll hope the alcohol won’t lead you to his bedroom, and when he walks you to your front porch steps you’ll say the words “I love you” and you won’t expect a response. He’ll say, “I know.”

Your youngest sister will say, “So what is he like? He must be pretty great if he keeps you out all night.”

Your oldest brother will say, “I wouldn’t trust him. Men can be real pigs.”

This is what you’ll tell your piano students: Discipline and sacrifice is what it takes to make something of yourself.

When he asks you if you want to marry him, you will want to tell him that you are not a virgin. It will feel like a knot in your throat, like a flame in your stomach, like a secret that is begging not to be kept. You won’t tell him because it is 1964 and you are a religious woman living in a small rural town and you know what that would do to your reputation. You’ll say yes. He’ll kiss you on the cheek and you’ll feel whole.

Your sisters will all want to be a part of the wedding. There are six of them. You will compromise until the wedding is more about everyone else than about you. The

ceremony will be small and at your church, but there will be lilacs. You will remember the smell of lilacs for the rest of your life. Later that year, you will birth your first child. A son. You will name him Keith and feel joy. He will tell you he wants a big family, too, and you will believe him. You will try not to question why he never comes home from the bar some nights.

When you are twenty-nine, you will miscarry your fourth child, Karen. The doctors will discover that you have ovarian cancer and will schedule a full hysterectomy. You will feel nothing and everything at the same time. You will question your choices. You will question God. He will start drinking more and claim that this is somehow his burden. His loss. You will stop teaching piano lessons so you can take on a *real* job to pay for all the drinking.

When he asks you if his friend Gene can move in, you will think nothing of it because Harvey Milk hasn't been shot yet and you are a religious woman living in a small rural town. You will offer Gene the spare room or the couch, whichever he prefers, and the extra afghan from the closet that you crocheted last year. Gene will fit in like a part of the family; he will make the kids laugh when he helps put them to bed. Eventually, no one will even question Gene's place at the dinner table.

One day, you'll come home early from your factory job and you'll catch him and Gene making love. They will be tangled in your favorite bedsheets, the ones you picked out from Sears before they closed down. You will stare at them there, in your bed, sheets pulled up to their chins, fear in their eyes, and you will forget how to breathe. This is how you'll react: First, you'll scream and throw whatever is within reach. It might be a lamp

or maybe a book. Second, you'll be thankful the kids aren't home yet. For a moment, you'll be thankful for the miscarriage. Thankful that there are only three kids.

In your kitchen, he'll promise it won't happen again. He'll beg you to stay. He will cry. Don't give in. He'll keep begging. He'll tell you to think of the kids. He'll say that he never meant for this to happen. That he'll kick Gene out. That he'll stop drinking. That he'll start going to church more. Realize that this is not something that can be changed no matter how much you wish it could. You'll wonder what you are supposed to tell people, if you are even supposed to tell people.

Get in the car. Think about what it means to be a gracious woman. Think about what the Bible means by "honor." Remind yourself that maybe he loved you at one point. Pick up the kids from school. Don't explain why they are sleeping at grandma's house tonight. When they close the doors, try not to scream.

Your youngest sister will say, "I always suspected there was something a little *off* about him."

Your oldest brother will say, "Do you want me to kick his faggot ass?"

When you file the divorce papers, you will feel that knot in your throat again, that same fire in your belly. You'll keep his last name because it's less paperwork and less money and fewer people will ask questions about the kids. You'll try not to hate him. You'll try not to harbor a grudge, but you are a religious woman living in a small rural town and it is hard because people talk. You will wonder why he didn't feel whole. You will wonder if you weren't enough.

You will take on three jobs to support your three kids without thinking. Your two sons and daughter will question the structural change of the family. They will get picked on at school because it is a small rural town. They will blame you. You will remind them that there is always food on the table and that they still go to church on Sundays.

If you can, go to church and remind yourself about forgiveness. Read passages from Matthew about forgiveness and sin. Say the words “sin” and “forgiveness” out loud. Whisper them through clenched teeth and tear drops. Remind yourself of the heavenly Father. Think about what sins of your own need forgiving.

But don't forgive him. Not yet.

You will take him to court over child support and he will spend some time in jail. You'll think about feeling sorry for him but you won't. Give your children everything that they need without his help. Go to all their games, performances, and parent teacher conferences. Remind the world that you are a single woman raising three children. Start playing piano again.

Your youngest sister will say, “Did you hear that he's out of jail? He moved in with Gene above the hair salon downtown.”

But that doesn't matter. You'll remind her how far you've come. That you pay all your bills.

One day, when you are nearing forty, your two sons will tell you that they are gay. You will see the fear in their eyes as they give you this secret. You'll wonder how long they have known, how long they have held this secret inside them unable to tell you.

This is when you forgive him. Not with a knot in your throat or a fire in your belly. Just forgiveness.

You'll tell them something you should've told your piano students: we need passion to survive.

They will hug you with tears in their eyes and you will feel whole.

Play them your favorite Elvis songs on the piano. Sing them "Love Me Tender" and "Blue Suede Shoes." They will sing along and you will keep playing. Move on to Christmas carols when you run out of songs they know. Play "White Christmas" and "Sleigh Bells" even if your arthritic fingers struggle to find the keys. Through the window above the couch, the sun will shine on your faces. For a moment, you won't hear the music but you will feel it at your fingertips. In that moment, you will glance there, at the window. In that moment, you will be looking for something.

This is what you'll see: a small robin landing on the limp branch of a lilac bush in the backyard.

And you'll wonder if he'll smell them for the rest of his life.

BROKEN EGGS

In Mrs. Dickey's second grade classroom an incubator shed its flickering light over six dull eggs. Each day I rushed in to stare at the unmoving white masses penciled with Xs and Os. I would press my nose against the plastic to feel the radiating heat. I would try to get there early, before the other students, before Tyler Bennett would inevitably make Jake Renner cry, before Levi Bortoff again tried to steal gel pens from Krista McIntosh. I would stand beneath the alphabet banner, and paper chains, hundreds of handpainted turkeys dancing overhead, and I would stare and stare into the warmth. Mrs. Dickey told us it was meant to feel like the underside of a mother chicken's belly. The place in their nests where they felt safest and warm. I wondered why these eggs didn't have a mother.

Humans have been eating eggs since humans constructed time. In 1420 BCE, in Thebes, Egypt, Haremhab's tomb depicts a man carrying a bowl of eggs as an offering. In Ancient Rome, the Romans crush egg shells into their plates to prevent evil spirits from hiding there. But when I explain to my mom that the yellow orb she calls a dippy egg is a chicken embryo, she tells me not to ruin breakfast. I pick at scratches in the oak table to avoid eye contact. She places left over pieces of burnt toast on my Disney Princess plate before she passes to the corner of the room to dump her eggs in the trash.

I am staring at the paper cranes dangling from the ceiling when the doctor tells me I am a high risk for ovarian cancer. I absorb the information without any impact, I am unmoving, but I watch the cranes bounce and twirl, though the air in the room is still. I imagine them breaking free from the fishing line that holds them, taking flight, soaring past pregnancy test posters and 3D diagrams of vaginas. *Ovarian cancer*. The words are the sensation of grabbing a hot pan from the oven with your bare hands. It's that second of disbelief, the second where I don't think I'm going to die, but I know that it's coming, the second before you feel the 400 degrees of pain.

On a factory farm in Jackson, Mississippi, 100 million chickens are laying eggs. Each chicken will produce 300 eggs a year. All 300 eggs find themselves in cartons and grocery store shelves. During fetal life, a human body harbors up to 7 million eggs. I will only ever ovulate 300 of them. None of them will ever produce a child.

My body is a failing egg farm.

We learned a lot about eggs that month in second grade science class. We candled the eggs to identify their parts. The class was mystified by the orange glow and the red veins spread like misshapen spider webs under the thin shell. Even Levi Bortoff, who went by Levi Leone now, was quiet with his hands shoved deep in jeans pockets. Mrs. Dickey, in her plaid collared dress, frizzy curls in a tight bun, explained that the dark spot in the center was the eye of the embryo and the lighter spot was the air cell. Farmers grade this

cell—AA, A, B—and I wonder if somewhere, someone, maybe some kind of God, grades our cells too.

When we move into our first apartment, I am scared of the chickens. It has something to do with the way their heads move, or maybe their dark and beady eyes, or their beaks, hooked and ready to kill, or maybe, none of these things. He tells me they are harmless, just there for the neighbor's breakfast. But as I watch their bobbing heads from the window I see *The Birds*. That summer I tell him I want to become a vegetarian. He laughs, his fingers curled tightly around a Yuengling, so I never do.

On a factory farm in Okeboji, Iowa, hens are shoved into cages the size of file-drawers under artificial light. They are tricked into thinking it always time to lay eggs, like the way you tell me I have to be a mom. If they don't lay an egg a day, they will be left to rot. Katharine Hepburn says she would have been a terrible mother but did she hear the ghostly cry of an infant in her sleep? Did she hear the squeak of a stroller never opened? Is being a terrible mother better than not being a mother at all?

In Egypt, eggs are hung in temples to encourage fertility. I don't believe in magic and mythology but I start eating eggs for breakfast anyway. I begin to measure my years in increases and decreases. Increased chance of cancer. Decreased chance of conception.

Now that you're married, when are you going to have kids?

I wonder which thing is worse.

In fifth grade health class, they teach us about the birds and the bees. They tell us about egg cells and sperm cells but they use words like *ovum* and *ejaculate*. They show us diagrams of fallopian tubes and microscopic images of STDs. Tyler Bennett has since moved to Robb Elementary. Something about his mom going to jail. Whispers of the Bennett family losing their home fill the air but when the teacher, Mrs. York, shows us the slide of chlamydia, they fall silent. I can feel the eggs inside of me and my stomach rolls into knots that I'll never untangle. I swear it.

In Dubois County, Indiana there is an outbreak of avian influenza. 155,000 hens are depopulated; over 250,000 birds are deemed unsafe. *You're wasting your womanhood*. I wonder where the infected birds go. Do they realize that they are a victim to their cells?

I carry the dormant cancer inside of me, an interminable guilt. I imagine it waiting inside me like a patient customer at Denny's. I imagine it will eat my eggs for breakfast. Some sort of twisted Grand Slam. I remember telling you out of spite that I never wanted to have kids.

You'll change your mind.

The Hindu's described the beginning of the world as an egg. First there was non-being and then non-being became existent and that existence was an egg. When it split open,

one half was silver and the other gold, our earth and our sky. But I am apathetic at best and my baskets are empty of egg shells to walk on.

When he tells me that he'll love me even if we never have kids, I break like the shell of the robin's egg I delicately crushed in my palm when I was eleven. My cousin, Jennifer, wanted to keep the egg, so specific in color that Crayola couldn't come up with another name. She wanted to be its new mom. As the gooey insides dripped over my fingers, I knew, even then, as the wind stirred the leaves and the tire swing swayed before us, that my maternal instinct was tainted.

Side effects of ovarian cancer include: vomiting, pelvic pain, hearing loss, kidney failure, removal of one or both ovaries. I wonder if the vacancy in my gut will feel anything like the blank space you left when you died. I imagine my eggs looking for the next uninhabited womb. I think, maybe, if my ovaries are gone, no one can say that it's my fault.

On a factory farm in Abbeville, Alabama, chickens are held hostage from motherhood. 642 eggs in their lifetime, but these chickens are not mothers; they are machines. I wonder if the chicken notices that no fruits are bore from her labor. I wonder if she feels on her shoulders the crushing weight of every unborn chick.

In Southern China, they use the egg for divination. They boil painted eggs to read the patterns in their cracks. I picture painted pastel Easter eggs abandoned in woven baskets

for Cadbury's and think maybe they would have predicted my future if I'd bothered to look.

When we moved to Michigan as newlyweds, I didn't break an egg when we entered our apartment and I wonder if that's the universe's inappropriate but well-timed fertility joke. Something I should have read in the cracks. I wonder which is less believable: magic or God. Supposedly, Christ rose from a sealed tomb like a bird from an egg shell. Which came first: the chicken or God? The wand or the puff of smoke?

On a factory farm in Salisbury, Maryland, "cage-free" becomes the buzzword. But "cage-free" is just a nicer way to say "less caged than before." My doctor tells me not to worry because the mass is just a cyst and not a tumor. The cranes have been replaced with a poster of a puppy. I search for answers in its stupid pink tongue, and I blame the heat in my face on its infuriating cuteness. I wonder if, like the male chicks, the cranes have been macerated.

Is motherhood still a blessing if it's shrouded in needles? Do they make Hallmark cards congratulating the tubes and the pills? I see my failed future in blurry ultrasounds on Facebook; the millennial ink blot. I picture his blue eyes on a baby boy and I think maybe I could do it for you. *For him.* For the cage-free birds too fat to escape the syringes.

In Macedonia they crack eggs and smear them on their hoes in hopes of creating fertile soil. When I mention being a vegetarian again he tells me that more chickens are raised

and killed than any other land mammal and that less meat on my plate won't stop that. I watch *Food Inc.* again and I think maybe cancer is saving my body from something worse.

On a factory farm in Mount Joy, Pennsylvania, a chicken is pumped full of hormones. Her breasts grow at such a rapid rate that she can no longer walk or eat and she dies without ever being touched.

I dream of her on bedsheets the color of yolk. When I wake, I watch the spider pace along the ceiling. She tethers silk from curtain to door, and as it leaves her body, I swear I can see it, every millimeter, still wet and glistening from its hiding place inside her. I imagine her eggs; I imagine hundreds arranged delicately on her back, I imagine them hatching, black specs flooding my wall as they run free. I watch her, but this tells me nothing about the origin of the earth, the original body. This is not the same as laying an egg.

THE COLOR OF GRIEVING

When I heard that a goat jumped into the ocean to his death, I considered jumping with him. He died while onlookers took photos. After 33 years in captivity for the sake of our pleasure, Tilikum died far from his home in Hafnarfjörður. Harambe was shot dead after a young boy fell into his enclosure at the Cincinnati Zoo. They call it animal magnetism, the way humans are so obsessed with viewing other species. They think it is some manifestation of existential crisis that forces us to seek the crossing of these barriers. That zoos are just living monuments.

I wonder if this phenomenon bleeds into the human experience of social media. If the way we track people in likes and photos is the same way we observe animals. I wonder if this is why I stare at my grandmother's Facebook page long after she is dead, unable to delete or unfriend her. Unable to stop staring at the last comment she ever posted.

Did Kelly tell you that Courtney's a senior this year? She's going to college next year. She turned out to be a really good kid. I just love her so much.

I read once, in Yellowstone, a man and his son saw a newborn bison. They thought it looked lost, so they put it in their car and drove. What the man and the boy didn't understand is that bison are protective and when a calf is taken away from his mother he can never return. He is rejected. The bison calf never saw its family again, and eventually, the park rangers had to euthanize him. With no home to call his own, the little

bison greeted every person and car that entered the park. He might not have even known he was dangerous. But the park rangers did.

Seward, Alaska is considered especially scenic because of its age. The community has a lot to offer, but it thrives on the money of tourists. Brochures, maps, and pamphlets lurk in every shop. “Best of Seward,” “Alaska Starts Here,” “10 Things to Do in Seward.” When people visit, they want to see and do everything. Sail the fjords, experience the wildlife, taste the food. The problem is that sometimes visitors are just parasites. They come to take, and they don’t care what they leave behind once they are gone.

When I move to a city on the coast of Lake Superior, I get a job at a hotel that faces the water. Here, we charge an extra 10% in taxes for being a tourist town. I memorize fun things to do, places to eat, where people can take their children. When someone asks me, “What is your favorite thing to eat there?” I realize I have not eaten at any of the restaurants I recommend. I have not been to any of the places I claim to love.

I tell them that I hear the whitefish is really good. Whitefish is a big thing when you’re living next to the largest of the Great Lakes. I tell my husband we need to make a list of things to do in Marquette before we move on to the next place. I write:

1. Climb Sugarloaf
2. Jump off Blackrocks
3. *Stop grieving.*
4. Bike through Presque Isle
5. See the UP 200
6. Go to Beer Fest

On the south end of the Seward Harbor breakwater dike in Alaska, a goat jumped to his death. While trying to get a good picture for Instagram, onlookers chased the goat for the best shot until he jumped into the ocean out of fear. Park rangers couldn't get to him in time. In the headlines, it sounds like a joke because goats aren't like people and can't be depressed or suicidal. But I know that goats are like people because we all share that fight or flight response that reminds us when we need to get out. To run. To jump.

There are other instincts we have though. To rubberneck. To stare. *Don't blink or you might miss it.* The news reports said that had the crowds not stood on the shore watching the goat try to swim, he might have been able to return to shore and would still be alive.

I never saw the goat, except in news photos and Facebook shares. But I felt a connection to him as something running for its life. I wondered, perhaps too often, about his goat family. Mountain goats can have loose-knit herds of up to fifty. I wondered if they noticed that he is gone. If he had offspring that he'll never return to. I wonder how he even got separated and lost in the south side of Seward in the first place. Many people believe that only humans have feelings. That to think that goats grieve is just some form of anthropomorphism. I wonder if, maybe, goats just grieve in different colors. If they feel the loss in a different way.

For goats, compassion is killing the members of your herd that aren't viable. It's merciful. Sacrificial. It's possible that the herd of goats will never even notice that one of their fifty is missing. It's possible that he was a weak link and the crowds of people taking pictures as he drowned just enacted the inevitable. That somehow our parasitic desire to consume and document is just another part of the circle of life.

I wonder if that is what my father-in-law felt like as he struggled to remain afloat in his own personal demons. My husband says it was inevitable that he would go out this way. That he was always already prepared for his father to shoot himself in the chest. The moment when the phone rang was not a shock, but a relief. Maybe this is how goats grieve, too. In reds and oranges instead of blacks and greys.

In the evening, I visit the rocky shore of Lake Superior and stand where someone probably stood with their iPhone pointed towards the water. I let my hands touch the cool waves as they lap gently against the rocks. I think of the goat and the bison. I think of the whales and gorillas condemned, put down, for mauling people who got too close. I pick up the smoothest rocks I can find and toss one in for the animals that have died at the stupidity of our hands. I grieve for all of them, in every color, incase no one is grieving at all.

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