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THINGS WE HAVE IN COMMON: ESSAYS AND EXPERIMENTS

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ABSTRACT

THINGS WE HAVE IN COMMON: STORIES AND EXPERIMENTS

By

Willow Serena Grosz

Things We Have in Common is a collection of short stories, flash pieces, and image-text experiments that attempts, in the wake of the death of my mother, to excavate the relationship between memory and narrative, identity and belonging against a backdrop of the main forces that have influenced my familial group, namely generational poverty, a changing relationship with our Athabascan and Caucasian heritages, and the complicated ecology, geography, and culture of Alaska. Like many forays into memory, this project represents a joyous failure. Please read this collection as a love letter to Alaska.
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To my family.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you: the McNair Scholars Program and NMU’s Excellence in Education Program, without the support of which I would not have been able to complete this project. My colleagues and classmates, for class-time and nighttime discussions, venting, readings, your work, your feedback, and pizza, and pizza, and pizza. Rachel May, for image-text, Piper pets, and letting me cry when I needed it most. Jen Howard, for sharing hours and hours of advice with Passages North, for cat memes, for a light hand with revision that somehow always gets to the heart of things, and for assuring me that it’s OK to sometimes tell the reader when something is none of their business. Patricia Killelea, for reminding me that this thing shouldn’t simply be about singing the pain. My family. This project follows the MLA Style Manual.

Listen. This time has been a gift.
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I am twelve, chopping onions for my mom’s potato salad. I need to be very careful about the size of the chopped bits. The onions should be big enough to add crunch, texture, but not so big as to overwhelm. It is very important that the chopped pieces are all the same size.

What happens when memory fails, when the definition drops out from underneath the seemingly stable structure? My thesis project is concerned with excavating the relationship between memory, narrative, and identity against a backdrop of the main forces that have influenced my familial group, namely generational poverty, a changing relationship with our Athabascan and Caucasian heritages, and the complicated ecology, geography, and culture of Alaska. Given that memory is subjective and malleable, this project hopes to explore how a fragmented or shifting inheritance of familial memory might inform or complicate the collective and individual identities of a familial group. The short stories, essays, and experiments that result are both inherently and
intentionally fragmented and interrupted, although I hope common threads will connect the work.

Grief is one such thread. I began the story that would, in revised form, become the title story of this project shortly after learning my mother had been diagnosed with uterine cancer, and I began graduate school a mere month after she died. In many ways, this project was fated to be held together by my mother’s death more than by any other single event in my family’s history. It is no surprise then, that much of the work with which I find affinity deals with grief in some way.

Around the time of my mother’s diagnosis I stumbled across an interview in *The Paris Review* in which author Jonathan Franzen tells his interviewer, “[t]he literature I’m interested in and want to produce is about taking the cover off our superficial lives and delving into the hot stuff underneath.” He says that his project as a writer is “to invent characters enough unlike me to bear the weight of my material without collapsing into characters too much like me.” Upon my first reading of this interview, the imperative “write what you know” took on new depth and nuance. What if my approach to writing was all wrong? As an undergrad I thought I needed to say big, important things about the world, but what if I just needed to share my world? What if the little moments from my life that only seem momentous to me, the moments that I relive again and again
because their effects ripple through my life and the lives of my loved ones, what if those moments could be reinterpreted—re-envisioned—through the eyes of characters who are more able to “bear the weight” of these events? Could I make better sense of my life in this fashion? Could this be a more organic and successful way to say things about the world? In the uncertain light of my mother’s survival I decided to attempt to delve into my own “hot” material.

This approach is not without its detractors. In fact, in a fiction workshop during my first semester of graduate studies we read Charles Baxter’s The Art of Subtext. There was one essay in particular, “Creating a Scene,” that I could not shake. About writing as a form of therapy, he says: “For all those who are working with people in prisons and in halfway houses…I say, ‘Good luck and blessings on you,’ without ever doubting that literature and therapy are two different enterprises, and that their outcomes may be at war with each other” (120). Really, I thought grumpily and rather ungenerously. What a crotchety, misguided old man. This is mostly because I felt, and still feel, that I didn’t start making anything worthwhile until I had begun to sit with my own pain and work out how it connects to that of others. The Baxter essay affected me very deeply. In fact, I think I took it quite personally, and I am thankful for this, because after I finished being all worked up about it, I started writing one of the pieces in this collection of which I am most proud, titled “How to Become a Drug
Dealer.” The piece primarily attempts to recreate the experience of paralyzing grief after the death of a loved one. It is probably the most stubbornly ‘therapeutic’ story in this collection, but the other stories here, written from the same philosophy, though with less irritation, also continue to explore what comprises my “hot” material.

I was lucky, also, in that I soon found that I was not alone in my approach.

***

I am sixteen, and one of my adult sisters comes to visit for a weekend. She tries to help in the kitchen by chopping vegetables for a stir fry. Our mom goes back and re-cuts every vegetable until each piece is identical in size. Later, that sister will tell me that she now takes perverse delight in chopping vegetables to mismatched sizes when she is at home. I won’t wonder until later in my life where my mother inherited this anxiety.

***

I think part of my problem with Baxter’s outlook that the outcomes of literature and therapy “may be at war with each other” (120) is that it forwards what I see as the juvenile, patriarchal argument that healing is for anti-
intellectual weenies. This argument engenders the attitude that Art should be concerned, yes, with the portrayal of suffering, but only because isn’t it interesting how deeply humans can suffer, isn’t the condition of man brutal, and sad, and inescapable. This stance takes for granted that Good Literature should remain righteously above attempts to move beyond suffering. Failing to do this, in fact, constitutes irresponsible writing, because it is essentially an avoidance of the Truth.

And certainly, an unavoidable truth is that humans suffer, and deeply. And brutally. And pointlessly, to the point of absurdity. But what I’m trying to get at here is that I didn’t realize until later, until I was already exploring my hot material, that one might try to come out the other side, that faithful portrayal of suffering is necessary, but it is not enough. It is not enough because it is not all-encompassing. It is not enough because it leaches hope. It is not enough because suffering is not all that is interesting about humans. The ability to endure and to heal and to thrive is also interesting. But yes, when starting out on a path that included learning to portray suffering, it was necessary for me, at least, to temporarily set aside larger goals and focus solely on that portrayal.

One writer that stands as a brilliant guide in the realm of pain is Karen Russell. In “Haunting Olivia,” a short story from the collection St. Lucy’s Home for Girls Raised by Wolves, the main character’s little sister zooms down a sand dune
in the upturned shell of a giant crab. The new moon tide takes her out to sea, and she is never seen again. This doesn’t keep her brothers from trying to find her ghost in a heart wrenching quest, however. In its search for a more perfect tracing of sorrow, “Haunting Olivia” never shies away from what is necessary, be it the invention of new words, or the fantastic, like this: “The diabolical goggles were designed for little girls. They are pink, with a floral snorkel attached to the side. They have scratchproof lenses and an adjustable band. Wallow says we are going to use them to find our dead sister, Olivia” (26). And later in the story, this:

I tug at the goggles and stick my head under for a second look.

Immediately, I bite down on the mouthpiece of the snorkel to stop myself from screaming. The goggles: they work. And every inch of the ocean is haunted. There are ghost fish swimming all around me. My hands pass right through their flat bodies. Phantom crabs shake their phantom claws at me from behind a sunken anchor. Octopuses cartwheel by, leaving an effulgent red trail. A school of minnows swims right through my belly button. Dead, I think. They are all dead. (34)

In this story there are ghosts everywhere, and they highlight and draw out the brothers’ individual grief by dispersing it across the entire Atlantic. Likewise, the
main character’s attempts to escape his grief and guilt over his part in his sister’s death only serve to accentuate the same. I find in my story, “How to Become a Drug Dealer,” a similar turning away from grief. The main character’s insistence on playing childish games, the absurdity of the pound of weed hidden in the basement in the midst of the organization of a funeral only heightens and prolongs the character’s pain. In fact, it is only the end of the story, the place that points to what might happen next, that indicates the work of mourning that the character will have to endure. I wish I had Karen Russell’s ability to invoke the fantastic, but my prose remains somehow stubbornly rooted in representations of the possible world, however much I find affinity with her plumbing of the depths of grief.

When I require access to both rage and healing, and descriptions of the absurdity from which these necessarily stem, I turn to Susan Power’s novel The Grass Dancer. The character Red Dress’ section of the novel, Power’s portrayal of an ancestress of the Sioux, particularly speaks to me. Following a dream, Red Dress wages a stealthy war against the soldiers of Fort Laramie, and when she falls in battle, her husband, Ghost Horse, ceremonially places the pit of a plum in her mouth. The rest of the novel deals primarily with the descendents of Red Dress’ tribe, and although the future is shrouded in uncertainty, the end of her
section of the novel gives the reader a sense that healing is possible for the surviving members of the tribe:

At least a hundred years have passed, and the plum pit in my mouth has become a grove of trees. I can smell the fruit when it ripens, and my breath makes the leaves rustle.

I am hitched to the living, still moved by their concerns. My spirit never abandons the Dakota people, though sometimes all it can do is watch. I was there when the army confiscated our horses to cut off our legs. I stood behind the Ghost Dancers, and when they fainted in desperate, useless ecstasy, I blew a refreshing wind into their faces. There have been too many soldiers and too many graves. Too many children packed into trains and sent to the other side of the country. Many times I ran alongside those tracks and waved at the bleak copper faces. You are Dakota, I called to them. You are Dakota. One time I stood in front of a chuffing engine and tried to keep it from moving forward, but it blasted through me. I saw the language shrivel, and through I held out my hands to catch the words, so many of them slipped away, beyond recall. I am a talker now and chatter in my people’s ears until I grow weary of my own voice. I am memory, I tell them when they’re sleeping.
I prefer to watch the present unravel moment by moment than to look close behind me or far ahead. Time extends from me, flowing in many directions, meeting the horizon and then moving beyond to follow the curve of the earth. But I will not track its course with my eyes. It is too painful. I can bear witness to only a single moment of loss at a time. Still, hope flutters in my heart, a delicate pulse. I straddle the world and pray to Wakan Tanka that somewhere ahead of me He has planted an instant of joy. (281-82)

*Take that, Baxter,* my inner snark-monster crows. This is symbolic healing in action: here is a murdered ghost whose body has nourished a grove of trees. Susan Power is writing about genocide and the systematic destruction of a culture, and she is concluding with hope. She literally ends this section of her novel with joy. Even Red Dress’ name, so orthographically similar to the word *redress,* leads the reader to conclude that Power may be intentionally signaling that part of Red Dress’ place in the story, in the family history, is to be a source of remedy, or healing, for the wrongs done to the tribe.

Here is perhaps where my work veers from that of Power’s. Red Dress is an imagining, after all. Even if she is based on an historical figure, she is still, by necessity, partially imagined, and this seems to me a way to do the work of filling in the gaps of a history that has been largely stolen. While I aspire to this
work, I am not at this point yet. I am in many ways still doing the work of finding and tracing my gaps. I have not yet begun to imagine what might take their place. Yet this tracing feels like a necessary ground-laying to the eventual imaginative labor of healing.

***

This past summer, when I asked my sister about the vegetable-chopping incident, she said, you must have misremembered. Mom made me go back and recut them myself. Thirty years old and she made me feel like I was five again. But I can clearly remember our mother standing over the cutting board in the hot kitchen, gripping the knife, withholding comment, her tightly controlled silence smothering the house. The nature of memory is slippery, so now I can also remember my sister in that exact space, a palimpsest at the cutting board.

***

Every course I’ve taken since I began this program has forced me to revise my thinking on my thesis in some way. Flash Fiction, which I took midway through the program, was no different in this regard except in the extent of the
re-envisioning. Where before I had pictured longer pieces interspersed with shorter (but still kind-of long) vignettes, I suddenly discovered within myself a hidden flash writer. I think that what I actually discovered is that the rebellion I feel when sitting down to write a more traditional short story—where I have to force myself to drag out descriptions, to elongate scenes I feel should speak for themselves, to plod through the movement of characters across landscape and time—this rebellion is inextricably tied to my desire to dig directly into the heart of things. I am rarely successful at digging directly into the heart of things. Yet flash gets me closer to doing this than any other form has been able.

I have a contemporary attention span and a contemporary sense of patience, and at the same time that I want, impatiently, to dig directly into the heart of my material, the themes I am writing on—much of them at least semi-autobiographical—are often difficult to remember, hard to pin down, and painful to write. Add this to the growing list of reasons for my love of flash. I can ruminate on a moment, expand it, blow it up, hold its component parts in my hands, turn it from side to side, completely immerse myself in it, and yet I don’t have to worry about drowning in the whole big history of where that moment originated. I can safely set the moment aside when I am done. It will have changed me to write it, but it won’t have killed me the way that longer works sometimes feel as though they will kill me.
But because this is a long project that I am creating, because what I would like to eventually produce is something much more like a flash novella, I can accumulate these bite-sized little heartbreaks into something larger. For Flash Fiction I read *My Very End of the Universe: Five Novellas-in-Flash and A Study of the Form*. About the subject of flash, the editors, Beckel and Rooney, say:

The name “flash” is particularly apt and illustrative for both [flash and the novella-in-flash]: they surprise, they blaze, they make you blink. One way to describe the interplay of flash fiction and novellas-in-flash is to think of each flash as a star. Stars stand alone. They appear in the sky as singular sparks of light, each one possessed of its own flickering beauty. In nearly every era and culture, humans have named the stars and then taken those beloved luminous points and connected them in the sky into shapes and stories. Novellas-in-flash are like those constellations: writers linking their flashes together into a larger image—into narratives deep with possibilities. (viii)

These words assure me that I can allow my short attention span to slow itself on single moments and trust that with each moment I am building this project into, as Beckel and Rooney write, a “larger image—into narratives deep with possibilities” (viii). OK, maybe that’s a little grandiose. But it feels more
manageable than my first fiction workshop when, after reading the short story that was the tender little seed of my thesis, one of my classmates casually informed me that once I expanded on the thing, what I was really writing was a novel. I like the sound of novella-in-flash much better.

While this project doesn’t yet contain enough flash pieces to house a novella-in-flash, I believe my work has more in common with that form than with the novel. Beckel and Rooney insist that both flash and the novella-in-flash are hybrid forms (xii), and I happily claim kinship with this hybridity. My work tackles nonfictional material in a fictional format, and I attempt (and often fail) the concision and compression of poetry.

One of my favorite examples of the hybrid novella-in-flash comes from the fractured yet lyrical writing of Justin Torres. His book, *We The Animals*, is a constant reminder that prose can, and nearly always should, be poetry. The book opens with an introductory piece titled “We Wanted More.” A mere two pages long, the “We Wanted More” concludes with this paragraph:

Always more, always hungrily scratching for more. But there were times, quiet moments, when our mother was sleeping, when she hadn’t slept in two days, and any noise, any stair creak, any shut door, any stifled laugh, any voice at all, might wake her, those still, crystal mornings, when we wanted to protect her, this
confused goose of a woman, this stumbler, this gusher, with her backaches, and headaches, and her tired, tired ways, this uprooted Brooklyn creature, this tough talker, always with tears when she told us she loved us, her mixed-up love, her needy love, her warmth, those mornings when sunlight found the cracks in our blinds and laid itself down in crisp strips on our carpet, those quiet mornings when we’d fix ourselves oatmeal and sprawl onto our stomachs with crayons and paper, with glass marbles that we were careful not to rattle, when our mother was sleeping, when the air did not smell like sweat or breath or mold, when the air was still and light, those mornings when silence was our secret game and our gift and our sole accomplishment—we wanted less: less weight, less work, less noise, less father, less muscles and skin and hair. We wanted nothing, just this, just this. (2-3)

Here is prose that trips over itself in riotous frenzy. It tumbles. It is joyous and sad and ephemeral like the morning light it describes. The entire paragraph is just three sentences; it forces the middle sentence to bear nearly all of the stillness that is lacking in the first half of the piece. I hope that my work thinks about sentences like this: in terms of what they can bear, in terms of pushing them beyond what we think they can bear. My flash story, “How to Make Lemon
Cream Puffs with Your Mother’s Ghost,” is an example of an attempt to overload a sentence in just this way.

Sometimes, however, I find that my flash fiction needs to be overloaded in a different way: sometimes it begs not to be typed, but to be painted onto the page. My process makes use of painting gum, which is written onto the page first. When it dries, it is almost invisible. The paint comes next, and when that has dried, the gum is carefully rubbed away from the page. This process feels almost like an anti-erasure, revealing what was hidden beneath the black paint.

***

The last meal my mother had the strength to make was potato salad for a family barbeque. She sat stubbornly over the cutting board, meticulously chopping the onions, the celery, the potatoes. Then she got into bed to sleep sitting up. She could not sleep lying down because of the fluid around her heart. She was too tired to go to the barbeque, but she was proud to feed the people she loved. It takes an immensely damaged person to force themselves through this, but a tragically beautiful one to sacrifice in this way to feed her loved ones. I know I will never figure out where this comes from, but it seems worth my time to try.
Up, up and around the switchbacks to the overlook. Or some of us head straight up the game trails, bisecting and bypassing the switchbacks altogether. There are almost no mosquitoes this summer. It’s been raining steady through July, since the rains finally drowned the last remnants of lightning fire in late June. The air should be thick with that whine and our slaps, but instead we have this beautiful sunny day, a little play of breeze silvering the old homestead’s giant cottonwoods above us, deep purple of monk’s hood and pink of fireweed blooming along the trails and in the deep grass where the ruins of the old chimney hint at the original cabin.

We stop here for lunch before the switchbacks, and when a family friend sneakily hands around a bottle, we can see Dad seize up before walking away. Our newly-shaking alcoholic sister is here, two other sisters, sober over twenty years. Mom would have hated it. We can hear her disapproving, waiting until after, or out the side of her mouth during some quiet moment in the shade, wine is for weddings, not for funerals. An exercise in knowing we can love each other but we can’t control each other.

How do we talk about the little backpack with the .45 in case of bear, with the plastic bag of ash and calcium and bonegrit. About the little hole Dad went
up to dig alone the week before. Mom said, *spread me under my roses*, but after the chemo and the liver-killing pain meds, she wanted her toxic ashes buried and purified by the watershed. We’ll take a step back then, take a look at this view from the overlook: the plot with all the headstones. And all face north, all toward the mountains, the deep ravine to the river falling off fast and then the dapple of birch and spruce interrupting the view of the water below. Listen. You can hear it down there, but then there’s a long slow incline and the purple-green of the mountains hundreds of miles away, the clouds scudding in the breeze, and look behind; here we dig. Here we slice open the sealed plastic with a pocket knife, empty the backpack with a little puff of gray into the sandy red-orange loam.
HOW TO BECOME A DRUG DEALER

When your mother dies, and it becomes clear your father wants to take the whole mess to the dump, tell him you’ll deal with the two thousand dollars’ worth of unlicensed medical marijuana left over from her slow decline. Two thousand dollars is not something you can simply toss, even double-bagged, into those giant green dumpsters surrounded by a twelve foot fence to keep the bears out. You will not simply stuff more than eight ounces of homegrown into black plastic bags to let it arc up and over and out of sight, to let it be trucked away with the trash. Understand that maybe your father doesn’t know or care about things like street value.

Maybe what your father knows and cares about is the emptiness of the house, and the darkness, now that the two of you can’t bear to turn the lights on or even clean the dishes. Maybe what he cares about is the hollow vacuum of time when you go back to school at the end of the summer. When the relatives start calling, and your father tells you, ask them not to bring casseroles, honor his wishes. He asks for so little these days. Make sure you’re home to eat dinner with him, even if it’s just crackers and dip. When he goes to sleep early so he can get up for work, don’t lie in the dark listening to the clock. Go out to the bar and catch up with old friends.
When the town’s lone bar closes down at 4 am, wander over to the old ballfield with your best oldest friend. Sit on the dew-slick picnic tables and look for Venus in the dusk. It’s up there somewhere, maybe above those trees at the edge of the field. Your best oldest friend will not ask about your classes or the funeral preparations or your summer job selling trinkets to tourists. She talks about the past. About your mothers. Their kindness. Their hardness. Remember when she signed up to make twenty cheesecakes for the senior center bake sale? She kept me up till three in the morning grinding graham crackers for crust.

Yeah. Good cheesecake, though. The details differ, but your childhoods are the same, and you can spend years apart and fall into immediate easy silence. Climb the fence and run to the middle of the ballfield. Lie in the wet grass. Spend the rest of the night looking up, pointing out pretend constellations to each other in the grainy light.

You are no drug dealer: you are your father’s progeny. In the unrelenting twilight of Alaska’s summer, realize this: that your hometown is no longer your home, that regardless of your connections—your family, your old friends—you need much longer than the month you have left to become a drug dealer here. Wait a week. Wait two. Wait until the last minute, listening to the weed whispering from the locked basement: the dismantled grow lights, the blower fans so the plants wouldn’t grow spindly and bowed down. The necessities of
even a small indoor operation are astounding, but the growing season is so short your father wouldn’t risk the crop dying from frost outside. Wander amongst the white industrial bottles of pesticide left over from the spider mite infestation, the rows of empty plant trays, the black plastic sheeting tacked up to hide everything from sight. Maybe your friend J— could take it. But it turns out he doesn’t smoke anymore.

There are plenty of other responsibilities. Take care with logistics. Understand that time is limited. Understand that there are many tasks to complete. Make yourself a checklist. A checklist will solve all of your problems with time.

Do:

☐ Write the obituary. You have 250 words to describe her living through the Great Alaska Earthquake, winning a class action lawsuit for wage discrimination, driving fuel trucks on the ice of the North Slope, learning to play the violin at age 50, falling in love twice.

☐ Write the announcement for the Celebration of Life. This is different from the obituary in that you must tell people how to grieve, how to honor.
This is a summer town. Make summer friends. Walk down to the river, where you can see the mountains and the trees and the trestle bridge you climbed as a child. Get raging drunk every weekend. In the summer every day is the weekend. With your new friends, make up a new game where you throw rocks at other rocks. A summer friend throws a rock up. You throw to hit the rock in the air. Throw rocks at other rocks. Throw them as hard as you can. Measure the distance between precision and accuracy. Do not, under any circumstances, relinquish responsibility.

Your best summer friend has rainbow hair and aim almost as good as yours. Clock out at the tourist trap and pick her up from the pub where she waitresses. Stop going to the bar when you can buy a bottle of Jack and sit around a bonfire, your faces glowing in the aging season: your best summer friend, her boyfriend, you, the river sliding past in the near-dark.

It’s double-bagged down there, stuffed behind a sawhorse and under a gunnysack. You know the place really only smells like the sawdust from when your dad used to putter happily in his makeshift workshop. You know the basement doesn’t really smell as pungent and skunky as it did when you unbagged and extricated the eight carefully packed gallon Ziplocs to weigh the product. The seeds and stems were already in their own bags—separated out for processing into concentrated oil to be mixed just a drop at a time into tea.
Do:

☐ Plan the food for the service with your aunt. She will make sure there are meatballs and a dish full of barbequed chicken. And she’ll call in the cousins. Someone needs to bring potato salad. Macaroni salad. Scalloped potatoes. A Coleman water cooler full of gritty pink lemonade.

☐ Email your sisters. Your mother’s favorite color was purple. Or was it cobalt blue? Coordinate preferences. Irises on the tables. Like the ones she planted in her garden. Not everyone will be happy, so prioritize: what your mother would want, although she can’t talk anymore. What you think your father wants, although he can’t talk about her. Your sisters. Cousins.

Your best oldest friend won’t be able to make the service. She calls. Tells you she loves you. Her mother is sick now, too.

At the end, your mom’s lungs couldn’t take even a hint of smoke, but the THC was the only thing that dulled the nausea or the all-over body pain. And here is why what your parents did is illegal. Because while weed is legal now, quantities are still controlled. To grow enough to make the oil, your dad had to grow six plants to maturity at a time, when the limit is three plants to maturity.
Growing so much is a felony. Maintenance of a grow-room to produce illegal amounts is a felony. Manufacture of the raw material into cannabin oil is a felony, as is possessing the oil. Just the leftover amount tucked safely under the potato sack is worth five years and $50,000. Maybe M—— could sell it and split the money with you. But he has a big mouth, and you don’t want to leave a mess for your dad to clean up.

Do:

☐ Begin a list for thank you cards. Include: anyone who sent flowers. Anyone who donated to the library as requested instead of sending flowers. Anyone who relieved any kind of burden. Search for rules of etiquette, because how are you supposed to know this?

☐ Sit. Stand. Smile. Nod.

Your best summer friend wears a rainbow skirt to match her hair and your mother would have loved her. Her boyfriend sticks flowers in his beard and laughs at himself. The day of the service, your relatives tell you to sit down, let other people take care of you. Consider your mother baking twenty cheesecakes in a single night: graham cracker crumbs, melted butter, rogue sprinkles of sugar ground underfoot and dusting the countertops. The muscles of her forearm flexing and straining as she stirred the filling for the last batch.
Do not:

☐ Think about how you almost passed out when the cop asked you, *pro forma*, to go over the sequence of events leading up to the 911 call.

☐ Think about the 911 operator making your father begin CPR when she was clearly already gone.

☐ Think about the sound of ribs cracking under chest compressions.

☐ Think about the smell of voided bowels, or the blood on the floor, or how the fatty tissue of her eyes glazed over immediately, or how her head lolled to the side when you helped your father move her from the bed to the floor so he could start compressions.

☐ Express your anger at the 911 operator to your father.

The purple irises rest in bottles of cobalt blue. Your mother smiles in a pink and purple and turquoise shirt from the photograph your father picked out, the only request he made.

Let time force a tunnel through the intolerable thing. Let it drag you through to the end of the summer. Pretend time itself is not the intolerable thing.
Three days before you fly home your best summer friend tells you her boyfriend is moving back to Texas and leaving her with rent she can’t afford to pay. Recognize this as what you were waiting for. For a summer friend, two thousand dollars might solve the problem of the hard winter ahead. She’ll have to make her own choices, but you have the power to give her an option. Fully appreciate this power. It does not come often. Know that even with the state’s recently relaxed laws, you are offering equal parts gift and risk. Your mother would like this solution, though. She would appreciate the idea of passing something forward unexpectedly and without expectations.

You will leave the state in two days. You still have to deliver the thank you cards. Some can be mailed; some require three-hour chats with coffee and cream and too much sugar.

You have a one-hour window, then. Plan to drop off the weed at 11 am, plan to chat for five minutes. Feel the crowding of time—time inching in on you from all sides.

Next morning take the road into town, rushing, rushing, not too fast. Think of, but do not look at, the two thousand dollars’ worth of weed in the canvas makeup bag in the backseat. Just resting there. It’s quadruple-bagged in there with heavy-duty contractor bags, and then stuffed inside the canvas, and then you washed your hands about a thousand times. Can you really still smell
it? The speed limit is too slow; you need to be there now. Anything else is too fast; you might get caught. Drive too slow too fast into town, coast down the hill, mountains in view today, drifting out from two weeks of cloud cover into the morning sun, mountains more beautiful than they’ve ever been, don’t pay attention: watch the speedometer, anything over an eighth of an ounce is still a long time in prison.

Make the drop. Wave goodbye in the rearview mirror. I’ll see you soon, maybe tomorrow, I promise before I leave. You are behind schedule. Turn around and drive back out the sixty miles to your aunt’s log home.

No one leaves your aunt’s house without being fed. Marble cake and coffee. Don’t refuse the offer of seconds. Thirds. Eat until your stomach hurts. Give your aunt her thank you card and the jar of flowers you stopped to pick by the side of the road. Don’t think about how it took seven years and your mother dying to get you to come home. Drive back to your father’s house. Drive as fast as you want. Watch the clouds roll in to cover the mountains again, lightly pink as the sun starts to set.

Walk down to the river. Throw a rock at another rock, to vanish in the twilight sky, your eyes losing the rock as it arcs up, the sky melting into clouds, into mountains, where there’s no delineation between what is solid and what is
not. Throw a rock at another rock and lose them in the sky but watch the ripples as both rocks disappear into the river.
In the Summer, I felt like I belonged. Feel like I belonged. Feel like I belonged. 

How does one Belong? To make the others feel like a Tourist. 

I stumbled on a story of how my Grandfather installed the town’s first flush toilet. Right here in this bar. 

Everyone was drunk. At least I don’t feel like a human. 

It’s for fun, in the woods. 

The summer where my parents met. 

Well, it’s for love in the woods. 

No investment. No investment. More investment. 

At least I don’t feel like a human. 

But I keep getting cut off. 

Tourist. I keep my head down. 

This is no way to connect with people. 

I should keep trying.
What makes you feel like you belong?

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
This represents a quilt. A quilt should keep you warm.
As a favor, my sister goes out to dinner with her husband and a potential business partner. The business partner brings his wife, who is originally from the area. She spends the dinner reminiscing. When they were young, she would take her children down to the river. We used to watch the drunk Natives stumble out from under the bridge, she laughs.

When my sister tells me this, we are snuggled under a quilt talking about life. I imagine the woman as a dirty blonde, with a big, horsey laugh. I imagine her with smoker’s wrinkles around her lips, too-bright lipstick bleeding into the fine lines of her face. I imagine her with wavy red hair, freckles, perfect eye shadow. A vivid blonde pixie cut, shaped eyebrows, neutral-toned plumping lip-gloss. A laugh that can be described as ‘tinkling,’ I imagine she gets lettuce in her teeth during the salad course, and my sister neglects to tell her.
Does this woman think she is among friends? Does she feel like she belongs? My sister has our mother’s eyes—steel grey or blue grey or blue blue, depending. She gets the questions less than I do. Do you have a little Native in you? Always have. Always is. Always safely owned and contained.

Yes, and I get the questions less than a friend of mine, trapped once at the coffee shop where she works, trapped man standing in her way. Of course I’ll let you get back to work, but first you have to tell me: What are you?

My sister and I curl our bodies under the quilt she made and I try to figure out what we are. She taught herself to quilt. Our grandmother was a beader, a moccasin-maker, not a quilter. She licked the string to thread it through the eye of the needle, pinched her lips, said, not like that. said, follow the pattern. said, never. trust a blue-eyed dog.

We curl in, our foreheads resting against each other, hair tickling our noses. Whatever we are, we are only safely contained within each other.
But normally it is difficult to connect...

"there is also, perhaps, a certain loss of self implicit in the speaking of another's language."

We get that from our mother, maybe...
She got that from her mother, maybe...
Gaps where a history should be. Where a history is. A history of gaps. And what remains unspoken. She tells me Alice's story, not her own. Alice the outsider. Alice the married-in. The aunt-in-law. The sister-in-law. Great Aunt Alice with the horrible pet pug. Whose emphysemic gasps matched, to my nine year old self, matched, with alarming perfection, the gasps of her smoosh-faced little dog. Who lived on disability but insisted on paying us for helping her with yardwork. Debt maybe means something here. Maybe payment. In payment gave us six strawberry plants that exploded into a quarter-acre, so dense and entangled we gave up transplanting and just tilled between rows to make paths. Just made gaps, and saw what grew beside those gaps, saw that it was good, saw a freezer full of berries.

She tells me the stories beside her story, maybe so she can only see what grew up beside her and I try not to get angry at the gaps.
There's this idea that telling a story kills something...

I don't know if what dies is what is told or what is left untold.
“breast stroking into the xylem,
riding the elevator up
through the cambium and into the leaves...
...peering out from the sweet meat
with his hands pressed against the purple skin
like cathedral glass...”

"The magic dust our bodies become casts spells on the roots..."
This Summer when I go home, the house will be quiet.

In the mornings, my father will go to the computer and watch clips from the weather channel before going out to tend his strawberries. It will be light already. It will always have already been light. We will sit together over morning coffee without talking much. Maybe the cat will stroll in and jump onto his lap and he'll talk to her in a voice most people reserve for small children.

This is nice, I might think. This is okay. He will lace up his work boots and head to the train station, where tourists come to see the big charismatic megafauna—most bears—but where last summer we watched for a quiet half hour a weasel climbing onto the wheel-well of a parked car, poking its head out, pulling it in, springing full-bodied onto the shadow cast by the car before boogying and side-boogying back into the wheel to do it again.

We hold ourselves so carefully close.

I wonder what my father's reaction to the poet's words might be.
What does he think of my mother’s ashes buried up the train tracks at Gold Creek? Can he imagine rebirth? The joyous burst of growth after a slow death? I don’t mean to disparage the poet or his words. I just mean that we buried her instead of spreading her because she wanted the toxins from the chemotherapy to leach harmlessly away in the soil.

She did not want to weigh on our tongues, coat our throats. She did not want to settle, shear and grit-haunted on the yeasted blush of watermelon berry, or poison the bird shit for hundreds of miles.

But when I go home this summer, I will bring a poem about a man burying the ashes of his father to grow a plum tree. Maybe we’ll make plans to transplant six strawberry plants.
When she was finally tiny and smelled like dying, the family took Grandma Nellie back home to Gold Creek. Her adult grandchildren drove her in from where she lived now on the Kenai with all those saturated greens, decomposing nurse logs, the moss, the coastal hemlock catching fog and dripping condensation onto tar shingles. They followed the Sterling Highway, then the Seward, no whales breaching the waters of Turnagain Arm, but maybe instead the car followed a bore tide in to Anchorage before turning inland. Maybe the whales were down south, raising a new generation like my mother, or simply feeding along a different coast. Maybe they were hiding their heads in grief. Our grandmother sat in the back seat, her busy hands folded in her lap, too weak now to bead or sew. She concentrated on breathing as she watched the line of water pushing alongside the Buick, clear and strong and unruffled except where it broke on the dark charcoal silt and volcanic rocks along the shore.

In Anchorage, the scenery dried up and changed. The eight-story concrete office buildings, small already due to earthquake construction standards, dwarfed by the Chugach Mountains on one side and the ocean on the other. They might have driven through Spenard, where Grandma Nellie had her first
two kids, Noel and Jessie, where schoolkids threw rocks at her if she went out without her white husband. Maybe she had the energy to raise a shaking hand, pointing out the bones of the old cat track, now incorporated into Anchorage, turned gas stations and pawn shops and slum housing along a four-lane paved road. *There*, she might have said. *Cabin was there.* Her arm growing tired, she would have motioned with her head. *Your da’ trapped first rabbit there.*

They drove through the Chugach Mountains and across the Palmer Hay Flats, as far inland as Talkeetna. The eight hour journey was hard on her. Noel’s daughters, Noelle and Jennifer, took turns helping her into gas station restrooms along the way. Eight hours turned to twelve. They spent the night at Noelle’s cabin in Talkeetna.

And finally the train the next morning, the only way to get the fifty miles north through the woods from Talkeetna to Gold Creek where Nellie had her last two kids, my mother Patricia, and the youngest, Danny. Where Nellie brought the rifle along for bear when she took them berry picking, where she taught herself to read and write so she could teach her children. Where my mother was sent away to a boarding school in Oklahoma for first grade.

When they got off the train, Jennifer and Noelle’s brother, Buddy, came down from the cabin to meet them. He picked our grandmother up and carried her the quarter mile from the railroad tracks up the airstrip to the cabin, planting
his feet steadily, the hip-high grass of the unmown airstrip _shu-shushing_ as it parted for this giant whirlwind of a man, and loud, who learned from Nellie to solve every problem by bustling into the kitchen, by chopping up a bunch of vegetables and throwing them in a frying pan with some eggs and hot sauce. Who always picked fights and pushed friends and family away before he went on his benders, hiding out in the gutted apartment in Anchorage. There he is: he is halfway between slumped defeat and urgent restlessness, his eyes hollow and ever-blinking, staring at the gray sky through the one living room window from his seat on the tan industrial carpet. Beside him, the brown couch with the stuffing leaking out, the empty pizza boxes and half-full bowls of macaroni, empty wrappers and lighters and bottles. But after: he is on the train to dry himself out in the woods where he grew up, Gold Creek, where we all still fly like homing pigeons.

[what I feel compelled to add: something about Buddy’s childhood fifty miles up the tracks, hidden in that idyllic woods, something about him and his brother and sisters being beaten for mouthing off to their stepmother, a board with nails for spankings, the hazy, urgent questions of family gossip shared over potato salad and smoked salmon, the question of whether our grandmother was there, whether she knew and did nothing.]
Listen. They brought Grandma Nellie home to die, and Cousin Buddy came down through the cottonwoods and spruce and his own hurt to meet the train. He bent down and picked up the husk of her body as gently as he could, and even this must have caused her pain.
WE MAKE POTATO SALAD THE WAY OUR MOTHER TAUGHT US

I was twenty when my sister told me about the way she chops vegetables. At twenty, I wasn’t thinking much about cooking: I was focused on the freedom of college, on grades and sex and finding a job so I wouldn’t have to drop out. She invited me for dinner so we wouldn’t lose each other. *Big and uneven. Screw consistency of cooking time.* I watched her mouth twist a little like all our mouths do when we’re hiding pain, jaw clenched and chin jutted, bottom lip pinched around something unspoken. I looked past her to the slowly growing snowbank and the deep blue twilight of the 4 pm Fairbanks winter. The cold seeped just a little through the double paned picture window if I held my hand against it.

I remembered being fourteen, just leaving home school for high school, counting down years. Dreaming New York. Chicago. Anywhere *big*, anywhere *real*. Remembered standing over a bowl of celery and onions, our mother hovering over me. No chef’s knife on chopping block, always a paring knife cupped in a fist and pressed sturdy against a thumb. Always a cramping hand curled over itself, dropping uniform crescents of celery one at a time into a mixing bowl.

Summertime, and the potatoes and eggs would be boiling on the stove, heating up the little one-window attic apartment we lived in. We would clear a
space for the bowl amidst the piles of mail and miscellany, carefully pushing aside the Smithsonian, the jar of extra screws, the Burpee’s and Gurney’s seed catalogs, the two oil lamps, the NRA magazine, the tackle box of beads Mom kept meaning to give to Cousin Jenny, the National Geographics, the ceramic sunflower pitcher Mom hated but couldn’t get rid of, the Mother Jones magazines, the fruit bowl. And finally enough room for a workspace at the plywood board wrapped in wallpaper resting on two sawhorses that we used as a table. My family drips rivers of sweat. It runs from our temples down our cheeks, plops embarrassingly onto surfaces in front of us. We use our forearms to brush it away, and it comes trickling back.

Anger then, at fourteen. Why would every bite need to be so perfect? No one at the potluck is going to notice, Mom. The cat tried to jump on the stack of magazines below the skylight and they slid into a slippery pile.

And anger again, at twenty, flashing bright, cramping down my arm and through my fist. The body remakes itself from scratch. How does it still remember this pain so easily while I need to be reminded of it? And maybe that is also how I chop vegetables now: haphazard and so intentionally careless. Or maybe each time I cook remains a battle of wills and memories. Each new dish my mother stands over me requiring perfection, my sister’s anger argues against it, and I see our mother dicing onions, the way she must have been taught, for
the last potato salad she made, the wheeze and gasp of the oxygen machine, nasal cannulae forking from her nostrils and tubing thrown over her shoulder and safely out of the way of her knife. She sat beside the same sawhorse table, elbows braced against the chair arms, folded over herself, bowl on the floor because she couldn’t sit up to fill her lungs. How long does it take a do a job right? Hours and hours, sometimes. Sometimes so long that you go straight to bed instead of to the potluck.
WHAT’S ANOTHER WORD FOR BURY

*Lingula*, from the Latin *lingua*, for ‘tongue,’ and the diminutive suffix –*ula*, denoting ‘little.’ “Little tongue.” In our lungs, on the left side, where the body shifts to make room for the heart, we have a little tongue.


A little tongue. Perhaps it laps up the words we bury inside, chews. Swallows. Refuses to smile on command. Perhaps we suffocate by a process of accretion. A failure of negative pressure, as if in the breathing-in we have no way to filter out what harms us, as if the words we lock inside fill us to brimming. Here then, is the place we start. Let us drag our hands through this muck, sift until we find
a spoonful.
Listen. We are out here on the ridge, the old fireline, where the car sits upside-down by the two-track, pushed off by a snowplow up into the berm of dead wood and soil. We scrape through all that brush and tangle by the road until we’re out above the treeline, and the sun, with our feet a little wet from the moss, the leather leaves on the plants, the small spaces between the rains, where we can see the virga coming across the hills, watch the play of cloudshadows out, out, out to the mountains where everything stops.

And my sister tells me about coming out here one fall, when all the greens were yellow, to pick cranberries with her new boyfriend and send them overnight to Mom. This would have been when I was a child, and my sister was maybe twenty-five or thirty. She was a very new adult. And proud. And when she came to visit months later and the berries were tucked into the back of the fridge with that tangy ferment wafting off them and that whitish fuzz—oh.

But we are here for blueberries, not cranberries, and I am sitting in front of a loaded bush with an unripe berry taming my mouth and I have one eye on those clouds and the sun warming my back and we are thinking we’ll bake muffins for me to take home on the train tomorrow and my sister turns her head
the way all us girls do before we laugh, and before my sister’s heart can be broken from disuse we’ll make sure that this work, this bending and picking, these happy sore backs, won’t be wasted this time, we can save this sun in tupperware for later.
The land was cleared and the first house was built before the snow flew. I think my parents wanted to build the way the Finnish settlers did in the Midwest: a makeshift shelter first that could be converted to something useful after a more permanent home had been constructed. But where Finnish immigrants converted their first-year homes into saunas, my parents had a more elaborate plan. They wanted a woodshop for my dad downstairs and a rental unit upstairs. Then they would build their dream home on the adjacent lot.

But a million things happen. Life happens. The kids start school. You meet your neighbors. The local radio station holds a concert. You take your kids and sit next to your new neighbors. You take your youngest child trick-or-treating. Your oldest child is suspended for mouthing off repeatedly to a teacher. You get a library card. You get your children library cards. You get your mail at the post office and every day that you drive in to town to pick it up you see the mountains from the lookout on the hill down into town. You help your youngest child build a school project on the medieval period. You take your oldest child to anger management. You drive to town to get the mail and from the top of the hill
you see the river shining on the other side of town. Your youngest child checks out books instead of doing schoolwork and walks down Main Street to read on the rocks by the flash of spawning salmon. Your oldest child climbs the railroad trestle and gets stoned to the rumble and shake of a train passing in the night below. Years go by and you haven’t finished the apartment, or the shop, or even started planning the dream home.

I don’t think I knew my parents’ original plan for the house. I was nine-going-on-ten when we moved in—too young, perhaps, to be very aware of large scale plans. It was a novelty, before the plumbing was installed, to get up in the night to use the honey bucket, to carry the bucket out every day to dump in the porta-potty my parents rented during construction. And it was a victory when the flushing toilet was installed, when the light green blanket was hung from nails to cover the bathroom door.

I do not know when my parents began to fight about the unfinished bathroom. About the lack of tiles or a shower curtain. About the pink and yellow insulation showing through the plastic vapor barrier. About the strandboard that left splinters in our feet if we walked around inside without slippers or socks. About the lack of cupboards or a kitchen sink. But it was warm in that house in
the winter. And it was an adventure to stay up past my bedtime and sneak into
the bones of the laundry room to watch along with whatever late-night movies
were on through the un-walled 2x4 studs.

When my fifteen-year-old cousin Henry ran his dad’s last nerve and got
kicked out of his parents’ house in North Dakota, he came to stay with us in
Alaska for a summer. Early in the spring he shot a mother robin with a bb gun
while her fledgling fluttered on the ground nearby. I told on him. Instead of
kicking him out, my parents locked up the bb gun and put him to work. Henry
was helpful around the house, but he was angry all the time. We would walk out
to the sidelot, where the driveway lay between the house and the fruit garden,
and beyond that undisturbed birch and spruce. We would go out to weed, or
later that fall, to pick berries, and halfway through he would throw down his
work and stomp off with his hands stuffed in his pockets.

“I just need some space,” he said.

When he left, he didn’t try to go back home. He went into a program to
earn his GED instead.

The winter I was twelve my parents started planning the dream house.
We cleared a space on the table and laid out graph paper.

“How do you want your room to look?” Mom said.
My dad bought a design program for home architecture. Together, my parents spent hours staring at the screen, rearranging walls, doors, windows. My mom had never lived in a place that had enough storage. She wanted closets everywhere. A giant pantry. A root cellar designed into the basement. An artist studio for her pottery. But most of all, bedrooms. She wanted a place for every person who needed a place to stay.

One summer a family friend’s son, Joey, came and stayed. Joey had long, curly hair and set up his few belongings and a bed in the shed we stored the chicken feed in. He helped around the house to show his appreciation, but he wasted insane amounts of water doing dishes. Because we still didn’t have a kitchen sink, we had a system with a Rubbermaid tub and two teakettles. Hot water and soap went into the tub, and then the kettles were filled and heated again to rinse the dishes before setting them on a rack to dry. The process was laborious, especially for a kid who just wanted to be done, to be outside playing in the trees. Rationing the rinse water meant getting done faster, but Joey simply could not grasp this concept and would pour half a teapot’s worth of water on one dish.

“What’s the big deal?” he joked, when he saw my frustration. “There are always more dishes to do.” Then he threw soap bubbles at me until I laughed.
He had a good sense of humor, and it was fun to do chores with him even if it took too long. When the summer was over, he moved back in with his mom and they tried to make things work again.

My dad and the contractors he hired poured the foundation in increments because the pad was so gigantic—2,400 square feet, to be exact. They checked the weather religiously, rented a small cement mixer, marked off each day’s section with 2x6 boards, poured bags of gray dust and water, smoothed and smoothed and smoothed. The contractors took smoke breaks and looked at the sky, fingering their beards and eying each other knowingly. My mom brought them coffee cans to put their cigarette butts in, and homemade biscuits and cokes. They nodded their thanks, the younger ones taking more than their share, missing the cans when they threw their butts down. The older ones worked cigarette in mouth, jaws clamped down while hammering—one-two-three—never more than four strikes to get a nail in, but always someone with a black thumbnail.

When my Aunt Noelle’s boyfriend ran her down with his car and put her in the hospital for two weeks, her nine-year-old son came to stay with us while she recuperated and got clear of the boyfriend. My cousin was quiet, very quiet.

After the foundation was laid in the spring, the frame of the house went up over the summer. The goal was to get it closed in and protected from the
elements before winter. The basement was blocked in and the stairs were built up to the first floor. Then the second floor, with the contractors working from scaffolding and perching on unlikely places in the skeleton of the house. Then the third floor—the massive rec room my parents let me design instead of an attic crawl space. Finally the rafters, the roof, the shingles, the window frames. Plastic sheeting to protect the bare wood before siding could be installed.

And then I learned you could go into debt building a house. I learned not to answer the phone. I learned that debt collectors do not care how old the person answering the phone is. Their job is to keep you on the line no matter what. Their job is to collect. I learned we had gone into debt building a house. I think I learned what it feels like to give up.

I don’t think I am properly conveying the experience of debt collectors. First of all, they call multiple times per day, often multiple times per hour. Then there’s the rising tone of irritation in their voices, no matter how polite you are. Hello. This is W---- from F------------. Is one of your parents there? Of course, after a while, the answer was always no, but often it was the truth. “I’m sorry, but they’re not in right now. Can I take a message?” And a huffy sniff, as though W-- just knew I was lying. Well, when will they be in? “I’m really not sure. I’m sorry.” Well you need to tell them to call me. Never a call with new information. Never, it seemed, assistance with a plan or a budget. Just call after call after call,
demanding payment a person can’t afford fifteen minutes after demanding
payment a person can’t afford.

I don’t know how my parents overextended themselves. They were
retired when we moved to Alaska, but after the creditors, they both picked up
jobs to cover the bills and the payments. They even built their credit back up. But
the house?

The bones are there. Good bones, though the place has stood as it is for ten
years. Half of the windows are installed, and the plywood sheeting on the
outside is still half covered with Tyvek. There’s a woodstove installed in the
basement. The root cellar is functional. The windows that aren’t installed were
covered over with vapor barrier that has by now disintegrated to plastic
streamers that rattle in the wind. Sometimes chickadees and sparrows get into
the attic and leave bird shit on the floors. But it stays dry in the rainy season. The
roof is shingled over. The woodstove in the basement works. It’s there in case of
an extended power outage during a cold winter.

Walk in the front door and there are boxes stacked where my mom
planned a bench to take off boots and winter coats. In the giant living room, my
dad’s woodworking equipment, where he devises solutions to any number of
household problems, but where he leaves his wood scraps in a pile where the
kitchen island was supposed to be. In the pantry, safe and sound, boards of
insulation. Where the master bedroom was supposed to be, a birch vanity and
matching wardrobe, a handmade bedframe rubbing shoulders with the dirt bike
my mom planned to someday learn to ride. Upstairs in the guest bedrooms, all of
my dead uncle’s personal belongings, boxes and boxes of books and magazines.
Nowhere a place for a person who needs a place to stay.
WHAT WE DID WITH THE FIVE DOLLAR SUNGLASSES

Mom was always losing her sunglasses, could never find them in the shuffle of junk mail and dirty dishes. We were always running late. She started buying them at every gas station, every mall kiosk on trips to Anchorage. Even then, she was always digging through her purse, rummaging in the glove box, patting her pockets and the top of her own head.

Once she had them, though, we would be ready, we would be off. If she was mad about being late she could suck the air right out of the car. Oh, but if she was in a good mood, we would fly. We would take the Talkeetna Spur Road, and that fourteen mile stretch of pavement would send us down over Answer Creek, past Question Lakes, Sunshine Lakes, Fish Lake, past those gravel roads named after all those old dead bush pilots, named after all the people we’re related to. It would bring us right to the top of the hill into town: see the river angling around the base of the bluff down there, see, far out, Foraker, Hunter, and Denali, snowcapped, or covered in a bank of clouds, or with a halo of termination dust floating off into the atmosphere of the late season. We would crest that hill, Mom’s sunglasses safely in place against the glare, and coast down
gathering speed past the Twister Creek wetland, over the railroad tracks. Mail first, errands first, then hours at the library, maybe coffee before heading home.

In the last year of Mom’s life, one of us sisters cleaned the house, collecting a whole box of sunglasses along the way. The box rattling in the center of the newly cleared kitchen table. Clutterblind then, she really couldn’t find a pair. And she got online to order ten new sets, so she’d always be able to find one.
ON A SEPARATE PIECE OF PAPER

"Hi . This is your mother calling. Just making sure you haven't been abducted by aliens. Call me back when you get the chance."

60
This represents a set of lungs. Lungs should allow you to breathe. Does this representation allow you to breathe?

- yes
- no
For eleven years, you live over 3,000 miles from your childhood home. You'll visit next year, you tell yourself, next Christmas, the next time you have the money, the next time you get drunk and search flight prices, the next time you feel so guilty you can't even make yourself call home.
The Path of Air Into the Body

It follows a branching, cartilaginous tube, which becomes smaller and less cartilaginous by increments as it branches—first the trachea, then the bronchi, bronchioli, and finally microscopic diffusions.
You smoke your first cigarette at age nineteen, the legal smoking age in Alaska. At age twenty-six, fourteen years before you were born, your mother hitchhiked the five miles to the corner store through a snowstorm to buy cigarettes. If your life were a work of literary fiction, would this constitute a motif? Does this make you feel closer to your mother? Explain.

Extra Credit: How does your answer change when you discover your mother brought your two oldest sisters, ages two and four, with her through the snowstorm?
The lungs are clearly divided into lobes. Each lobe is further divided into smaller segments, fed by the tertiary bronchi. Because the heart rests in the lungs, the left heart lobe, the lungs are not symmetrical. The segmental anatomy is useful clinically for localising disease processes in the lungs. Think maps.
The white pastor in the small Lutheran community in North Dakota tells you white father to burn your NDN mother’s spiritual books. Your two clearest religious memories from this time:

1) Driving for hours for the smell of fry bread, the rhythmic jingle of dance bells, peering through legs to watch the sway and flair of regalia under the blue, blue sky.

2) The pastor asking the congregation in their Sunday best to raise their hands if they would die to be a flower of God.

Which memory is more important? Explain.
This represents a number of options available for pulmonary lobectomy in case of disease.

Does this representation allow you to breathe?

- yes
- no
On vacation in Canada in the early 90s, your white father and your Athabascan mother find that they and their two children are unofficially unwelcome in small town diners. Age four at the time, you will have no memory of waiting in the car with the youngest of your three sisters, age ten. All day in the car and your parents must decide whether to get something to go or take their business elsewhere.

How many times as a child living in North Dakota were you asked why you weren’t living on the Rez. On a separate piece of paper, write a letter thanking the Mandan people for their hospitality during the time you lived on their ancestral land. Be sure to include how claustrophobic you felt when your family returned to your ancestral lands, all trees and green closing overhead, cutting off the horizon.

"Extra Credit: Name an appropriate gift to bring your former hosts given the circumstance of your visit."
Fill in the blank:

1) Without factoring in other variables, the probability that you will become addicted to cigarettes based on your ethnicity is □ %.

2) The probability you will become a parent in your teens is □ %.

3) The probability you will graduate from elementary school is □ %.

4) From high school: □ %

5) From college: □ %
OUR MOTHER LIVES THROUGH THE 1964 ANCHORAGE EARTHQUAKE

During Mom’s earthquake: at five thirty-six pm on March twenty-seventh, nineteen sixty-four, for four minutes and thirty-eight seconds, hiding under the kitchen table, my nineteen-year-old mother watched the sliding glass doors shimmer and wobble, the magical ordering of their transverse waves somehow not shattering, a mirage that kept just that small infinity of the world together.

What was lost: a million delicate china hours by the now-collapsed fireplace chatting and drinking coffee with her future mother-in-law; good soil that liquefied, lost in fissures; the part of town that dropped 200 feet and broke the Government Hill School in half; 139 lives.

Fifty years later she too became an earthquake. When she breathed, dishes in cupboards. When she coughed, our hearts shook and swamped to free her lungs. She became a gravity, our world shifting when she shifted.
YOU LIVE THROUGH THE 2002 DENALI EARTHQUAKE

In a big one, the rumble arrives before the shake. The neighborhood dogs set off barking and howling and afterward you always think: well, duh. Most people consider earthquakes in terms of intensity, energy transferred into numbered measurements. A one-to-one ratio of seismic waves to destruction. But an earthquake’s power is measured exponentially; and it’s the proximity—to the surface, to you—that does the damage.

The dishes rattle first, and then you feel the deep shudder of the house moving from its roots. You’ve been babysitting the twins. You are coloring with Steven, but Michael is sitting all the way across the room with his blocks. So you pick Steven up and carry him under the doorframe to the unfinished hallway that goes back to the bathroom and the laundry room and your bedroom, all with blankets hung up for doors. You are fourteen, standing in the middle of your house, grasping a bare 2x4 stud in one hand and a wriggling three-year-old in the other.

Your nephews are wild explorers and haters of bedtime. When they come to stay, they sleep together in a nest of blankets in a raised playpen with softnetted sides. Every night, Michael holds onto the rail, throws his head back,
stiffens his body and lets go, screaming the whole time. He does this again and again and you worry about his neck. You worry about his brain.

You stand in the middle of the house, grasping a bare 2x4 stud in one hand and a wriggling three-year-old in the other. You look across the open living room at your nephew and he looks back at you across all that vibrating space.

You call him to you but he stays where he is.
THE PATH THROUGH THE WOODS IS STILL THERE AFTER ALL THESE YEARS

The house sat where it sat, barn-red plywood walls and blue sheet-metal A-frame roof. The downstairs shop, the upstairs apartment. Then the garden in the low spot, the trees bulldozed, moss and roots scraped over, topsoil brought in. Until finally, an area larger than a softball field, ringed with the fluttering silver leaves of cottonwood and birch, the little stand of towering spruce Mom wouldn’t let the contractor level.

To drive to the place, little gravel subdivision roads named after bush pilots and enterprising homesteaders: Sheldon Avenue, Noel Wein Avenue, George Kitchen Avenue, Airstrip Avenue. The house tucked safely in, collecting the dust kicked up by people driving past on the dirt. But to step out back on the far side of the garden where the strawberry patch loses control of itself. My sister, six years older than me, made the shortcut through the woods. The path cut the time to the highway from a ten minute walk in the dust to two minutes through the garden and green woods. Later, I used it to catch the bus, to visit kids on the other side of the highway. By the time I was a teenager, the borough put a bike path along the road, and I took it to cut through the trees and go for runs or ride my bicycle the three miles along the highway to the high school.
But in the beginning, it was a route of escape. In the beginning, my sister wore down the path to hitchhike the eleven miles the other direction into town. The first summer we were there, skeleton of a house under construction, piles of brush and scoops of topsoil a confused mess in the woods. That first summer, when I was nine and she was fifteen, my earliest memory of the trail through the woods was of a screaming match, a slamming door, watching my sister disappear into the woods and my parents ask each other whether she had run away again.
Mondays and Fridays we get out of school and then Robbie and I walk the mile to Nieminen’s Gas & More to wait for the bus into town. In the winter we tuck our hands into our pockets and just gogogo, with our chins down in our collars if it’s windy. It blows snow lots of days, so we just put our heads down and plunk, plunk our feet so they just keep moving. Where we go by the swamp is the worst ‘cause the road is low and the swamp floods over it and then freezes. Then the snow covers up the ice, and you never know when your feet are just going to go right out from under you. That’s how I broke my wrist last year. I had to walk around with a dumb cast, and I didn’t even get a cool color like the hot pink one Maddy Thompson got when she broke her arm. Mom said we couldn’t afford any extras, but I’m pretty sure colors don’t cost more.

The best part of the walk is when we get to the big bend in the road just before Nieminen’s because if you know where the trail is you can cut straight through the woods and also cut five minutes right off your walk. There’s these big old birches and hemlocks in there and they keep the snow off the path for a long, long time so we take the shortcut most of the winter. There’s all these soft needles on the trail from the hemlocks and moss-covered dead trees all around on the ground. In the summer we take turns running in ahead and hiding while
the other one walks along as softly as possible. Once I walked all the way to where the trail empties out behind the gas station and I had to call back to Robbie to catch up to me. That’s a tie, because I didn’t see where he was hiding, but he didn’t hear me go past. He’s never snuck past me. In the winter, if Mr. Nieminen is working he’ll let us buy hot chocolates and wait inside. But if it’s Mrs. Nieminen we’re out of luck because Mrs. Nieminen says having you kids standing around the store scares off customers, so then we have to pretend like we’re deciding to get coffee or hot chocolate and then we pour our hot chocolates real slow, and even though I’m supposed to save our money for milk and bread and bologna in town, I let Robbie take as long as he wants picking out a candy bar. Mrs. Nieminen watches us all squinty-eyed, with her mouth twisted up to one side like we’re gonna steal something, but that kid will not let anyone rush him when it comes to candy. He just stands there scuffing his feet on the dirty tiles and putting his finger on his lips, going from the Junior Mints to the Charleston Chews to the Butterfingers and back again, with the snow whipping around in these big flurries outside, piling up against the window the whole time.
NOTHING TASTES LIKE HOME-RAISED CHICKENS

May is twelve when she learns that chickens will peck on the weak until the weak are dead. Her parents are homestead-crazy, have bitten off more than they can chew. They buy the run of one hundred chickens in early spring. May is still eleven. The chickens are impossibly delicate handfuls of yellow fluff and hollow bone, cardboard boxes. Heat lamps in the dark basement.

Her father sets up a little chicken wire fence on the concrete floor. He lays down newspaper and sprinkles sawdust. Then they get to work on a coop for when the chicks are ready to be moved outside. May learns to use a hammer, write down measurements, to hold boards flush against other boards.

She visits the chicks every day after school. They move constantly, small circles within the larger circle of their cage. Sometimes one will find an extra tasty bit of feed, grab it, and run off with it chased by a handful of its mates. If they catch the runaway, they will take the food right from its mouth, peck and shove it to the side, squabble over the crumbs. Her favorite thing to do is to pick one up, still warm from the heat lamp, and hold it cupped very lightly in both hands. She’ll bring it in close, so close, until it settles and stills, small nibbling pecks tickling her fingers. The basement has begun to take on a pleasantly rancid
smell that May cannot quite describe: the mildew from the woodchips, the
sweetness of rolled oats and dried corn, the spicy smell of chicken waste.

Nine die within the first week. This is normal, the feed store man assures
them. Better than normal. New chicks are stuffed into shipping trucks, held in
boxes waiting for pickup or delivery. They sicken. They die. They have a ten to
twenty percent mortality rate, but if they make it past the first week they should
be fine.

May learns quickly during that first week to spot the lethargic droop of a
dying chick. The eyes half closed, the beak open a few millimeters, the rasp of a
chest moving a little too fast. In the mornings before school she begins checking
for the ones that have died in the night. Her father takes the bodies one by one to
the burn barrel with the used newspapers and junk mail. They cannot afford to
bury them and tempt in wild animals that might come later for the fully grown
chickens.

The chicken coop, when it is finished, is gigantic—the size of a small
house, and May thinks she would like to live in something like it someday. It is
full of ramps and roosting platforms and there is a large fenced area out back.
Later, it will become a storage shed: snowshoes, a dogsled, broken chairs, a
dresser intended for restoration nestled in the rafters. And below, the ramps and
platforms removed, the chicken poop shoveled out and the floor and walls
scrubbed with bleach, now canning equipment and boxes of dishes mixed in
with potting soil, garden tools, trays of planters for starting seeds, bags of trash
set aside to be taken to the dump.

The coop is ready before the chickens are big enough to move outside. The
days grow longer, the first green appears in the birches. May turns twelve and
toward the end of sixth grade. After the summer she will move up to the
combined middle and high school. She is nervous and excited. Near the end of
the school year the two sixth-grade classes go on a field trip to take a tour of their
new school. They sit wide-eyed in the bleachers (real bleachers!) and listen to the
principal talk about new responsibilities. They eat lunch clustered in a small
group in the corner of their new cafeteria. Then they file back onto the busses.
May has spent the day shifting uncomfortably in the new dress her mother made
her wear. She is not used to dresses. She thinks this one is supposed to make her
feel grown up, but instead it makes her feel even tinier than being in the huge
gym. When the next school year starts, she decides, she will only wear clothes
that make her feel comfortable.

And then school is out and May is free for the summer. She still visits the
chicks every day, though they no longer fit so easily in her hands. They still
make no sounds louder than breathy cheeps, but they have begun to sprout
awkward spikey feathers in uneven patches over their heads and bodies. And
now the biggest ones saunter to the food dish and posture by it, arching their
necks and flapping their little wings aggressively. May finds these displays
endearing until her father points out that the largest pullet (he tells her they’re
called pullets when they’re this size) is more than twice the size of the smallest
one. Soon May and her mother and father spend part of a day moving the
chickens out of the basement to the coop where they’ll have more room, where
her father can set up more feeders.

Now summer, it’s May’s job to bring the chickens food and water. They
are growing quickly, can polish off nearly eight feeders’ worth of food, four in
the morning and four in the afternoon. The grass outside the coop is completely
gone, and when May watches them, she can see them tilt their heads and lunge
as their bright red and black eyes pick up the movements of bugs in the dust of
their yard. How easy would it be for a chicken to turn those eyes on her
wonders, when they crowd in close around her ankles and the feed bucket.

When she first notices the missing feathers she thinks they might be
getting sick from something, and she tells her parents right away. No, her father
says. We’ll keep watch, but they are probably doing it to each other, honey. They need to
establish a pecking order so they know who’s boss.

Her mother says, I’ve been thinking about homeschooling you next year. In the
fight that follows May forgets about missing feathers for a while.
But the birds keep pecking at each other, and it’s the smallest one that gets the worst of it. They peck at it until it is almost completely bare of feathers, and then they peck until there is a gaping wound between its wings. May comes out to feed one morning in midsummer and finds its body in a corner of the coop, as though it had tried to tuck itself away in the safety of the wood chips and straw. It is sprawled out face down in the hay, its bald nubby skin a pinkish gray, its eyes matte black. It looks flattened, and May wonders if the other chickens sat on it and kept pecking once it was dead. She grabs a work glove and carries it to the burn barrel herself, hefting it by its feet, the tip of its beak grazing the ground with every second step.

The chickens do this five more times throughout the summer, each time with the smallest chicken. *This is crazy. Sophie and Jess are never going to believe this*, May thinks. Then she wonders, if she ends up homeschooled, will she ever see them again?

Once, amidst the milling feet and fluffed up feathers, she doesn’t find the dead chicken for two days, and she is certain that more of it is missing than usual. *Chickens are carnivores. I guessed they’d cannibalize each other under the right circumstances*, her father says.

*When you start homeschool next fall, you can write a report about it for your science class*, her mother says. May never writes this report. Her parents are
homestead-crazy, have bitten off more than they can chew. She spends two years in homeschool and it is such a misery for everyone that she is allowed to return to school for the rest of high school.

Nothing else tastes like home-raised chicken. They are tender and juicy, and their constant movement means each muscle is deliciously defined with none of the flabby fat of a store bought chicken. At the end of the summer, May helps butcher eighty-five chickens. It is her job to dip the headless birds in hot water, carry them to a table laid out under a bright light in the basement, pluck the feathers from the carcass until each pink naked thing is ready to be carved up. She never raises chickens again.
WHY I WAS CRUSHING GRAHAM CRACKERS BY HAND WITH A MORTAR AND PESTLE FOR EIGHT CHEESECAKE CRUSTS FOR THE CHARITY BAKE SALE ON A SCHOOL NIGHT AT AGE 14, 2 AM, WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 21, 2001

or

WHY MY WORK ETHIC IS COMPLETELY FUCKED, I TAKE ON MORE THAN I CAN CHEW, AND I NEVER KNOW WHEN TO JUST BE DONE FOR THE DAY

The phone rang.

Mom said: of course I can have something ready for the bake sale tomorrow.

Mom said: why waste the money. We can make them better ourselves.
WHEN WEASELS STALK OUTSIDE OUR CAGES

She’s thinking of the cages her mom’s cousin taught her dad to make. Of the careful timeframe, how long to wait before you know it’s caught: is the animal pulling her fur out to make the softest nest in the world? The time spent waiting, the keeping track: so many animals, who is related to whom and how? Her dad kept a ledger for this—bound seriously in dark green and brown canvas.

They started with five rabbits her mom’s cousin gave them and ended with perhaps a million at the end of that first summer. Perhaps a hundred. Hutches along the entire length of the house, hutches under the deck. Up in the little wooded area the deck overlooked. The heat that first summer. Alaska shouldn’t be that hot. She was twelve: her job then, to feed every day, to water twice a day. A million times. Two million. They butchered down to a good twenty to care for over the winter, her dad killing each one swiftly with a metal pipe, though not swiftly enough to stop the screaming.

But she’s thinking now of the cooling-off night of fall, then winter. Tromping through snow with a bucket of food. Hands stuck to frozen metal at watering time. The screaming from the hutches in the dark and her dad racing out of the warm yellow light of the house with the .22 from beside the door. The
bloody item, the kill, red smoothing to pink frozen sharp to fur at the throat the
next morning. The waste of the extra dead. She’s thinking not really of blood, but
of impact—escapescapescapeSCAPESCAPE—the confined terror of jumping
so hard you break your own neck inside your cage.
Football season, and the trendy German-inspired restaurant I can’t afford is serving wings. Buffalo. Requisite celery sticks, the ranch in tiny white ramekins. Garlic parmesan with rich white slivers of real cheese. Ginger scallion. Perfect crisp skin, especially at the joint where the integument puckers over tendons and cartilage and gets real crunchy under the broiler. I clean each bone, driving my new boyfriend mad. I can’t afford to waste food. I savor, return to the old challenge of how little I can leave on the plate.

My mother savored wings just this way. Awe at her skill. A vague and unsourced sense of shame. That I could never clean a bone so thoroughly. That we were making a scene, somehow, taking up table space for too long, slurping and sucking sounds, lips pulled back and simian to remove the barrier between our teeth and our meat, fingers greasy with sauce we had to lick instead of wipe away.

This is not an essay about how eating in public is a metaphor for our animalistic tendencies. This is an essay about hunger. This is an essay about my grandmother, age thirteen, killing a man over a pound of flour and some lard. This is an essay about how her children ate chicken wings, fear and trembling and what we can’t afford to waste.
Later in life I learned to be afraid of meaning, but I have this memory from my childhood—one of those memories that makes me feel safe, taken care of—it’s a memory of sitting in the passenger seat, and my mom is braking—smoothly, competently—and smiling, disaster averted, as she waves some premature driver the rest of the way through the intersection. “Das ah-hah dah way,” she says, smiling, nodding, waving; and I go back to looking at the scenery—the tops of the residential trees, the bottoms of the swaying traffic lights, the tinted strip of glass in the windshield and how the whole world turns purple looking through it. What I can see from this angle: my mom’s tan profile, her gaudy, five-dollar sunglasses, her vigilance behind them. Das ah-hah dah way. And this means I am safe.

And from my late adolescence there is the memory of my middle sister Maisie picking me up from campus and driving me up to her place on the hill. Maisie, who is sixteen years older than me, who barely features in my childhood memories. We will be good sisters to each other and lay our lives out side by side to look for connections—my first semester of college, her first year of marriage. We have plans to make dinner, in the tradition of family members who don’t really know each other well and don’t know what else to do together. She drives
with her sunglasses pushed up on her head, knee guiding the steering wheel while she changes CDs and adjusts the climate control. She drives us past the rocky outcroppings that look down over Fairbanks. The scraggly, competing black spruce in the swamp. No. That must be from a different memory. This dinner is in the winter. There is snow. And cold. Maybe a sparkling ice fog from the inversion layer—pushing the city down behind as we rise up through the twisting roads. In the winter, Maisie drives with both hands firmly on the wheel.

Oh, to rise out from that dark. To be heading toward my sister’s cabin in the woods. To be trying. Listen. Sisters are difficult sometimes. I don’t have to tell you.

Maisie gives me a tour.

Everything in the house has a story. The set of blue crackled glasses Maisie and our oldest sister, Addy, picked up in Costa Rica on their annual winter vacation to Anywhere Warm. The framed photo Michael took of Maisie picking blueberries in the mountains. Michael’s home brewing kit that’s relegated to the garage because Maisie doesn’t want the temptation, even though she hates the taste of hops. In her bedroom, she shows me a drawer devoted entirely to socks, bras, and underwear that all come in matching sets.

“I’m so excited about this,” she says. “We never had anything that matched when I was little.”
On top of the dresser balances an old black and white photo of our mother as a child. She stares at us fiercely, clutching a fluffy calico who wears a resigned expression. There are our mother’s familiar grey eyes and nearly-black hair. There is her clenched jaw coming to a point with her weak chin. There she is wearing a painfully clean plaid jumper on the steps that are obviously hand-hewn.

We talk as we make dinner. She teaches me a new way to peel garlic. We grate ginger onto noodles.

“Have you thought about a summer job yet?” She grabs two plates from the cupboard.

“Well, no. Not yet. I don’t really know what’s available.” The only job I’m qualified for is housekeeping. I spent every summer in high school cleaning a bed and breakfast.

“Planning is important. We’ll go online after dinner and look. I know there will be some openings on the road crews around town.” She puts a huge bowl of salad on the table. “Have you met anyone on campus yet? Any boys?”

Yes. Kind of. “Not really. I’m focusing on my classes, mostly.” I find the low-fat salad dressing in the fridge and place it next to the salad bowl. I spent last night sitting with Avery at the top of an empty stairwell, talking about
working with troubled kids, tracing the painted cement blocks with our fingertips.

“That’s good. Smart. Don’t forget to socialize, though.”

“My friend Sophie is going to be in a play next weekend. I thought I might go check that out.” Sophie, who helped me sneak our friend Molly safely into her dorm after she’d had too much to drink. Who sat up all night and held Molly’s hair back and didn’t once tell her you should be more careful. Details are important, I know, but I don’t know how to describe these things.

“A theater girl, huh?” The question hangs. She gets up from the table to grab the steamed broccoli from the microwave above the refrigerator. She comes back from the kitchen with the broccoli and a photo of a family I don’t know.

“Do you remember your cousin Margaret? She’s hosting the family reunion this summer.”

So there we are in my sister’s new kitchen. And because I didn’t meet my sisters until I was five, and because I have brand new friends on campus who I feel closer to than my family, I don’t know if I should even go to this reunion. I say, “I believe in families of friends.” I am all the time making stupid youthful assertions like this. Listen. Sisters are difficult sometimes. But Maisie is very patient with me.
In college I learned to be afraid and anxious when I opened a book—looking for the dialectical puzzles that I knew I would miss. For the meaning that would come spidering off the page in scratchy black tessellations, for the words I would have to look up. For the lonely meaning—the meaning that, once acquired, I could share with almost no one—no one I knew was interested in this shit. If there was one thing our mom did right, she made sure we loved books, that we loved stories. But this kind of reading was nothing like that.

Maisie spoons the broccoli onto the plates and says, “Let me tell you a story.” And the memory that Maisie shares must be something Addy told her, because Maisie was too young to remember. And I feel awful because this is how close real family should be. How dependable. Because they’re close in lots of ways, my sisters. Like they have the same dad. Like they’re only two years apart. Like when Addy was four and Maisie was two they held each other’s hands as they went wandering through the legs of strangers in their own house, hitching up a sagging, heavy diaper, looking for a capable adult, looking for a sober adult.
Through low, throaty laughter and smoke that tapped acridly against their eyelids. And seeing their mother. Our mother. Passed out on the couch next to laughing strangers. Addy holding Maisie’s hand as they search for someone to change a diaper. Addy dragging Maisie a little as Maisie hitches up the sagging diaper with her free hand. And their mother. Our mother. In her mid-twenties. Crazy. Young. With problems of her own. Passing her problems to her children like some kind of disease. Teaching her daughters what it is to bear the full weight of a sister’s life.

Another story, one of Maisie’s own memories, added to the historical record: Addy holding Maisie’s hand as they stand bundled in snow gear, hitchhiking with our mother in a blizzard the ten miles it takes to get a pack of cigarettes. My sisters have very different reasons than me for not wanting children.

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I once read a story where the narrator insisted she wouldn’t subject me to intentional meaning. But we all know that unreliable narrators are as bad as unreliable parents, so that just made me even more nervous. Listen. We’re
figuring it out every day, my sisters and I, what’s wrong with us. Someday we’ll have it all figured out. But we’ll none of us have kids to pass it on to.

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I try, and fail, to get a clear picture of our mother dragging her children through a blizzard for cigarettes. Our mother, who read my favorite story to me again and again, no matter how many times I asked. Who brought home the book the high school library banned just to prove there was nothing dirty about Native American Creation stories. Our mother, who ripped a comb across my scalp, hair snarled and dreadlocked from running wild through the birch and spruce. I cried and she threatened to cut my hair off, although she never did. She just kept combing and combing and braiding until I looked like that old black and white photo of her staring at the camera and gripping that calico cat way too tight. Until I looked exactly like that, with two braids hanging down my shoulders. Did she cry when Grandma braided her hair?

When I was a kid, if we went to a potluck and an elder was there—somebody’s grandmother, maybe—they always spoke English with such thick accents, and dropped articles and ran their consonants into their vowels in funny ways. It was easy to lose track, to lose your place, to miss important details
without those cues. But my mother was magical. She never missed a beat, never got lost. “Your grandmother talked like that,” she told me much later.

And what was our mother’s childhood like? But to understand that, I have to understand my grandmother, and maybe my grandmother’s mother, and maybe her mother too. And there are so many missing details.

Grandpa moved the family away from Anchorage and far out to a tiny settlement on the railroad tracks. Our grandmother loved Gold Creek. That was her kind of place, Mom says. It was heaven for Grandma, a dirty native woman married to a white man, shunned by the community, and sick of living in the muddy cat track of Spenard. Out there in the woods she was still shunned, but she didn’t care so much. The religious nuts—the Jehovahs—were at least kind when they came spreading the word, and no one threw things at her like in the city.

There wasn’t a school though. She had never gone to school, herself. She had no education whatsoever, and after he moved them out there he told her he expected his kids to learn to read and write. This, before he headed back to Anchorage to look for work. So with the help of the Jehovah’s Witnesses and through sheer force of will she taught herself to read with old, dog-eared copies of The Watchtower, although she was never very good at it—never very fluent. My God, this is my grandmother. And maybe her story puts into perspective the
voracity with which I devoured books as a child. Maybe it puts into perspective almost everything about my relationship with books.

My grandmother, who tried to teach her children how to read and write while learning how herself.

My mother and her siblings, who grew up half wild on the tracks.

My grandmother, who raised four kids in a cabin by the creek while my grandfather was gone for months at a time.

My mother’s brother, who chopped a hole in the ice to carry buckets of water up from the creek. Buckets for drinking. Buckets for bathing. For dishes. For laundry.

My mother, who climbed down the ladder to the root cellar and tripping, and falling, and hanging upside down by her wrenched ankle until she woke up with a throbbing egg on the back of her head.

My mother, who wasted precious batteries to read all night under the covers: Les Misérables, Frankenstein, Emily Dickenson. My mother dreaming college but never finishing.

My mother’s birth certificate, which reads: DAUGHTER OF NOLAN CAMPBELL AND A NATIVE WOMAN.
My grandmother, my mother, my aunt, my uncles, all dying off slowly from the poison the railroad dumped out there by the creek, carried up to the cabin bucket by bucket.

There are things my mother refuses to talk about. Stories she refuses to finish. There are things I’ll never know. A sample of what she will tell me: Their dog, who killed a chicken when they needed the chickens, when they needed the food, when eggs were more valuable than money. “That’s awful that way,” my mother’s mother saying in her broken English, because once a dog has killed it will kill again, no doubt. But they needed the dog, too. They needed the warning for bear, and moose. It was impractical to admit they also needed the company, an Other, a friend who would love them no matter what. So my Grandmother tied the dead chicken around the dog’s neck, fastened it tight between his shoulder blades where he couldn’t reach it; the dog chained outside during those hot summer weeks while the chicken slowly putrefied and wetly disintegrated into a sac of maggots and clicking bones and frass. The scabby, infected patch of skin on his back took as long to heal as the chicken took to rot, but he never killed another bird.

I am sixteen when my mother tells me this story, and I think I have had a hard life. It’s been ages since I sat in the passenger seat counting the fake diamonds on my mother’s sunglasses. When she tells me this story, my mother

What I have from my grandmother: one hard-won phrase of tortured English.

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As we clear the table, Maisie questions me about my life. Details are important. Details must be collected and categorized and set carefully amongst the family photographs where they can provide context. This brand of conversation can feel like an inquisition.

But then what comes next? You’d think I wanted this story to do things for me. You’d think I was expecting redemption from this story or something. You’d think I was expecting this story to save us or something. Listen. Family can be difficult. But I wish I’d said it. I wish I’d said everything I meant. I wish I’d said, “I believe in families of friends. Like you and Addy. Like we could be.”
Think of how they would have gotten the toilet there. Talkeetna in those days was not on any road system. Everything either came in by boat on the river or up the railroad from Anchorage.

And the special consideration of having the thing upstairs—would those wild folk at the Fairview have cared about it being more out-of-the-way? A private, upstairs place to do their business? But someone measured how much piping was necessary to install an upstairs toilet, someone ordered that pipe and the solder to connect each joint. The stack vent. Toilet plunger. It would have been easier to put it in on the ground floor where they did, in fact, install both a men’s and a women’s restroom decades later.

And maybe that was it. The challenge. The stupid animal urge to work against yourself. Set yourself a puzzle—especially in the winter, when the snow and the dark start to get to you and you think to yourself, ‘yes. Yes! And let’s order twenty feet of pipe. There’s no sewage system yet, won’t be until the ‘80s, another thirty years at least; let’s have a septic tank custom made and delivered! Let’s aim to flush the first flush on New Year’s!’
Blueprints on record indicate that the original floorplan had a single communal bathroom upstairs along with the town’s first bathtub, right where the upstairs bathroom remains to this day, so perhaps it was a matter of using the space already available. All of the guest rooms were upstairs as well, and the bathroom would have been just a short jaunt down the hall in the middle of the night. The housekeepers must have been excited at the prospect of no longer having to carry the night’s honeypots downstairs to dump into the outhouse. But I like the idea that my grandfather and the maintenance man intentionally set themselves a nice December project, ordered those supplies in the fall, got the septic in before the freeze, and then monkeyed around, cut holes between the floors, dropped a plumb bob, maybe spiked their cups with a little whisky, brushed sawdust from their hands onto their work pants, left coffee rings on top of the upright piano.

And let’s stretch this job out. The homestead is fifty miles up the tracks at Gold Creek. The cabin’s warm and cozy this time of year, but the water’s frozen over, the mining’s done for the season. The only thing to do up there is play endless hands of rummy, carry water up from the hole chopped in the creek, listen to the kids pick fights with each other until they’re sent out to play in the snow. No, let’s stay in the free room, eat breakfast every morning at the Roadhouse, sourdough pancakes and eggs and biscuits and gravy and rough
men settling in for the winter. Let’s stick around when they send the wrong part
and wait for the replacement to come in by rail. By now there’s snow on the
tracks, and the train has to push through with an engine at each end, a plough
attached to its front.

The job would have been completed suddenly, surprisingly. One day the
drain pipes would be lying on the floor, the next they would simply be in, joined
together all the way out of the building into the little holding tank. The toilet an
unnerving white. They would have filled the tank with a bucket of water from
the well, gathered the town for a party. Only a select group would have been in
the room itself—everyone else downstairs toasting in the New Year and the
Future. Perhaps they formed a queue up the stairs. Maybe they jockeyed and
argued about who would get to see it flush next.

The proprietor would have waited for the unveiling, let everyone have a
bite and a few drinks. Then he would have stood by the bar and rung the bell for
everyone’s attention. Said a few words before leading the worthy few up the
stairs.

In any case, what happened next is town legend. My grandfather grabbed
hold of the flush handle, the water started swirling, and then it stopped swirling
and it became obvious that the bowl was simply filling. The men scrambled back
from the toilet, but with the crowd all the way up the stairs and outside the door
there wasn’t anywhere to go, and the water from the first toilet flush in Talkeetna, Alaska welled up and over the lip of the bowl, swamped out from under the bathroom door, and waterfalled down those stairs, getting everyone’s shoes wet in the process.

No folk to let failure spoil a good party, the crowd assembled at the Fairview toasted in the New Year anyway, and the next day my grandfather installed the neglected air vent, and the first successful flush went by mostly unnoticed except by the housekeeping staff. I imagine my grandfather brushed the last of the sawdust off his hands, said to himself, ‘let’s pick up something nice at the general store. Some beads or leather for the wife, a couple books and an orange for each kid. A new deck of cards to kill the rest of winter.’ I imagine he thought longingly about his next project.
IN THE EVENT OF AN EMERGENCY

When my great aunt Alice took the .22 down from its place above the cabin door and aimed it at her husband’s feet, did she know what she was starting?

***

There are a million reasons a person can snap.

***

The driveway was long and narrow, with close-grown tag alder that switched at the sides of the truck at every turn and every bump. There was no seeing the cabin from the road.

***

Sometimes a person can snap for no reason, or the wrong one.
The old pickup bounced to a stop, and Alice got out calmly, took the steps—one-two-three—quickly, opened the door, reached up—

Sometimes people snap and when we hear their stories we applaud.

Their two children—five and eight—were there in the cabin, or there in the truck, or gone visiting friends. The cabin was low, one-room, single-story, with a roof that extended out over the front deck. Friends and family had framed it out and raised it over a warm summer weekend not long after the couple was married. A single barrel stove heated the main room in the winter, and the hot air collected in the half-loft at the back of the cabin where Alice and Harden slept. Alice would fall asleep sweating and wake clammy and shivering, certain that the darkness above her was a million tons of rock suspended in uneasy
equilibrium, waiting for the slightest movement to shift the balance and crush her. This went on for a long time.

***

Sometimes when we hear the stories of people who snapped, we don’t applaud and later we are ashamed.

***

Of course he beat her. Of course she always wore makeup, even at home, and long sleeves. Her in-laws laughed at her behind her back and said she looked like a *cheechako*, even though she had more Native blood than her husband. When her sister-in-law came to visit, Alice would reach up into the cupboard for the two good coffee cups. She wished they could relax out on the deck with the chipped, everyday mugs and their beading supplies set up on the card table between them. She dreamt of having a sister to sit and watch the play of clouds across sky, for them to close their eyes in rest and listen to the sighing exchanges of the white birch trees behind the cabin. Or work parties in the corner of the cabin that was her kitchen. She dreamt of a sister who would bustle the
men and the children out of the house and turn to her with mischief in her eyes and a paring knife in her hands. Alice reached up into the cupboard for the two good coffee cups and sat quietly cutting the leather into patterns for the moccasins her sister-in-law didn’t trust her to sew. Maybe she tried to think up ways to ask how not to make her husband so mad.

***

Sometimes we feel ashamed no matter what. We wonder if our actions or inactions have caused things to be worse, if—if we had done something differently—we could have prevented just one bruise or broken rib, just one split lip. *If only we had known, we say.*

***

Of course this went on for years.

Of course this went on for years.

Of course this went on for years.
Sometimes we are ashamed because we didn’t want to know.

They went into town to get supplies and mail. Out the long driveway and then sixteen miles along the dirt road into Kenai. Maybe the store was out of coffee or didn’t have the sawblade he wanted. Maybe the mail shipment wasn’t in or a mob of white children gathered to throw mudballs at the couple. Maybe it was raining too hard or the sun was shining in his eyes or she talked back when he complained about the service at the store. But there they were in the post office surrounded by their neighbors and he slapped her across the face. And Alice, so used to doing nothing, to curling up, to taking up as little space as possible, did nothing. She did nothing and she said nothing and she carried the packages or the groceries or whatever needed carrying and she went and sat quietly in the truck.
Sometimes shame is about the secrets we don’t want others to know.

***

Told a certain way, this is a story about a woman who finally refuses to be a victim, who holds a gun on her abuser, and when he doesn’t take her seriously, shoots the ground around his feet until he leaves.

***

Or another way, this becomes a story about private shame brought into the public sphere. Of our collective disgust of weakness, which is so strong that a woman who quietly endured years of physical and emotional abuse could not handle knowing that people knew.

***

Another way, it’s a story about a woman mocked and belittled for years for her silliness and stupidity and only welcomed after she goes to drastic
lengths to defend herself. There is no way to know whether Alice’s in-laws knew what she was living through, but after the incident with the gun Great Aunt Alice became more family than Great Uncle Harden, whose blood we share.

***

I can’t imagine what she thought of us.
Gaps where a history should be. Where a history is. A history of gaps. And what remains unspoken. She tells me Alice’s story, not her own. Alice the outsider. Alice the married-in.

Debt maybe means something here.

Plants that exploded into a quarter-acre, so dense and entangled we gave up transplanting and just tilled between rows to make paths. Just made gaps, and saw what grew beside those. Whether an absence is a sort of presence.

She tells me the stories beside her story, maybe so she can only see what grew up beside her and I try not to get angry at the gaps.
When my friend David tells us he sometimes takes girls up to the top of the railroad trestle to see the sun rise, the guy we’re with says, *I know what you mean. That’s how I weed chicks out. If they can’t hold their own, then—*

He trails off, gestures dismissively. David and I look at each other across the empty air. *I will not roll my eyes, I will not roll my eyes, we will not roll our eyes.*

***

Every spring during breakup, David jumps across the pack ice—gathering himself over his lanky legs, launching himself, balancing—until he discovers just the right iceberg, and then he pushes off with a pole, floats the river from the trestle to just below town. He is reckless, perhaps, but he doesn’t expect anyone to come with him.

***
I didn’t climb anywhere prohibited on the trestle until the summer my mom died, the summer I turned 30, and then it was down to the concrete substructure, gripping iron girders slick with dew, the bolts my shoes tried to grip protruding like useless bubbles. I shimmied under the tracks, listened to the water rushing and lapping below in the 4 am twilight. I sat in the cool damp a long time, the bridge throwing shadows so I could barely see: pebbles shining wet on the far shore, graffiti from other explorers, the shape of a tree branch bouncing periodically from the drag of water in the dark.

***

The dark. This place is dark most of the year. Growing up here is a daily exercise in holding your own, in keeping your balance. And choosing to stay here?—whistling into that dark, looking for cracks in the sky, for anything that makes you turn back to the door, call for a friend, bundle warm, crunch across a frozen field to lie down and look up, cheeks and fingers and toes tingling numb. But most often we hole up indoors, hide from the dark and the weather in a nine-month nest of our own boredom. If you’re still here after that, you don’t have to prove yourself by climbing to the top of anything.
So when my friend David tells us he takes girls to the top of the railroad trestle to see the sun rise, I say to myself, *I think I know what you mean. We share what we love, right? Doesn’t that make the rest bearable?*
When my sister tells me our mother was classified as an Indian-at-large, I make a joke. I say, of course she was. I think of how Mom hated to be categorized. The inherited fear of being numbered and archived.

The phone crackles. She says, no. The government disbanded the tribe.

The, she says. The tribe. What she means is our.

Our tribe.

Us.

Somebody disbanded us.
BODY OF FOIA APPLICATION:

I am looking for my mother's and my maternal grandmother's applications and any additional associated documents for enrollment with Doyon and/or CIRI Alaska Native corporations. I believe, but I am unsure, that this occurred after our tribe was disbanded. I am seeking to discover the name of the tribe that my family belongs to.

My mother, Patricia Josephine Schaefer (nee Callahan), was living in Fairbanks at the time, so she enrolled with Doyon. This likely occurred between the years of 1963-1986.

My grandmother was Nellie Callahan (nee Atwater). I am unsure where she was living at the time or whether she chose to enroll with Doyon or CIRI, or if she completed enrollment as an at-large member of any corporation.

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enrollment with Doyon and/or CIRI Alaska Native corporations. I believe, but I am unsure, that this occurred after our tribe was disbanded. I am seeking to discover the name of the tribe that my family belongs to.

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My grandmother was Nellie Callahan (nee Atwater). I am unsure where she was living at the time, or whether she chose to enroll with Doyon or CIRI, or if she completed enrollment as an at-large member of any corporation.

I am looking
United States Department of the Interior  
BUREAU OF INDIAN AFFAIRS  
Alaska Regional Office  
3601 C Street, Suite 1200  
Anchorage, AK 99503  
May 07, 2018

We are writing in response to your request dated April 10, 2018 and assigned control number BIA-2018-

Enclosed are 4-pages of responsive documents. Upon research requested for Patricia Josephine Schaefer (nee Callahan) and Nellie Callahan (nee Atwater) which was found.

You may appeal this response to the Department’s FOIA/Privacy Act Appeals Officer. If you choose to appeal, the FOIA/Privacy Act Appeals Officer must receive your FOIA as soon as possible after this letter. Appeals arriving or delivered after 5 p.m. Eastern Time, Monday through Friday, will be deemed received on the next workday.

Your appeal must be made in writing. You may submit your appeal and accompanying materials to the FOIA/Privacy Act Appeals Officer by mail, courier service, fax, or email. All communications concerning your appeal should be clearly marked with the words: "FREEDOM OF INFORMATION APPEAL."

You must include an explanation of why you believe the Bureau of Indian Affairs’ response is in error. You must also include with your appeal copies of all correspondence between you and BIA concerning your FOIA request, including your original FOIA request and the BIA response. Failure to include with your appeal all correspondence between you and BIA will result in the Department's rejection of your appeal, unless the FOIA/Privacy Act Appeals Officer determines that good cause exists to accept the defective appeal.

Please include your name and daytime telephone number, email address and fax number (if available) in case the FOIA/Privacy Act Appeals Officer needs additional information or clarification of your appeal.

DOI FOIA/Privacy Act Appeals Office Contact Information

Department of the Interior  
Office of the Solicitor  
1449 C Street, N.W.  
MS-6556 MIB  
Washington, DC 20240  
Attn: FOIA/Privacy Act Appeals Office
Telephone: (202) 208-5339
Fax: (202) 208-6677
Email: FOIA.Appeals@sol.doi.gov

You also may seek dispute resolution services from our FOIA Public Liaison at 202-208-3135.

This concludes our response to your request on behalf of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Alaska Region. If you have questions concerning your request please contact our Alternate Regional FOIA Coordinator, [redacted] at [redacted]@bia.gov.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

[Redacted]
Acting Regional Director

Enclosures: 4 pages of responsive documents
I wonder who has the authority to say, *you no longer exist.*
I wonder what would happen if we said, *we don’t recognize your authority.*
four pages.
<table>
<thead>
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<tr>
<td>2. ID</td>
<td>16803</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Applican's First &amp; Middle Name</td>
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<td>4. Applicant's Last Name</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Applicant's Current City/State</td>
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<td>9. Applicant's Social Security Number</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. Relationship</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Signature of Applicant's Father</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Signature of Applicant's Mother</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Certification:**

In my knowledge and belief, I certify that the above statements are true and correct. The information provided is complete and accurate to the best of my knowledge.

Name: Thomas Cheeks

Signature: ____________________________

Date: ________________
here is our mother

the proof of her parents

where we lived

the family number

the year
At large, from Middle English, ‘at liberty.’ And liberty, from the Latin libertas, for ‘freedom.’ Our tribe was liberated.

**Liberty:** 1. The condition of being free from control or restrictions, 2. The condition of being free from imprisonment, slavery or forced labor, 3. The condition of being free to act, believe or express oneself as one chooses, 4. Freedom from excessive government control, 5. A short period when a sailor is allowed ashore, 6. (often plural) A breach of social convention, 7. A local division of government administration in medieval England, 8. In the board game go, an empty space next to a group of stones of the same color.

To be told, “go now. You are free.” The body does not believe. The body cannot forget the responsibilities of its inheritance. It remembers: the skill of patience.

Crafting the bone into needle, the guts into thread, each quill a promise. This body remembers the skill of patience, but not what that patience was for. These fingers have never threaded sinew through the puckered top of a cooking bag, this body is free of the burden of making its own moccasins, quilts, of cooking to feed the family.
When her children had children of their own and she came to visit, her children would lay out the extra blankets in the bunk bed, and Grandma Nellie would close her eyes and pretend to go to sleep. *Be good,* she told herself. Not even when the quiet rustling in the top bunk turned to the gentle shaking of her granddaughter’s silent laughter would she open her eyes. Only when she heard the downstairs toilet flush and the soft padding down the hall and she could feel every fiber of attention from the small body now hanging over the top bunk staring at her. Then they would tell stories and jokes until the footsteps and the
door opening and the light from the hall, and when it was quiet again she would peek one eye open, and they would giggle late into the dark, Nellie Atwater and her granddaughter Jenny.
Start with children.
Show women by maiden name.

THEODORE ATWATER
FATHER
Native Blood: Tribe & Degree

ROSE ATWATER

HERBERT MATTHEW ATWATER
APPLICANT
Native Blood: Tribe & Degree

NELLIE BELL STRAND
MOTHER
Native Blood: Tribe & Degree

LILLIE
GRANDMOTHER
Native Blood: Tribe & Degree

THOMAS STRAND
GRANDFATHER
Native Blood: Tribe & Degree

EVA UNK
GRANDMOTHER
Native Blood: Tribe & Degree

LEE W. ATWATER
GRANDFATHER
Native Blood: Tribe & Degree

GREAT-GRANDFATHER
Native Blood: Tribe & Degree

GREAT-GRANDMOTHER
Native Blood: Tribe & Degree

GREAT-GRANDFATHER
Native Blood: Tribe & Degree

GREAT-GRANDMOTHER
Native Blood: Tribe & Degree

GREAT-GRANDFATHER
Native Blood: Tribe & Degree

GREAT-GRANDMOTHER
Native Blood: Tribe & Degree

GREAT-GRANDFATHER
Native Blood: Tribe & Degree

GREAT-GRANDMOTHER
Native Blood: Tribe & Degree
Nellie Atwater died before I turned one. She never had the chance to teach my hands the patience of moccasins.
FAMILY TREE CHART

Start with children.

Show women by maiden name.
the archive gives me the word for *ribs*:

*t’aayk’e*
the archive gives me the word for our mother:

nenaan
is it possible to be thankful for a nightmare?
the archive gives me the word used when one is getting close to guessing the answer to a riddle:

*isdoggi*
Start with children.

Show women by maiden name.
FAMILY TREE CHART

E = Eskimo
A = Alsat
I = Indian
T = Turkmien
N-N = Non-Native

COPY

Lee W. Atwater
GRANDFATHER
N-N
Native Blood: Tribe & Degree

Theodore Atwater
FATHER
Pa-I
Native Blood: Tribe & Degree

Unknown
GRANDMOTHER
Pa-I
Native Blood: Tribe & Degree

Rose Atwater
APPLICANT
Herbert Atwater
MOTHER
Husband Blood: Tribe & Degree

Unknown
GRANDMOTHER
Pa-I
Native Blood: Tribe & Degree

Unknown
GRANDMOTHER
Pa-I
Native Blood: Tribe & Degree

Unknown
GRANDMOTHER
Pa-I
Native Blood: Tribe & Degree

Unknown
GRANDMOTHER
Pa-I
Native Blood: Tribe & Degree

Unknown
GRANDMOTHER
Pa-I
Native Blood: Tribe & Degree

Unknown
GRANDMOTHER
Pa-I
Native Blood: Tribe & Degree

Unknown
GRANDMOTHER
Pa-I
Native Blood: Tribe & Degree

Eva unk
GRANDMOTHER
Pa-I
Native Blood: Tribe & Degree

Nellie Gillland
MOTHER
Nellie Gillland
Pa-I
Native Blood: Tribe & Degree

Unknown
GRANDMOTHER
Pa-I
Native Blood: Tribe & Degree

Unknown
GRANDMOTHER
Pa-I
Native Blood: Tribe & Degree

Unknown
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Native Blood: Tribe & Degree

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GRANDMOTHER
Pa-I
Native Blood: Tribe & Degree

Unknown
GRANDMOTHER
Pa-I
Native Blood: Tribe & Degree

Unknown
GRANDMOTHER
Pa-I
Native Blood: Tribe & Degree

Start with children.
Show women by maiden name.
Start with children.
Show women by maiden name.
FAMILY TREE CHART

COPY

Theodore Atwater

Lillie

Lee W. Atwater

Unknown

Unknown

Rose Atwater

Lillie

Unknown

Unknown

Unknown

Herbert Matthew Atwater

Grandfather

Great-grandfather

Great-grandmother

Great-grandmother

Great-grandfather

Great-grandmother

Great-grandfather

Great-grandmother

N-N

N-N

N-N

N-N

Native Blood

Native Blood

Native Blood

Native Blood

Tribe & Degree

Tribe & Degree

Tribe & Degree

Tribe & Degree

Native Blood

Native Blood

Native Blood

Native Blood

Tribe & Degree

Tribe & Degree

Tribe & Degree

Tribe & Degree

Start with children.

Show women by maiden name.
Start with children.

Show women by maiden name.
FAMILY TREE CHART

E = Eskimo
A = Alsat
I = Indian
T = Tuskglen
N-N = Non-Native

Theodore Atwater
FATHER

Lee W. Atwater
GRANDFATHER

Unknown
GREAT-GRANDFATHER

Unknown
GREAT-GRANDMOHER

Rose Atwater
GRANDMOTHER

Lillian
GRANDMOTHER

Unknown
GRANDMOTHER

Herbert Matthew Atwater
APPLICANT

Unknown
GRANDFATHER

Unknown
GRANDFATHER

Unknown
GRANDFATHER

Nellie Bell Strand
MOTHER

Thomas Strand
GRANDFATHER

Unknown
GRANDFATHER

Unknown
GRANDFATHER

Eva UNK
GRANDMOTHER

Unknown
GRANDMOTHER

Unknown
GRANDMOTHER

Start with children.
Show women by maiden name.
FAMILY TREE CHART

COPY

Lee W. Atwater
GRANDFATHER
N-N

NATIVE BLOOD
Tribe & Degree

THEODORE ATWATER
FATHER
N-N

NATIVE BLOOD
Tribe & Degree

LILIE
GRANDMOTHER
M-N

NATIVE BLOOD
Tribe & Degree

THOMAS STRAND
GRANDFATHER
N-N

NATIVE BLOOD
Tribe & Degree

WILLIE BELL STRAND
MOTHER
Pa T

NATIVE BLOOD
Tribe & Degree

EVA N.
GRANDMOTHER
M-N

NATIVE BLOOD
Tribe & Degree

UnKnown
GRANDMOTHER
M-N

NATIVE BLOOD
Tribe & Degree

UnKnown
GRANDMOTHER
M-N

NATIVE BLOOD
Tribe & Degree

UnKnown
GRANDMOTHER
M-N

NATIVE BLOOD
Tribe & Degree

UnKnown
GRANDMOTHER
M-N

NATIVE BLOOD
Tribe & Degree

UnKnown
GRANDMOTHER
M-N

NATIVE BLOOD
Tribe & Degree

UnKnown
GRANDMOTHER
M-N

NATIVE BLOOD
Tribe & Degree

Start with children.

Show women by maiden name.
Telephone: (202) 213-5334
Fax: (202) 213-7777
Email: FOIA.Appeals@siol.doc.gov

You also may seek dispute resolution services from our FOIA Public Liaison at 202-213-3135.

This concludes our response to your request on behalf of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Alaska Region. If you have questions regarding your request, please contact our Alternate Regional FOIA Coordinator.

@bia.gov

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Acting Regional Director

Enclosures: 4 pages of responsive documents
LUCKY

When the Miracle happened, he knew he was alive for a reason. Being a good Midwestern Lutheran, he figured this must mean he was, in fact, destined to have a child. He hadn’t thought about having children for years. He was too old, they were too messy and loud, and besides, he had notoriously bad luck with women. Once, in a bar, he had nervously approached and offered to buy a woman a drink, and with no warning she had reared back and slapped him, her many rings leaving a set of scratches on his face that hadn’t healed for weeks. Since the Miracle he felt a sense of amazed gratitude just to be alive. If that same woman slapped him now, he might smile at her blankly as his vision swam and his cheek stung.

He passed by the site of the event every day on the way to buy his Luckies. He’d never considered his job on the road construction crew to be that dangerous. You had to be careful crossing the road, but there was a flagger, and they were separated from the traffic by a hip-high meridian. They had been replacing the pipe infrastructure under the road through town. He was on his way back from lunch, walking along with the concrete lane divider to his right. All of a sudden, all he could hear was yelling. He looked to his left and froze as he saw the crane’s boom lift swinging toward him. Widow-maker, he remembered
thinking, and then the next thing he knew he was standing fifty feet away on the other side of the barrier. Nobody could tell him how he had gotten there, gaping stupidly back at the boom, which had hit the lane divider quite solidly and cracked it down the center. There were no prints in the fifty feet of damp sand between himself and the crane. Somehow, from where he now stood, the whole ensemble resembled a child’s toy set.

And so, after the Miracle, he thought about his interactions with women differently, and he started taking relationships more seriously. Well, he was living with his parents. He might as well consider the relationship his mother and father had. Yet this felt like a dead end. To begin with, there was a fog that he felt uncomfortable penetrating regarding his own origins. And then his parents were so old now, his mother tottering precariously down the stairs in the morning to sit in the kitchen hours after his father had wandered out to the workshop in the garage. He rarely saw them during the day while he was at work, but at dinnertime he was able to observe them without interruption. They didn’t talk much. Aside from his mother’s lifelong habit of humming quietly until she was startled by his father’s periodic booming nasal clearing, they seemed elderly beyond individual personality traits. His private image of his indestructible parents no longer matched what he saw before him. They had become hunched and wrinkled and glassy-eyed without his noticing, and he
realized with dismay that they were helpless without him and that he would
take care of them until they died.

His childhood memories of his parents were no help either. He couldn’t
seem to be able to remember them together. He explored this thought a bit. He
could clearly remember helping his mother in the kitchen where he had learned
how to kill and pluck and butcher, and then roast and baste a chicken. He
thought about his mother’s hand resting gently on his shoulder the first time he
had wrung a chicken’s neck. It was something that needed to happen, killing this
bird, but he hadn’t felt good about it; the thing had struggled more than normal
and broken a wing, and then it had slipped from his hands onto the soggy
ground to flop miserably in the spring mud. As he stood in the yard feeling
stupid, he felt a warm weight on his shoulder. He held himself very still and
looked back down at the chicken. They stood like that for a moment, and then his
mother reached down and plucked the bird up, and together they returned to the
kitchen to finish the job of turning it into dinner.

And he could clearly remember helping his father in the fields, where he
had learned the importance of taking breaks in the shade and pairing salt with
water on ninety degree haying days. He winced a little to remember learning this
lesson. Two of his father’s friends had come to help with the haying. They were
tough men, hard and wiry, with pale white scars that stood out against the sun-
damaged skin on their arms and the backs of their hands. One was missing the first two knuckles of his right index finger from a combine accident. The men threw three bales each to his one, and they threw them almost twice as far. At fourteen, he was sick of feeling like a little kid. He was sick of his father telling the men—just loud enough for him to hear—that he’d spent too much time in the kitchen as a boy. So when the others had stopped midday to sit in the shade of the old truck, he had taken off his shirt, wiped his forehead with it, and kept working, clearing the finished bales from the field. When the men had come back to work, his father had brought him some water and a handful of potato chips. “Here,” he’d said. “Balance them electrolytes.” That was approval. He’d woken up the next morning with blisters the size of crabapples all over his shoulders and back, and a fever that had persisted for days. His father had a new complaint then. “Not enough sense to get out of the sun.” Even now, he had to fully cover his arms and legs before heading out to lay pipe or he would get sick. Sun poisoning, the doctor called it.

So try as he might, he couldn’t remember his parents together. Well, no matter. He could observe his sister’s marriage instead. But she just took his interest as an invitation to set him up with a series of her horrible church friends. They weren’t actually horrible, he reasoned. They were just younger women that his sister had taken under her wing, and while they were all interested in starting
families, at forty-six years old he wasn’t exactly prime husband and father material. And then, just as he was losing hope, he met her.

He was standing in line to pay for his gas at the Conoco when he noticed the woman ahead of him. She was wearing a light blue sundress that came to just above her knees. He admired the twin indents of smooth, tanned muscle in her calves. She was wearing a single, simple chain necklace, he noticed. No dangerous rings. The man ahead of her finished his transaction and she stepped up to the counter and pushed her sunglasses onto the top of her head.

“She smokes the same brand as me,” he thought as the teenaged clerk fiddled with her calculator and then punched some numbers into the register.

“That’ll be twenty, even,” the kid said, reaching overhead for the cigarettes. “Last pack. Nice luck with those Luckies,” she added, laughing at her own joke. As the woman reached into her purse and pulled out a bill, he knew it was a sign.

“Wait,” he said, as his hands started sweating. “I’ll pay for your cigarettes if you’ll share them with me.”
The only problem was the woman’s daughter. The child hated him from the start. Four years old, and she sat and glared at him through the entire painful dinner while he stared at the Formica-flecked table and tried not to spill spaghetti sauce down his shirt. He knew it would be best if he could make an ally of the child, but he couldn’t seem to do or say anything right. He had no idea what a four-year-old wanted.

After dinner, he sat on the couch watching the girl play on the floor while the woman made coffee in the kitchen. He noticed that one of the child’s stuffed animals lay behind her on the floor while she had the others gathered in a circle in front of her. They seemed to be travelling carefully around the room and now they were stuck where a bright blue throw rug had created a giant lake.

“What do you think your tiger would like to play, too?” he attempted. “Maybe he could help.”

“No!” she said loudly, without looking up. “Tigg was bad! He doesn’t get to play!” And she continued as if she hadn’t been interrupted. The woman arrived with the coffee, saving him from having to think of a response.

“How’re the two of you getting along?” she asked in a cheery voice as she set his cup in front of him. The girl shrugged. He wrinkled his forehead worriedly at the woman, but she nodded reassuringly back at him. Later, when
the girl had been put to bed, the woman asked him to spend the night for the first time.

“She just needs to get used to you,” she said, brushing her fingers lightly over the sparse red hairs on his chest. “If she really didn’t like you, she’d act much worse. Believe me.” The moonlight shining into the room reflected off her skin and created a halo effect. It made him think of the Miracle.

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They decided to quit smoking together. Cold turkey, they told each other. No gum, no patch, no weaning down from three packs to two to one. They had been together for four months now, and over the last month, without Luckies, there were times they could barely tolerate each other. He knew that when she was very angry her jaw moved back and forth faster than his eyes could easily follow. He knew better than to ask if she did it on purpose. And he knew that when she was happy she tried to sit still, but couldn’t, so that her whole body looked like a dance.

In her bedroom, he stretched his hand through the moonlight to trace the slope of her shoulder and then watched his fingers follow her collarbone to the hollow of her throat. She closed her eyes and shivered.
“Marry me,” he said.

“OK,” she whispered, smiling, dancing somehow without moving at all.

“I’m pregnant.”

***

His new wife had been put on bed rest for the last two weeks of her pregnancy, and he was starting to win the child over simply by virtue of having the energy to spend time with her. He had realized that if he sat near her quietly while she played, if he sat and read, say, then she might talk to him, surreptitiously, without looking at him.

“Where will the baby sleep?” she asked on one occasion.

“The baby will sleep in the room with your mom and me at first. When it gets older, it might share with you. Would you like that?” He watched Tigg lead a single-file expedition across the coffee table. She frowned down at the line of animals.

“Yeah. Not my toys, though.”

When his wife had been put on bed rest he’d convinced the child to help him pack the delivery bag with the promise of a new toy at the hospital. She even
got excited about making sure her mother had her favorite perfume, and she drew a set of pictures to put in the bag as a surprise.

“Don’t tell,” she whispered, giving him a smile for the first time. It was a good smile, he thought, mischievous but generous at the same time. He smiled back and promised he wouldn’t ruin the surprise.

The mother went into labor just after noon on a Saturday. He wasn’t sure how he kept calm, but he managed to remember the overnight bag, the promised toy, the child, and the mother herself. And then, after expertly delivering everyone to the hospital, he was relegated to the waiting room along with the child. Well, he probably wouldn’t feel any more useful in the actual room, anyway. And he had a child to entertain. They played eye-spy and tic-tac-toe first. Then they went in search of food, and he let her choose the junkiest snacks she wanted. When they returned to the waiting room, he got her to play a little more. After a few hours, he could see she was getting bored, and he revealed the toy. It was a dump truck big enough for all of her stuffed animals at once. She looked up at him for just a moment and gave him that smile, and then she quickly started tearing open the packaging. As she stood up to carry it across the room, it slipped from her hands and landed on the floor. One wheel bounced off, but he could see that it could easily be fixed. He knew he should reach out and rest his hand on her shoulder. He didn’t need to say anything. The simple animal
comfort would be enough. But at that moment, the nurse poked her head out of
the delivery room and said, “It’s a girl,” and he hurried toward the Miracle he
had been born for.
MAYBE I SHOULD SAY

When I was a kid reading children’s literature, I never understood why a main character still wanted to be friends with her betrayer. I always wanted her to isolate herself, a clean cut, a painless excision. I didn’t know the word excision. In my head I would rewrite the more painful and embarrassing scenes to completely remove the heroine from her tormentors. But that kind of revisionist shit isn’t realistic.

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Izzy sits in the back seat thinking that Alaska must be the hardest state to run away from. Alaska! How would you get through Canada if you made it to the border? Izzy’s book, Maniac Magee, is just under the seat in front of her, but there’s no way she’s moving to reach for it—not with the storm brewing in the front seat, not with the sudden stop that sent the book sliding down there in the first place. The seating goes like this: Dad in the driver’s seat, Mom in the front passenger seat, a ten-year-old Izzy behind Dad, a sixteen-year-old Crystal behind Mom. Mom is mimicking Crystal.


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They picked Crystal up from The Home for Troubled Teens less than twenty minutes ago, and the Trouble has returned already. According to the brochure that Izzy stole and keeps tucked in the back of her diary, “In addition to its very successful rehabilitative detention services, the Sunny Days Foundation also supervises the transition of institutionalized youth being released back into community.” She hates the name. It’s such a lie. She knows Crystal hates it, too—she makes fun of it all the time.

Izzy wasn’t paying close enough attention when the Trouble started—she was watching the trees go past, the book lying idly in her lap. She pays attention now; the space between Mom and Crystal might as well be on fire. It doesn’t matter how it started. It must have started a long time ago, long before The Home, long before Alaska, in North Dakota maybe, before Crystal went away the first time.

They moved to Alaska two years ago, and this place still doesn’t feel like home. They try, sometimes. Sometimes Mom makes Crystal’s favorite meal. Sometimes Crystal comes out of her room to eat with the family. Mostly, they pick idly at each other’s wounds in a Ping-Pong of escalation until they’re gleefully ripping each other apart, until they’re each trying to outscream the other, until Crystal is dispatched, or runs, back to The Home. It doesn’t matter how it started. Probably.
Once, only once, Izzy stood up and shouted, “Stop yelling at each other.” And Mom turned to her and screamed, “I’m not yelling. Do you want to hear me yell?” Izzy made the mistake of mentioning this later, in therapy at The Home, where they go to talk about Family Issues. The counselor said something about expressing emotions, but, looking at Mom, in a healthy way. And Mom said, “Yes, we need to try harder to be better about that. But honey,” smiling sweetly at Izzy, “sometimes we get frustrated and we raise our voices. But that doesn’t mean that we’re yelling. We still love each other.” Mom hates when people air what she calls their dirty laundry in public.

If that’s love, Izzy thinks, then love is bullshit.

The fight on the right side of the car continues, but Izzy’s attention shifts to the driver’s seat. Izzy adores her father. Usually, he’s the most patient person she knows. He answers all her questions about the speed of light and gravity, dragonflies and plate tectonics. Now she watches him become more and more still, as though in an inverse relationship to the pitch and volume of the fight. This. This careful movement of the car from drive to park. This slow, deliberate backwards rotation of the key in the ignition

“What do you want us to take you back there?” He shouldn’t make any sound. His jaw doesn’t move at all.

“Maybe I do.” Directed at Mom, a knife twisting.
“Then we will,” Mom snarls back.

And Dad, finally exploding at both of them, “Figure it out yourselves,” before he launches himself from the car and slams the door. He is a good twenty yards down the road, shoulders already hunched, hands already stuffed in pockets, before Izzy hurtles after him. They walk for two hours before Mom and Crystal catch up to them in the car, slightly subdued.

***

Maybe I should say I still freeze up in an argument. I will smile and lie and fawn to avoid confrontation. Any cost, please don’t leave me, please don’t be mad at me, please don’t yell at me. And after, I will stay up late, secretly excising. Can a whole person be a phantom limb?

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Izzy’s second-grade bus stop is right at the end of her driveway. This part of North Dakota is a vast expanse of rolling prairie punctuated by scruffy, stunted settlements of doublewides and prefabs with flaking paint. Izzy is seven; she doesn’t yet hate getting up in the mornings, won’t develop this hatred for a
few years. She is always the first out the door, down the walk with her Garfield
and Friends lunch box (with matching thermos!), waiting for the bus by the
mailboxes in the bruised half-light.

She has already developed the habit of reading under the covers by
flashlight. She currently has The Secret Garden tucked in her pillowcase, but she
doesn’t understand why Mary keeps going back to see Colin when he is so
horrible to her. Why doesn’t she just go to stay with Martha’s family out on the
moor?

Izzy stands by the mailboxes and watches as Crystal lets the screen door
slam, as she heads directly off along the side of the house before suddenly
stopping and walking slowly back through the dewy grass toward Izzy.

“Tell anyone who asks I’m not coming today. I have a doctor’s
appointment.” Crystal stands with her backpack slung over one shoulder and all
her weight slung to one hip.

“Mom didn’t say anything about a doctor’s appointment. Can I come with
you?” When Crystal cries, her nose turns bright red. It’s red now, but Izzy thinks
it must be the spring wind.

Crystal kneels so that her face is right in front Izzy’s, her hand on Izzy’s
shoulder, her blue eyes frowning seriously into Izzy’s brown eyes.
“Don’t worry. I’ll come back for you.” Crystal looks down, picks at the flaking green nail polish on her thumb. “You can watch after Tigg while I’m gone, if you like.” Crystal never even lets Izzy touch ratty old Tigg, so Izzy just stares in response.

This is how Izzy sees clearly for the first time that although Crystal’s hair is red and Izzy’s is brown, their noses are the same. And their eyes are different colors, but they both have the same pale rings around their irises. But, oh! Their noses are exactly the same! The same flaring nostrils that Izzy secretly hates, the same slight flatness on the bridge. She stands transfixed by the fact of Crystal’s nose until it doesn’t even seem like part of a face anymore, and becomes a rubbery shape without meaning. And then Crystal is gone and Izzy is cold, shivering in the pre-dawn air, holding tight to the lie she will tell all day. She begins with the bus driver.

Crystal has a doctor’s appointment. She’s not riding today. That should be it, but around midmorning Izzy gets called to the principal’s office.

***

Maybe I should say that I waited for you to come back for me like you said. Days went by. I stood at the bus stop until school let out for the summer. Weeks. I watched the
cat stalk grasshoppers on the lawn and eat them, segmented legs sticking out as his teeth crunched down. Months. I created a tribe with the cat, catching grasshoppers and pulling off a rear leg; he would always have easy prey nearby. I grew wild there, free of your love.

***

Brittany is Izzy’s next door neighbor, and was Crystal’s best friend before Crystal went away. Brittany’s mom makes red and green Christmas candies in little molds every winter and always keeps Country Time lemonade in a glass pitcher in the fridge in the summer. Brittany is tiny, birdlike. Blue, blue veins announce themselves through her pale, pale skin, and she has to drink a protein shake every day to gain weight.

Ever since Crystal left a month ago, Brittany spends a lot of time with Izzy. It’s summer now, they have days and days of free time, and Brittany is older—implicitly trusted with the care of seven-year-old Izzy. Away from grown-up eyes, they often play a game they call “Runaway,” where two plucky heroines escape the clutches of various evil overlords. Sometimes the bad guys they imagine are so scary that Izzy’s heart races, but neither she nor Brittany ever suggest a different game.
Maybe I should say I hate being left behind.

One evening, about two months after the morning at the bus stop, the phone rings and Mom and Dad throw some things in an overnight bag, call a sitter for Izzy, and book an overnight flight to California. And so that’s where they find Crystal, where she’s held overnight in a police station before they can pick her up. They bring her back, but she doesn’t come straight home.

Crystal stays in a special wing in the hospital for a while until it’s determined safe for her to go home. Izzy thinks this makes it sound like Crystal has grown fangs and claws or has some kind of illness, like when Josh Krause got the chicken pox, but when Izzy goes to visit, she just thinks Crystal looks tired, the dark shadows under her blue eyes highlighted by sterile white walls and fluorescent lighting, so Izzy doesn’t say anything.

With Mom and Dad visiting Crystal in the city so often, the summer continues much as before. Brittany decides they should put on a play for their parents before the end of the summer.
They play a dressed up version of Runaway. They wear roller skates and serve their moms lemonade from the glass pitcher, which Izzy thinks is quite a feat—she doesn’t fall down once in the skates Brittany lends her.

The moms sit at the patio table, under a flowered umbrella, and condensation drips down the sides of the untouched glasses. Izzy’s mom sits very still and smiles very sweetly through the whole performance. When she gets up to go at the end, Izzy clomps along beside her, happily going over her lines in her head.

“What did you think?” Izzy reaches for her mother’s hand.

“I am not impressed. I don’t want you spending time with that girl from now on.” Izzy’s mom strides on ahead until she gets to their door, waiting until Izzy slumps on the porch to slowly untie the skates before going into the silent house.

Before long they will pack up their lives. They will try to start fresh. Crystal has mandatory counseling, but Mom will begin participating, then she will drag Dad along, and finally the whole family will attend sporadic counseling sessions.

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You must have been scared. Where did you sleep out there in California? What did you do to get by? We’re both grown-ups ourselves now. Why do I still find these questions impossible?

***

“—figure it out yourselves.” Later, Izzy will remember vague and random snapshots of that walk. The final explosion. The car door slamming. The three trapped in a car filled with rage and flames. Her father stalking away, shoulders hunched, hands stuffed in pockets. She will remember the heat from the bickering beside her as she watched her father walk into the sun. How he wavered in her vision, blinked out, then reappeared. She didn’t hesitate. She threw open the door and hurtled after him.

The grasshoppers alongside the road leapt out of her way, rustling and ticking in the dry grass. She raced. She refused to look—to see if he’d disappear again—just closed her eyes and ran until she heard the steady crunch of his feet. She thought about reaching out for his hand like she used to do when she was very little, but instead she looked at the yellowing grasses in the ditch, slowed her pace to match his, slowed her breathing.
She felt the broken shoulder of the road, watched her feet make new shadows with every step. She looked back. Through the heat-haze coming off the pavement, the car seemed to waver, and then it vanished completely.
I DON’T THINK WE MEANT TO DISAPPOINT EACH OTHER, BUT

We talked about your dreams, the prophetic ones. The hours you spent untangling my hair while I tried not to cry. Braids. I wake up, turn over. My pillow smells like salt and oil. How do I say I’ve inherited your superstitions but I still recognize them as superstitions. We did not talk about your mother braiding your hair. Maybe I’ll just say that when I dreamed you with your hands around my throat it was clear you were trying to help me. Where do you wish your spirit went now that your body has become the earth?
A NON-COMPREHENSIVE LIST OF OBJECTS WE DIDN’T THROW AWAY
WHILE CLEANING THE HOUSE AFTER MOM DIED

1. The box of sunglasses she ordered after my sister cleaned the house that
one time and Mom ransacked the house looking for just one pair, dammit.

2. The crystal glassware she ordered one piece at a time, dreaming in the
   glow of the computer of having that kind of house, until there were stacks
   and stacks of boxes in the old shed.*

3. The clothes she decided to donate before she ran out of energy. Except the
   bras and underwear.†

4. The photo album, including the random selection of old photographs that
   show landmarks of Fairbanks experimentally overlaid with landscapes or
   sled dogs. Mom went to college for a year in Fairbanks. Did she take a
   photography course?‡

5. The oxygen machine that we had to drive two hours to return to the
   pharmacist.

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* She wanted us sisters to divide the pieces up when she was gone. She wanted them to be an inheritance for us. None of
  us likes sparkly crystal things, not on our hands, in our ears, on our clothing. Not in our cupboards.
† How do you go through someone’s bras and underwear? How do you throw such things away?
‡ Why are there no photographs of my mom and dad together?
I USED TO HAVE THESE DREAMS OF FALLING

—and I would wake up just as I hit the ground and everything would spin in the dark as I lay there with my eyes open trying to breathe (I didn’t know how I came to be falling)

For a long time Mom had these horrible nightmares and she would wake up shaking and sweating, wanting to throw up (Did she know how she came to be falling?)

She had those dreams until a friend gave her a dreamcatcher, simple leather and sinew wrappings, the dreams falling safely through, nightmares caught in the web, but then she kept waking up gasping desperately for air anyway (Is it possible to be grateful for a nightmare?)

The surgery for her sleep apnea went fine

The real story here is the other dreamcatcher, years later, the beautiful one my sister made as a gift for Mother’s Day. The one with the two metal rings she welded herself in a friend’s workshop before wrapping them in cobalt thread. And the web, a three-dimensional thing with tiny hand-chosen glass beads and bone shards sprinkled throughout. How you’re not supposed to move a dreamcatcher after you’ve hung it. How the house wasn’t finished. How the house wasn’t finished. How the house wasn’t finished. How the ceiling was that pink and yellow fiberglass insulation covered with a plastic vapor barrier: no place to puncture with a pin or a nail. Instead of catching nightmares, how the thing sat on a pile of junk mail catching years of dust.
HOW TO MAKE LEMON CREAM PUFFS WITH YOUR MOTHER’S GHOST

How you check the dough mixture is like this: you stick your finger right into the gooey dough in a couple of places, and if you can hold your hand there without burning it, it’s ready for the eggs. This action, the alchemical precision of pressing your fingertips into the giving structure, and the divots you leave behind, this is what will call your mother’s ghost. Because you can’t make these careless little plunks of fingerprints without remembering that first failed hard batch of impossible crackers that you carried out in the compost bucket to the birch trees for the chickens, and you can’t remember the compost bucket without being right there squeezed into the makeshift kitchen with the plastic linoleum flooring nailed down on the countertops, and the open cupboard space underneath, all the bags of flour and rice and containers of oatmeal gathering dust and floor grit over the years, the strandboard floors that you should never walk barefoot, the cookie sheets that didn’t come from your grandmother’s collection because your grandmother’s collection of bakeware and perfectly kept stainless steel was ransacked by—how do you concisely say your mother’s brother’s ex wife? how do you say your grandmother’s son’s ex wife, your uncle’s ex wife? in the language that was stolen there was a single word for this—stole so many of these things that all you have of your grandmother’s is
one single stainless steel camp-style coffee cup with her name etched carefully on the bottom. And how do you say that you know in the connective tissue of your ribs that this is where your appreciation of well-kept things comes from, that you remember learning as a young child that even the best stainless steel can rust, that it’s important to take care of your belongings, but in your family this translates into simply keeping as many of these things as possible even if you never use them because at any minute they might be stolen or you might lose them in a fire, but if you keep them in a pile in the back bedroom or the laundry room or along the wall in the bathroom or in a growing stack in the living room and you never, never use them or pick them up or look at them they can never destroy you by falling apart or decaying or breaking or rusting. You can’t plunk your fingers into warm dough, you can’t squeeze into that space, without remembering the first successful batch that came after the first disaster. Perfect little puffs of crust filled with tart lemon cream that you will never make again.
He said, *don’t ever let that cat near Buster. That dog’ll grab on and shake and never stop. He’s eaten cats before.*

But Maxwell was an adolescent cat and he went everywhere. He stalked the rhubarb and Mom’s flower beds, went for walks with Dad and me through the neighborhood, brought us shrews and birds and waggled his tail with a proud meow: nothing was going to keep him from

or

The only way to go from the ground floor to the second floor was by going outside, but there was a hole in the floor where the upstairs heater shared a fuel line with the downstairs heater and the hole was big enough to shove a foot in and wiggle toes or watch G.I. Joes and Lego men lose a hundred battles and fall to their deaths, but it was along a side wall where no one could run into it by accident so it hadn’t been closed off

or
Cousin Buddy had just broken up with his girlfriend and needed a place to stay with his pitbull. All we had was a little foam mattress that he put in front of the heater, a privacy wall made of boxes full of junk from the move, the concrete workshop floor. He said: I’ve never seen a cat move so fast. He came plopping down face-to-face with Buster and before Buster could move that cat jumped on his face and then ran around the whole room on the walls before he scrambled back up the hole

or
WE MOON THE MIDNIGHT TRAIN

We fill a passenger car with kids running back and forth to the bathrooms, turning in the seats to throw dried cranberries at each other. We fill the freight car with coolers of brats and homemade macaroni salad, with sleeping bags, cookware. Guns and dogs. The wind rushes past the open freight doors and we lean against the padded chains and look ahead to watch the tracks follow first one river, then another, and on the other side, the rock cutbank, so close we feel we can reach out and touch the sprays of cliffbreak ferns, the roots of clinging and stubborn black spruce, the seeps that trickle down over years of moss to the waterways below.

And when the train stops, it’s fast. We throw everything down into a pile and jump after it, load everything on four-wheelers and walk or ride up the old grown-over airstrip with the dogs loping alongside, staking out territory and smells, picking up droplets from thigh-high greenery until we’re soaked and a little shivering.

We set up in the July drizzle and feed the fire in the ring with hot-burning spruce and alder and smokey green aspen, and the kids and dogs chase each other around the outer circle while we cook burgers on the grill and make sure the salads and the grandparents are under the open-walled shed with the
couches, folding chairs collecting rain in a circle around the fire. And we stand
and drink PBR and giant cups of Imperial vodka with black cherry lime Crystal
Light. We take the kids on four-wheeler rides down the trails to the sawmill and
back until their heads droop even when their scrawny arms cling to the rack,
little bodies jostling through potholes and standing water.

And we thin out, we thin ourselves out until we’re all generations back in
the cabin lying in the dark, sleeping bodies in all of the bunks, on the couch,
sleeping bags on the floor. Us cousins listening from our places among the snores
and creakings of our family. And at some unspoken signal, let’s go down to the
bridge and wait for the train. We head down, a bottle of Yukon Jack passing back
and forth, getting lost on the birchgreen trails, slipsliding arm in arm in the silt
and the puddles, laughing drunk to the river until we—

in the not-dark, in the grainy rushing twilight of the river, we line up, face
upriver, away from the tracks. Pass the bottle, listen for the whistle that warns of
a train approaching a bridge, then the vibration on the trestle. Unzip. Wait,
grasping jean fabric in each hand, bracing slightly, leaning just a little forward,
jostling, bumping elbows, then all the way forward, pants down, bent over, a line
of cheeks facing up at the rumble of the midnight engineer, just like every Fourth
of July, just like our parents, our grandparents. He pulls the whistle again,
acknowledging he’s seen us, a yearly secret we don’t show to the daylight
tourists on the sightseeing rides. We stay and talk, dreaming the river out into

Tikahtnu—the Cook Inlet—where the bore tide rushes up the Kenai Peninsula to meet it.
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