



FROM
CURLERS
TO CHAINSAWS

Women and Their Machines

EDITED BY

Joyce Dyer

Jennifer Cognard-Black

Elizabeth MacLeod Walls



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To Daniel, Andrew, and Craig

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Preface

Wheel, gear, handle, lever, button, key, window, screen—regardless of what it does or when it was first made, a machine is always the sum of its parts. Performance is all: what happens when the button is pushed, the lever switched on, the gear engaged, the screen illuminated. A combination of ingenuity and miracle, machines expand the capacities of the human. Invent a wheel, and bodies move faster than legs. Design a spinning jenny, and wool is transformed into winter clothing. Create a computer, and minds roam through space and across time.

As editors of this collection, we believe that the most significant part of any machine is human touch—the energy that brings the device to life and directs its performance. When people combine mechanical ingenuity with the wonder of touch, their eyes see farther, their ears hear better, their bodies move with greater fluidity and speed. In this collection, our writers use machines to make a voice resonate, to restore a lost limb, and to extend the pleasure of sex. For a machine is a kind of magic, whether it's a stove in a kitchen or a smartphone at a board meeting. With the touch of a hand, a dead object is animated, Lazarus-like. As Ana Maria Spagna says of her Stihl chainsaw, “After a while, after a few years and a few hundred trees, the chainsaw began to feel like an appendage.” We humans are right there with our machines, and they are with us.

Although science fiction and movies predict the rise of machines—signaling their importance as icons of danger and awe—they are not in the world merely to serve us, nor are we here to serve them. Rather,

since machines come from organic computers (our brains), they inhabit our collective imagination. They are symbols. They are metaphors. And yet, when we're not confronted with fantasies of Terminator robots or a sentient HAL 9000, we tend to forget or ignore the import of machines in our day-to-day lives, reducing them to their functionality. This anthology, then, is an attempt to think carefully and deliberately about our unthinking tools, to have a conversation with plastic and steel in order to try to understand what our machines mean—why we need them, or if we do; where they came from, or what they might signify; and what the future holds for further integrations of body and contraption.

Numerous writers and scholars have warned about envisioning machines as antagonists, oppressors, and competitors. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote about the potential dehumanization that can result from engaging with gadgets. The mechanic becomes his machine, the sailor “a rope of a ship.”¹ Even now, a “hired hand” is a metaphor suggesting that a person wielding a tool becomes his hammer or her scythe. And history itself has made us deeply aware of the harm machines have caused people in the factories of industrial America. In the textile industry in the 1820s, roughly 85–95 percent of workers were women, and by 1850, Massachusetts employed one-third of its women between the ages of ten and twenty-nine in factories²—the town of Lowell having emerged as the “City of Spindles.” The textile mills were dangerous and unhealthful. Poor ventilation and too few exits led to fires and deaths, and every two or three minutes, workers had to put their mouths to the shuttle and suck thread through a small hole, a literal “kiss of death” from inhaling lint and fabric in the process.³ Feminist scholars have pointed out that, despite theoretical discussions of a genderless or transgendered worldview, machines often continue to be seen as either “feminine” or “masculine,” particularly in terms of their use. In a potent phrase coined by Arlie Russell Hochschild, there persists a “second shift” for working women, tasks performed at home, using domestic machines, added to a woman’s paid labor in the public sector.⁴ Ruth Schwartz Cowan, writing about technological systems in postwar

America, asks that women not “succumb entirely to the work processes that they seem to have ordained for us.”⁵

Indeed, historically women have been strongly associated with machines that cast a domestic hue, defined by the task at hand. These machines are often ones that weave, feed, and clean: the hoe, the stove, the loom, the vacuum. Throughout the centuries, such contraptions have enabled women to care for children, the ill, and the elderly. Yet women have wielded other machines, too: those of engineers, farmers, athletes, and artists. During the Neolithic period, women across the Near East pulverized grain with grindstones. Farming in Iowa around AD 1000, Oneota women scraped the ground with hoes made of bison scapulae to cultivate corn. Women living in medieval and Renaissance Europe operated machines to weave cloth, to give birth—and to write. Rural Victorian women risked their lives manipulating threshers on the farm, while their urban counterparts used gymnastics equipment to offset the potential harm of sedentary city life. Even goddesses have plied certain tools. The British Museum displays an ancient tablet showing Athena handling a wooden level as she oversees mortals building a ship, while the princess Devahuti, of Hindu lore, joins her husband in piloting a *vimana*, a rudimentary airplane.

While drawings, letters, histories, and museums tell us something about the machines women have used across time, what those women thought of these devices—and what they felt about them—has largely been lost. What remains are the objects themselves, sitting cipher-like on shelves or in the pages of books: pestles, blades, steel arms, spoons, and a treadle wheel or two. Given the impossibility of retracing or restructuring the histories of women of the past, as editors of this volume we have turned to contemporary women.

In the modern moment, both women and men have many of the same machines—computers and iPhones, cars and coffeemakers. As editors, however, we’ve chosen to focus this collection on the particular complications and complexities women have with their devices, in part because women’s own bodies have often been perceived as machines

themselves (sex machines, baby-making machines, domestic machines), and also because women have been urged by industry and advertising to use various devices to modify deeply personal matters of identity (how they look or act). Even now, machines have distinct implications for women. As Emily Rapp says in her essay about growing up with a leg prosthesis, “This relationship I have with a mechanized body has always been contentious, because a woman’s body is, in part, her currency in the world, however we might try to deny it. . . . We are easily reduced to the sum of our parts, and sometimes we are reduced to only our parts.” With informed and lyrical voices, and with extraordinary fearlessness, our writers focus on the meaning machines contain and retain for them—modern women who can only speak for themselves, of course, but whose responses are so redolent that they echo the past even as they invite others into future conversations.

The writers in our collection continue to write about machines that are domestic and intimate, though they are aware of the historical weight such devices have for contemporary women, since domestic machines carry the stories of generations of women who came before them—including their foremothers. What did domestic machines once mean to their ancestors, and what do they mean to women today? Psyche Williams-Forsen cooks collards on her gas stove; E. J. Levy extends pleasure for herself and her lovers with a vibrator; Mary Swander experiments with an Excalibur food dehydrator; Norma Tilden directly addresses a photograph of a 1939 Maytag washing machine (“Maytag, you crafty girl”); and Joyce Dyer removes her mother’s Singer sewing machine from the dusty cabinet where for decades it had been “roosting, but unable to fall into flight.” Rebecca McClanahan finds that ironing is her way “to survive the deepest pains and joys,” and will not apologize for her need to iron. But other writers in our collection deftly handle machines usually seen as masculine. Maureen Stanton learns how to operate the bright red Snapper lawn mower she purchases. Debra Marquart, a rock singer as well as writer, explores how her erotic Electro-Voice PL-80 microphone helps her keep her own voice “above the noisy fray” of the guitarists standing

behind her. Mary Quade learns about the Cockshutt tractor used by her family on their Kansas farm, along with the stories that accompany it, the “dings and dents” of both. And Karen Salyer McElmurray drives a 1967 Dodge Dart—“to the next town. The next state. The next school, degree, boyfriend, lover.”

Whatever machine is their subject, our writers take seriously the job of understanding what it signifies. A machine is what’s beneath and beyond the mere gears and metal plates of its making. The essayists in this collection know that machines are more than just practical or serviceable, whether the object is Jennifer Cognard-Black’s curling iron, or “hot thing,” which she takes up in “fearful fantasy of attaining such beauty” though she risks being burned; or Joy Castro’s Ruger GP .357 handgun, which may or may not contain the power to shield her infant child from the fear she carries of her own stepfather, whose violence, Castro writes, is knifed into her “like scrimshaw cut in living bone.” In turn, Mary Swander, struck by illness that demands she preserve organic food for long Iowa winters (and eat only that), has spent the last several decades negotiating with a variety of machines that help her dehydrate the food she grows. Her story is both a literal progression and metaphoric tracking of a better understanding of herself, the natural world, and the universe—as is Jen Hirt’s story of her metaphoric stapler (“I need to remember that it took me a long time to learn how to let the staple do its job”).

Other writers consider how mass-media machines have shaped their inner lives. For Elizabeth MacLeod Walls, her iPhone is a device that has at times served as an uncomfortable link to the external, one that has altered her seclusion, the private life within so important to the production of art and ideas. For Diana Salman, however, the opposite is true: media machines once helped her escape the seclusion of wartime Lebanon. As a young girl, she discovered the poetry of Nizar Qabbani on her grandfather’s portable radio, her longing for both love and the Arabic language in black-and-white Egyptian movies on the TV, and her desperate loneliness for her father—working in the Congo without his family—through the cassette tapes she was forced by her mother to make.

Even Nikky Finney's No. 1 pencil, such a simple tool of both mass media and intimate thought, is not merely a writing implement. "The more I pencil-dig down," she explains, "the more frankincense I turn up from the shank and shale of this life, the more I understand that there is even more bounty to field into the air." Melissa A. Goldthwaite's Canon PowerShot camera alerts her to both the riches and the dangers of an artist's life. Though the camera allows her to capture images of sugar packets, fruit, and flowers, she also recognizes the distance her photographs place between her subject and herself—her inevitable role as observer. And Monica Berlin conflates time, experience, and place with the myriad machines associated with city living (trains, cars, turntables, telephones) to outline the relationship between art and the past as represented by the tools and machines all around us, outside of us, and in our memories.

It's not surprising that—in a collection that sets out to consider the integration of machines into the bodies, minds, and imaginations of women—several of our contributors talk about how certain devices translate artistic creativity: a camera and a microphone and a pencil. Such devices become word, image, note. In Karen Outen's essay, the device itself metamorphoses into idea. Her typewriter, companion to all of the artistic impulses of her early adulthood, emerges later in life as a MacBook Air, a new creature entirely—and one that serves both as a conduit and a symbol of her interior world. Sometimes these machines resist the hard job of artistic translation—for months or even years—but then, one day, Debra Marquart's Electro-Voice PL-80 microphone bends and yields, finally fitting the contour of the fingers pressing down on them, the mouth close to them, the hands holding on tight.

Sue William Silverman comes to see how the pressing down of keys, over time, can bring a life together—the whole past and present of it. Two parallel actions, both pressing down on piano keys as well as the keys of a QWERTY keyboard, slowly but powerfully join Silverman's difficult family past and her changing sense of that past, and through this integration, Silverman produces art. For ultimately, to write—to be a woman writer—is,

in one way, to be both mechanical and a mechanic. We still call punctuation and grammar the “mechanics” of writing, and even language itself is a technology. But then, as writing occurs through such machinery, craft and art combine. The writer takes the mechanics (craft) from the machine, but the machine takes from the writer the art that causes it to move.

All women who use machines, and have used them since the beginning of civilization, have understood the world the way they do in part because of the devices they employ. Our writers have taken machines into all the spaces where they live their lives, giving these spaces a local habitation and a name. As editors, we have chosen to organize the essays around such places: Hearth and Home; Bedroom and Birthing Room; Farm, Lawn, Hill, and Wood; Stage and World; and The Writer’s Studio. Women’s relationships to others, to the world, and to themselves are often articulated by the machines that accompany them into these spaces, which then help to connect them to the tangible world. The writers in our volume understand the transformation that occurs when a hand touches a machine. It should not surprise us that Monica Frantz, a midwife, rethinks human hands as the most valuable of machines during birth—“tools of muscle and bone are best suited for working with muscle and bone.” Only after she sees the hands of her newborn daughter does the fact of her child’s birth seem real. “She had passed from my body into my arms, but she didn’t feel like mine until I saw her hands. There were my long fingers, my wide fingernails. I knew those hands,” she writes. “My own reborn.”

As women writers, our contributors are indeed reborn—remade—through their craft. With the symbol and metaphor of the machine as their collective conduit for new understanding, their essays become spaces where readers can join them to reconsider these machines that inhabit and change our world.

NOTES

1. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar,” *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1983), 54.

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2. S. J. Kleinberg, *Women in the United States, 1830–1945* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 26–27.
 3. U.S. Department of Labor, “State Investigations.” <http://www.dol.gov/dol/aboutdol/history/mono-regsafepart01.htm>.
 4. Arlie Russell Hochschild and Anne Machung, *The Second Shift: Working Families and the Revolution at Home* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), xv.
 5. Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 214.

Acknowledgments

We began to cook up the idea for a collection about women and their machines over fried fish at Courtney's restaurant in Southern Maryland, before a reading at St. Mary's College of Maryland. Norma started talking about the old Maytag washer her mother used, and then Joyce mentioned her mother's Singer sewing machine, and Jennifer, her long and complicated relationship with curling irons. The stories we told and the hard questions we asked around that table suggested that our conversation would not end once the fish was eaten and our check arrived. And, indeed, this suspicion was confirmed when Jennifer subsequently had a powerful conversation with Elizabeth about the impersonal intimacy of iPhones. This subject of women and their machines was (and is) provocative and complex, resonant and intriguing—and thus, this collection was born.

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Hearth and Home

Maytag Washer, 1939

Norma Tilden

The Alliance of Art and Industry: Toledo Designs for a Modern America opened last month. The focus is on the 1930s and '40s, when the Ohio city emerged as a hotbed of product design. . . . A 1939 Maytag washing machine was so smoothly rounded and practical that its design remained unchanged for 40 years.

—*WASHINGTON POST*, 6 APRIL 2002

Maytag, you crafty girl, you got your picture in the papers. You got them to look at you, coolly appraising your rounded, “practical” curves, your tapered legs and porcelain skin. Maytag—ingenious lovely thing—you worked your way out of the basement.

• • •

In “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen,” writing in the wake of what was then regarded as surely the last Great War, poet William Butler Yeats mourned the passing of “many ingenious lovely things,” delicate old masterworks of art and intellect that now lay buried under the brute rubble of history. These were ornamental things that once had seemed “sheer miracle to the multitude”—polished ivory statues, beribboned dancers, bronzed peacock feathers—refined and precious monuments to a view of civilization that should have been “protected” from the routine violence that “pitches common things about.” Or so the poet thought.

By the beginning of the next war, the multitudes were turning to the more practical miracles of “common things,” mass-produced and easily replaced. Already in 1934, Philip Johnson had gathered hundreds of ingenious lovely things for a show of masterworks of design at the

Museum of Modern Art. He called these democratized treasures “Machine Art”—industrial bolts and screws, household tools, electrical coils, incandescent bulbs, bronze bearings, tire treads—all of them showcased as organic forms, at once functional and beautiful. Except that by the 1930s Yankee ingenuity had managed to collapse the distinction: these things were beautiful in use.

It was Yeats again who, early in the century, had invented a “beautiful mild woman” to speak for him on the beauties of industry: “To be born woman is to know / Although they do not talk of it at school— / That we must labour to be beautiful.” Yeats called this labor “Adam’s Curse,” and spoke of it as the fine and difficult work of poets and women.

You knew about Adam’s curse, Maytag, ingenious and lovely thing, rocking in rhythmic labor in the steamy basements of Ohio—that 1930s “hotbed” of industrial design. And in your presence, clustered around you with our mothers, their faces blushed with steam, we would learn what it meant to be born a woman: the intricate mechanics of beauty and use. In those days, to find a mother—usually any mother would do—we raised the heavy trapdoor to the cellar, making our way through the canopy of dripping clothes suspended over a delicate cat’s cradle of waxy rope. The clotheslines were themselves ingenious webs, crossing over and under each other in that cramped space, lowered to receive the dripping weight of the laundry, then hoisted toward the basement ceiling on flimsy notched poles. Although they had not learned of it at school, our mothers understood this levered counterpoise of heft and height: lifting the newly laundered sheets above the floor on sagging stilts, then lowering them dry and almost weightless. Briskly, they would pinch off the colored plastic clothespins, folding the sweetened basement air into the sheets as they wrapped them loosely into themselves, then nestled them, like bunting, in the wicker laundry baskets.

Any Monday, we could follow the sounds of the Maytag down through the veils of linens and delicately patterned housedresses, the stiff dark cotton of uniforms and “work clothes,” the soft muslin diapers and summer-printed sunsuits. We followed the rhythmic humming and the heavy

smells of potions until, somewhere below that damp canopy, we found our mothers gathered—Pauline, Yolanda, Josephine, Nelda, Connie—with the Maytag wringer washer, rocking as it worked, all of them beautiful in use.

The mothers were busy mixing lotions and powders with modern chemical names, their faces reddened in the warm fog of perfumed salts: “Oxydol” for heavy-duty cleaning, its name a potent blend of chemistry and girlish play; “Fels Naptha,” to be scrubbed with wiry brushes over grass stains and the greasy knees of work pants. For whiter whites, there was the mystery of “Rinso Blue,” which came in two forms: a thick, cobalt-stained syrup or a tidy wafer, like a poker chip, dissolving in a whirlpool of molten blue when dropped into the churning cauldron of the Maytag.

The gentle washing of fine things required a box of “Ivory Snow,” which, even before we peeled back the cover, seemed buoyant, a cache of paper thin, luminescent flakes. Each of us begged to be the helper chosen to drift the flakes in a simulated blizzard over the tub. There they would quickly melt into a layer of yellowed suds, swirling back and forth in the repeated, half-circular motion of the Maytag’s busy agitator. Delicate garments were tagged “Ivory Washable, 99⁴⁴/₁₀₀% pure.” But Ivory was not just for lingerie. For a few weeks back in 1940, eight hundred people a day had visited the “Ivory Washable House” at Radio City in New York. Garishly colored ads in *House Beautiful* touted “the famous house that could be washed from front door to back,” but only with Ivory Soap, 99⁴⁴/₁₀₀% pure. Those lucky New Yorkers who toured the house must have left Radio City with a deep appreciation of Adam’s curse. “As practical as it is decorative,” the ads proclaimed. Like other miracles of machine art, the Ivory House promised to be beautiful in use.

• • •

My mother and I worried that impurities might lurk in the remaining ⁵⁶/₁₀₀ of 1 percent. For us, then, there was a dangerous white jug of “Clorox Bleach,” surely 100 percent pure. Clorox represented the epitome of better-living-through-chemistry, so powerfully clean that they called it “Ox”—or so I thought. My mother stirred it into the washtub with a sawed-off section

of broomstick, scrubbed to the color of raw oak by its weekly plunge into the rinse water.

When the Maytag's churning action stopped, our mothers used the broomstick to fish the sodden fabrics from the sudsy mix and move them to the rinse, lines of bluing running up their arms toward the caplet sleeves of their housedresses. Then, one piece at a time, they fed the dripping laundry through the hard rubber lips of the wringer. Behind it, one of us was stationed to catch the flattened garment, pull it through in a ropey twist, and layer it like ribbon in the basket, ready for the clothespins and a space on the line.

Fels Naptha for work clothes . . . Rinso for whites . . . a heady mix of chemical smells, dampened voices, and steady industrial sounds that I remember still, fifty years later, as both sweet and strong. In the cellar, as they scooped and measured potions, even their language seemed to be processed through the pursed lips of the Maytag: "That bitch Marie—she put my brother through the wringer. And now, mark my words, she'll take him to the cleaners, too." Tide for colors . . . Dreft for baby things. "Hazel, I told her, 'don't you let that man soft-soap you.'" Giggles bubbled up through the mass of steamy ringlets bobbing over the tub. Someone replied, "Listen to me, honey. You need to put some of that starch in *your* undies." The vaned agitator, metal before the war but now a rugged plastic, forced water through the clothes. These were the luxurious, sloshing sounds of your labor, Maytag. Always you seemed overfull.

• • •

Pictured here in the morning paper, you are still lovely, though no longer in use. The stuff of your labors is hidden now, injector hoses coiled behind the tub, agitator finally at rest in the gray, freckled cavity beneath the porcelain lid. "Well-rounded design, then and now: A 1939 Maytag Washer." With a mild shock, I realize that I am looking at a crude metallic rendering of a woman, solid and big-bellied. Her slim legs barely support her swaying girth. She stands on exhibit at the Toledo Museum of Art, turning slightly to the side, a pregnant woman, at once proud and bashful. Her shapely

legs, smooth and white, thicken into thighs where they extend up the side of the tub. These are legs “that go all the way up to her ears”—the manly compliment I overheard from my uncles, laughing on the porch stoop where they huddled after work. Four legs, not two; this design was an improvement on nature: two legs to support the heavy belly, two to hold up the wide hips at the back. From the base of the tub, they taper to slim ankles banded in chrome bracelets, then slip into tiny round-toed shoes on black castor heels. Against the stark backdrop of her museum perch, the Maytag poses hieratically, like an Egyptian wall princess, all four small feet fixed at the same sharp angle perpendicular to the body, as if to prevent her from slipping away. Circling the top of the tub, a girdle of bright chrome holds the enormous, bulging cavity in place. Squarely in its center is a protruding black navel—a plug of some sort—for filling and emptying the tub.

And there, above the enormous belly, is the small head of the Maytag, its mouth a wide black hole hooded by a red metal lipstick smear. Just visible inside that chasm are the tight, rolling lips of the wringer. At once prim and merciless, those lips could pull you in, then send you out stiff and one-dimensional. A single arm holds the head in place. Above it, instead of an ear, rests the tiny mind of the clutch. The Maytag’s head can be moved aside for easier access to her trunk. The only other flash of color is a word in neat, feminine script, written in lipstick cursive across the tub: “Maytag,” your name, a game for girls in spring.

• • •

When the wash was done, the fierce agitation finally quiet, the clothes, still heavy with sweet-smelling water, sagging just above the cement floor, my mother would rinse the Maytag with Clorox and polish it dry. She would leave it, cool and empty, prepared for tomorrow. Immaculate metal—you could see yourself in it.

My Mother's Singer

My mother's Singer folds down into a little wooden cabinet, completely out of view. It had become for me no more than a piece of bedroom furniture—a sort of table for my pills, a water glass, and whatever book I was reading to help me fall asleep at night. One day last March, soon after I had finished reading Jonathan Rosen's book about birds, *The Life of the Skies*, I lifted the Singer out of its cabinet for the first time since the machine had come into my house. Three Men and a Truck had delivered it to me in 1991, right after I sold the small Tudor house my mother couldn't live in anymore.

For years my husband had been suggesting that I fix Annabelle Coyne's old machine. I'd known he was right, but machinery has always intimidated me, and my mother's Singer was such a heavy thing. I had no idea what I'd be facing once I peered into the dark interior and saw the sewing machine hanging there, upside down, like a roosting blue jay, or a bat.

"You should do it," he'd say.

"I will," I'd reply. But I never did.

Until I read Rosen's book. He drew a connection between the extinction of the ivory-billed woodpecker and the Singer Sewing Machine Company. The juxtaposition surprised me, and I rubbed my sleepy eyes. Rosen alluded to land where, seventy years before, the last official sighting of an ivory-billed occurred—wooded property in Louisiana once owned by the company and known as the "Singer Tract."¹ In 2000, Rosen traveled south to do a story for the *New Yorker* about an unofficial sighting in a different area of Louisiana, and in 2005 he went to Bayou de View in Arkansas after other sightings were reported there.

How odd, I thought, that the last confirmed sighting of the ivory-billed took place on property that Singer owned.

I kept glancing at the cabinet while I read, realizing that I didn't know

anything about the company, and not much more about my mother's machine. I could barely even picture her Singer now, so many years after I'd last heard its hum. All I knew was that it was black and heavy and had been my mother's daily companion. I wasn't even sure if it worked anymore. While it rested in its cabinet all those years, it had become an antique, and perhaps now its age was the only value that it held.

I learned from Rosen that the last official sighting coincided with the controversial removal of ancient trees from the Singer Tract by loggers who had leased the land. The ivory-billed was a very specialized bird that lived on the grubs of decaying trees in old virgin forests like the Singer Tract. Rosen said the ivory-billed preferred trees that were five hundred to seven hundred years old, though some ornithologists thought they would feed on trees only one hundred years old.² In 1944 the last ivory-billed refused to move, even when the loggers came. She just sat there, cocking her head when the tractors rolled in, and then she vanished. For fifty-five years no one claimed to see another.

Rosen's book did exactly what I hadn't wanted—it kept me awake. I could not dismiss the odd coincidence he'd drawn my attention to. The book had begun to expose my ignorance, and when I turned off the light

those nights I read its chapters, I began to fuse birds and sewing machines and mothers into a single thing—some strange hatted creature with metal quills and presser feet.

• • •

During the days, I would try to remember whatever I could about my mother's Singer. The Singer my mother loved became a puzzle to her, and now it was a puzzle to me. Sometime in the early 1980s, when Alzheimer's announced itself in her life, she lowered her machine and never took it out again. She soon forgot what was inside. She forgot it had an inside. She forgot "inside" altogether. By the 1990s her confusion was so profound that I moved her into an Alzheimer's unit—something I vowed never to do—where she lived five more years in a single room surrounded by three pieces of blond furniture from her old bedroom set, all of which she stripped of their wood veneer with her thumbnails.

I had wanted to keep my farewell to my mother orderly, and final. I wrote a book about her after she died and had thought its pages made sense of her life and held my goodbye. But in the years since writing it, I had begun to suspect that I had left something out, and thinking about her Singer because of the Rosen book made me quite sure of it. I had told only about the Alzheimer's years, omitting all the long, healthy days of her life. It was easier that way, though people thought I had done something brave. After she stopped sewing and dementia sealed off her brain, she was all mine. She was caught. I could love her and study her the way that Alexander Wilson and James Audubon leisurely studied and painted birds they had captured or killed. I could invent her. She was finally still, as safe as the Singer inside that cabinet. But when she sewed, she belonged to no one and she was as elusive as an ivory-billed. Opening up her machine seemed too great a risk, for couldn't something unexpected fly out and devour me?

But that ivory-billed woodpecker had started to tap away in recent days. Singer's trademark was an "S" with a woman behind it, her body visible between the loops of the letter. The woman sat on a chair, working at a machine. Tap, tap, tapping, hoping someone would notice her.

I began to wonder who she was, and I knew I would have to remove

my mother's machine from the cabinet in order to find her because my mother and the woman suddenly were the same, both hidden from me.

I couldn't recall a day when my mother didn't sew—well, until Alzheimer's interrupted her work. I would have to look at the needles and tension and light inside.

I hadn't been very attentive to the Singer when I was around it. It was always there, and my mother was always leaning over it—the woman behind the “S.” I just hadn't watched them much. Besides, in our house my mother, not I, was the seamstress. I used the Singer occasionally, but she was definitely its mistress. My mother would look at my stitching when I asked her for help on projects for my home economics class in school (she'd actually sew for me, if I asked her to, never bothered by the ethics of this) or show me little tricks when she saw me stall: how to adjust the tension on the machine, lift the presser foot so the fabric turned, remedy a jam. But her instruction was so infrequent that all of it barely added up to a single lesson. She was very casual about my sewing. She put no demands on me to be better than average (which was about my level of proficiency). She never praised my good work or criticized my bad. What she did at her machine seemed to have nothing at all to do with me.

I wasn't worried when she stopped sewing. Maybe I had asked about the disappearance of her machine, and she told me her arthritic hands could no longer thread a needle. I may have nodded my head. I would have wanted a simple explanation, and that's what she would have given me. Perhaps I hadn't even inquired.

The house felt different to me after the retirement of the machine. I do remember that much. It was far quieter than it had been all the years I'd grown up in it. But now, so many years later, I was beginning to recall something else: Annabelle, at exactly the moment the Singer vanished, had begun to grow more restless. How had I missed seeing the connection between these two things—the disappearance of the Singer and my mother's gradual fall into madness? Not until reading Rosen had I made this association, but when I did, a new thought arrived: What kind of courage had it taken that day for my mother to lower her Singer into its cabinet and leave it there? What kind of courage to bury herself in dark and dust?

• • •

I removed all the items from the top and folded out the panels, little wooden wings. The right panel extended the length of the cabinet's surface about six inches—a good place to line up thread and attachments and shears—but the left panel, by the needle, was twenty inches long. It fed the fabric into the machine. Almost everything I wore for the first twenty-one years of my life passed over the grain of that piece of wood, urged along by Annabelle.

Now the cavity was exposed. I looked inside and saw the Singer there and almost pitied it. It had hung upside down in that dark place for decades—roosting, but unable to fall into flight. I found its neck and struggled to lift it out, but the machine was even heavier than I had thought. This was no bird with hollow bones, and it was resisting me.

I tilted the Singer to an upright position, placed it gently in its wooden groove at the front, and released it into light. Dust coating its enamel finish, it resembled a relic I might have unearthed from the sand. It was not plugged in. I looked at the wires and realized I couldn't operate this machine, even if I dusted it off, even if I could remember how to thread it (which I could not), even if the motor was undamaged by time. Wrapped around the wire that ran from the machine to the foot pedal were pieces of tape—some black electrical tape, now dry and loose; some brittle, yellowing Scotch tape. I imagined my mother, her disease darkening, reaching for something sticky to repair these fraying pieces, trying to keep them together a little longer. An impossible riddle for her.

Toward the end, right before her disease completely claimed her, Scotch tape was her universal remedy to life's problems. She put it over cuts on her skin, rips in lampshade covers, broken glass, dirt on carpets, clocks that stopped, tears in nylons, hangnails, acrostic puzzles in the local paper that she no longer could solve, broken stems of flowers in her garden bed—and now, I saw, the bare wires of her Singer sewing machine.

I removed all the tape from the connecting cord and then dusted the Singer, lint rising from the machine and floating into my eyes and up my nose.

I would have to get the Singer fixed if I ever hoped to use it. I wasn't sure that I cared to sew again, but I still wanted the machine in good repair. I'd grown to value old objects more than I once had, and if I ever needed a machine, I wanted it to be the Singer.

There were a few very small scuffs on the paint at the front edge, but otherwise it was beautiful. So nearly perfect. No surface scratches, all the decorative letters and borders intact—The Singer Manufacturing Co. on the top, SINGER spelled out in large letters facing the seamstress, the Singer “S” in the middle of the base (under the light), a decorative gold edging all the way around the border of the base, including the curves at the soft corners. I had purchased enough appliances over my lifetime to know that this sturdy thing—made of steel and cast iron—was going to be far better than anything I could buy today. I didn't care what it cost to fix it.

• • •

I looked in the yellow pages under “Sewing Machine Repair” and found that there were still five places close to my home that fixed machines. I was surprised there were any. I remembered a sign for sewing machines in the front yard of a house I always passed on my way to a local mall, so that's the shop I chose. I knew where it was, and I liked the idea that the work would take place in a house.

I would have to remove the machine from its cabinet to transport it. There was no way I could wrestle the whole thing down the stairs—cabinet and all—and then fit it into my little sedan, so I removed the screws behind the machine that secured it to the cabinet. They popped out easily, but the rings of metal underneath the screws were difficult to dislodge. I had to force them. The wire to the foot pedal (the one Annabelle had so hopelessly patched) was the greater puzzle, though. It began at the base of the machine, passed through a metal ring in the cabinet—drilled into some sort of grille work—and then disappeared into the casing of the foot pedal. I couldn't figure out how to release the wire from either the machine or the foot pedal so that I could thread it through this small opening.

I could cut the wire, but I thought that would be rash. I think I was

afraid of damaging the machine in some irreparable way. As illogical as it was, I sensed that my mother's old Singer could be lost with a careless snip of the shears.

• • •

Annabelle was absolutely at ease with her machine. My understanding of mechanical invention was far less natural than hers. I was puzzled by a small wire that was ruining all my plans.

I'd been reading about Isaac Merritt Singer since I'd come across the allusion to Singer in the Rosen book. Singer wouldn't have sat all afternoon, as I had, trying to figure out how to free up a wire from a sewing-machine foot pedal. It took him only eleven days and nights to discover how to build a practical sewing machine (with a few refinements added on the twelfth)—a little longer than it took God to make the universe, but not much. In 1850, in Boston, Singer was working in the machine shop of Orson C. Phelps at 19 Harvard Place in Cambridge when someone brought in a Lerow and Blodgett sewing machine for repair. Early machines were temperamental and seldom sustained continuous sewing. Singer studied the machine—processing the inventions of other people in his great brain and planning improvements of his own. What he invented—or perfected—made him a wealthy man: a vertical needle, a transverse shuttle, a foot treadle (freeing up both hands), improvements in tension that greatly increased the number of stitches that could be sewn per minute.

No, Isaac Merritt Singer—second-generation immigrant, the youngest of eight children, the son of divorced parents (his mother walked out on his father when Isaac was ten years old, and became a Quaker), neglected child³—would not have had any trouble detaching the wire from my mother's sewing machine. Then again, neither would she.

• • •

I entered the Akron Sewing Machine Center. There was a neon sign that said "Open" in the window, and a second sign, handwritten, posted by the buzzer: "Please ring before entering." A woman with stringy brown hair and glasses let me in.

She said her name was “Dawn” and squinted at me (I didn’t have a machine in my hands, so I probably looked suspicious). I began explaining the problem I was having disconnecting the sewing machine wire, but she grew impatient and yelled up the stairs. “Lora! There’s a woman here who has a Singer she can’t get the wiring through. One of those models with the metal grille.”

A small woman quickly descended. Lora, I learned, was the owner whose family had been in the business of sewing machine repair for three generations. Behind her was a former customer who had fallen in love with sewing machines and now was a collector—and Lora’s friend.

“All you have to do is take that screw off the pedal,” Lora said, speaking very rapidly and then disappearing into a back room. She was small and moved like a bug. She seemed to be thinking of several things at once, and darted toward one of them.

Lora’s friend was standing next to me, and I could tell she wanted to help. She spoke slowly, the way a schoolteacher does to very young children, and told me how to undo screws on the foot pedal so that two wires inside could be detached from metal hooks, pulled out, and then threaded through the hinge. “Do that,” she said, “and it’s free!”

“What if—”

“You can always take the foot control apart. Always. Just the way I explained it to you.”

“OK,” I said. “Thanks.”

Dawn and Lora had come back. “I’ll give you a stub when you bring the machine in,” Dawn said, probably wondering why I still was standing in Lora’s house.

I smiled and left the building, not sure I’d ever be able to gather this thing in my arms.

• • •

In Akron, Ohio—my hometown—the Singer Manufacturing Company branch managed by D. L. Foust stood in the late 1870s at 174 South Howard Street. It was one of Singer’s first two hundred stores in America. You can buy a Singer at a Walmart now, but you couldn’t then—only at a Singer

store. The Akron store moved several times, but I remember it in the 1950s at 203 South Main, just across from O'Neil's Department Store.⁴

When my mother and I rode downtown to shop, she often would leave me with my aunt Marie, a younger sister of Annabelle's who worked at the cosmetics counter of O'Neil's. My mother would disappear, but soon return, happy, with some product for her sewing machine—one day a new buttonholer with templates; the next, sewing machine needles or motor lubricant.

I seldom went with her. I was much more interested in having my aunt dab my arms with new fragrances, and in staring at the glittering bottles and bright tubes through the glass case my aunt Marie kept free of a single smudge. Elizabeth Arden's porcelain apothecary jar that held *Crème Extraordinaire*, fingernail polish by Charles of the Ritz, a new line of Dorothy Gray—every product held some sweet secret for me. My aunt, with her unlined skin and perfect legs, always smelled like the first rush of lilac in early spring, not like Singer sewing machine oil, the way my mother did.

• • •

The sewing machine was beside me on the front seat, detached from its cabinet. I'd found the screw on the foot pedal when I got home from the shop—just as Lora and her friend had told me I would—and released the wire. The airbag alert began to sound the second I turned on the car, the weight of the machine having fooled my Toyota into thinking a person was sitting next to me, not just a piece of metal. The buzzer stopped after a while, but the airbag light kept flashing all the way to Lora's parking lot.

From the window of the house, Lora saw me struggling and ran to open the door. "Hey, Dawn!" she yelled. "She got the machine out!"

"See, it wasn't that hard, was it?" Dawn said.

I just smiled.

"Set it right here," Lora said, leading me to a table by the entrance. And then, "Well, let's see what her name is."

Lora raced toward her desk—which was in the room down one step from the area where I was standing—and retrieved a Blue Book with model

numbers for every Singer machine ever made. She read the number on my machine and then flipped the pages of her manual. "AH369694," she repeated, going up and down the columns. "That was 1947 or 1948."

"Really?" I said, surprised. "I thought it was earlier than that. My mother won a Singer contest in high school—that would have been the late twenties. First prize was a sewing machine, and I thought that was the machine in our house."

"Nope," she said. "Yours is about 1947."

"The year I was born."

"Women do that, sometimes, when babies come," she said. "She probably traded her old machine in. Singer always encouraged people to trade up."

My mother's "new" machine, the one I was having repaired, was my age. Lora was suggesting that my mother's machine had something to do with my arrival in the world, and for the first time I looked at it as if it were a reflection of me.

Dawn came into the room with a small tablet, and Lora suddenly disappeared.

"OK, now what we're doing is basically cleaning and oiling and rewiring for you. It's not cheap, but the final cost depends on how bad the wires are."

She looked more closely at the hinges I'd removed.

"You shouldn't have taken those off. It's a part of the cab—"

"They just came off," I explained, humiliated. Now I realized why the machine hadn't lifted out easily after the screws had been removed. I'd taken off the metal hinges along with the two small rings of cabinet wood they were attached to.

She showed me something. "See these? They're called 'set screws.' You just loosen them. You took the hinges off the cabinet instead of taking the machine off the hinges."

There was one more thing: "Where's your slide panel that covers the bobbin?"

"I think I remember seeing that in a cabinet drawer," I said. "Silver, isn't it?"

“Well, you need it. Our machinist won’t work on this unless he knows you own the part. You can’t get all the parts for old machines like this, and you can’t sew without covering up the bobbin.”

“I’m sure I have it,” I said, not sure at all.

I could tell she had had enough of me.

• • •

Lora called me about the slide plate. As Dawn had suspected, the machinist wanted to know if I had it at home. I had checked and found it.

“Good!” Lora said. “Then he can go ahead.”

“Oh, by the way, Lora,” I said, “would you ask the machinist if he finds anything recognizable inside the machine to save it for me? You know, a little piece of fabric or maybe a strand of thread? Something substantial in the lint?”

“Sure,” she said, not seeming to think my request at all odd, even though it sounded pretty strange to me.

• • •

My mother was a silent woman. So was her mother. I come from a long line of Women Who Seldom Spoke. I can’t reconstruct a single conversation I had with my mother. I can barely hear her voice in my head anymore.

I remember that she often called my father “a big stubborn Irishman” when he did something really stupid—pry off a window frame and ruin the living room wallpaper, force us to plow ahead toward free lodging with relatives in Poughkeepsie during the worst winter storm I can remember rather than pull off at a Holiday Inn we could see from the road. She never spoke unless spoken to, wrote “Congratulations, Darling” or “Thank you” on cards to me instead of the long epistles my father gushed, and usually remained quiet, sewing, while other people talked. A piece of thread would say more to me than my mother ever had.

• • •

Lora was just driving out when I arrived to claim my Singer. She rolled

down the car window. "Have to fix some machines at a uniform shop in Barberton!" she said. "Yours is ready, though. Just go inside."

Since Lora had seen me, I knew I couldn't drive away.

So I entered the house and spoke to Dawn. "Did the machinist have any problems with it?"

"I don't know," she said. "He didn't talk to me about it. He talked to her. I think the only problem that he had was that he couldn't put the foot control back together, since you forgot to bring in the screws and the bracket."

She spent the next few minutes instructing me about how to reassemble the foot pedal.

"I can do that," I said.

"So, \$95.57 total," she said, writing out the bill. "It ended up being a little less because some of the wires were all right. You got off lucky."

"I did."

"I'll carry it out for you," she said.

"I can do it," I told her.

"No, I do that part. That's how we do it here. I carry the machines out. You might set it down the wrong way and get oil on the seat or hurt the machine. What you want to do is lay it over so it doesn't tip when you drive. Sewing machines don't like bouncing on the road, they don't like fire, and they don't like water."

She lifted the machine, carried it easily to my car, and laid it on its side in the trunk. Then I drove away with it, Dawn's words in my ears.

. . .

I'd never associated my mother's Singer with natural disasters before. It seemed such a curious thing for a person to say. Peril to a domestic machine from earth, fire, water? Annabelle's Singer seemed immune from any forces other than herself.

But Dawn's words made me think of the famous fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company in Greenwich Village, the worst workplace disaster in U.S. history before 9/11 and the Twin Towers. All my adult life I'd found my way to books about its story, never understanding my strange fascination.

I was neither a pyromaniac nor a person fond of disaster movies. But this story was different, somehow. On March 25, 1911—one hundred years after Singer was born—146 people died in a horrible fire, and 123 of them were women. Most were seamstresses.

It was a photo from a book I'd just read that I thought of as I drove away from the repair shop. The picture, in David Von Drehle's *Triangle: The Fire That Changed America*, was taken on the ninth floor of the Asch Building—where there were 278 sewing machines, and where the majority of the deaths occurred. It was a photo of several tables in a far corner of the room, some still partially standing. Everything else seemed to have melted. The only light in the picture came in through openings that had been windows once. It was not a black-and-white photograph, but black-on-black.

After I had stared at the picture through a magnifying glass, I saw a familiar shape. There, on the tables that remained, were the sewing machines—Singers, the word on the front still recognizable. Up and down the tables, row after row, were machines very much like the one I now owned. It was obscene. Each weighed thirty-three pounds, and they had survived, but the women who worked them had not.⁵

My mother was lucky. She was a generation removed from most of the women who burned in the fire. She had escaped the sweatshop.

But on the way home I began to sense that my mother was still somehow connected to the women who died in that fire. She, too, was the daughter of immigrants; she, too, had talent in her hands that held the promise that she would not be poor. I could see the other women, and then see her, living in a tenement house near Greene and Washington Place—see her walking one morning to the Triangle Shirtwaist Company because she needed work and she could sew and her parents had told her it was time. I could see them, then her, taking the elevator to the tenth floor of the Asch Building, where a man would hire her in a minute, never telling her about the hazards of his shop, never telling her that her machine might run right over her like the little black locomotive it resembled, with its decorative chrome grille on the front, its powerful wheel on the back, its spouts for oil, and its deadly chug, chug, chug.

She never said how she felt about her Singer, but I always knew she loved it. It was her whole world. When she sewed in the dark, and the light from her machine was on, the Singer cast a shadow on the wall as big as a continent. Little circles of light scattered on the ceiling, like tiny stars.

I think my father and I were afraid of her when she sewed. When we walked by her Singer, we did it quickly and reverently. Sometimes I think we did it jealously. She seemed more fond of her machine than she was of us.

There was so little emotion to read in Annabelle. I never felt she was in trouble, or knew what trouble was—until the Alzheimer's years. She was not nervous. She never bit her nails, the way I did (and do), never seemed to suffer from “hormonal imbalances” or insomnia, the way the current Xanax generation does. She loved her job ordering food for the Akron City Schools and never complained. She rarely saw a doctor and was a model of equanimity and good health.

She just didn't speak. That's all. It wasn't a malady, anything treatable. It was merely a fact. I don't mean to imply that she was rude or neglectful or unloving, because she was none of those things. She just never thought to give direct advice to a daughter, or to worry about her very much. Those heart-to-heart talks that mothers and daughters are known for? We never had a single one. Not in all the years I lived in her house. She talked more in the Alzheimer's unit than she ever had before—though seldom uttering anything intelligible.

I don't know what her dreams were, or her fears. I don't know what she saw when she looked in my direction. I don't know any of these things. All I really know is that she loved to sew.

• • •

She liked clothes—surprising clothes, beautiful clothes, clothes that worked against the properties of a particular fabric. She sewed on the bias. In early photos of my mother, she wears hats that tilt at sexy angles and often have feathers at the side, coats with fur collars, sleeveless evening dresses with low necklines (her sisters wear dresses with stiff, high collars and long, tight sleeves), shiny rhinestone buttons that dot wrists and bodice fronts. She made everything she owned.

When I knew her, she sewed with darker colors than I think she wore as a girl (as best as I can tell from photographs) and made tailored clothes for “work,” but even her later wardrobe began with difficult Vogue patterns (seldom McCall’s) and always introduced a little danger. She would change a dart, remove sleeves, join jarring colors, pinch and lower a waist. She knew her body, and guided her machine in its direction.

She loved using that Singer of hers, but I don’t think it was ever for the reasons Singer and Edward Clark, his business partner, said she should. She didn’t sew because advertisements told her it would save her labor. It created labor. She didn’t sew because it saved her money; we were working-class, but we could easily have bought all our clothes at Penney’s. And she certainly never expected to make money from owning her own machine—a promise from the manufacturer that was lost on her.

She was practical, so perhaps that was part of it. But she was practical only in the way that Admiral Richard Byrd was practical when he carried six Singers on his Antarctic expedition in 1930 and the Wright brothers were practical when they used their mother’s Singer to create the fabric of airplane wings and Mahatma Gandhi was practical when he learned to sew on a Singer while he was in prison during British colonial rule.⁶

It didn’t “civilize” her in any way that I could tell. Clark proposed that it would be a sort of missionary tool for “primitive” people in remote nations around the world. There’s a company ad from the 1890s that shows the King of Ou (Caroline Islands) sitting at a sewing machine with a grass skirt and a bone in his ear. The caption reads, “The Herald of Civilization—Missionary Work of the Singer Manufacturing Company.”⁷

As far as I can determine, my mother’s Singer made her no more social than she ever was. She never sewed with other women (it was always a private affair), and she generally made her trips to fabric stores and the Singer shop alone.

Nor did she sew for others. I liked the clothes she made for me, but they never felt like mine. They always reminded me of her. It’s easier for me to say why she didn’t sew than it is to say why she did.

I want to think she sewed because she loved me. I want Lora’s theory

that she bought her new machine for me to be correct. I was her daughter—the only child she would ever bear. But I know this is self-flattery (self-foolery) and has very little to do with the truth of my mother's sewing life. I'm inventing her still, wishing for the kind of mother little girls dream about: someone who vanishes in adoration of a daughter, who surrenders all too easily, and all too soon, to new growth and doesn't fight to remain (the way the ivory-billed did in the Singer Tract). It's much more likely that the Singer was her way to escape motherhood, not to embrace it.

• • •

Neighbors and family would enter our house and look at my mother hovered over that machine, or admire my clothes, and sometimes say, "Annabelle is so domestic! Oh, my, that woman can sew!" When she sewed, I suppose she did look domestic, but for her, domesticity was a ruse—the feathers that she grew so that others wouldn't see what she was really up to, or what was underneath. Neighbors and family would not disturb her when she sewed, because she was politely perched where she belonged.

But I see so little that was domestic now. Her hair was wild; she perspired; there were pins between her teeth. You might have thought her machine was a sort of weapon when she put her arms around it and turned it on. That vertical needle was a dangerous, powerful thing, and she had an arsenal of needles in a box—in all sizes, with replacements ready for those that broke.

The sewing machine allowed her to avoid encounters with the domestic world, not to have them. She could escape the kitchen, the basement (where most women kept a wringer washer, but we never owned one), vacuum cleaners, furniture polish, dust, and Saturday errands (except those that took her to a fabric store). She was so busy with her sewing that she only had time to make stuffed peppers twice a year, but never any cookies, cakes, or anything that required a sauce. Her menu was the same, week after week. Our food was simple and dry.

My mother had little ambition to rise in this world, the way that Isaac Merritt Singer did. Or to live multiple lives. She was not, like Singer,

a polygamist in any sense.⁸ She didn't take lovers, didn't run off with a theater troupe, never did anything extravagant that I recall, seldom cried (never from self-pity), ordered a lone daiquiri when we went out to a fancy dinner (which was once or twice a year), had her hair done on Saturday mornings by her friend Maxine, filed and polished her own nails, did the taxes, paid the bills. All she really seemed to want was to sew. Her life was focused on that one task.

Annabelle left me no words of comfort. When sorrow and worry have stopped my breath in recent years, I've had only this to call on: the image of a woman on a stool zigzagging her way across a piece of cloth with a silver needle going up and down.

• • •

I take the objects off the top of the cabinet, fold the side panels down, and raise the machine in the air to position it. I tilt it back toward the wall, slide it into the spokes of the cabinet hinges, tighten the set screws, and then lower it. I thread the wire to the foot pedal through the metal grille as Dawn has instructed me.

I plug in the Singer. Switch on the light.

I place a spool of red thread on the spool pin, but after looping the thread through the first guide that carries it over the neck to the left side of the machine, where the needle waits, I can't remember how to pass it between the tension discs. I consult my mother's old instruction manual and successfully draw the thread into the take-up spring on my second try. I close my eyes, open them again, and complete the upper threading on my own. I can't remember what direction to thread the needle, but my hand tells me right to left, and so that's what I do.

I remember how to draw the thread into the slots of the bobbin. Right to left again. I close the slide plate when I'm finished, turn the wheel of the machine, and let the needle down to pull the bobbin thread up and make it visible. I place an old linen tea towel I found in a drawer underneath the presser foot.

As eager as I am to see a red stitch race down the fabric, I don't feel any

desire to buy a piece of beautiful cloth for some summer occasion I hope I'll be invited to. I don't want to sew. All I want is to hear the machine, and so I press the pedal down.

It begins in little chugs, or chirps. It's noisy, but its sound does not unsettle me. The machine feels like silk under my fingers, like water or my mother's hair.

I think of the tendency of bird watchers to turn birdsong into human language so that they can more easily locate a species. In the trill of birdsong, they hear words. The white-throated sparrow is said to sing *Old Sam Peabody*, according to my *Backyard Birdsong Guide*. The Baltimore oriole, the mnemonic *Here, here, come right here, dear*. And the red-eyed vireo, *Here I am . . . over here . . . vireo . . . listen now . . . believe me . . . that's right*.⁹ To David Kullivan, a turkey hunter who claimed to have spotted an "extinct" pair of ivory-billed woodpeckers in 1999, the sound of the male call was a "loud nasal *kent*."¹⁰

I want to believe that the sightings of ivory-billed woodpeckers in 1999 and 2004 were real, just as Rosen did. Cornell University announced that there was enough material evidence to call the return "definitive" after David Luneau caught a bird on a piece of video, but an expert on the ivory-billed, Jerome Jackson, soon declared he was not convinced by the footage.¹¹

I think of the return of the ivory-billed to trees that had been planted after the old virgin forests were cut down, to trees that were starting to decay—finally ready for the birds' return.

Now that my mother's machine has been repaired, I think I'll catch a glimpse of her. If you can recognize the sound of a bird, the American Birding Association accepts that as evidence of a sighting. You don't have to see it. You can check it off your list.

So what is my mother saying to me in the familiar voice that I hear again today; hear after an absence of so many years; hear, perhaps for the first time, with ears and heart that are ready for her?

Is it, *Work work work work work work*? Perhaps. It sounds a little like that as the needle engages and races down the cloth. But sometimes I think I hear *No no no no no no no*. Or, *Yes yes yes yes*, or *Truly truly truly truly*. The

thing that puzzles me is that the sounds repeat and are absolutely regular as the needle smoothly punches through the cloth, and yet, each time I lift my foot to stop and turn the fabric, and then press again, I hear a different word. Sometimes the tune sounds like a warning; other times, sheer glee.

She spoke every day to me. I know that now. She sang with the mockingbird, the owls, the titmouse, the Carolina wren—with all the mysterious birds that sing at night. She sat on her little leather stool—her night roost—and called.

I rest my head on her Singer as I slide my hands up the cloth, watching the needle strike. The only noise in the whole house is my mother's sewing machine. There is no one with me, and even the pipes and planks of this place are still.

I'll begin to translate her song tonight, though it won't be easy. I had thought that fixing her machine would solve everything—would quickly bring her back—but I was wrong. I should have listened to her more carefully when she was here, but it's too late for that. Now I know my only chance is to name her as a birder would. I will jot down a notation in my Composition Book—maybe catch a syllable before midnight comes. Tomorrow, a split-second phrase could arrive, and I'll write that down. This elusive creature I'd give anything to know may have a different song for morning, noon, and night, and for every season of the year. Deep listening is what birders call it—this thing that I'm about to do.¹² It's a new technique for me.

NOTES

1. Jonathan Rosen, *The Life of the Skies: Birding at the End of Nature* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 53.
2. *Ibid.*, 55.
3. Specifics about the life of Isaac M. Singer and the invention of the sewing machine are from Don Bissell, *The First Conglomerate: 145 Years of the Singer Sewing Machine Company* (Brunswick, ME: Audenreed Press, 1999), 21; Ruth Brandon, *Singer and the Sewing Machine: A Capitalist Romance* (New York: Kodansha International, 1977), 42–52; Robert Bruce Davies, *Peacefully Working to Conquer the World: Singer Sewing Machines in Foreign Markets, 1854–1920* (New York: Arno Press, 1976), 11; Andrew B. Jack, “The

Channels of Distribution for an Innovation: The Sewing-Machine Industry in America, 1860–1865,” *Explorations in Entrepreneurial History* 9 (February 1957): 136; and a historical reprint of an 1867 essay in the *Atlantic Monthly*, James Parton’s “History of the Sewing Machine,” available through the Michigan Historical Reprint Series, which reprints manuscripts from the collection of the University of Michigan, 1–31.

4. Akron city directories from the University of Akron Archives in the Polsky Building provided specific information about the nineteenth-century Akron store.
5. The details of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire are taken from David Von Drehle, *Triangle: The Fire That Changed America* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2003), 105–6. The photo referred to is included in the text and comes from the Archives at Cornell University.
6. References to Admiral Byrd, the Wright brothers, and Mahatma Gandhi come from Bissell, *The First Conglomerate*, 1, 6.
7. The photograph of the King of Ou is in Davies, *Peacefully Working*.
8. Details about I. M. Singer’s polygamous relationships can be found in almost any biography of him, but especially helpful are Bissell, *The First Conglomerate*, 12–13, 26–30; Brandon, *Singer and the Sewing Machine*, 141–206; and Charles M. Eastley, *The Singer Saga* (Devon, UK: Merlin, 1983), 21–35.
9. The translations of the songs of birds mentioned in this paragraph are found in Donald Kroodsma, *The Backyard Birdsong Guide: A Guide to Listening* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2008). The book is a Cornell Lab of Ornithology Audio Field Guide, and the relevant audio numbers for the birds described in the text are 113 (sparrow), 126 (Baltimore oriole), and 048, 049 (vireo).
10. The observation by Kullivan is quoted in Rosen, *The Life of the Skies*, 26.
11. The inconclusive nature of the video shot by David Luneau is discussed in Rosen, *The Life of the Skies*, 273.
12. In *The Backyard Birdsong Guide*, Kroodsma includes an introductory chapter called “The Practice of Deep Listening,” 15–20.

If You Can't Stand the Heat

Ruminations on the Stove
from an African American Woman

Psyche Williams-Forson

Do you want it on your collard greens?
Do you want it in your candy sweets?
Do you want it on your pickled beets?
Give it to me, give it to me, give it.
Do you want it on your rice and gravy?
Do you want it on your biscuits baby?
Do you want it on your black-eyed peas?
Feed it to me, feed it to me, feed it.
Ooh it's love, ooh it's love.

—JILL SCOTT, "IT'S LOVE"

One of the smells I most remember from my childhood is garlic. This aroma most often meant that my mom was frying chicken for Sunday dinner. Early in the morning, I would be awakened by the tangy, pungent odor wafting through our house. Since the bedroom I shared with my sisters was close to the kitchen, the smells were usually accompanied by the incessant sounds of sizzle as the oil cooked through the juices of the chicken. A much lighter sleeper than my sisters, I would drag myself, sleepy-eyed, into the

kitchen and perch on the stool directly beside the Sears model freestanding gas stove that occupied our very small kitchen in rural Virginia. The hiss of the frying pan and the stove that provided its heat serve as vehicles of remembrance: a breeding ground for acts of agency and activism, and a bridge to cultural transmission, preservation, and sustainability—even as they sometimes also operate as symbols of ambivalence.

Telling one's life history through food—or more directly the stove—means remembering dirt and ashes. It means remembering physical labor. As an African American woman thinking and writing about both stoves and cooking, I significantly engage the ways that my foremothers performed work on coal or wood-burning stoves as well as electric and gas ranges. I muse often about the ways that, as we cooked for others as well as ourselves, they/we had steam burn our faces and hot grease sear our skin. I think this is partly how they came to be “strong black women”—they stood over the heat, they created the heat, they were burned by the heat, and they kept on going. Not invincible, mind you, but black women (like many others) had work to do, and the stove factored centrally in that work.

Since our arrival on the shores of the Americas, African and African American women have been primarily relegated to kitchens. Well-documented, the histories of African American women and domestic work reflect a heritage of pride as much as drudgery. Since first landing in Jamestown, Virginia, African American women have cooked for, and worked in the service of, white families. We are now coming to learn more fully the work that enslaved women performed over an open hearth or a fireplace with their pots and skillets. We are learning that this work not only fed those who enslaved them but also sometimes was used to make Pepper Pot—a hot soup cooked from tripe or some other cheap meat, bird peppers, root vegetables, yams or plantains, okra, salt and other seasonings—or fried chicken and pies, coffee, and other foods that they could sell when time, permission, or the system of labor allowed them to do so. This work was stifling! Not only was this a life of toil, but also the heat from an open fireplace in summertime was taxing.

Long after enslavement, African American women were still entwined with this piece of kitchen technology, often by racist caricatures of the late nineteenth century that tied them to blackening stove polishes as well as to limited employment. It was work that tethered them to cooking and other domestic chores such as laundering and ironing—all of which involved stove heat. But it is black women's use of the stove to cook that primarily frames my own memories. I remember the large black woman who served as our babysitter once or twice. I recall that while she was ironing clothes to help out my mother, she gnawed on a cold pork chop bone, saying it was too much work to heat the stove. I remember thinking, *I don't want to eat a cold pork chop* because when meat fat is cold, it turns snow white. *So I'm going to have to learn to cook.*

Do you want it on your collard greens?

My sisters and I learned to cook from watching our parents. In his youth, my father had been a short-order cook, so we were regaled with stories of diners on the boardwalk of Atlantic City. Childhood breakfasts were filled with a variety of foods—fried potatoes, eggs cooked runny with the yolk upright (i.e., sunny-side up); fried eggs flipped over with the yolk somewhat soft and runny (i.e., over-easy); fried eggs, flipped over, with the yolk solid all the way through (i.e., over-hard, my favorite); eggs scrambled hard, scrambled easy, scrambled light; egg whites only; and the timeless cheese and/or vegetable omelet. Being from the South, it was not uncommon for us also to have grits and salmon cakes for breakfasts during the weekday. Holiday breakfasts brought fried oysters, a remembrance of my father's past. Lunches were either provided in school or consisted of peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches on the weekends when we went to dance classes. The other children in class frequented McDonald's during the lunch breaks.

My mother's tenure as "Mommy" spanned the gamut from staying at home when we were young (selling *World Book Encyclopedia*, Sara Coventry

Jewelry, and Avon) to working as a social worker after we grew up, all while getting her bachelor's degree. Dinners were usually her domain—stuffed green peppers, pork chops, meatloaf, and chicken (baked, fried, barbecued, stewed), with all kinds of vegetables as sides. Initially, we ate a lot of gravies and white bread, but when my dad was diagnosed with diabetes, more salads were added to our weekly menu, including tuna, chicken, carrot and raisin (his beloved), and a variety of tossed, all with iceberg lettuce.¹ The stove still remained an important kitchen appliance designed to provide nourishment, but now it took on a different role—sustaining personal health. Long before popular edicts on healthy eating became the order of the day, my family was using the stove to transform death into life using vegetables—okra, kale, peas (fresh, frozen, and especially pearly), glazed carrots, eggplant, and always collard greens. Food was pleasure, and my parents enjoyed cooking.

In our home, the stove occupied a place in a life of constant activity. In my early years, rarely did my mother perform cooking as menial work, and my family didn't see the stove as a site of oppression. Like many women of her era, my mother enjoyed cooking—just like many other women of her time loathed it. Despite the labor-intensive nature of cooking some foods, my mother found joy in cooking. Take, for instance, collard greens. On any given Sunday (then and now), greens could be found on our dining-room table. Long before kale became “hip” and “cool,” it would be simmering on our stove in a pot filled with collards and maybe turnip greens as well. On Saturday, we would go to Shop-Rite or Tops grocery store, and back at home as we put away the food, we were told to get out the big pot and leave the greens on the counter. My mother would sit at the kitchen table and tear the leaves away from the stems and then tear them further into small pieces. I never saw her cut the greens into the neat strips found in restaurants today. Washing any kind of greens is essential because the last thing you want is to “bite down on some grit.” That will ruin a good pot of greens anytime. Using just a smidgen of dish detergent (today we use vinegar or veggie wash), my mother would soak the greens like she was hand-washing delicacies. Several rinses ensued, during which time she would also add salt to the water to

separate the grit further. When she could swipe the bottom of the sink and not feel any dirt or grime, the greens were clean.

Saturday evenings and the smell of cooking greens meant we also had to prepare for church the next day. Church prep meant putting out our clothes, shining our shoes, and getting our hair done. My mother would pull up a chair close to the stove, assembling all combs, brushes, and hair grease, preparing to straighten our hair. To the unaware, this means that a hot comb is run through the hair in order to flatten or straighten it to give it a smooth, “sleek” appearance.² My mother would put the hot comb on the flame of the gas stove until it heated. While it was getting hot, she would part and grease our hair, most likely with Blue Magic hair grease. By then, the comb would be ready, and she would always say, “Hold your ear!” With shoulders undoubtedly hunched, and curls of steam rising from the comb, my mother would blow on it for no real apparent reason as it never actually cooled. The next thing we heard was the hiss and pop as the hot comb made contact with strands of our hair. Though our hair sizzled and the smell of burnt hair filled the air, mixing with the aroma of collard greens simmering on the stove, we knew we would leave the chair beside the stove with a bit more pep in our step!

Do you want it on your candy sweets?

These kinds of childhood recollections are a filter through which objects, such as stoves, take on meanings that fashion a collective memory and that also illustrate women’s influence and power in the kitchen. Thinking about my youth enables me to recognize my own memories as a part of self-validation.³ In my African American middle-class family, the stove was central to our family’s identity. For example, by cooking and making meals at home, our family was able to use our disposable income for other kinds of activities. Not only were our lunches packed for us when we went to dance class but also when we traveled.

I saw every travel opportunity as an adventure. When we were preparing

to travel to Colorado or even back home to Virginia or to wherever we would go, my mom would get out the picnic basket. She would then start the task of preparing foods that we would take with us—usually fried chicken wings, fruit, barrel juices (“juicees”), chips, and some “candy sweets” such as cookies and moon pies. Southerners and African Americans, more than many others, have a taste for foods that are higher in sugar, salt, and fat ingredients.⁴ So, candy sweets are often found on the menu. In fact, as Norma Jean and Carole Darden explain in their memoir cookbook *Spoonbread and Strawberry Wine*, when traveling, sweets are considered mandatory. When Norma Jean and Carole traveled in the 1950s, their “shoebox lunch” included “fried chicken, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, deviled eggs, carrot and celery sticks, salt and pepper, chocolate layer cake, and lemonade, all neatly wrapped in wax paper, with ‘extra treats’ like fruit, nuts, raisins, and cheese.”⁵ Similarly, we ate a lot of cakes, pies, and cookies until my dad’s illness came into play. Then, like the Darden sisters, we continued to travel with small confections but leaned more toward “fruit, nuts, raisins, and cheese.”

Utensils, condiments, napkins, and so on would complete the basket. I didn’t know then that our food basket for a family of five was as much about economy as it was about racial history. On the mornings of our family trips, I would awaken early to the smells of chicken frying in the kitchen. Sometimes my mother would let me season the chicken with salt, pepper, paprika, and garlic. As I watched and helped, I was also taught. I learned more than how to season fried chicken. I also learned that we traveled with food both out of financial necessity and also for historical reasons: the lack of hospitable places to eat in the rural South. This knowledge dampened my excitement a bit. And yet my parents saw these realities as teachable moments. Since the early 1970s was not too far removed from the racial and cultural tensions surrounding the civil rights movement, travel in rural Virginia late at night could still engender discomfort. Understanding this dynamic, and its social and political implications, my parents turned this stretch of our trip into a time when we learned more about racial inequity.

In packing our food, they were negotiating the financial constraints of traveling. By explaining racism, they were exercising resistance. And when they allowed my sisters and me to assist in the process of packing our own boxes, they taught us the meanings of self-support and collective memory.⁶ Here, then, the kitchen stove is a tool that provides both the sweet and the bitter. On the one hand, it was the source for preparing layer cakes and pies; on the other hand, it was a platform for learning, as the foods prepared by my mom “were materials of political necessity as well as social protest.”⁷

Do you want it on your pickled beets?

The recipe for making pickled beets is relatively simple: beets, cider vinegar, sugar, olive oil, and, if you desire, cloves. According to the *Complete Guide to Home Canning*, when cooked in a pot atop the stove, the entire process should take approximately thirty to forty-five minutes.⁸ The art of pickling is an age-old preservation technique that might include either fermentation to prevent spoilage or simply preserving foods in vinegar (e.g., pickles). But pickling also changes tastes and textures (e.g., cabbage into sauerkraut), mixing together the bitter (vinegar) and the sweet (sugar). The stove functions to change something that could be bitter into something tasty—such as pickled beets. As Jill Scott sings about the flavors of life, love, and the self in her song “It’s Love,” she sees fit to add pickled beets to her lexicon of Southern cuisine alongside collard greens, sweet potatoes, and black-eyed peas.

I grew up eating pickled and nonpickled beets because anemia runs in my family, and they almost immediately restore power and energy. Given the particular quality of this foodstuff, pickled beets become an interesting symbol of agency and activism: a food that synthesizes the bitter with the sweet and one that also gives strength. In my own upbringing, the development of my social consciousness stemmed directly from being the daughter of civil rights activists in my minister father and educator

mother. Cooking and mealtimes were most always used for discussions and debates on social and political awareness. As my mother came into her own gender consciousness during the 1970s, she made sure my sisters and I understood the dynamics of what it meant to be middle-class black women growing up in America, burdened with interlocking systems of oppression. In the Williams family, mealtimes were crucial in the development of collective cultural awareness: my mother procured, prepared, and presented a variety of foods, explaining when they were a part of our culinary heritage. Then my father stressed the importance of what we were eating and why. "Eat!" he would say. "There are people starving in the world!" And through the food itself as well as our discussions about it, my sisters and I would consume, absorb, and digest the physical, social, and psychological complexities of life.⁹

From stove to table, my parents built community within our home and then moved that community outward to sites of our daily lives. In this way, my parents ensured that we took kitchen-table talk to the streets in order to effect social change, no matter how seemingly inconsequential. Little did I know that one of my first engagements with activism would come by way of food. Black women and men have often used stoves, cooking, and foods to change lives. For African Americans, food means something more than just a meal. Stoves have been deployed to contribute to local and communal economies through the cultural work of feeding and the activist work of fundraising. In today's world of fast-food options such as KFC, Hardees, Wendy's, Chinese take-out restaurants, and grocery stores that provide ready-to-eat fried chicken meals, it is easy to forget that, for many, homemade fried chicken and biscuits were, and are, a means to a profitable—and political—end.

During the summer of 1974, my sisters and I learned about the nexus of racism, sexism, and class and how these variables could be connected to dietary exchange. My parents announced that we were driving across town to purchase fried chicken dinners from a group of people raising money for the Joan Little Defense Fund. Little was accused of first-degree

murder in Beaufort County, North Carolina, for *allegedly* using an ice pick to stab to death a corrections officer named Clarence Alligood and then trying to escape.¹⁰ To get our dinners, we had to go to the predominantly black section of Buffalo, New York, known as “The Fruitbelt” (because all of the streets were named after fruit). I have a vivid recollection of feeling uncomfortable as my father explained to us the devastating thing called “rape.” And I specifically remember the soothing tones of my mother as she gently helped us (at thirteen, ten, and eight years old) to process our new knowledge of this oppressive phenomenon while we ate our chicken dinners, purchased in the name of self-defense.

Do you want it on your rice and gravy . . . or biscuits, baby?

Fried chicken is a Southern hallmark, a celebrated food. Because it was and is often served on Sundays, it is commonly referred to as the Gospel Bird. Celebrity chef Virginia Willis says that fried chicken, rice, and gravy make up the Holy Trinity of food:

Real fried chicken still is special and means down-home comfort for many folks like no other dish. It is the cast-iron Holy Grail of Southern comfort food. Ah, but chicken without gravy and rice is like heaven without the angels: really, really great, but not quite the ticket. Gravy is a salve to the soul. Gravy marries the chicken to the rice and is the deep brown pool for baptizing the biscuit. Chicken with rice and gravy is the comfort food holy trinity.¹¹

By the time my family returned to the South, after years of living in the North, I knew how to make rice and gravy. I was about twelve years old and had been cooking for almost four years. We learned to cook by necessity—out of the need to help out around the house. This practice continued in earnest when we moved back into the Southern home my grandparents

once occupied. A one-level, six-room house with a very small kitchen might be considered cramped by today's standards. We almost never ate in the kitchen, which was nestled in the back of the house, with catty-cornered windows that let in lots of sunlight. Despite the welcome brightness, the kitchen was relatively tight, so we ate our meals in the dining room. Sitting against one of the kitchen windows was a small table, cushioned between a single inset cabinet on the left (crammed with dishes and spices) and a hot water heater on the right, where my mother put her weathered cookbooks. I vividly remember the presence of *A Good Heart and a Light Hand: Ruth Gaskins' Collection of Traditional Negro Recipes*, Mary Burgess's *Soul to Soul: A Vegetarian Soul Food Cookbook*, and a vintage version of Irma Rombauer's classic *Joy of Cooking*. "The wood stove," as we called it, was adjacent to the water heater. It heated our house in the winter, even as it was also used to cook pots of white beans, cast-iron corn bread, or vegetable stew made from leftovers.

But it was our gas stove, which sat beside the wood stove, that primarily fed the family. Almost thirty years after my mother started using the gas stove, she still remembers how much she enjoyed cooking on it, seeing us relish the foods she prepared. As she says, food was "fresher, tastier, and had more substance to it" back then. "Your dad always had a story to tell and everyone always had input. . . . It's not like now where everyone jumps up from the table after they eat."¹² It was innocuous, really, just a plain white stove, but it was the bedrock for so much more: the stove was the means of bringing the farm to the table and of extending our family time together and thus creating strong family bonds.

Wedge in between elaborate home-cooked breakfasts and school-provided lunches, our slow-cooked dinners would line the stove—string beans with chicken or meatloaf. Then there were the nights of liver and onions, when my dad would pour what seemed like a vat of flour on the table in order to give the liver a good coating. We didn't have many big meals because schedules didn't allow for such; leftovers might last a couple of days because of our activities—band practice, basketball practice, and so

on. The heaviest meal of the week was on Sunday, when dinner was often collard greens, fried chicken, and potato salad.

Fried chicken on Sunday has been part of a long-standing tradition among many African Americans. Spending most of the day in church (from sunup to sundown), many congregants did not have the time to travel home and back to make it for the late evening service. Because in many rural churches folks had no access to kitchen facilities, women would prepare the Sunday meals at home, and during a break in the service, they would spread their food on blankets and eat. The bird is critical to church food, both out of habit and because it “traveled well.” And because the pastor is considered to hold the position of highest esteem and cultural power in the church—and often the community—it remains a privilege to serve him or her the best pieces of chicken, usually the breast.

If Sundays were marked by serving chicken, summers were filled with fresh vegetables from someone’s garden and my sister’s runt tomatoes grown for 4-H competitions. Often, the latter made their way to our white corner stove, where they were stewed, fried, or boiled. We would wake on summer mornings to the smell of slab bacon and homemade biscuits made from flour, baking powder, salt, and shortening (we used Crisco). My mom would roll out the flour, cut the biscuits out with a glass or a jar—just like her mom used—and then she would prick them. I don’t know why she did this: my mother was never sure if it was for decoration or to let out the air.

Then there were the apples that we fried for breakfast, acquired from Ms. Edna’s tree next door, always by invitation. Sometimes we were awakened just so that we could go next door to get the apples that had fallen off the tree. I gathered sour apples, sometimes with smudges, into a bag, or, if my sisters came along, we loaded them into our arms. Sometimes we just wiped them on our clothes and took a bite. But if they were for breakfast, we washed them off with water and lemon juice. Then we sliced them and put them in the frying pan that had been heating with butter. I listened for the sizzle. The loud hiss and crackle let me know that apples were starting

to cook. As the sounds of frying died down, I would know it was time to add some water to keep them from sticking to the bottom of the pan. As the water met the heat, the apples would steam and brown. I watched my mom add cinnamon and maybe a dash of sugar, and let it “stew down” until there was just the slightest hint of crisp.

I watched, I learned, and then, eventually, I improvised. It was not innate—none of it was innate. My mom learned to cook from her mother, as each one of my sisters and I learned from our own mother. My mother says that the first thing my grandmother taught her to cook were meatballs. Every now and then, my grandmother would let my mother make the meatballs herself, and then my mom moved on to pies. As my mother says, back then “You sat and watched your parents cook” (just as we watched her). She elaborates:

You learned by trial and error. And then you were around your aunts and others. It's not like today where young people don't go around older people. People cooked back then. You watched people cook and prepare for revivals and holidays—Christmas, Thanksgiving, Easter—people cooked! If you were old enough, you participated; you just didn't watch. You peeled potatoes, peaches, [and] pears for the summers to can and all that kind of stuff. You didn't just sit and watch. When they taught you, they would start you off by saying, “Here, do this.” You say, “What do I do?” And they showed you how. “You do it this way, and you learn how to do it this way.” Then you said, “What do you do next?” My mother, my aunt, my grandmother, around my mother's friends, Daut [my cousin], that's how we learned to cook.¹³

Many black women have a strong relationship to cooking. During enslavement, black women dominated the cooking on many plantations. They have been widely credited with lining “Southern groaning boards” with all kinds of marvelous sweet and savory dishes—from pickled beets to rice and gravy. But centrally important, yet often ignored, is not only

the technical labor that was employed by African and African American women, or the actual foods they cooked, but also the tremendous amount of time spent trying to “get it right.” Cooking is rarely an intrinsic or instinctive process; assuming so belies the levels of skill involved and time taken to perfect one’s talents. Many African American women burned foods until they learned how to cook them—the exact temperatures needed to brown sauces, the right spices to combine in order to season correctly, and so on.

Recognizing and acknowledging this history frees black women from an oppressive and repressive bind and allows us to stop “clinging to mammy,” a stereotypical image that continues to function as a trope in the collective American imagination. Though countless studies have deconstructed the myth of African American women as obese, large-breasted, asexual, and aged mammies who happily perform their domestic duties with broad grins and subservient attitudes, this cultural idea persists.¹⁴ As my mother reflects,

And then so many black women like my mother, aunts, and their friends worked for white families and learned how to do things a certain way and they brought that home. [White women] helped them improve their skills. I never forget how your cousin Daut used to set the breakfast table every day at her own house—coffee, juice, cream, sugar, and the proper utensils on the table. I have gone over there many a day and said, who’s coming for breakfast? But no one was coming; it was just her and [her husband], but it had become a part of her and that’s what she did.

Setting the table the way a white woman taught my cousin Daut is more than a revealing anecdote about dining rituals; it is also a metaphor for the politics and the subtleties of power that are embedded in African American cooking practices: the ways that food and foodways can be read as an indicator of social and political meaning. As anthropologist Jeremy MacClancy argues, “Food is power. . . . Those who regulate its production, distribution and consumption can control others.”¹⁵ In other words, power

related to food circulation is a process of negotiation and interactions with others in order to change the conditions of one's culture and surroundings. For this reason, power cannot be viewed as solely structural. It is multifaceted; just like in a multicourse meal, power has many courses, with rules governing the presentation of each new dish. By studying food, food processes, and objects like stoves, we gain a better understanding of the multiple uses and illustrations of power, much of which lies underneath the layers of the meal preparation process. It is there as well that a kind of ambivalence lurks, the kind that governs the ways in which many other women and I approach the stove.

Feed it to me, feed it to me . . . It's love . . .

It is said that food is love. It is also said that the way to a person's—mostly a man's—heart is through his stomach. So what happens when the act of feeding and/or the food you cook disrupts his or your child's stomach? What results when you doubt yourself in the kitchen—or worse, when as an African American woman, you hate to cook, belying the legacy? My mother puts it this way: “These kids today—some of them want to learn to cook because they see it on tv. It looks fun, and it's exotic. We learned to cook because that's what you did to help out. . . . You knew you had to eat. . . . People passed traits and skills from one generation to another, just like cleaning and washing clothes.” In reply to this comment, I say to my mother, “Yes, but cooking is different. I think there is something different about knowing or not knowing how to cook. The act of feeding is fraught with so much tension.”

Literally and figuratively, there is a level of skill that must be employed in the kitchen to keep from burning yourself. The same danger does not accompany cleaning and washing clothes. There are reasons that many women fear the stove. For one, food is so heavily tied to emotion, taste, praise, reprisal, and rebuke that it engenders a lot of anxiety. I have heard

countless women say, “My mother wasn’t a good cook,” so they themselves didn’t learn to cook, or they feel that they can’t cook. As my mother points out, “The reality is [such women] probably can [cook], but maybe not as well as someone else.” Cooking and stoves are powerful symbols of love and familial identity because, in part, so many people attribute their own cooking skill to having had a “good mother” or a “bad mother,” depending on how well their mothers cooked.

Food also has the power to shape time, place, and social interaction and most often this begins at the stove. For this reason, among others, the thought of using a stove—any kind of stove—stirs a lot of emotion. Recently, as my best friend watched me butter cornbread, she said, “No wonder my food always looks so ashy.” With this lament, she implied that in her attempts at health consciousness, she sacrifices taste. Interestingly, she will most often eat anything that I cook, as she knows I am equally as health conscious. Perhaps one of the differences between us is that I’ve been cooking a long time, and I learned how to gauge the use of oils and butters without measuring. Like Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor, I tend to cook by vibration. In her landmark autoethnographic cookbook, she writes: “And when I cook, I never measure or weigh anything. I cook by vibration. I can tell by the look and smell of it. . . . Different strokes for different folks. Do your thing your way.”¹⁶

Cooking by vibration is also why I prefer a gas stove. It is difficult for me to calibrate temperature sometimes using an electric eye. I can cook on it all right, but given the choice, I want to see the flame. For me, it goes along with the sounds of cooking. The higher the flame, of course, the faster food cooks. The lower it is, the more food simmers. Seeing the flame lets me know how well the food is cooking. Adjusting the flame on the stove enables my food to have a particular look and a particular taste. Knowing and being true to your own taste is important anyhow but especially when you are trying to cook cross-culturally.

When I was married, I used to be told, “That is too much oil.” There was a particular consternation on my part that followed such admonitions, as

I was supremely confident that I knew what I was doing. As detailed elsewhere¹⁷ cross-cultural food differences and preferences can be challenging in relationships, even when you marry within a racial and/or ethnic group. I argue, “Food is instrumental in highlighting the ways that situated daily practices can reveal processes of identity formation and place making. Recognizing that food has a unifying power in helping us to construct our sense of belonging and nationality is not a new concept unto itself. Neither is it novel to note that homes and kitchens are more than sites of consumption. They are, in fact, spaces where food and power intersect in the performance of identity negotiation, formation, and reformation.”¹⁸ In our marriage, the stove often served as a barrier—literally and figuratively. It was difficult for us to use the kitchen space or its appliances at the same time. Having worked for some time in an industrial kitchen, my husband was used to each person having a large station in which to work. Similar to my father who needed to flour the entire kitchen table to coat the liver before frying, my husband needed “space” in which to create. I, on the other hand, could produce a meal in minutes pulling together whatever I had planned without needing a lot of terrain.

Though probably very much unintentional, the battle over space became a besmirching of how I was producing “family.” Marjorie DeVault, who has written widely on this argument in *Feeding the Family*, argues, “Part of the intention behind producing the meal is to produce ‘home’ and ‘family.’”¹⁹ The inability, then, to produce family or home in a way that was culinarily satisfying to everyone was resolved by the implementation of a kinship or “othermothering” network. Because our intercultural black household (like other families) was complex in its makeup, to produce “home” we engaged our stove in a “gender, race, and ethnic negotiation, compromise, and accommodation.” To accommodate my husband’s taste for a certain kind of cooking, I relinquished the stove:

On multiple occasions I would frequent [my sister-in-law’s ethnic market] for “kitchen-talk”—casual or serious family and business-related

conversations—or to purchase items needed at home. Often, they would dole out motherly advice to me about “setting up house.” . . . [One time] one of my sisters-in-law mentioned in passing that prior to our getting married, they would sometimes cook for their younger brother, stockpiling several of his favorite meals. It could have been missed, this subtle request/invitation to continue occasionally this practice. And while I recognized that such an arrangement could be loaded with all kinds of gender and family issues, not to mention power relations, the context and presentation of the request was understated enough that I agreed to its continuance. At that moment, a deal was struck that needed no additional clarification. Like seasoning without measuring, it was decided upon that my home, literally and figuratively, would be open to a certain amount of outside influence—culinary influence. . . . As spices and smells of foreign and homelands intermingled, we crisscrossed continents and once again married, not just to families but also food traditions. Consenting to the food arrangement proffered by the sisters made it clear that I was willing to engage in an act of culinary plurality. It was a befitting space—the ethnic market—in which to gel such an agreement because food would serve as an adhesive for binding our new family relationship.²⁰

By letting go of the stove and my control over the gender norm that compelled me to cook for my husband, I engaged in a conscious strategy that enabled us to produce our own version of home and family. My in-laws participated in varying traditional gender roles in part because they recognized my cultural status as a university professor.

Here, the stove is symbolic of the myriad implications wrought by race, gender, class, region, and nation. Perhaps more importantly, it expands the understanding of the relationships that black women (and men) have to food, cooking, cookery, and kitchens. This need to enlarge society’s understanding is what fuels another ambivalence I have toward stoves—I tend not to bring actual cooking and/or food into my courses on gender,

food, and identity. It is my express purpose to challenge students to see beyond food as intimacy and communion—a view many already tend to hold—in order to see food as tension and as undergirded by layers of power. More importantly, I need them to see me as a professor: a woman in authority, not as a black woman always already associated with cooking. I do not begrudge my colleagues who introduce actual foodstuffs in the classroom—not at all. But because I believe it is an expectation of me and of a food course in the humanities more generally, I always emphasize to my students, “We will not be eating in this class as a part of the course.”

African American women have always had complicated relationships with stoves. This is due as much to our history in domestic service as to the numerous myths surrounding our ability to cook. Contrary to these fables, I have vivid memories of learning how to make gravies, frying chicken and cabbage, and even boiling corn, by listening to and watching my father and mother. These memories have served me well through the years as I have learned that the stove has held a role of central importance in the lives of many black women, particularly as a source for home provisioning, entrepreneurship, community engagement, and social activism.

My love of cooking by “vibration” and my social class have enabled me to experiment with different herbs and spices. Reay Tannahill reminds us that “food flexibility (as a matter of choice) is usually a characteristic of affluent societies. The nearness of hunger breeds conservatism. Only the well-fed can afford to try something new because only they can afford to leave it on the plate if they dislike it.”²¹ My socioeconomic status allows me to have more time and freedom to try out different ingredients, if I choose, and to acquire new knowledge and skills in the kitchen. I have also learned that for many of my African American sisters—historically and today—the stove was and is viewed as an anathema. And as I struggle to cook for my family at the end of a long, busy day, I find sometimes that I, too, look upon this object with loathing, and I wonder, am I losing my love for the stove?

I hope not. I have many more meals to cook and words to share about

the central importance of this material object in the lives of African American people—as well as in my own life.

NOTES

The verse in the epigraph and referred to throughout this chapter come from Jill Scott's song "It's Love" (*Who is Jill Scott?, Words and Sounds*, Vol. 1, Hidden Beach Recordings, 2000).

1. I will never forget the first time we had a tossed salad with hot dogs in it. In the 1970s, who knew any better? We thought it was original and tasty.
2. Hair straightening is an age-old technique that dates back to early societies. As late as the nineteenth century, hot combs were available in Sears catalogs for white and African American women. Early on, when African American women wanted to press their hair, they would use an actual iron. Generally, hair straightening by black women is seen as a desire to conform to white standards of beauty. However, hair performs a number of different cultural and personal articulations for women, so there are a number of reasons why, as children, my sisters and I liked to get our hair pressed. See Noliwe Rooks, *Hair Raising: Beauty, Culture, and African American Women* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996).
3. Psyche Williams-Forson, *Building Houses out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, and Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 132.
4. See Tony L. Whitehead, "In Search of Soul Food and Meaning: Culture, Food, and Health," in *African Americans in the South: Issues of Race, Class, and Gender*, ed. Hans A. Baer and Yvonne Jones (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 97–142.
5. Norma Jean Darden and Carole Darden, *Spoonbread and Strawberry Wine: Recipes and Reminiscences of a Family* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 290–91.
6. Williams-Forson, *Building Houses out of Chicken Legs*, 132.
7. *Ibid.*
8. National Center for Home Food Preparation, "Preparing and Canning Pickled Vegetables," *Complete Guide to Home Canning*, Agriculture Information Bulletin No. 539, USDA, 2009.
9. Williams-Forson, *Building Houses out of Chicken Legs*, 133.
10. Little was placed on trial while serving an initial sentence for a charge of larceny as well as breaking and entering. So important was the trial to women's and civil rights groups that it became a cause célèbre requiring several changes in venue and a heavily

guarded courtroom. Major fundraising efforts took place to secure defense money, involving the Southern Poverty Law Center, the Black Panther Party, and numerous grassroots organizations. After various pieces of evidence verified Little's story, and her testimony was substantiated by a lie-detector test, the charges were reduced to manslaughter. Citing overall lack of evidence, a jury acquitted Little. This case set a precedent for rape victims who wanted to argue self-defense. It also set in motion numerous investigations of women being abused in North Carolina jails. For more complete details on this story, see Wayne King's coverage for the *New York Times* from July 1975 to October of that same year.

11. Virginia Willis, "Fried Chicken with Black Pepper Gravy—Down-Home Comfort," *FN Dish (Food Network)*, 24 January 2014, <http://blog.foodnetwork.com/fn-dish/2014/01/fried-chicken-with-black-pepper-gravy-down-home-comfort>.
12. Lyllie Williams, interviews by the author, 28 April 2012; 1 February 2014. Note that all quotations from my mother come from these two interviews.
13. Ibid.
14. One need only turn on any of today's cooking shows such as *My Momma Throws Down* and *Sweetie Pie's* to see the replication of the mammy stereotype. See also (among others) the work of Kenneth W. Goings, *Mammy and Uncle Mose: Black Collectibles and American Stereotyping* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); Patricia Turner, *Ceramic Uncles and Celluloid Mammies: Black Images and Their Influence on Culture* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994); Kimberly Wallace-Sanders, *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009); Micki McElya, *Clinging to Mammy: The Faithful Slave in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); and pieces by Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, *Living In, Living Out: African American Domestic Workers in Washington, D.C., 1910–1940* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994); Psyche Williams-Forson, *Building Houses out of Chicken Legs* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); and Rebecca Sharpless, *Cooking in Other Women's Kitchens: Domestic Workers in the South, 1865–1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).
15. Jeremy MacClancy, *Consuming Culture: Why You Eat What You Eat* (New York: Henry Holt, 1993), 2. Importantly, cultural critics Ann Bookman and Sandra Morgen further refine this definition by explaining that power is not something "groups or individuals have; rather, it is a social relationship between groups that determines access to, use of and control over the basic material and ideological resources in society." See Ann Bookman and Sandra Morgen, eds., *Women and the Politics of Empowerment* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 4.
16. Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor, *Vibration Cooking: Or the Travel Notes of a GeeChee Girl*. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970), xiii.

17. Psyche Williams-Forson, "Other Women Cooked for My Husband: Negotiating Gender, Food, and Identities in an African American/Ghanaian Household." *Feminist Studies* 36.2 (Summer 2010): 435–61.
18. Williams-Forson, "Other Women Cooked for My Husband," 437.
19. Marjorie DeVault, *Feeding the Family: The Social Organization of Caring as Gendered Work* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 79.
20. Williams-Forson, "Other Women Cooked for My Husband," 446.
21. Reay Tannahill, *Food in History* (New York: Stein and Day, 1973), 393. See also Robert Degner, *Reaching Consumers with Novel Foods* (Gainesville: Florida Agricultural Market Research Center, 1986), 5.

Sad-Iron, Glad-Iron

Rebecca McClanahan

I kneel beneath the ironing board, a linen tablecloth draped to the floor, my mother's house-slipped feet the only evidence that this is not a beautiful dream, this moment of white, domestic enclosure. I hear the spritz of the Niagara spray can, smell its starchy fragrance. Now a tiny huff of steam. A sizzle too quiet to be a sizzle, but *sizzle* is a new word in one of my picture books and I am practicing thinking it. It must be a Saturday. When Mother is finished, she will spread the cloth on the long table so it will be ready for Sunday dinner.

The linen shifts, then rises. Light enters my dream. The long tail of the iron moves back and forth, making a shape like the *z* in the middle of *sizzle*. Mother's slippers hush against the linoleum. If I hold my breath, she won't know I'm here. But if I don't crawl out right now, I won't get to see the rest; she will finish the ironing without me. Finish the tablecloth with its satiny sheen. Finish the linen napkins she's rolled into a damp bundle. Finish my father's handkerchiefs, even the fancy one with his initials—PGM—stitched onto the top. All the white, flat things I love. The things she will one day let me iron. "When you start school," she has promised. "Then, we'll see."

• • •

Had it not been for our church youth group, our paths might never have crossed. Sheila lived on the other side of our Southern California town, with all the connotations "other side" suggests. Not that our family was wealthy; my father supported a wife, six kids, and our sometime-resident Great Aunt Bessie on a Marine Corps salary. Even so, I sensed a vast difference between Sheila's life and mine. Never mind that her brother had his own room (my brothers shared a room, as did my sisters and I, sometimes with Bessie) or that their family of five had a new three-bedroom house while our family

of eight, sometimes nine, managed in an aging four-bedroom. Still, their house seemed, I know no other word to describe it, *insubstantial*. The walls were thin, the door jambs not quite square, the carpet worn down in places.

Especially that spot right off the kitchen, in the alcove that served as their dining area. The spot where Sheila's young, very substantial mother (*zaftig* comes to mind) stood at the ironing board, several baskets of laundry on the carpet beside her. The radio on the counter was tuned to the local AM station—The Beach Boys, Jan and Dean, The Surfaris—but her mother didn't sing along or acknowledge the music. She just ironed. No matter when I visited, the radio was on and Sheila's mother was standing barefoot at the ironing board, her hair done up in pin curls, a scowl across her face. The laundry baskets were always full.

"She takes in ironing," Sheila said with a shrug, when I asked. Sheila was not a big talker.

When she noticed that I required more information, Sheila offered, "For other people."

I nodded, still not sure what this was adding up to.

"For money," Sheila said.

I'd never considered this, that a mother would have to take in laundry. Other people's laundry, to help pay the household bills. Or that ironing could be a hated and hateful task. My mother ironed, of course—whose mother didn't back then? But not every day. And certainly not to pay our bills. Ironing was just one of many things my mother did—effortlessly, it seemed, and not without occasional gestures of pleasure; she sometimes hummed while she worked. She ironed my younger sisters' dresses, my younger brother's cowboy shirts, and my father's civilian shirts when he was stateside. She never ironed his uniforms, not even his khakis. This was the early 1960s, and the break-starch tradition still ruled. No easy task, meeting such razor-creased standards, and my father never asked this of her; he had his uniforms sent out.

I'd taken over the Sunday-dinner tablecloth privilege years before, along with the linen napkins, my own dresses and blouses, and any other wrinkled thing I could lay my hands on. As I ironed, I hummed, recited

poems I'd memorized, and often broke into song. I love that you can break *into* song, gain entry into its gates—and that it can break you, break *into* you, like a wave crashing. Iron and sing, iron and sing, the world falls away, placket and pleat, collar and yoke, ruffle and pocket, bodice and sleeve. Steam, release.

My older brother ironed too. Tom was a jock, but also a clotheshorse, particularly meticulous about the yoke pleats in his Oxford shirts. Yokes weren't my forte; I was better at button plackets, a skill I'd practiced on doll clothes years before. Sometimes, when Tom was running late, he'd pay me a quarter to iron his shirt. I never let on that I would gladly pay *him*. I needed the practice, especially on the Gant shirts with that tricky locker loop on the back. I never grabbed one off a boy's shirt, but lots of girls at school did, to get a cute boy's attention. What a waste of a perfectly good shirt, I'd think.

***Sadism: directly follows sad-iron in my
Oxford English Dictionary.***

This alphabetical quirk has not escaped my notice. Nor the photos I've seen of Victorian screw presses, or napkin presses, linen cupboards that resemble medieval torture racks. Tightening the screws to press the life out of something, it appears, serves not only to flatten it and emphasize its folds, but also to impart a subtle luster to impress your dinner guests. Nothing new under the sun, or beneath the earth for that matter. Case in point: the depiction of a single-screw clothing press on a wall in Pompeii. Send your toga out to the local *fullonica*, the *fullo* would return it brightened and freshened from its chemical-soaked, foot-trampled, thistle-brushed, screw-pressed journey, polished to an admirable sheen. Most likely your *fullo* was a man. Or a young boy training to join the highly respected guild of *fullones* in ancient Rome, though at times male slaves were engaged, and females, too. Against their will, I imagine.

How would it feel to be forced to do work I had not chosen? To stand for hours in a Roman treading stall, my feet in a tub of chemically treated

water, trampling out the soil of someone else's garments? Or, for that matter, to stand all day at an ironing board behind the window of a Columbus Avenue dry cleaner's, steaming out the collars of clients who demand hand-pressed shirts no matter the cost. Not that the cost will be reflected in your minimum-wage paycheck, laundry work being one of the worst-paying jobs on the planet. Each day, passing one such dry cleaning establishment as I walked with Donald to his downtown office, I'd avert my eyes at the sight of the lovely, dark-eyed woman, young enough to pass for a girl, whose delicate hands grasped a heavy, industrial-sized iron, its electrical cord suspended above her like one of those snakes that hang from jungle trees. She would still be there when I returned from my walk in Central Park. Still there when I pulled my rolling cart home from the grocery store late afternoons. Who knows, she may still be there at her ironing station, four years since we moved from the city. It's late afternoon now, so I imagine the orange sun is just beginning to set over the Hudson, a sight she will probably never have a chance to see.

• • •

May 12, 1897. "Pa came in and asked us if we wanted to go fishing . . . we just unhitched and went." Great Aunt Bessie was sixteen when she recorded this event in her diary, and though she would one day become what her nieces described as "an artist when it came to ironing," in this moment the young Bessie seems delighted to be released from her duties at the ironing table to join the men and boys along Wildcat Creek. Seems she didn't waste any time getting out of the kitchen, either; she just "unhitched" her sad-iron "and went." Out the screen door, down the path, and into the May morning.

The sad-irons that Bessie and her mother used were heated on the wood stove, irons that they maintained between uses by sandpapering, polishing, greasing, or rubbing with beeswax. The irons might have had detachable wooden handles (the detachable handle was patented by Mrs. Mary Florence Potts in 1871) or the women might have wrapped the hot handles in flannel. I imagine the tiny kitchen where mother and daughter worked side by side, the warm woolen smell of the irons heating on the

wood stove, the brief sizzle as Bessie touched a moistened index finger to the iron to test for just the right amount of heat. Too hot, and the clothes would scorch. Too cold, and the iron wouldn't do its job. The last job of their long laundry days, the tail end of the seemingly endless tasks of soaking, scrubbing, bluing, rinsing, hauling, drying on racks, bushes, makeshift clotheslines, or on boards balanced between two chairs. Finally, for this moment at least, their work was done.

There's something to be said for finishing a job, for having something to show for your labor: the men's Sunday dress shirts with starched, upright collars; the women's shirtwaists creased to perfection—or as close to perfection as human hands could manage. Stacks of sheets, dishtowels, hand-embroidered pillowcases, and the satiny linens that a great-niece would one day retrieve from a trunk, running her hands over the history of her foremothers' lives, her mother's life, her own.

***Mangle board: a classic Scandinavian betrothal gift,
one half of a pair, the roller being the other half.***

Imagine receiving from your beloved a hand-fashioned mangle board. Carved with a horse-shaped handle, perhaps, along with your initials and his, and the dates of your forthcoming wedding, to mark the yoking together of two lives. With this board, I thee wed. And with its companion the roller, our union is complete, two made one. Dampen the linen, wind it tightly around the roller, press the roller with as much force as possible against the mangle board. To smooth the linen that will line our days and nights: kitchen, bath, closet, bed, winding sheet.

Peter was of Scandinavian stock. Had we married four hundred years ago, or even one hundred years ago, he might have presented me with a mangle board, carved by his own hands. Hands that, as I recall all these decades later, were wide-palmed, blunt-fingered. Wind-chapped and sun-freckled, too, from his days building patio covers; Southern California sun is not kind to the skin of Norwegians.

The patio-cover job was before our wedding and before he joined up—not to *serve* in Vietnam, but rather to escape it by spending the next several months, then years, in army training schools, mastering one foreign language after another. Tonal languages, mostly. Despite my musical training, I could not make my voice rise and fall as his did. He tried to teach me more than once—*Bao*, in Mandarin, for example. Depending on your intonation, *bao* can mean any number of things: precious jewel, bag, placenta, the calyx of a flower, a stronghold, a position of defense. A pot, a saucepan, a bundle, a newspaper, a contract. To praise, to embrace, to eat until full, to level or smooth. To hold, to keep.

Had Peter fashioned a mangle board with his own sun-freckled hands, would our life together have run a different course? Or even had he presented the Sunbeam Ironmaster that provided me such pleasure those first married years? I know, I know, what woman wants a steam iron as a gift from her lover? But, see, that's my point exactly: What woman? *This* woman. I wish he would have known me better and deeper. And I, him. So much was never spoken, all those secrets folded in the creases, jewels in a bag, precious, placental.

• • •

Instead, I opened the Sunbeam Ironmaster at my December 1970 wedding shower, hosted by one of my mother's friends. No men were present. After punch and sugar cookies and a few rounds of Bride Bingo, we sat in a circle, caressing the monogrammed dishtowels and silver-plated relish trays and burping the lids of the pastel Tupperware bowls as we passed them hand to hand. Lest you think I am exaggerating, that I am poking fun, that given the fact that this was 1970, I must have bit my lip and seethed inside—wanting this to be over so that I could, what? Join the antiwar march at the junior college where I was taking night classes after working days at my minimum wage job? Pass out flyers? Burn my bra? Truth be told, the Tupperware game was my idea, delighted as I was with the circle of women who had gathered, bestowing gifts upon me, showing me the way.

• • •

In my favorite Tillie Olsen short story, a narrator addresses an imagined audience, most likely a guidance counselor, who has requested a conference regarding the narrator's troubled daughter. "I stand here ironing," the story begins, "and what you asked me moves tormented back and forth with the iron." As the story progresses, we learn that Emily's childhood has always been troubled, and that the narrator/mother both blames and forgives herself for her part in Emily's trouble. The story, celebrated by decades of writers, readers, and critics, is revered as a brilliant meditation on motherhood, difficult love, survival, and the crushing power of cultural, historical, social, and economic forces on the lives of women. Yes, I nod. Yes. The story is all these things, and more.

But what about the iron? Why does no one discuss *it*? Despite the fact that the iron appears in the title, in the first line and last lines, and twice in between—quite a few references in such a short story—its role in the story is rarely mentioned. Yet it is the iron that makes the narrator's journey possible. "And when is there time to remember, to sift, to weigh, to estimate, to total?" she asks herself as she guides the iron across the dresses, ransacking memory to find a response to the counselor's request.

When is there time? The answer lies in the iron, in its heavy, substantial necessity. The way it keeps her standing in place, so that everything that is swirling around her—the care of the household, the baby boy who is crying because his diaper is wet, the torment of her own mind—is for this moment, at least, stilled. Back and forth, back and forth, the motion not mindless after all, finally, given the back-and-forth motion of her mind leading to the resolution at the end of the story. Not a perfect resolution, of course. No happy, movie-of-the-week ending. But a resolution all the same.

. . .

When do you know, how long does it take to recognize that something has ended? We were young; we were poor. I worked at Sears, minimum wage, and Peter was in language class all day. Evenings, he studied vocabulary and tonal inflections. Sometimes he left for several hours, to meet some buddies, he said; it would be months before the truth came out, before

I encountered our divorced neighbor in the Laundromat and read the expression on her face.

Friday mornings, Peter stood inspection with the other enlisted men. Never mind that Vietnam was in full throttle and even stateside soldiers had tougher things to concern them, appearances still mattered. Kiwi-waxed, spit-polished shoes; Brassoed belt buckles and insignia. Razor edges on cuffs and trousers. Peter labored so hard over the shoes and brass, the least I could do was to steam-press his shirts and crease his trousers. To save money so we could go out to eat twice a month, or buy a bottle of Lambrusco for our second wedding anniversary, coming up any day now. No, I told him when he offered to send the uniform out. No, no need. I'm happy to do it. By then, I was master of my Ironmaster. I knew each steam vent intimately and could guess within a millisecond when a dangerous leak might occur.

No one warned me about trouser creases. How to hold the pants upside down and center the crease precisely between the seams before reaching for the Niagara. Or, more serious, the nearly impossible challenge of the double crease. How difficult it is to erase it. To start fresh.

An early Friday morning, December 1972. Peter is upstairs. He's running late, afraid he won't make the 7:00 inspection. I'm downstairs in the kitchen, already dressed for Sears, wearing one of the new bell-bottom pantsuits I've sewn on the Singer my mother has loaned me. The coffee pot is rinsed, the breakfast dishes draining in the dish rack, when I hear, from the top of the stairs, a growl. Animal in its fierceness, what *is* it?, I think. It grows and grows, deeper, huskier, then rises higher, like a teakettle approaching its steamy peak. Another tonal rise, another, and then the eruption. Wordless. And the trousers thrown from the top of the steps, sailing in midair as I watch the slow-motion descent and then the crumpled landing, inches from my feet.

• • •

Red-letter, blue-letter, black-letter days. How to survive the deepest pains and joys? Some women shoot heroin; some shop for \$300 shoes. Some jog or punch the air or curse or dance barefoot alone in their apartments or

drink too much scotch or drop to their knees in supplication or praise. I don't do heroin or shoes, but everything else, sure, of course, why not, you have to do something with the fullness.

Mostly, though, I iron. I ironed the day Peter walked out the door, the day I signed the divorce papers, the day Aunt Bessie died, the day I met Donald, the day we bought our first home, the day my first niece was born, the day I received the cancer diagnosis, the day the towers fell, the day I won the fellowship, the day the surgeon cut me free, the day the book came out, the intensive-care day when my mother couldn't call my name or read my face. The day when, recovered, she could.

***Sad-iron*: derived not from sad, as in unhappy, but sad as in solid, heavy, compact, complete.**

After the divorce, after I'd pieced together what was left of myself and kicking and screaming reentered the world, I started taking writing workshops and publishing poems, including one about the tyranny of bridal showers. The details came easily, but the emotion was trumped-up: the comic absurdity of Bride Bingo cards; of dimpled, stocking-covered knees pressed together; of all the mythic, howling initiation rites of passage I had craved but not received.

The poem is still in print, which shames me now, given the cowardice from which I know it sprang. Oh, how far I was from that Tupperware moment, I imagined. Or rather, pretended to imagine as I met with the other female poets—we allowed no men inside—to share our poems. It was the mid-1970s. I knew I was supposed to be roaring against male oppression, domestic servitude, my own internal censor. I was supposed to be writing my Mother Poem. Every woman must write the Mother Poem, our workshop leader announced, staring over her half-glasses in my direction. I'd written plenty of mother poems, but after sharing one and receiving lukewarm response, I knew the leader meant something else entirely. Never mind the truth—that I'd lucked out, won the mother lottery, that I honestly

had nothing to roar against in the mother department—I would never move “Into My Own As a Woman” until this task was done.

I nodded mutely and swallowed back the rest. My reluctance to relinquish the furnishings of my former life: my long hair, the manicured nails, the pantyhose and eyebrow tweezers, and all the shower gifts I’d received. The Tupperware that practically burped itself, the Harvest Gold matching towels, and the iron, oh the iron, my Sunbeam Ironmaster! On and on the arguments steamed, the women’s voices rising until here it comes, I’d think—meals, dishwashing, laundry, the inherent evils of all domestic arts, and do I have the energy for this, no I don’t, and so, silently and not without a taste of guilt, I’d swallow it back again—my passion for sewing, cooking, scrubbing, polishing. And the pièce de résistance—my secret, fiery affair with my Ironmaster, its thumb-tip control, stainless-steel water tank, its cushion of graduated, rolling steam.

• • •

I never wrote the Mother Poem, a fact of which I am proud. And I kept my Ironmaster. I understand now that oppression can take many forms. That moving into your own as a woman doesn’t always have to be a bitter, bloody journey. Sometimes it means accepting what is given to you without asking, and letting the rest fall away.

Donald: (1) divorced father who owns his own G.E. Black Chrome Spray Steam & Dry; (2) a man who insists, “No need, I can do my own shirts” until, once you finally convince him that the task gives you joy, never questions you again.

I’d expected that the G.E. Steam & Dry would carry us into old age. It might have, except that a year after we’d moved to New York, our ancient vacuum cleaner expired. After we’d tried out every model in the Oreck store on Broadway, we decided on a lightweight upright that could handle both floors and carpets. The fact that I don’t know its make or model tells you

something about the division of labor in our household; Donald usually does the vacuuming. After we'd finalized the delivery details, the salesman said, "I forgot to mention that you get a free gift."

"Oh?" I said, imagining extra vacuum cleaner bags, or some of that white powder you sprinkle on your carpets to make them smell good.

"The Oreck 850," he answered.

I took a deep breath, no reason to get excited. "An iron?"

"A very popular model."

"Is it," I began, hoping against hope, it *was* a free gift after all, "cordless?"

He nodded. "Has its own charging station. Hold on," he said, turning from the counter and walking toward the back room. "I'll get it. You can take it with you today."

• • •

A few years later, I attended a reading at a radical feminist bookstore on the Lower East Side. During the reading, I noticed that the woman seated next to me was staring at my feet. It was summer, and I was wearing sandals that revealed my freshly pedicured *Love That Red* nails. Afterwards, as I gathered with others to congratulate the poets, the woman joined us, and once again began staring at my feet.

"Is something wrong?" I asked, turning to address her.

She raised her head and looked sternly at me, her brow creased. "Why do you do that?" she said.

I was flummoxed. "Do what?"

"Paint your toenails."

Warmth rose in my chest. My mind began reeling, the years spinning dizzily backward, two decades, three, four, and the endless discussions—empowerment, male oppression, patriarchy, female servitude, the tyranny of bras and skirts and high heels, not to mention nail polish, and how Jo was the only acceptable March sister to present to our daughters. "But what about Meg and Beth and Amy?" I'd offer timidly, thinking, don't the other sisters count? Why does every woman have to be Jo; what kind of world would that be?

I looked down at my feet, then back up into the woman's face.

"Why do I paint my toenails?" I said, drawing the question out slowly while I auditioned the perfect answer. Isn't it anti-feminist to suggest that a woman can't celebrate every part of herself, including her toenails? Doesn't a woman's body belong only to her? And her history, as well? And her days, what she chooses to do with them? I thought of my padded ironing board, opened proudly beside the Murphy bed in our apartment, my Oreck 850 resting patiently on its charging station. I thought of my freshly laundered blouses hanging on the shower rod beside Donald's collared shirts—still slightly damp, I hoped, to encourage that satisfying steam.

The espresso machine was sputtering, the crowd humming around us. A short walk to the subway, two transfers to the 1/9, another short block to our apartment, and I'd be home. I took a deep, cleansing breath. Counted two beats, three.

"I paint my toenails because I can. Because I am a feminist."

• • •

We are all captives of time, place, situation, fate. One woman's joy is another's sorrow; her sorrow, another woman's joy. I know how it feels to move with the iron, tormented. To want to press the life out of something. And then, in the next breath, smooth and smooth its ruffled self until something else emerges. Name it order. As in "Be Still My Soul," my favorite ironing hymn lately: "Leave to thy God to order and provide." Sometimes, of course, he doesn't provide. Or *she*, depending on the history of your roaring.

But sometimes he does. Last night, I plugged in the charging station on the Oreck 850 and ironed away: our linen tea towels, Donald's handkerchiefs, pillowcases his mother had embroidered the year she died. One thumb opens the Oreck's mouth, and the distilled water settles languidly down into the reservoir tank, which is a clear, dreamlike turquoise. The color of the water at Trunk Bay, St. John, where we celebrated our thirtieth anniversary. Water so tranquil and warm, I floated effortlessly on my back, Donald just inches from me, and for once I did not hold back when the tears started, did not try to make a joke or deflect. This was pure, ordinary joy,

and I was a lucky, lucky woman who had never let herself believe—perhaps until this very moment—that a moment like this could come, that I could pass three decades with this man, that the turquoise water could hold me up, that I could let it have its way with me. My Oreck 850 has it all—a sleek, white body, smoothly gliding soleplate, dial-operated fabric guide, and stable charging station. Until something better comes along, and I can't imagine that it ever will, I plan to keep it.

Grip

Joy Castro

Over the crib in the tiny apartment, there hung a bullet-holed paper target, the size and dark shape of a man—its heart zone, head zone perforated where my aim had torn through: thirty-six little rips, no strays, centered on spots that would make a man die.

“Beginner’s luck,” said the guys at the shooting range, at first. “Little lady,” they’d said, until the silhouette slid back and farther back. They’d cleared their throats, fallen silent.

A bad neighborhood. An infant child. A Ruger GP .357 with speed-loader.

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It’s not as morbid as it sounds, a target pinned above a crib: the place was small, the walls already plastered full with paintings, sketches, pretty leaves, hand-illuminated psychedelic broadsides of poems by my friends. I masking-taped my paper massacre to the only empty space, a door I’d closed to form a wall.

• • •

When my stepfather got out of prison, he tracked my mother down. He found the city where she’d moved. He broke a basement window and crawled in. She never saw his car, halfway up the dark block, stuffed behind a bush.

• • •

My mother lived. She wouldn’t say what happened in the house that night. Cops came: that’s what I know. Silent, she hung a screen between that scene and me. It’s what a mother does.

She lived—as lived the violence of our years with him, knifed into us like scrimshaw cut in living bone.

Carved but alive, we learned to hold our breath, dive deep, bare our teeth to what fed us.

• • •

When I was twenty-one, my son slept under the outline of what I could do, a death I could hold in my hands.

At the time, I'd have denied its locale any meaning, called its placement coincidence, pointing to walls crowded with other kinds of dreams.

But that dark, torn thing did hang there, its lower edge obscured behind the wooden slats, the flannel duck, the stuffed white bear.

It hung there like a promise, like a headboard, like a *No*, like a terrible poem, like these lines I will never show you, shielding you from the fear I carry—like a sort of oath I swore over your quiet sleep.

Bedroom and Birthing Room

Of Vibrators

For years after I came out as a lesbian in my mid-twenties, I preferred ménage à trois in bed: my lover, myself, a vibrator. At the time, I was agnostic on the question of female heterosexual orgasm, deeply skeptical. When I had slept with young men in college, I counted ceiling tiles or bedsprings (if it was a lower bunk), the equivalent in my American youth of closing my eyes, opening my legs, and thinking of England. I did not imagine that I was alone—or even in the minority—in this experience of sex. Sex with men, I was convinced, was a dull business; by contrast, going to bed with a woman for the first time was a revelation. Sex with a woman introduced me to pleasure I'd considered as mythical as a unicorn; it also introduced me to vibrators—a revelation of their own.

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I don't recall my first encounter with a vibrator, though I know it must have come—as I first did—around the time I met Juliet, one of those wonderfully unsuitable partners one seems to encounter in one's twenties and perhaps again, if unlucky in love, in one's forties. In times of confusion, these lovers appear like Virgil in Hell to escort us through the difficult terrain of youth (or middle age): persons of unlikely compatibility and unreliable affections, who nonetheless reveal crucial secrets of a certain time or place. Sexual cicerone.

The year I turned twenty-five, this person was Juliet, a smart, witty, mild-mannered, defensive, bespectacled, Midwestern butch with magnificent breasts, who was—it seemed to me when we first met in a feminist philosophy class at the University of Minnesota—the lesbian equivalent of training wheels or a trike: unthreatening, slow-moving, perfect for a socially inept, deeply insecure, highly abstracted, desperate-for-sex,

recent college grad like me. (In my forties, that lover would be Rick, a fifty-something filmmaker with a fascinating coterie of famous artists, journalists, and glam rockers as well as attachment issues that perfectly matched my own.)

My first lesbian love affair did not last long—after a few weeks, Juliet dumped me at a party, leaving with another woman on her arm—but the possibility of sexual satisfaction she'd introduced to me remained. In the wake of that failed affair, I ventured into a small, Japanese-themed boutique on the East Bank of Minnesota's sprawling campus to buy a "personal massager" (like the one Juliet must have had or spoken of). The place was cramped and too clean, depressingly sanitized. Its vibrators were arrayed on stark pine stands like shoes on racks. No one approached to offer help, or even to smirk; the clerk from whom I bought my massager was small, tidy, bored, utterly unfriendly. It was a transaction—like Minnesota itself—without the slightest whiff of the erotic.

The model I bought was a sturdy article, roughly the same size, shape, and heft as a small, hand-held blow-dryer, save that in place of a nozzle for air there was an inch-long plastic rod onto which one might mount an array of massage attachments, all of which I discarded save for the bulbous vibrator head, no longer than the first digit of my thumb, shaped like a tiny, putty-colored chef's hat. Later that same year, this unassuming appliance would see me into (and five years later out of) my first serious love affair with a woman, and then through the half-dozen other lovers who would follow. Lovers would come and go, but this vibrator would remain with me for the next twenty years. And what an ironic bedfellow, given the machine-like qualities of the appliance; it is, as a friend of mine once wrote in an e-mail, "strange to seek in machinery a feeling that, in film and novels and in dreams, we associate with the pliable, semi-liquid, human form—not a hard, plastic, electric, mechanical one." Indeed.

• • •

To be clear: satisfying sex with another woman did not require equipment. I did.

Perhaps the vibrator was a necessary antidote to my extreme sexual naïveté, a crash course in clitoral stimulation. In my youth, I was severely limited in regard to libertinism; until I met Juliet, I hadn't had an orgasm with another person. I didn't even know where my clitoris was—let alone what it was for—until I read *The Color Purple* as an undergraduate at Yale at the age of twenty-two. I only once visited a porn shop—while a graduate student in Columbus, Ohio—where the most arresting object was not among the wide array of vibrators but a blow-up doll promising what its manufacturer claimed were “10 life-like features,” including to my amazement “real pubic hair,” a “sucking mouth,” both “anus and vagina holes” and (somehow most shocking) faux-pearl earrings. My lesbian lover and I thought this a risibly literal construction of female sexuality, which revealed far too much about what men considered essential in a woman. What disturbs me now about the doll is not the desire for sexual surrogacy it revealed (which I could hardly criticize given my own mechanical friend), but the attempt to trick it out with such faint trappings of humanity, which suggest that the catalog of qualities required for arousal are few, and leave out much, including humanity itself.

Then again, the pleasure that I took in a vibrator may have stemmed from a dim awareness of my parents' unsatisfying sex life. Although I didn't know it at the time, throughout my childhood my parents failed each other in what could be called a first duty of matrimony: sexual gratification. (Immanuel Kant actually defines marriage as a lifelong contract for the exclusive use of one another's genitals.) I would be in my thirties before I would learn of my father's decade-long neglect, a crime under Jewish law for which my mother might have divorced him. Instead, she wondered if his heart medicine had undone his sex drive, or if he were (as I was) gay. In fact, he was off with other women—a ménage she was not privy to, which robbed her of half a lifetime of intimacy. It was an unspeakable cruelty, unnamed for years, but I suspect I sensed it even as a girl, not knowing sorrow's source. Perhaps having the instrument of my own satisfaction freed me to take pleasure in another without fear of suffering the deprivation that she had.

• • •

Like any convert, I was inclined to evangelize. It was not merely my own pleasure that I sought, once I had bought my first vibrator, but the means to bestow pleasure on those I loved. One partner, as we lay in bed in a satisfied postcoital haze, said of the appliance, “Wow, every girl should be issued one of these when she turns twelve” (an opinion later seconded by Dr. Laura Berman on Oprah Winfrey’s show). I was not the first woman this particular lover had gone to bed with, but I was the first to be so well-endowed with electronics.

Of course, it is possible to be too well-endowed when it comes to sexual appliances. In my mid-thirties, a magnificent Amazon of a woman developed an urgent crush on me and flew across the continent to pay a visit. She arrived at the airport bearing a gym bag of sexual accoutrements: cuffs, dildos, studded collars, harnesses, lube, and ropes. (Interestingly, the only item she did not transport was a vibrator.) Hers seemed less an aphrodisiacal entourage than an arsenal. I felt less that I was on a date than that I was being laid siege. Needless to say, the weekend ended badly.

• • •

I’ve dated too few men to know if it’s apocryphal or true that they often name their own sexual equipment, calling their penises by pet names, sometimes using a diminutive of their own, such as Little Jim, though the latter would give me the creeps if I were male, making me nervous about what I might see next time I glanced in a mirror (if that’s the little version, what is the big?).

I do know that I named the vibrator that accompanied me for two decades, calling it affectionately The Toy. This pet name was not intended to diminish its import, to make of it a mere child’s plaything, or to deny the gravity of pleasure it might augment; rather the nickname rescued the object from the realms of the clinical and the medical from which it came.

It’s common knowledge these days that the vibrator was employed as a

medical device during the nineteenth century when women's sexuality was deemed an illness, pathologized as hysteria. (The use of "pelvic massage" as a female curative dates back much farther than this, according to scholar Rachel Maines, to Hippocrates in 450 BC.) Antique as such notions seem now, locating a woman's dis-ease in her genitalia bespeaks a recognition of the power of desire and attests to orgasm's curative capacity—its power not only to satisfy but to heal.¹

From the first such recorded mechanical device in 1734—the French *tremousoir*—the vibrator has been deemed tonic, a cure for what ails us, if we're women. A steam-powered vibrator was invented by an American physician, George Taylor, in 1869, while the first electromechanical vibrator was created around 1880 by Dr. Joseph Mortimer Granville. Hamilton Beach patented the earliest electric vibrator in 1902, making it among the very first electrified appliances, along with the sewing machine, tea kettle, and toaster.

But it was not until the 1960s—when Second Wave feminists linked the personal to the political, the body to the body politic, and Jon H. Tavel patented the "Cordless Electric Vibrator for Use on the Human Body"—that the personal vibrator gained widespread domestic use, a momentum that continues today as vibrators are featured in articles in the *New York Times* and *Essence* and sold in posh retailers, including Henri Bendel in Manhattan.² Sex toys, it would seem, have come out of the closet, just as I did some twenty years ago.

• • •

As we slip further into this new century, there is talk in the popular press of the End of Men—a phrase coined by journalist Hanna Rosin to describe the increasing female dominance in American schools, homes, and work—a mounting anxiety that the male of the species is becoming socially obsolete. I wonder if the social, economic, and political gains women have made in the West over the last half century may stem as much from the popularization of the vibrator as from multiple waves of feminism, which have freed women to be (in the best sense) self-centered and self-satisfied.

I am old enough to remember when it was a commonplace to assert that girls offered sex for love, boys love for sex. Sexual desire was assumed to be a male province, a territory that girls and women merely visited, along for the ride. This is a convenient claim for patriarchy, given that desire is arguably the first fuel of self, its primal pulse. As the author and mystic Thomas Merton wrote, “We are what we love.” I would say, we are what we desire, given that longing shapes our actions, by which we make, or unmake, ourselves.

To lay claim to sexual desire, then, is arguably to lay claim to one’s self, so what could be more empowering than to teach the young the means to its satisfaction? Possessed of a vibrator, I became sexually self-possessed, invulnerable to the affectional vagaries that had undone my mother’s intimate life and the cultural narratives that had circumscribed my youth. If self-possession is an attribute of the well-balanced, what could be more useful than to be in possession of one’s erotic impulses, that substratum of self and soul? This makes the vibrator more than a toy or a tool of healing: it makes it something of a philosophical, perhaps even a spiritual, instrument.

• • •

In my forties, I parted ways with my vibrator, as I parted ways with my own youth, finding both a bit overstimulating, embarrassingly loud. Such equipment no longer seemed necessary to release me to unselfconscious satisfaction, but it also felt slightly insulting to my partner, who is—rather surprisingly—a man.

According to a 2013 report by researchers from universities in Minnesota and Arizona—based on interviews with dozens of gay and straight women—lesbians delight in sex toys, finding them stimulating of pleasure and charmingly subversive of authority, while straight women, by and large, do not. For the latter, a vibrator is often a source of embarrassment and shame, suggesting a lack in themselves or in their male partners.³

That a straight woman might be ashamed of a vibrator seems to me ironic. For it was precisely the opposite that the modest machine offered me at twenty-five: an uncoupling in the bedroom of that first and famous

couple—shame and desire. To me, there seemed nothing shameful about a sexual appliance, perhaps because I was so thoroughly suburban and placed great faith in that middle-American religion of consumer products. (I did not find irony in the fact that I was seeking the satisfaction of sexual intimacy in a machine rather than with a lover.) A washing machine, a television set, an electric toothbrush, a vibrator: all seemed instruments to that very American end—a more pleasurable life.

• • •

The ancients, it seems, have nothing to tell us about sex toys: Seneca, Cicero, Horace are mute on the subject, as far as I know. But postmoderns discuss them with increasing ease, as an essay in the Sunday *New York Times* in 2013 attests; in it, an aging baby-boomer faces death and the dilemma of what to do with her sex toys so her children will not have to dispose of them postmortem or post-compos mentis.⁴

I still have my vibrator in a drawer of gym socks and bikinis (themselves little used these days), but I employ it infrequently now. When I get into bed with my beloved, when we slip between the sheets, I want nothing between us but skin. I want no third party, no ménage, just—as Bill Withers, balladeer of my long-lost youth, proclaimed—just the two of us.

NOTES

1. Rachel P. Maines, *The Technology of Orgasm: "Hysteria," the Vibrator, and Women's Sexual Satisfaction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 23, 67.
2. Karen Springen, "A More Posh Vibe," *Newsweek*, 25 July 2005, 16.
3. Breanne Fahs and Eric Swank, "Adventures with the 'Plastic Man': Sex Toys, Compulsory Heterosexuality, and the Politics of Women's Sexual Pleasure," *Sexuality & Culture* 17, no. 4 (December 2013): 666–85.
4. Joyce Wadler, "The Sex Toys in the Attic," *New York Times*, 9 November 2013.

The Hot Thing

Every morning, I curl my hair. In the shower, my body sloughs off the day before, the dirt and the fumes. At the mirror, my mouth burns with toothpaste. My body is light, my stomach empty, and I feel clean.

Cylindrical and sleek, my curling iron heats quickly. I have it down to six twists: hairline, left side, right side twice, whole back, top back again, and then around to the front once more for the short wisps. Four minutes, and I am ready.

If my daughter Kate comes in, thick with sleep, I say, “Watch out. The hot thing’s on.”

She may make a low, husky noise. She may say, “God, it’s called a curling iron.” Or she may laugh and shake her head, saying, “I’m not going to touch it, Mom,” overemphasizing the “m” in “Mom” like a jilted heroine in a romance novel—a tone I’ve heard before.

My stomach tightens, for Kate’s life is inside my life, and yet there’s a lethal weapon between us.

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The noun “curl” is derived from the Dutch verb *krul*, meaning “to twist.” The primary definition for “curl” is a “lock of hair of a spiral or convolute form; a ringlet.”¹ Curled hair is hair that spirals, undulating like eels or smoke. Defined by movement—with origins in a verb—curls are dead strands that spring into living helixes. The dead as the living, a verb as a noun: curls twist meaning as well as hair.

The chief implement for creating curls—the curling iron—similarly convolutes sense. A modern iron is the ideal technology for its task. Stickless ceramic distributes heat evenly. A spring-loaded clamp holds and separates

each section of hair, as flat and distinct as ribbons. And heat-resistant tips as well as silicone storage shields minimize burns. Yet such irons are also risky; they can be hot as hate. As a girl, my idea of the beautiful was twisted by images of mock bodies styled into being. In fearful fantasy of attaining such beauty, I took up the curling iron. I risked being burned.

• • •

In grade school, I didn't have friends. I was the girl that books on bullying describe under a false name, the one with sugar-and-butter knees, nerdy jeans, and low self-esteem. It wasn't that I was especially ugly or fat or that my family was poor: we lived in a middle-class suburb in a buttoned-down, Midwestern city, and my features were regular, my chubbiness more plump than porky. The main problem was that my parents were English teachers. What money they had was spent on books, antiques, and the occasional study tour to Britain rather than clothes, cable tv, or Colorado ski trips. On the playground, I used words such as "furthermore" and "superb." In class, I raised my hand too much. In gym, I couldn't scale the climbing rope. For lunch, my mom packed me nothing that was advertised on Saturday-morning cartoons—just carrots, sad little bags of raisins, and thick cheese sandwiches, all tucked inside a Holly Hobby lunchbox, usually with a note. I played the piano; I liked brussels sprouts; I'd seen more than one Shakespeare play, live, and could quote bits of *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*. Worst of all, my outfits came from Sears. Mom liked the brand Garanimals because she could match the cartoon monkeys or zebras on the hang-tags to coordinate my pants and shirts. Not funky enough for flair—and the antithesis of chic—my clothes talked their own language. They said, "Dork." They said, "Loser." My red, blue, and green Garanimals marked me like a target, one that most everyone in my class wanted to shoot.

The bullying took many forms. In kindergarten, Kari Kussatz and Lynn Mumby pushed me down while we were walking home; my knees grew matching scabs, then scars. In first grade, Jeff Hellman told me I talked like I was thirty, saying "thirty" as if he was saying "whore." In second grade, Holly Tropp and Susan Hubbard made fun of my favorite, non-Garanimal

dress, frilly and lollipop pink; after lunch, they circled me, chanting, “Barbie retard. Barbie retard.” In third grade, the boy I thought was cute, Chris Hilsabrook, walked up to me, flanked by his friends, and asked me to “go with” him—slang for date. When I said yes, he yelled, “April Fool’s,” his laughter like hot tar down my back.

Each time, I wanted to say something cutting and smart, something to make Kari’s hair melt or Susan’s skin bleed. I wanted to spit in Chris’s face—a wet, spraying spit—or kick him, as Mom said, where it counts. I did none of these things. I didn’t even tell my teachers, not wanting to be called a nark, the thought of confession pricking all the pores on my skin at once, needle-sharp. Instead, I imagined disappearing: first my feet, then the curves of my calves, my heavy hips, my arms and breasts, and finally my head, all melting away like frost from a windowpane.

At age eleven, my body finally shed its flesh. Cells collapsed in my bedroom corners like the coils of old snake skin, and a new form emerged. I was Farrah Fawcett. I was Olivia Newton-John. I was Daisy Duke. Or, rather, I wanted to be these images, these ideas: Farrah’s sunflower hair, Olivia’s tabletop stomach, Daisy’s chopstick legs. Like a teenage boy, I pinned their posters around my room. I scrutinized; I fantasized. Farrah, head thrown back, nipples winking through her raspberry-red bathing suit. Olivia in her all-black, bad-girl outfit from the last scenes of *Grease*. Daisy’s legs sprouting long and brown from underneath a pair of cut-off shorts. Once, I borrowed my mom’s high heels, tucked up one of Dad’s flannel shirts into a modified bikini top, and sheared off the legs of an old pair of jeans. Wobbling around the house, I struck poses and thrust my hips, saying, “Oh, hun,” and “Stop your joshin, now,” batting my eyelashes and grinning wide. I imagined spreading my body on a hay-bale mattress, waiting for some cowboy to drive up in his ten-gallon hat and stitched leather boots, to press his lips to mine, to change me with a kiss. In the photographic chamber of my mind, I was Daisy Duke: an advertisement, a thought, a vision. A living poster.

In reality, however, my flesh-and-blood parts were all wrong: a soft stomach, flat feet, my skin pale as parchment, blue veins etched along my hips and breasts like the coat-rack limbs of winter trees. My nose was too

big for my face, my legs too thick for chopsticks. I was nothing like Daisy Duke. The real belied the ideal.

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A perpetual present tense, my pre-eleven world was a noodly scoop of Hamburger Helper, searing tears in a bathroom stall, patterns of piano keys moving apart and coming together, tight lungs after gym class, or the turfy smell of my dog Cinnamon's fur when I scratched her stomach. From the first, I bent towards food, sounds, and words like a daylily in the sun, so meals and snacks were a consistent happiness: popsicles the color of basketballs, pork chops, candy bars, and buttery mashed potatoes I squished through my teeth. Music was either suspect (a new song I wasn't sure of) or affirming, a tune I liked because I knew it and could sing along with my high, slender voice. I loved storytelling for its rhythm and warmth; I could listen and listen to an adult reading a book just as I could have spent an afternoon lying in the bottom of a rowboat, rocking and rocking, watching a sugar-cloud sky. When Mom signed me up for ballet dancing—"To give you grace and poise," she said—I excelled, even though my arms and thighs were wrapped tight as sausages. They swung through the five positions with the peace and precision of pendulums.

My body was a factory, a system, an organization. My legs were motion machines, my nose a smelling device, my stomach a food bag, my skin a thermometer. Legs, arms, feet, hands, torso, face: my parts were both sensible and miraculous, as everyday extraordinary as a glass of cold milk. In the poem "Tintern Abbey," William Wordsworth writes of half-remembering the "animal movements" of his boyish days now "all gone by," and that is how I knew my body: as an animal would, with immediacy and without much reflection.

Particularly when I could avoid school—weekends, vacations, summers—my body was blissful as butter: playing Chinese jump rope with my sister, listening to a Judy Collins record, riding my bike without hands, devouring birthday cake in the shape of a belled dress. Apart from moments when I got a mouthful of Listerine or came down with the chickenpox or

was pinched and called Miss Piggy at recess, mostly my senses offered me pleasure.

But then, at ten years and ten months old, I got my period. Like wet mud, my body thickened and slowed. It throbbed a new pattern of dull notes: Philip Glass instead of Bach or Judy Collins. Its smell changed from orchid and orange to iron and black pepper. Seemingly overnight, my body became a thing of ache—of pain and desire.

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Hiding in my parents' bathroom as far from my family as possible, I felt a low drag across my abdomen and thought I might have to do a serious number two. Maybe I'd eaten something fishy. Maybe I needed Pepto-Bismol, minty and lipstick-pink—almost, but not quite, tasty. As I pulled down my underwear and sat on the cold ring of the toilet, I noticed a rust-red stain. Even though I'd seen the cartoony film at school about "female development," had had more than one chat with Mom about "becoming a woman," and had stolen Mom's menstrual pads, thick as diapers, to examine behind a locked bedroom door, this stain in my underwear was a betrayal. Not one of my classmates had her period yet. Not one.

Calling to Mom, eyes hot, cheeks red as beets, I started to cry. I cried as she helped to clean me up. I cried as she fetched me a pair of clean underwear. I cried as she peeled off the long strip from the sticky back of one of her monster pads.

"I'm not ready," I said. "No one else has it." Between my legs, the pad felt big as a baguette.

"I know. I know," Mom said. "It's really early, sweetheart. Really early. But I got mine early, too. And it will be all right—you'll see. You'll get used to it."

"I'll never get used to it," I said, drawing out the "n" in "never" like a jilted heroine in a romance novel. "It's just not fair."

In a misguided attempt to gain a friend through secret-telling, I confessed my shame to Julie Agena—a girl who'd been sitting with me at lunch for a few weeks, had even shared her Oreos. The same day, Julie told almost

the whole fourth grade, including a flint-eyed boy named Roger Johnson, who called me “Period” on the playground for the next few weeks.

I loathed my disloyal body as much as I hated the kids who bullied me. My body became a crow-eaten garden, a roof-collapsed house. Dark as black cloth, my body bound and blinded me. I wanted rid of it, to crumple it up and toss it in the trash. I wanted to scorch it away, black butterflies of charred skin and muscle crisping the air.

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The following month, I asked Mom to take me to the grocery store, and I picked out thinner pads with the heady name of New Freedom, a name matched by the whip-thin women on the purple package, women wearing figure-eight sunglasses and striding purposefully in their candy-red bell-bottoms. And although I found it almost impossible to stride with any pad under my Garanimal jeans, I started imagining myself as a young woman who might, one day, stride. Something was waiting inside of me—something prepared for striding.

From that first box of New Freedom, my body moved from the perpetual now into a forever future, a fairytale of potential and longing. Although I still felt my body as a gelatinous slug—a gloppy form, slowly sliding forward—unlike Mom, at least I was modern: a girl who wouldn’t have to skip a pool party (if ever invited) because blood was seeping down my leg, puddling in my shoes. Because Mom was a Liberal with a capital L, I already knew about sex: she’d explained it matter-of-factly when, at age five, I’d asked The Question. And I understood all the dirty lyrics in John Travolta’s “Greased Lightning,” although now these phrases seemed more than blushworthy. Girls creaming their jeans, guys getting off their rocks, all while driving fast as lightning in a pussy wagon: this was suddenly interesting.

Eleven and menstruating, my body became a divining rod. At school, if a cute boy was close, my breasts and stomach seemed to vibrate and quiver, searching for pay dirt. I watched boys more carefully, studying their turned eyes, their bouncing knees. I listened not for what they said

but for how they said it, even though they didn't speak to me, volleying the cannonballs of their shouts at each other and asking feigned questions of better-dressed, skinny girls whose parents had MTV. My desire for a cute boy's attention was as urgent as needing to pee on a road trip, no exit in sight. I wanted a boy to want me with pain, a keen wolf smelling blood. I wanted to spark such lust.

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A sexual neophyte, I still understood that allure was an admixture of beauty and wit. I'd seen *Much Ado about Nothing*, had felt the sizzle and pop between Beatrice and Benedick, even as they traded insults in place of greetings. I knew I could whip-crack words. After all, Jeff Hellman had told me I talked like I was thirty. Yet I didn't have the beauty—at least not beauty as defined by middle-class, vanilla girls in 1980.

My body was an apple, not a pear, so achieving a flat stomach was improbable. My feet and nose had grown like rapid-rise yeast before the rest of my body could catch up, and it wasn't yet de rigueur for parents to give nose jobs as birthday gifts. (Of course, my own parents were more likely to give me cigarettes, a fifth of bourbon, and an hour with an escort than they were to pay for plastic surgery.) Yet unlike my roly-poly waist or wide nose, my hair was a feature that could be changed easily. It might be straightened or permed, colored or cut.

It might be curled.

As a child, I'd had long hair—a burden. I hadn't appreciated its dual functions of trapping heat and providing sense reception: how this long mane of mine could keep me warm without a hat or extend my sense of touch, tapping the air. All I knew was that, every day, my mother brushed my truculent locks, that once a week she washed them, and that, sometimes, she yanked them up into pigtails, as high and tight as two bowed arrows. Hair hurt—that was the simple fact. Strands twisted in my coat zippers or snagged the chewing gum I tried to spit on the ground. Mom's villainous brush dragged and jerked, and pulling my hair into pigtails felt as sharp as dislocating both shoulders. Worse yet were the tangles. Wet or dry, my

hair collected snarls, the promise of “No More Tears” on the Johnson & Johnson shampoo bottle a bald-faced lie. Brushing my hair was a daily skirmish: me screaming, Mom placating, her voice soft but her hands firm. Fearful grooming.

“Hold still. We have to get this tangle out,” she’d say, wrapping one hand around a length of hair, wielding her wooden-handled torture device in the other to tug and tug at some knot.

Ripped strands stuffed the brush. Sometimes I’d pull out these dark nests, shake them under Mom’s nose, demanding, “Cut my hair. Cut it all off!”

Mom told me repeatedly that I’d be sorry if I lost my hair, that it would take a long time to grow it back. “You won’t like it,” she insisted. “You’ll be sorry.” I argued that I should be able to cut my hair if I wanted to, an early rebellion.

In the second grade, I won: Mom let me cut my hair short, ears whistling in the wind. No more hair brushes, no more tangles, just a quick comb to find the part. My hair now did its job and without pain: like a lid on a pot or a cap on a bottle, my hair fit, covering my head and no more.

Come age eleven, however, my hair no longer seemed like a curse or merely something to wash, comb, and forget. It was a canvas. Like a painting, I thought it would benefit from an artistic eye, careful training, and a whole new range of supplies. I might never aerobicize my legs down to Daisy’s or crunch my abdominals as flat as Olivia’s, but I might—I just might—be able to mimic Farrah’s feathered look.

Due to the popularity of *Charlie’s Angels* and especially her iconic poster—one that eventually earned her more money than her TV contract—Farrah Fawcett’s wing-back hairstyle reigned supreme among us miserable few who tried to copy whatever impossible fashions our *Teen Beat* magazines offered up as sine qua non. Called the “Farrah flip” or the “Farrah-do,” the look was hard to achieve with such poor tools as White Rain hairspray and a Clairol curling iron. But I strove to attain it, slowly growing my hair back down to my shoulders. I pinned back my lanky bangs with combs and barrettes, suffering Mom’s told-you-so looks.

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When I saved up my allowance to buy a slim, plastic curling iron, it was the first such appliance in our house. To say that my mom was uninterested in beauty culture is an understatement. She didn't curl, perm, highlight, or dye her hair; she didn't wear any makeup other than lipstick; and she bought all of her work suits at bargain-basement sales: perpetually last season's style and often either too snug or too loose, a bit like playing dress-up. Mom didn't even wear jewelry apart from her wedding ring, a Timex watch, and a single selection from her brooch collection: a cameo or a silver Celtic design pinned to her lapel each day.

I was greenly jealous of my peers' moms with their bleach-blonde hair, tanning-bed arms, toothpick waists, and closets full of brand-new clothes: blouses and skirts and pants and designer jeans that some of the mothers let their daughters borrow. I didn't know whether Mom's lack of interest in all things fashionable came from being an immigrant from Scotland—where the media-saturated and commodity-rich beauty industry didn't take over until the end of the twentieth century—or because she was a reader, a writer, and a teacher: mind over matter. All I knew was that, while she would buy me any book I asked for or take me to any play I might want to see, she couldn't explain how to contour eye shadow or tell me whether my sweater complemented my complexion. She didn't diet, she didn't read women's magazines, and she refused to buy me the enormous gold earrings or the pair of spiky red shoes I coveted, stilettos sharp enough to skewer fish. And even though her disinterest meant I didn't have to participate in a daily beauty competition—one with a trophy mom sacrificing her body on the altar of loveliness—I also didn't have a beauty mentor that I could trust.

So I was left to try to copy the popular girls at school, tv and movie icons, or the breathtaking stars in magazines. Even the curling iron was a purchase I had to negotiate on my own. I asked Mom to take me to a drugstore, stuffing a magazine ad in my purse for a Crazy Curl Clairol curling iron. The ad assured me that, in mere seconds, this Steam Styling Wand would create “quick little flips” or “crazy little curls.” It vowed it had

the power to make me beautiful, that I'd love my new device "like crazy." At the store, I parted from Mom and strode to the hair-care aisle. There it was on the shelf in all its lime-green glory: a Crazy Curl curling iron with a photograph of a blonde model flaunting a flawless Farrah flip. "Behind this beautiful machine," the box promised, "is a great-looking you."

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It wasn't accidental or anomalous that, in 1980, Americans thought curly-headed girls were pretty and playful, or that curling irons, hot rollers, and permanent waves became widespread means for spiraling straight locks. Curlicue hair is cheerful and lively: tousled, bouncy, buoyant. Curly-haired girls catch the eye and hook the heart, garnering attention and special nicknames: "Curly Top," "Curly Sue," and "the girl with the curls." In surfing, a "curl" means the curved top of a breaking wave, that adventurous curl-crest of roaring water. In angling, a "curl" is an eddy or ripple caused by the wind, the place where the best fish lie. In cricket, a bowler's "curl" is the inward spin that makes his or her bowling extraordinary. And a spirited head of hair often signifies an adventurous, extraordinary, one-of-a-kind girl: one with spunk, pluck, and a tendency to get into mischief. At the same time, though, such a girl is also apple-wholesome, her curls evidence of simplicity and candor.

Curls are innocence—a common symbol in fiction and film. In the 1871 novel *Little Women*, Louisa May Alcott describes the youngest of the March daughters, Amy, as a paragon of beauty and etiquette, "with blue eyes, and yellow hair curling on her shoulders, . . . always carrying herself like a young lady mindful of her manners."² At the turn of the next century, silent film star Mary Pickford, known as "America's sweetheart" from playing such parts as Pollyanna and Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm, became the epitome of the vivacious yet virtuous girl-next-door, her celebrated ringlets suggesting both innocence and impishness.³ And during the Depression, Shirley Temple's curly-topped portrayals of Heidi and Little Miss Marker—as well as her singing of such saccharine songs as "On the Good Ship Lollipop"—led to a curl franchise: dolls, dresses,

cereal bowls, mirrors, soap, and mugs, all selling the naiveté and charm of the all-American girl with trademark curls.⁴

Yet curls also lie. Temple's gold-colored ringlets weren't natural, as false as infomercials. From the time Temple was three, her mother, Gertrude, styled her daughter's hair to look like Pickford's, rolling her locks into exactly fifty-six pin curls each night.⁵ Eventually, after Temple signed with Twentieth Century Fox, Gertrude was paid to be her daughter's official hairdresser. And while Pickford herself was born with hair as twirled as Botticelli's Venus, even she believed in the need for a fake set of ringlets, at the heady price of \$50 each, for those days when the humidity was too high on the movie set.⁶

Curls stage beauty: they perform it and work it. In the United States, methods for faking curls have been around for centuries. In the early 1700s, popular Fontange coiffures required that women pile their curls high around an elaborate headdress called a *frelange*. Later in the eighteenth century, as pink-, blue-, and violet-powdered wigs came into vogue—built upon a wire scaffold called a *commode* and sometimes reaching a sculptural height of two-and-a-half feet—a whole vocabulary developed to designate individual ringlets or sections of curls: *des migraines*, *frivolité*, *l'insurgent*, *frelange*, *sorti*, *flandon*, *choux*, *burgoigne*, *monte la haut*, and more.⁷ During the nineteenth century, intricate middle-class hairstyles, such as fringed chignons and Gibson Girl looks, necessitated either a mass of ringlets down the back or clusters of curls at the temple, which could be achieved by using a false front, a kind of Victorian weave. In the 1847 novel *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë, Mr. Brocklehurst—the headmaster of Lowood, Jane's brutal boarding school—chastises a pupil, Julia Severn, for her curls. Brocklehurst asks the principal, Miss Temple, "What—what is that girl with curled hair? Red hair, ma'am, curled—curled all over?" In response, Miss Temple quietly replies, "Julia's hair curls naturally," whereupon Brocklehurst bristles, exclaiming, "Naturally! Yes, but we are not to conform to nature. . . . I have again and again intimated that I desire the hair to be arranged closely, modestly, plainly. Miss Temple, that girl's hair must be cut off entirely." Close on the heels of this outburst, Brocklehurst's wife and

two daughters enter the room, dressed to the nines. The two girls sport ostrich-plumed beaver hats over “a profusion of light tresses, elaborately curled,” whereas Mrs. Brocklehurst wears “a false front of French curls.”⁸ Thus curls present a face, or “front,” that’s false. Curls smile their lies. They manifest hypocrisy—pure pretense.

Such contradictory connections between curls and purity, curls and falsity, remain to this day. Hollywood mistresses are often adorned with curly wantonness juxtaposed against the soccer-mom straight cuts of ignorant wives. Glenn Close in *Fatal Attraction* and Meryl Streep in *She-Devil* literally let their hair down, spreading their coiffured clouds against satin sheets. On the other hand, one of the Disney Corporation’s visual equivalents of Pickford-and-Temple wholesomeness—Miley Cyrus as the fictional singer Hannah Montana, with a mane of long, languid curls—was a character meant to capture the hearts and pocketbooks of their targeted demographic, tween girls. When my own daughter was ten years old, her Hannah Montana Halloween costume came replete with a sparkly pink dress, a faux-leather jacket, a plastic microphone, and a long, curly blonde wig. Now, of course, Montana’s doppelgänger—the real-life singer Cyrus, who has blunted and buzzed her cut into what might be called a shock of hair to match her shocking, twerking transformation—reveals the mere hair’s breadth between the good girl and the girl gone bad, between hairstyles of virtue and those of vice.

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While wigs and false fronts have been the preferred means of wearing someone else’s tresses, to turn one’s own hair from flat strands into curls, the long-favored tool has been—and is—the curling iron.

Tongs, rods, and irons for curling hair have been around for millennia. Such devices have been found in Egyptian tombs, and the early Greeks heated a metal stick, called a *calamistrum*, over wood ashes to burn curls into straight strips of hair.⁹ Through the early twentieth century, all such implements had to be heated over flames or on a stove, which made temperature control difficult at best, sometimes leading to very bad hair days.

In *Little Women*, Meg March wants “a few curls about her face” for a New Year’s Eve party, and her younger sister Jo assumes the job of “pinch[ing] the papered locks with a pair of hot tongs.” Two other March sisters, Beth and Amy, observe this little bit of toilette, one of them asking, “Ought they to smoke like that?” and the other observing, “What a queer smell! It’s like burned feathers.” When Jo finally takes off the curling papers, “no cloud of ringlets appear[s],” Meg’s hair coming away along with the papers. Horrified, Jo lays “a row of little scorched bundles on the bureau before her victim,” while Meg cries, “What have you done? I’m spoiled!” gazing with despair at the “uneven frizzle on her forehead.”¹⁰

Curling one’s hair can be disastrous, yet it can also be downright dangerous. Now, anyone hoping for curls may walk into the hair-styling aisle in any big-box store, and she’ll have her pick of irons: Conair and Curlipops, Tourmaline and Proliss Twister, an InStyler Wet-2-Dry Hot Iron or a Rock-n-Roller Bubble Wand. The packaging practically shouts their safety features: ceramic cylinders, automatic off-switches, a dial for regulating temperature, sometimes a heat-protective glove or a silicone shield for storage. When I was eleven, however, my Crazy Curl curling iron wasn’t that far removed from Jo’s Victorian tongs, despite my iron’s electric heating element and plastic construction. My device had a single on-off setting, a small water reservoir for producing “steam” for “longer-lasting curls,” and if I accidentally left it on, it would burn, baby, burn all the night long. The white plastic barrel and gooseberry-green clamp were fully exposed—no shield—and the iron produced uneven heat, often at a very high temperature, with the capacity to reach the searing heat of 230 degrees Fahrenheit.¹¹

At ages eleven, fifteen, and twenty-two, I gave myself second-degree burns while curling my hair. At twenty-two, the burn was along my hairline, just under my bangs where I’d turned the barrel too tightly. First an angry, raised red, then the color and crinkled consistency of blackened toast, the remnants of the burn finally flaked off, leaving a small scar. At fifteen, the morning of my ninth-grade school photograph, I tried to flip my hair out rather than in—hoping for a daisy effect instead of my usual curled-under

mushroom. I was not used to twisting my wrist out, and the hot wand touched my neck. The burn bubbled, turning raspberry-dark while I ate breakfast. It looked like a hickey, a fact that Chris Hilsabrook—still a charmer—pointed out to me. “You must have been having fun last night, Jenn,” he said. “Look at your big hickey.”

When I was eleven, the burn was on my inside thigh. One slow Saturday morning a few weeks after getting my Crazy Curl, I was out of the shower, hair dried and towel-wrapped, with nothing particular to do. So I shut my bedroom door, plugged in my curling iron, picked up my latest copy of *Teen Beat*, and lay back on my bedspread, holding the magazine above my head and clamping the iron between my knees, waiting for it to heat up. The cover claimed, “John’s Special Gift for You”—an exclusive interview with John Schneider, my current heartthrob from *The Dukes of Hazzard*, Daisy Duke’s oh-so-kissable cousin, a poster of him on my wall next to Daisy herself: John leaning easy against a tree, his thumb hooked to the front pocket of his jeans, his smile a wedge of sunlight.

The night before, after my parents and sister had fallen asleep, I’d shed my pajamas, coiling my nightgown and underwear on the floor. Walking slowly up to my wall, I’d pressed my naked body against John’s paper flesh. Closing my eyes, I rebuilt my awkward, adolescent form into its own poster perfection: large breasts, a sleek stomach, and scissor-sharp legs, with a bottom as round as an inverted heart. Pressing my thin lips against John’s smile, I imagined his ghost arms curling around my waist. To “curl up” can mean to give up, and I gave myself up to this fantasy—the cold, flat wall starting to warm with my own body’s heat.

Now, though, hiding my body under a towel as I paged through my *Teen Beat*, trying to discover exactly what John’s gift for me might be, I shifted my knees, and the hot iron fell against my thigh, bouncing to the floor as I jumped and shrieked. The burn blistered, and the iron charred the rug.

When Mom came running from the kitchen, I had no choice but to explain my foolishness to her, how I’d put a hot rod between my legs. Mom soothed me, curling me into her own arms. “It’s OK,” she said. “It’ll be OK, sweetie. Don’t worry about the rug.”

It would be years before I had a boyfriend. It would be years more before I had sex. But even so, I was mortified, sure my mother would guess my secret—my body marked by its own wanting.

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Ironically, modern curling irons are chilly and chilling objects, shiny with threat. Shaped like weapons, an electric iron might be a lightsaber, a cattle prod, a hot truncheon. It also might be a penis—which, for a girl, can be an uncanny shape, one of both danger and intrigue.

Curls are innocent. Curls are spunky. Curls are perilous. Curls are sexy. When I finally went to college, quite unexpectedly and without warning I became the kind of girl who boys noticed. At dance parties and in class, they would give me flashing, hard looks, ones that I learned meant they wanted their hands up inside of my curly hair, lifting and twisting it from the back of my neck.

My second weekend at college, it was a boy named Tam. I'd gone to my first frat party, and he'd walked toward me through a crowd of damp hair and clammy T-shirts, brushing bodies as he passed. Tam moved slow, so slow that, long before he reached me, I'd ached for his wrists and hips, the ridge of his stomach and the stretch of his calves. Without a thing to say, I mumbled into my drink, forgot to smile, crossed my legs.

But Tam had been kind. He asked me about high school, about what I might major in, about the sorority I'd just joined. Then he took me back to his room, away from the jaw-rattling music, the squeals of weekend laughter. Although I was frightened when he untied my skirt, his voice was so level, so sane with its flat Nebraska vowels and soft consonants, that my years of wondering about what goes where and when and how evaporated under Tam's sure hands, unclipping my bra in one motion before I was ready. For a few weeks, I fell for him because he didn't say a word afterwards, didn't tell me a thing, didn't call me again. But after Tam, I picked up on the game. I came to realize that it was all just a lust dance—the dance of boys in urgent and painful and passing love.

Towards the end of my first semester, there was one late-spring evening

when I was at another frat party, and one of my friends, drunk and in tears, tugged at my sleeve, asked me to leave with her, said she just had to go, just had to get out of there. We went back to my room, my roommate still out. Instead of turning on the lights, we lit a scented candle, drank wine coolers out of my dorm-room fridge. That night, my friend talked about a lot of things—how her boyfriend had cheated on her, how she was failing her health class—and then, for some reason, she confessed that she'd been gang-raped in high school, her memory fresh as a new bruise. At some party when her parents were out of town, she'd had way too much to drink, had found herself in a boy's bedroom, his buddies waiting. It turned out I knew one of her rapists, Chris Hilsabrook. At his name, hate filled my mouth, copper-sharp.

To curl up one's body is a gesture of defeat and of comfort. Curling up against me, my friend cried all of her tears.

After she left to head home, I snuffed our candle and stood in the semidarkness, the only light from the room's wide windows a dim light, like a night sky viewed from the bottom of a hole. Getting ready for bed, I slid my jeans and underwear to the floor, peeled off my top, unhooked my bra and flung it over a chair. Standing by my shared desk, I looked outside. The view was only of the parking lot and the cramped backyards one block over. In the light of the moon, my body was bluish-black. I was almost colorless—even my forearms looked gray. I thought about what a boy might see looking at me in the almost-dark, a body waiting for him. My palms warm on the cold glass, my curled hair swished against my shoulders like fingertips.

But like fingernails, hair is already dead. To curl it animates a corpse.

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Hissing heat, curling irons have the capacity to maim and to mutilate. According to a study published in 2001, curling-iron injuries constitute 78 percent of hair care-related wounds treated at American emergency rooms. Of these, 70 percent involve females, with a median age of eight.

Thermal burns are the most common injury, with 98 percent occurring in the home: 56 percent from touching or grabbing the hot barrel, the rest from “contact while in use.” The wrist rolls; the iron slips. Corneal burns make up 69 percent of the overall wounds in emergency rooms, yet most curling-iron burns are treated at home.¹² A simple Google search with the phrase “curling iron burn” results in 367,000 hits, recording injuries ranging from mild to serious on virtually every part of the female body, including foreheads, necks, arms, wrists, fingers, torso, thighs, legs, feet, breasts, buttocks, and even a vagina, one girl trying to curl her pubic hair using a Baby Bliss iron.

As soon as my daughter Katharine could walk, I taught her to avoid my curling iron. Unlike the stovetop, the iron was easily within her grasp, sitting on the vanity or on top of the toilet. Shiny and smooth, with a dark-gold barrel and a movable part to snap open and closed like a mouth, I knew the iron would beckon its welcome. Glowing with its one red eye, it would say, “Come on, Kate. Come on and play.”

So I called my curling iron “the hot thing.” I said, “Kate, don’t go near the hot thing. It burns. It hurts.” I repeated these warnings every day.

Each morning for fourteen years now, Kate has watched me coil my hair into serpents. My curls aren’t those of an innocent pixie: I am a witch. Perhaps my lip curls, a mark of cruelty or disdain, when I say, “Watch out for the hot thing.”

For fourteen years, I have disguised my true fears in giving birth to a daughter rather than a son. I have tousled my locks forward, obscuring my features, refusing to look squarely at my fears, or my daughter, face-to-face. I’ve feared her being bullied, made to feel friendless and ugly. I’ve feared her disfiguring herself in the name of beauty, if not with a curling iron then with starvation or plastic surgery. I’ve feared her having teenage sex, trying to learn to love herself by seeking someone else’s love. I’ve feared her getting raped.

If I were to say I had curled my daughter’s toes, it would mean, metaphorically, that I’d shocked or frightened her, and this has been precisely

my intent: to make Kate afraid. As a small girl, I taught her to fear the hot thing. As a teenager, I've taught her to fear the Siren Song of beauty.

Hair hurts—that is the simple fact. And when I was age eleven—and for all of my years afterwards—I have willingly risked this pain: a burnt thigh, a burnt neck, a burnt forehead, and the burning that's not of skin but soul. Even now, at forty-five years old, my three lozenge-shaped scars remain sensitive and visible. My curling irons have stamped me with memory's brand.

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A few weeks ago, I bought a pair of Victorian hair tongs from one of those online antique sites specializing in crockery, maple furniture, and old tools. When they arrived, I only knew what they were because they were labeled, a handmade card tied to one of the handles with a bright red ribbon. Shaped like a vagina, the slender stem of the barrel resembles a slim birth canal, opening at the hinge to two wooden handles, curved like labia. Although this device once charred hair fairly easily, its form is pleasing. It's easy to hold, to curl my fingers around.

The hair tongs are sitting on the kitchen counter when Kate walks in to make herself a cup of tea. She says, "What are these?" and picks them up. The tongs fit her hand. They might be a garden tool or a kitchen implement. The handles are polished and creamy blonde, like hedge shears or a pair of well-worn salad tongs.

"It's an old-fashioned curling iron," I say. "I wanted to have one. I'm writing an essay about curling irons."

"The hot thing, you mean," she says, smirking.

Kate doesn't curl her hair. She washes it, combs it, and lets it dry; it has a natural, wild wave to it, soft as the sea. She says she wants her hair to get long enough to touch her bra line.

"Or maybe I'll just cut it off," Kate says.

I tell her that either way, she'll be beautiful.

NOTES

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5. Ibid.
6. Leavey, *Mary Pickford*, 104.
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Beautiful Monster

Life with a Prosthetic Limb

Emily Rapp

Ever since there have been wars, physical anomalies, accidents, aging, and bodily improvisation, there have been cyborgs—people who are half machine, half body. When one part of the organic organism does not function the way it should, someone crafts a part to fill its place, to accomplish the needed task. Artificial legs made of iron. Wooden-wheeled wheelchairs. In the last century, the definition of a cyborg has of course deepened and broadened. Prosthetic limbs now contain computers that work with the living person's brain, signaling the parts to move. Humans—part human, part machine—have always existed: *imago dei* sprung from human invention and creativity.

Since the time I learned to walk, I have worn a machine. Made of disparate parts, I have, like Frankenstein's monster, moved as a hybrid person through the world, an amalgamation of mechanical parts that enable me to live and to thrive. The correct functioning of my artificial part was as essential to me as food or drink, safety and shelter. Without it, I could not be at home in the world.

Born with a congenital birth defect that required the amputation of my left foot at the age of four, I began my toddler life in a metal brace secured to the body by Velcro straps and a foam "bump" under the left foot that made my legs even, or "line up," as we said ("Is it lined up? Do you feel lined up?" the brace fitter would ask). The brace helped me learn to walk and then

kept me walking. For years, whenever I had an art assignment in school, I would look at the lines on my drawing of a flower or a bear's two paws together, holding a pot of honey, and think of the lines of the human body and how both were meant to be even and symmetrical. My first brace was a primitive creation, all metal and easily soiled cloth, with a clicky-clanking noise, a literal cage for the smaller left leg that kept it straight and allowed it to swing through after the right leg, the "lead leg," took a step forward. One step, two step, three step. The dance of a broken doll.

After the amputation of my foot, I had subsequent "modification" operations to the hip and other areas of the femur, and I graduated to another leg made of a light wood the color of the cabinets in my childhood kitchen. This wooden shell fit over my residual limb and attached with a cloth waist belt that frayed at the edges and rubbed against my hips when I walked, often creating rashes and sores that my mom rubbed with ointment. Secured along the sides, like two metal eyes, were the hinges that swung the leg through to its next-step destination. My dad had hung a rope swing in our garage in Wyoming, and I loved to swing, charging the right leg forward and then watching the bottom half of the left leg move on its own, back and forth, like a door closing shut against the body, a door opening and closing in the strength of a breeze, the leg both a part of me and also separate from me, mindless in the way that inanimate objects are, and yet also possessed of a mind of its own. I accepted this cyborgian body as mine, and at night I tore off the leg and let it rest next to my bed, an off-body talisman that, in the morning, just like in some kind of modern fairy tale, would be reintegrated—although not always easily—into my body. Helpless without it, my body was made active and mobile with the presence and assistance of this human-made device.

As a child I imagined my body was put together by elves, beavering away in the back rooms of the Denver offices where we traveled for any leg-related activities. Denver was the closest city to our small town in rural Wyoming. The drives felt long to me then, the station wagon and then the minivan traversing miles of flat and desolate plains, with a hint of mountains in the distance as we approached Colorado. The prosthetist's rooms were coated

in sawdust, dirt, and metal parts. Like a fairy-tale princess, I was blessed (and this part I imagined with glitter) by a small group of people who were dedicated only to the crafting and welfare of my body. Instead of magical dresses and shoes, I was given magical body parts. As a child, I initially took great pride in being distinctive.

The prosthetist's office in Denver was located on the nondescript corner of a rundown block in a sketchy neighborhood, the floors coated in dust, the rickety side tables in the waiting room littered with old magazines. The traffic moving by on Colfax Avenue was often barely visible through the windows, which hadn't been cleaned for some time. I liked to rub a hole in the dirt with my sleeve and check for it when I returned; it was never wiped away. As an adult, looking back and thinking of this office—of its waiting room, the back room, and the “walking” runway where we tested the adjustments to the leg—I consider it as a place where objects of shame were manufactured: for the incompletes, the outcasts, the abnormal, the “disabled” as we were then (and are still) called, as if we constituted some beastly barbarian horde. Later, I would think about how those of us in these rooms were part of my strange fairy tale—instead of frogs turned into princes, we were people with misshapen bodies made acceptable (at least in part) to live and move in the world. As a child, however, I did not think of these things, but simply filled that dusty space with my constant chatter and genuine curiosity.

“What kind of leg do you have?” I'd ask the other amputees. In those days, the early 1980s, before the United States entered more wars from which men (and then women) would return in need of reconstructed body parts, the amputees I knew were Vietnam vets. They, too, were disabled, although the circumstances of them becoming so were far different from mine. These men, these war veterans—who seemed to me ancient and slightly edgy, with their smell of cigarette smoke and their sleeve tattoos—would chat to me about which legs they had, their ailments, their various aches and pains. As I thought later when I first heard the phrase, we were the definition of the “walking wounded.” In another century or another country or another time, we might have been made beggars or

literal outcasts, so we converged here, at this place where body parts were made, to collect the mechanical pieces that would make us mobile and animate and at least partially human.

As much as this early machine mobilized and enabled my life, it often failed me as well. Prosthetists were unaccustomed to constructing limbs for girls, and the height of my leg was often wrong, the fit too tight, the foot too large—made for a man. I was literally mismatched and asymmetrical, the one side slightly withered and incomplete. Slowly, as I graduated up through a succession of wooden legs, my feelings of distinctiveness gave way to feelings of shame. The difference I embodied was not a mark of being special; it signaled a freak show. I was a body made in Victor Frankenstein's workshop. Instead of inhabiting a regular girl's body that moved freely through the world, I had to be made: a created creature. I was the small girl version of Frankenstein's monster, weirdly constructed but heartier and stronger than I looked, full of both power and sadness.

Just before I started puberty—during one long, hot day of summer adjustments in the Denver office—I hopped to the back room to have a look at what my prosthetist (we called him a “doctor,” although he had never gone to medical school) was doing with my leg, this precious object. I stood in the doorway in my underwear, leaning against the frame, and watched my leg move back and forth beneath a saw that descended from the ceiling, roaring and raging, spinning angrily and preparing to cut, slice, devour, change. I was part of that galvanized matter that Dr. Frankenstein was endeavoring to create. Flecks of wood flew like sparks and floated through the air, flake-shaped particles, atoms of artificial wood-skin. How strange to be divided from a part of my body, to see it manipulated in the hands of another: treated, sawed, handled. I felt queasy and unsettled and out of place, as though I had no place at all, no body at all, no future. What did it mean to have a body that was made by a man with age spots crossing his bald head, with fat hands that adjusted part of me. What was my body? What was its purpose? What was its role? Without this thing being transformed beneath another's hands, I had no power, no mobility, no chance of being in the world in a way that was significant or, I felt, meaningful.

I reached down and touched the air where the finished prosthesis would go, the place where there was no leg. How could that be, when every other girl I knew so effortlessly embodied a two-legged form? It seemed such a simple thing, just the one missing piece from knee to foot, but the absence was everything, even when, in a tactile sense, it was nothing at all.

I stood there for a long time, watching the “doctor” do his work on my body that was also not my body. A cigarette hung from his lips, and bits of bright ash flickered on the table. He cursed at my leg, tugged at it. I ached for the leg, I hated it. I wanted to pluck it from beneath the whirring blades of the saw. I wanted it to be chewed up, incinerated, or disposed of once and for all.

On the way home, I was uncharacteristically quiet. “Are you OK?” my dad asked. “Are you happy with the leg?”

“Sure,” I said, but I couldn’t help thinking that someday I would walk through the doors of the prosthetist’s office with two real legs, as if a real metamorphosis had happened—from monster to princess. Instead of entering Frankenstein’s workshop, I would enter a world where real fairy tales came true: peasants were made queens.

At night I began storing the leg in the closet and shutting the door so I wouldn’t have to look at it or know it was there. I would lie in bed and imagine that a new leg, glorious in flesh and blood, would grow in the empty space beneath the covers. I would awake transformed. Reliance on an artificial leg made my hormonally charged heart spin: to wear the machine, to rely on it so deeply, was to be bound and shackled, but also, oddly, free.

“I hate you,” I once said to it, out loud. It was one morning as I was putting the leg on.

My brother walked past my bedroom door. “Who are you talking to?” he asked.

“You,” I said, slamming the door in his face. I did not talk about the leg, and nobody knew how I felt about needing it. I covered it with questionable fashion choices; I tried to put it out of my mind.

In high school, I still prayed to be healed of the problem that required me to use the leg, to be rid of it, although the idea of being parted from it

also filled me with a great and terrible dread, like the knowledge of death. It would be like jumping off a building to be seen without it, to be left without it. At slumber parties, I clutched it close in the sleeping bag. At high-school parties, I was careful to hide as much of it as I could, to shroud the difference in long pants or thick tights. I detested it. I relied on it.

As I've become an adult, I have cast off one leg after another as my body grew and prosthetic technology advanced. Now, artificial limbs have knees that operate like computers; feet come with intense shock absorbers that allow people to run and leap and participate in competitive sports. I own a running leg, and a leg with an adjustable foot made for wearing high heels. But this relationship I have with a mechanized body has always been contentious, because a woman's body is, in part, her currency in the world, however we might try to deny it. A woman is embodied, and she is judged accordingly. We want to think that we are beyond this, that we are more than our bodies, but in the end, we are not. We are easily reduced to the sum of our parts, and sometimes we are reduced to only our parts. As a woman who wears a permanent machine, I felt and still feel this reduction acutely.

At my high-school graduation, dressing in my room with another amputee friend of mine, pirouetting in front of the mirror, I observed that it would just be so much better with two real legs. She agreed. The "it" was the crucial point. We both wanted to be pretty, to have our bodies be acceptable, normal, noticeable—but in a way that felt special, not strange. We carefully calculated the fine line between these two descriptors. We didn't want to wear flesh-colored hose to match the flesh-colored paint of the artificial legs we wore, which hardly matched our own skin tones. We didn't want the leg to make loud noises as we walked. We didn't want to be stared at. We wanted to be women who didn't rely on any external, human-made parts to make us whole. We wanted to be whole without assistance.

Sex presented a particular dilemma. What to do with the leg? How to explain it? I worked to hide it, believing that the vulnerability of difference wasn't sexy or special. During those early years of sexual activity, I felt a deep embarrassment coupled with a furious wildness—a feeling that I

needed to overcompensate, prove that I was worthy, prove that I could be chosen, and that a so-called normal person would pluck me from the freak show, make me belong to a different group of people, the “right” group of people, the beautiful ones.

As a teenager, I became an expert at “partial sex.” I made sure that everything from the top down—face, arms, breasts—were arranged for maximum beauty, a standard based on what I saw in magazines. I was physically fit to the point of obsession, and I became fastidiously committed to virginity, if only because it bought me more time to avoid being vulnerable in a sexual way.

As an adult, my desires changed, but I remained terrified to reveal to others the truth of what I looked like and who I was. I didn’t want to experience that moment in *Frankenstein* when the doctor realizes the horror of what he has created. Not beauty, but ugliness:

How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavoured to form? . . . The different accidents of life are not so changeable as the feelings of human nature. I had worked hard for nearly two years, for the sole purpose of infusing life into an inanimate body. . . . I had desired it with an ardour that far exceeded moderation; but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart. Unable to endure the aspect of the being I had created, I rushed out of the room.¹

How could I know that someone would not, as the doctor had done, run away from me, horrified by what had been revealed? Beautiful face, terrible body. The Sphinx. A harpy. A siren. Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s witch-serpent Geraldine. Who could desire such a monster?

But people did, and do. This is, in fact, another great lesson of Frankenstein’s story: that love is given to all different kinds of human forms. That there is no fairy-tale body, no perfection. But I continue to struggle, finding it hard to walk by any magazine that promises “Your Perfect Body” or “Get

a Better Butt” without picking it up and studying it, wanting it, hating the fact that I cannot have it.

When I became a mother, my relationship to my body changed yet again. A different kind of somatic naturalness—all mysterious organs and processes—was activated inside me, and everything worked. I made a beautiful boy, Ronan—flawlessly made, it seemed. But at nine months old, he was diagnosed with a terminal illness—a progressive neurological disease—that would claim his life before the age of three.

At first, I irrationally blamed my hybrid body with its “fake” leg. How dare I think I might actually manage to build something perfect in this body helped along by expensive, human-made parts? But as my son’s condition developed, I developed a more nuanced relationship not only with my leg—which seemed an “easy” problem compared to his many ailments—but with other medical-grade machines that also contributed, for a brief time, to his well-being and quality of life. Because Ronan had trouble swallowing and sometimes breathing, he used a suction machine and an oxygen machine. At the end of his life, he used a nose tube that distributed pain medication. Nothing about his body in the world was easy, and suddenly all the mechanical parts of my own brain that worked together to enable me to speak, walk, type, move, shout, eat—all of them—were miraculous. I wasn’t monstrous; difference can’t be so easily understood or misunderstood. Everything, everything, everything was wrong with my son, and yet he was gorgeous and singular. He was my creation, but I would never, as Victor Frankenstein had, leave him.

Now, after my son’s death, I think about what a revelation it is to move food to my mouth, to walk across a room—assisted or not—to have vision, mobility, thoughts, and a chance at a life. I understand that the most powerful machine any of us has is the brain, and I am grateful for mine. I no longer curse the leg on the floor beside me, although it is true that I have occasionally cursed the world. Instead I am grateful for this complex system of interconnected neural pathways—mysterious pathways that remained unlit or burned to the ground in Ronan’s brain, but that function

in me in a way that enabled me to care for my son during his illness, and that continue to help me to survive, however uneasily, his death.

My body is, and always will be, partly mechanical. This fact is a burden, a gift, a risk, an attitude, and a reality that can be shifted in ways that I can control and not control. Like all of us who live and breathe and function in these bodies composed of so many disparate parts and processes, so many beauties and lies, so many conundrums and solutions, we are hybrid beings. We are, all of us, subject to the chaos and unpredictability that are creation, reinvention, and change.

We all live in a fairy tale called life. And we humans are, all of us, beautiful monsters.

NOTE

1. Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein; Or, The Modern Prometheus* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 58.

Midwife Hands, Mother Hands

Monica Frantz

The machines I use and value most are my hands.

I have big hands with long fingers. There is a scar on my left palm from the time I fell off a horse at eighteen and skidded to a stop on a dirt road. The veins on the back of my palms are prominent; the thick, blue lines under pale skin made a younger me self-conscious. In seventh grade, I sprained my middle finger trying to catch a softball, and wearing a bulky splint, I got to skip gym class for a week. In high school, my hands knew the perfect ballet stance, sculpted for turning and jumping. My hands fit perfectly in my dance partner's as we moved across the floor.

The human hand has twenty-seven bones wrapped in muscles, ligaments, and tendons. At the end of the arm, the palm, fingers, and thumb have almost unlimited variations of movement. The fingertips have dense collections of nerve endings to feel sharp, rough, smooth, soft, sticky, hot, cold, and wet. From before birth, the prints of our fingers contain our unique signature. As infants, hands are our first tools. Mostly blind when we arrive out of the womb, we use our hands as blunt fists to swat and to suck. But then we discover them by sight. We hold our hands in front of our small faces and unfold our fingers, eyes locked. We use our hands as mitts, stroking and patting and grabbing. They scratch: as the nerves in our fingertips come alive, tiny fingernails go scritch scritch on every surface. We start to pass objects from one hand to another, and our hands begin to

work together. We hold things and examine them with our eyes, not our mouths. We learn to use our fingers independently, pinching and poking. As we grow, our hands—endlessly versatile—adapt to whatever task we give them.

I have midwife hands, my fingernails rarely painted and always trimmed short. They are with me at every gynecology appointment, every prenatal appointment, and every birth. My hands evaluate women's bodies, even the hidden parts—vagina, cervix, uterus, and ovaries. These hands touch teenage women and menopausal women and pregnant women. The pelvis of a pregnant woman is often measured with what's called "pelvimetry" to confirm its capacity for a vaginal birth. My fingers are rulers—eleven centimeters long. In a vagina, my fingers measure how far away the sacrum—the bottom portion of the spine—is from the pubic bone. A woman lies on the exam table, and I stand between her legs with my fingers pointed straight back, deep in her vagina, parallel to the floor in the direction of her sacrum. This measurement, the diagonal conjugate, is a diameter of a woman's true pelvis, the bony passageway between the dark sea of the womb and the earth. The passage curves along the sacrum, past the prominent inward-facing bones of the pelvis, known as the ischial spines, and ends at the coccyx—the tailbone—and the pubic bone. Tracing the boundaries of this passage, my fingers judge the angle of the pubic arch, the shape of the ischial spines, the curvature of the sacrum, and the flexibility of the coccyx. The near universal suitability of these dimensions affirms my trust in women's bodies and their brilliant engineering. In a few moments, my fingers have done the job that an x-ray machine once did. Decades ago, x-ray was used to visualize the bone structure of a woman and her fetus, but my hands do the job best and safest. These tools of muscle and bone are best suited for working with muscle and bone.

While a woman is in labor, I periodically examine her body and her baby. A cervical exam includes evaluating the openness or dilation of the cervix, the effacement or thinness of the cervix, the station or height of the baby in the pelvis, and whether her water has broken. My fingers feel the crown of her baby's head as he descends through the open cervix and vagina, following his movements and rotations. The cervix ultimately opens

to a diameter of ten centimeters; my pointer and middle finger stretch apart and circle the baby's head as I check for that rubbery band of cervix and measure the diameter of the opening within a half centimeter. I feel the posterior fontanelle—a space between the bones of the skull that allow the baby's head to mold to the shape of his mother as he's being born—which tells me where his face and body are and whether his head is tucked or tilted or extended. Caring for women in labor is informed by science, but it will always be an art. My hands follow the changes in the woman's body, and the three of us—mother, baby, midwife—work together. As the baby navigates this passage, he actively participates in his birth; his head flexes and extends, his shoulders twist and turn, until he reaches the air. After a birth, my hands retain the chemical, plastic smell of sterile gloves and antimicrobial washing; the smell won't wash off. The smell reminds me of the new bodies my hands caught that day: wet, naked arms and legs flailing in search of their mother. My hands are strong. With these hands, I welcome generations.

I'm not the first woman in my family to work in birth. My mom was a nurse at a freestanding birth center, staffed by midwives, where natural births in a homelike setting were the norm. Most American families welcome their babies in hospitals, and there is no one way to describe a hospital birth: practices vary from hospital to hospital and from doctor to doctor. But, in general, hospitals have a stronger institutional feel: a standard-issue gown, IV fluids, a fancy mechanical bed, and a large, rotating staff of doctors and midwives and nurses. In many hospitals, a laboring woman will be restricted from eating during her labor. Her baby is often monitored continuously with devices that are pressed against her belly with belts. Her IV fluids connect her arm to the IV pole. Her fetal monitors connect her to the computer. Her blood-pressure cuff connects her to the automatic blood-pressure device. If this woman has an epidural for pain relief, she will have the epidural tube coming from her back and probably a urinary catheter coming from her bladder. Sometimes women give birth with a just-in-case IV line that is not connected to anything. Some hospitals do provide intermittent monitoring where a doctor or midwife listens to the baby with a handheld device at regular intervals, but this practice is

not the norm. The typical hospital room is crowded with machines that blink and alarm; technology is everywhere. In my experience, the image that represents hospital birth best is the laboring woman with lines and cords tying her down. A woman restrained.

While women and babies who are “high risk” are served best in hospitals by specialized teams with operating rooms and neonatal intensive-care units down the hall, women without these risk factors can make another choice. It’s a much less common choice, at least in America, but historically—and still in many places around the world—out-of-hospital birth was a common and safe practice for most women. Out-of-hospital birth includes giving birth at home or in a freestanding birth center and is typically attended by a midwife. Women birth in their own clothing or even naked. Unattached to any machines, women can move from room to room and birth wherever they choose. There are no anesthesiologists to give epidurals, but women receive pain relief by soaking in warm water, showering, massage, walking, and minimizing stress. Many women I know talk about having a feeling of control during an out-of-hospital birth—control of who saw or touched their vagina, control of where they could go, control of how they could move in labor, and control of how they pushed out their babies. My mom talks about having had control over her new babies after she helped to birth them. Unlike in a hospital, after being born, babies never leave their mothers’ arms. Babies are not whisked off to the newborn nursery an hour after birth, or given exams and injections across the room. Everything the baby needs can be done while he rests on his mother’s chest.

When I was a kid, my mom worked on-call, usually overnight, and I grew to believe that all babies arrived in the darkest hours of the night. My siblings and I spent a lot of time at the birth center as kids, often rolling around on birthing balls—large, round exercise balls—while my mom resupplied and organized the birth rooms. As a reward for good behavior, my mom would let my little brother and sister take bubble baths in the Jacuzzi tub that offered pain relief to laboring women. I would tag along with my mom to check on mothers and new babies at their own homes, waiting in the living room while she was in the bedroom.

When my mom was pregnant with my little sister, I used construction paper and glue to make a picture of my new sibling, complete with uterus, placenta, and umbilical cord. My mother referred to “the birth canal” with such frequency that I thought it was a separate passage altogether, unique to pregnant women. There was a photograph in a hall near one of the birthing rooms of a baby crowning. It was a black-and-white shot of a woman’s perineum stretched thin, a baby’s head peeking out. Eye-level with the perineum, her thighs rising out of the frame, the pale skin of the woman’s body made a perfect circle around the baby’s head, which was covered in dark hair. It was an awesome and mesmerizing scene: one body emerging alive from another.

As a four-and-a-half-year-old at my little sister’s birth, I stayed up all night playing with my grandparents and older brother and waiting for my sister to arrive. My mom’s best friend and I baked a birthday cake and put a “zero” candle on top. I didn’t watch the actual birth, but I remember being in and out of the room my mother was in and meeting my sister right after she was born. My memories of the night are all positive. It was a family celebration, preschooler included. My sister was not swaddled or placed in a plastic bassinet. Taking one arm out of my nightgown, I cuddled her against my skin.

Babies held with their bare skin against the bare skin of caretakers are calm. Their body functions regulate, and the stress of adjusting to this world of light and noise and cold dissolves. No incubator can replicate a mother’s chest. Nature is the most advanced technology.

Robots can reproduce the movements of the hand. On assembly lines, machines replace hands and repeat the same motion thousands of times without needing a break. But the sensory ability of hands cannot be replicated in a machine. My robotic vacuum attempts to sense as a hand does when it bounces off of the baseboard, turns, and bumps into a chair. When its sensor encounters pressure, the vacuum stops and changes direction. But this sensor does not prevent it from pushing the dog’s water bowl across the kitchen floor or dragging electrical cords through the living room. The ability of our hands to integrate movement and sensory information is unparalleled.

Palpation, a foundation of medical assessment, is skilled touch. And touch, even in the exam room, is intimate. The way we touch each other communicates what our words cannot; respectful touch builds trust, and a trusting relationship between patient and provider begets optimal care. When I studied to become a midwife, we did our first pelvic exams on each other. The correct touch is the hardest skill to acquire; the hands should be confident and heavy, neither sensual nor abrupt. I remember the first time we practiced in groups of three with an instructor; undressed from the waist down, I allowed a fellow student to hold the speculum, rotating it and opening it to see my cervix. At first the speculum is an unfamiliar appendage: shaky and slippery and confusing. But with time, it can become an extension of my hand, its movements second nature.

Now, I start every pelvic exam by telling the woman that she'll feel the back of my hand on her thigh. The back of my hand is less intimate, and her thigh is less sensitive than her vagina. Throughout the exam, I tell her what I am doing, because giving her information puts her in control. With that first touch, her body will tense, but then it relaxes a bit, and I begin. We've talked about her medical history, and I've listened to her heart and lungs, but we've just met. I am responsible for her physical and emotional safety; I take it seriously. The last part of the exam is the bimanual exam. Like my stethoscope, speculum, and specimen collection kits, my hands are just another tool. I use two fingers in the vagina and one hand on the abdomen to palpate the uterus and ovaries.

To learn about the position and size of the baby in the uterus, I use my hands. The woman lifts her shirt to expose her stomach and reclines on the exam table. I lay my hands on her belly. They glide in circles until I locate a smooth, curved back and a jumble of hands and feet. *Hello, baby.* A knee or fist pushes slow, stretching against my hand. A quick kick surprises the mother and me. When I grasp it and jiggle from side to side, the fetal head nods back and forth in my hand, independent from the body; it is ballotable. Because the baby's bottom is continuous with the torso, the same hand movement will cause the entire body to bob in the amniotic fluid. I take the mother's hand in mine and place it on her baby's back, bottom, foot. We are three in the room. I place my hand on the head

and the other on the bottom, and then I place them on the baby's back and one on the arms and legs. I weigh the baby. Five pounds. Six pounds. Seven-and-a-half pounds. My hands can estimate the weight of a fetus as well as an ultrasound machine.

I learned to be a midwife with a senior midwife's hands directly on mine. During pelvic exams and births, I tried to feel her energy. My hands learned where she directed pressure, when she pushed, and when she pulled her hands away. Our four hands sometimes crowded each other and made awkward motions, but I needed her guidance. Most babies are born facing down towards the mother's sacrum, reaching the perineum with their chins on their chests, and emerging by extending their heads, faces reaching skyward. The speed with which the head extends is often controlled by giving support to the perineum to prevent excess trauma to the woman's body. During birth, each midwife has her own style of supporting the perineum. Some press flat against the perineum, some squeeze, pulling their thumb and fingers together. Sometimes their hands hover in wait, occasionally touching the perineum lightly as if to test it. At the first birth I attended as a student, it was little more than literal catching; the baby was born so quickly, I didn't even have time to think about how to adjust the pressure or placement of my hands—yet my novice hands had caught their first baby. The senior midwife's hands fluttered around mine—checking and suctioning and clamping and cutting.

Now my hands perform all of the tasks independently. My left hand keeps the head flexed as it emerges, pushing down as the woman pushes her baby out. My right hand is on her perineum, that magnificent space between the vagina and the anus, as it stretches and accommodates. I feel the skin extending, and I push back, countering the mother's expulsive force. I'm also talking to her as I feel the skin become taut; I tell her to pant and stop pushing, so the skin can relax a bit. Then, as she pushes again, I push the bulging perineum back past the baby's ears, nose, and mouth, allowing the head to emerge. My hands pull away for a moment to check the baby's neck for an umbilical cord and to watch the head turn ninety degrees so that the shoulders pass through the widest diameter of the pelvis. I place my hands on the sides of the baby's head and move it downwards to allow

the top shoulder to be born. Once the top shoulder passes the pubic bone, I lift up and gather the newborn into my arms and pass her to her mother.

On her mother, the baby takes her first gasping breath with an effort that must fill her lungs with air and force the remaining amniotic fluid into her bloodstream. It's the hardest breath she'll ever take. There are a number of elements that encourage this inhalation—the relatively cool temperature outside the womb, the squeeze of the vagina and the subsequent release, a need for oxygen after the taxing birth process—but sometimes the baby lands naked and still on her mother's soft belly. She is still being oxygenated by the umbilical cord, but outside the mother's body, that lifeline starts to contract, and blood flow slows. So I reach my hands up and rub the baby's back. With the up-and-down strokes, air fills her lungs, and she cries those first beautiful cries. I realize I've been holding my breath with her. As she inhales, I exhale.

Birth is a lot of waiting and a lot of rushing and a lot of holding of breath. Hands off. Hands on. Hands two steps ahead of my brain. My hands are steady and calm and quick, even though there is always fear in my chest. I let it live there because I must not forget how fragile our entry is into this world. My hands are resuscitation tools. They stimulate. They suction. They hold the bag-valve mask over a baby's mouth and nose and give breaths that are just the right size. They wrap around tiny rib cages and give chest compressions. In that pause between birth and first breath, we all hang in limbo, and the fear starts to rise in my throat. Each lung-clearing cry pushes that fear back.

I am humbled by birth, privileged to attend women in their most intense moments. My hands are consecrated by their work. Trained to be tools, they are made holy by each baby they usher into the world. They are made holy by each birthing woman who allows my hands to comfort her, who trusts my hands to keep her and her baby safe. My hands hold the hands of scared, hurting, grieving women; birth is often joyful, but sometimes it is not. There is miscarriage and loss and sickness and infertility, and in the church of the exam room, I am both midwife and minister. I once cared for a woman in labor with a son who had died in the womb around the seventh month of pregnancy—what is called a fetal demise. She had been

under the care of another doctor, but I was called when she was ready to birth unexpectedly. I had not met her until I came into the delivery room with a senior midwife. I had never seen a dead baby before. His small, thin body showed signs of decay after spending weeks in amniotic fluid after his heart stopped beating. I wrapped up her son in a receiving blanket and cleaned his face as best as I could and handed him to her. His skin was peeling, his eyes empty. She was already crying. At that moment, my hands were those of a mortician.

Less than a month after I finished midwifery school, I birthed my daughter into the hands of a midwife. As I neared my due date, I would try to check my cervix in hopes of learning how close I was to labor: that gate between the dark, aquatic womb and the dry land of earth. The cervix changes throughout a woman's menstrual cycle and also throughout pregnancy, becoming softer or harder and even moving forward in line with the vagina or facing backwards. In labor, the cervix shortens, opens, and shifts forward. It eventually disappears completely, creating that open passage. With my own enormous belly, no matter how deeply I squatted, I just couldn't reach my cervix. My fingers searched, but my cervix remained closed and tucked away.

On a hot Thursday afternoon in August, my labor began. Slowly. I was in our pool enjoying the warm sun and decadent buoyancy of the cool water when I had a couple of uncomfortable contractions. Not yet sure that I was in labor, I went inside to take a nap and woke up with a strong contraction. Determined to distract myself from what could be a false alarm or the beginning of a days-long labor, I kept my hands busy: making fried rice for dinner and baking a cake. But the contractions continued, so I migrated to the bathtub to relax. My partner was anxious and unbelieving that this was labor, and I was still hesitant to declare that it was. I was excited and restless; my body was on autopilot, my brain left behind. I kept thinking of all of the women I had triaged who were barely in labor; I would be so embarrassed if I, the midwife, showed up at the birth center with a closed cervix. After a long soak in the tub, then a shower, and then another soak in the tub, I decided to try and check myself. I squatted again on the bathmat and reached around my belly. My two fingers entered my vagina—spongy, slippery, and

soft. My fingers hardly had to reach; just a few centimeters in, I felt my thin cervix—it had moved forward and opened up almost four centimeters, a bag of water protruding through it. Inside that bag was amniotic fluid, and floating in that ocean was my baby. As another contraction started, I removed my fingers and stood up. My body was changing, yes, but I still had doubts. My hands weren't able to work as the tools I had come to know and to trust. Those fingers that had confidently felt other women's bodies open up and push out their babies didn't seem to believe what my own body was capable of. At midnight, with contractions coming every two to four minutes, I called my mom to ask her if it was time. She didn't hesitate. It was time.

We left for the birth center at one o'clock on Friday morning, and when we arrived, my midwife checked me, and I was seven-and-a-half centimeters dilated. My cervix had thinned completely, and the baby's head was engaged in my pelvis, just beginning to descend. Her hands confirmed what I had felt; there was a pocket of amniotic fluid in front of the baby's head pushing through the cervix. It turned out that my hands still worked. After my mom arrived, my water broke in one enormous gush.

I moved into the bathtub to seek relief from the warm water. The contractions roared. I reached down and felt her head traveling lower and lower between each push, but there was still a strange disconnect between my hands and my body. Feeling the head of a baby inside a vagina was familiar, but feeling my own baby in my own vagina was new and strange. I had only felt this before with sterile gloves on. I was used to feigning complete relaxation as I watched mom, baby, and dad, arranging the tools on my sterile table—clamps, scissors, bulb syringe, needle holders. Now, for the first time, I was the one lying naked in a bathtub, awaiting another contraction. My baby was coming now—four days early—and my hands were ungloved, and one rested on my vulva, protecting. I had imagined that I would catch my own baby, but when my midwife asked, I knew I needed her to do it. The angle was all wrong, and I couldn't see my perineum at all in the dark bathroom, and the pain arched my back, my head thrown back, my eyes closed.

This time, I was the mother, not the midwife.

And so I allowed the midwife's hands to welcome my baby into the warm water and to bring her up to my chest. My daughter's arms were stretched out in front of her, reaching, her eyes puffy, her blood still flowing through the umbilical cord to our shared placenta. She looked up at me, in between worlds. Air had not yet filled her lungs; her blood still flowed to and from the placenta. An alien from a watery world, journeying across galaxies. And although I had known her for months, I held her then for the first time. I took my hand and rubbed her back. She took that first, most difficult breath, and she cried.

After I carried her from the tub to the bed, after her dad cut her umbilical cord, after I delivered our placenta, after she bobbed her head around on my naked chest and found the breast, I examined her. As she nursed, I opened her walnut-sized fists and stroked her hands. She had passed from my body into my arms, but she didn't feel like mine until I saw her hands. There were my long fingers, my wide fingernails. I knew those hands: my own reborn.

In time, her hands will grow. She'll paint her nails at sleepovers and get paper cuts. Her hands will hold a pencil and type on a keyboard. Her hands will tan and wrinkle and scar. Our machines are the same model—strong and graceful—but she must decide what functions hers will perform.

Now my daughter's hand is tucked in the collar of my shirt, her fingertips pressing into my skin, lightly kneading as she sleeps. We rock in the rocking chair. I kiss the top of her head and smell her sweet straw smell. I remember the first time I touched the crown of her head, early on that Friday morning, my knees bent against the side of the tub, my belly rising above the water. My hips ached, and my thoughts were both frantic and in slow motion. My hand moved from where it had been braced on my thigh and to my vagina. I touched her. For months I had felt her inside of me, kicking and pushing and rolling, but now my hands could reach her. I felt her hair and the wrinkled skin of her scalp. I felt her in my uterus—kicking and twisting. I felt her with my hands—her flesh squeezed tightly within mine as our bodies molded together.

I brush her head with my hand now. Big hands with long fingers smooth her fine hair, and we rock.

Farm, Lawn, Hill, and Wood

Tsantas and the Mind- Expanding Power of a Small Machine

Mary Swander

My machine? It sits on my kitchen counter and is bigger than a breadbox. It's brown and clunky with twelve shelves made of window screen. It heats up and a fan blows air over the shelves. It is regulated by a thermostat with suggested temperatures: for meat, for vegetables, for fruits. It hums. It whirls. It fills the room with scents of the summer garden. It lulls me to sleep at night.

My machine has been around longer than any one of my cars, longer than any one of my computers, even longer than most people I've known. My romance with my machine arose from necessity and my experimentation with food preservation. In 1983 a severe illness forced me to go on a diet of all organic foods, and at that time, there were very few such foods anywhere where I lived in Iowa. Oh, you could buy organic rice and organic peanut butter at the local food co-op, but that was about it. All the vegetables the co-op carried came right off the same truck that delivered California plastic-wrapped produce to the Hy-Vee supermarket down the street.

So I bought organic meat from nearby Amish farmers, and decided to grow all my own vegetables. The other alternative? Pay to have the veggies shipped to me at great cost. And then it hit me. If I grew my own food, I would have to preserve my own food, too. With long, harsh winters, Iowa has a short growing season. Most of the vegetables in the garden would have



Excalibur food dehydrator. Photo by Mary Swander.

to be “put by” and stored. And their preservation would most likely involve some kind of mechanical device or machine. Yikes. I didn’t know much about machines. Just the thought of a machine, any machine—anything from a simple device you had to remember to turn “off” once it was “on,” to a machine that had the potential to amputate a digit—was enough to make my neck muscles tighten into spasms. So I began using the devices that the women in my family had used to preserve food. A process of trial and error, it took a while before I found “my machine,” the machine that finally made me feel comfortable, the machine that I loved so much I eventually found a way to do without it.

I froze the Amish meat and started canning the vegetables with a pressure cooker. I had remembered how my grandmother canned just about everything, her homemade apron tied around her waist, the steam warming the kitchen, the jars cooling on the kitchen table, their lids

pinging soft notes in a syncopated rhythm. The pressure cooker was my grandmother's machine. With a grunt, she hoisted the heavy thing up from the bottom cupboard onto the gas stove. A quick snap of her wrists secured the lid, sealing the gasket tight. She lifted the pressure regulator off the steam-vent tube with a roast fork. She played the pressure cooker like she played the piano, with bravado, her hands dramatically rising and falling, each staccato movement executed with complete confidence.

I lifted my pressure cooker from the box, and the whole scene lost its nostalgia. Obsessively, I began reading the instructions, my heart racing, imagining that once I started heating up the cooker on the stove, the whole thing would blow up, spraying glass and rotten tomatoes all over the kitchen walls. Finally, I figured out that pressure canning wasn't that difficult and I nailed the procedure. Nothing went flying. No salmonella appeared. I did not drop dead of food poisoning. Every jar pinged at just the right time—just like Grandma's—and the jars sealed. I put away bushel after bushel of pressure-canned green beans and sweet corn and stored them in a cabinet in the darkness of my basement.

But what a job. Most of the vegetables I canned were harvested in the heat of the Iowa summer when temperatures climbed to one hundred degrees. I stepped out into my garden in mid-morning, the sun bearing down hard upon my head. A few snips, a cut with a knife, and the veggies landed in a wire basket. Then a quick bath for the harvest in cool water in the kitchen sink. Ah, I let my fingers linger in the pool, some momentary relief. But soon the heat from the stove and steam from the pressure cooker sent the mercury even higher. Sweat oozed out of the pores of my back. Rivulets of sweat trickled down my chest. I tied a bandana around my head to keep sweat from dripping into my eyes. So you heat up this little steam-bath pressure cooker on the stove in the middle of the hottest days of the year?

I began researching food preservation and found that canning only retains about 40 percent of the nutrients in foods. That seemed like a good excuse to give up that method.

Next, I tried freezing my vegetables. Freezing retains about 60 percent

of nutrients. You still have to blanch produce before you freeze it, but the process is quick and not as steamy as canning. The problem with freezing is that you have to put your veggies in a freezer. First you have to invest in a freezer, and soon you run out of freezer space. Your freezer is filled with vegetables, but you have no room for your meat. So you upscale and buy a bigger freezer and this freezer takes more electricity. You end up paying for your frozen produce every month on your electric bill. And then a major ice storm comes along in January, snapping off the limbs of your trees, the falling branches taking down your power lines, knocking out your electricity for a week. Your electric bill drops, but your frozen vegetables thaw and your meat rots. You pack up your vegetables and trot outside, storing them in a metal box in the garage—safe from rodents. But then you hit the January thaw. Your box of veggies turns to mush. Your meat draws out the sleeping flies from the corners of the garage. And that was the food you were counting on to take you through until spring.

The third try was the dehydrator. Dehydrating retains almost 90 percent of nutrients. I'd seen pictures of dehydrators in gardening catalogs. I'd heard that they were convenient and quick, but I'd never really experienced one in action. Grandma never used a contraption like that, and I knew there would be a steep learning curve. I checked out a book from the library on dehydrating food and studied the process. I began to understand that different foods dry at different temperatures in a slow process, but one without much fear of failure or burning the house down. OK, great. At least no explosions or flying glass.

I decided to give dehydrating a try and ordered a small, cheap “snack” dehydrator to test out my ability. A snack dehydrator is like a child's version of the real thing. It holds only a couple of trays of food. In a snack dehydrator, you might dry a couple of tomatoes as opposed to a bushel of tomatoes on a “real” dehydrator. I bought the snack dehydrator because I wanted to see if I could master the drying technique before I invested in a larger model. It was like taking piano lessons as a child. First, I practiced on an old clunky upright at school. Once my parents thought I'd stay with the instrument, they invested in a sleeker upright at home. When I never fully

imitated my grandma's talent, they sold the piano and I took up the banjo. I didn't have a lot of faith in my dehydration abilities at first, and I didn't want to waste money on an expensive machine. Dehydration conjured up wretched meals on camping trips, cowboys farting beans around the chuck wagon, and hardtack with sailors dying of scurvy.

But the snack dehydrator turned out to be a good fit. Looky here. Just a heating coil and a little fan. I liked that. Not much to break or to go wrong. Not much to fix if it did. And if it couldn't be fixed, I didn't waste a lot of money. The snack dehydrator soothed my fear of machines. I love machines for the work that they do. I love their cleverness, their inventiveness, their designs. But I hate it when they break. I hate it when I'm too dumb to fix them. I hate it when they are too heavy for me to carry to the car to take to someone else to fix. I hate it when I get the repair bill.

Most of all, I hate the gender issues that machines create for me. I grew up in the fifties and sixties. Girls were supposed to help their mothers clean the house, do the dishes and laundry. Boys were supposed to buzz away with power tools, snow blowers, and hot-rod cars. Girls weren't supposed to worry their pretty heads about fixing anything. That was left to the men. But at the same time, girls were considered dumb when they couldn't fix machines.

"All you have to do is just turn this little screw. See, stupid?"

Screw you, I thought, but didn't dare say it. Girls weren't supposed to use such language.

Ah, the classic double bind. And even if you did have some interest in machines, your ideas were discounted and dismissed.

"The cord on this vacuum cleaner is a real pain," I said when I was about twelve years old, doing my Saturday chores. The vacuum cleaner cord got caught around chairs and table legs, abruptly halting my movement through the house. Once a week, my job was to vacuum everything, from the second floor all the way down to the basement of the house—carpets and tiled floors. You switched the attachment over—the smooth side for carpeting, the bristled side for tile and wood floors. You stuck on the crevice attachment to burrow down into the dust hidden in comfortable chairs

Soon, I was dehydrating everything. I made dehydrated tomatoes with basil. I made zucchini chips with paprika. I made fruit roll-ups, dried berries to add to muffins. I branched out into fish and meat and made jerky.

I went off for a whole semester at a time to teach in different locales with my plastic bin in the back of my car. Presto. I had ready-made dried soups and sauces. Presto. I had gumbo. Presto. I had tomatoes, onions, garlic, and mushrooms to add to spaghetti sauce.

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After several years, I outgrew my little snack dehydrator. The heating coil and fan couldn't keep up with my bountiful harvests. I grew impatient. The stackable plastic shelves became too small and began deteriorating and cracking. I duct-taped the shelves together for another year, then broke down and took the plunge: I bought the industrial-model dehydrator, the Excalibur, the big one that sits proudly on my counter, ready for an abundant harvest. At last, I felt like I'd mastered the art of dehydration well enough to move up to this larger, more expensive model. This was it! This was my machine! This was my instrument that I played with real expertise. I stuffed it full of vegetables and pulled out thousands of tsantas, ready for any ritual, my little talismans there to ward off evil.

The devil never arrived. Instead, one day one of my angelic Amish neighbors wandered over and surveyed my dehydrating operation.

"That's something." Katie nodded, standing in my kitchen, a red kerchief tied around her head. She wiped her hands on her apron and peeked inside the dehydrator at the tomatoes. She immediately saw the benefits of the device. No more steam from the pressure cooker. No more mushy, overcooked vegetables. No sterilizing glass jars. I could tell she was trying to figure out how she could dehydrate vegetables in her home, where she lived without electricity. Most Amish near me heat their homes with wood, but run their kitchen appliances—refrigerators and stoves—on propane, an allowable energy source within the dictates of their religious system.

"I'm wondering if I could dry fruits and vegetables like that in my gas oven," Katie said.

“No doubt,” I said, “but you would have to heat the oven on low for a long time.”

She thought of other non-electric possibilities. “What about just laying the vegetables between two old window screens and putting them out in the summer sun?”

A bigger, cheaper dehydrator was born in Katie’s mind.

And my mind began to take a turn, too. That’s it. Why do we “English” think we need machines at all? Don’t we just make our lives more complicated? Don’t we just develop more wants and desires? What have all our machines gotten us? More repair bills and back pain trying to lift the darn things into the car. You start out with a snack dehydrator and where do you end up? Is an electric dehydrator better than a solar dryer? The electric dryer can be used at any time of the day or night, and in any weather. You don’t have to wait for steady sunshine as you would with the solar dryer. But the electric dryer is much more expensive to run.

I sat in the kitchen in front of Excalibur and meditated. Instead of articulating *om*, I concentrated on *hummmmmmmmm*. I listened to the dehydrator’s rhythmic drone, the whirling, twirling blades of its little fan carrying me into the dark on those hot August nights, the new moon a silver rind in the sky. The fireflies twinkled on and off, the cicadas turning up their pitch, the garter snake backing out of its skin, leaving its crispy impression on my front step. And what impression was I making? What was I leaving behind? Why was I here? Why was I here on earth but to listen to the hum, to become the hum?

And to turn off the dang machine. Why did I need this electric dehydrator at all? Even this simple, small machine? A heating coil and a little fan. Couldn’t I improve on this? Do without the electricity? Preserve my food without adding any more cost? I had dug a little root cellar for my potatoes, rutabagas, and carrots. Root cellaring took no added energy and preserved almost 100 percent of nutrients. Couldn’t I find another way to preserve those things I couldn’t root cellar? For eventually, even the big one, this Excalibur, would die and I would have to replace it, putting me forever on the treadmill of planned obsolescence and consumerism. The

Amish had avoided this whole syndrome in the first place. Weren't they telling me something?

I began sketching out the design for a gardening shed, one that I'd been planning to build for several years, one that would hold my hand tools: rakes, shovels, hoes, and spades. One that had been originally planned with just one small window. Now, on my sketchpad, I added a bank of south-facing windows to the design. Now I added insulation and a plan to fill up the space with mass: plastic barrels of water painted black to absorb the heat from the winter sun. At night, the barrels would emit the heat back into the shed. Now I sketched in a small cold frame attached to the south side of the shed.

In the early spring, I took my piece of sketch paper to Joe, the Amish carpenter.

"Well, Ms. Swander," he said, tilting his straw hat back and scratching his head, "I believe I could improve on your design." Joe sketched in more windows—on both the east and west sides of the shed—and he added a skylight. He slanted the roof and raised the south-facing windows to a height where they would catch more of the sun.

My shanty was ready by spring. Joe built the shed at his workshop and hired a Mennonite with a flat-bottomed truck to deliver the building to my acreage. A small shanty originally designed as a tool shed became a multipurpose building. In went my bushel baskets, rakes and hoes, row covers, trowels, and everything else I wanted near my garden. In went my seed trays and watering cans. The shelves Joe installed along the windows were perfect for starting seedlings. And in went drying racks I made from an old window screen.

In the summer, after my seedlings were planted and thriving in the garden, I began moving my dehydrating operation to the shed. I placed my vegetables on the screen racks, stacking them up on the shelves near the window. I closed the shed door tightly, and kept the door closed during the heat of the day, the optimal dehydrating time. The shed kept flies and other flying insects away from the tsantas. It generated a slow, low drying temperature, great for lighter-weight veggies. The cold frame emitted

a hotter, drier temperature, better for thicker vegetables like tomatoes with a higher water content. With my shed and cold-frame dehydrators, I could dry a higher volume of produce. I had plenty of room. And it cost me nothing for electricity. And the whole process took place in utter silence. The mesmerizing, annoying hum had been stilled.

Oh, there were still some things that needed a burst of hotter air from the electric dehydrator—like the fish and meat jerkies. And sometimes a rainy day spelled doom for the solar dehydrating operation; but mostly the shed and cold frame did the trick. I had learned from my Amish neighbors, learned how to do something without electricity, learned how to actually save time, money, and energy. I would have to maintain the shed—keep a fresh coat of stain on it, repair boards that might get damaged in a storm—but I would never have to go through the frustration of having the shed break down, conk out on me when the electricity went out. I would never have to lift the shed into my car to take it to a mechanic for repair.

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I began to wonder if there were other ways to save. Were there other machines that I could phase out of my life? My solar dehydrator launched me on an exploration of off-the-grid living. For now, I'm hooked up with electricity, but maybe down the road, I could eliminate it altogether. The electric oven takes the most juice in my house, so I looked into making a solar oven out of a paper box. Then I asked myself, "Do I really need the box?" I placed a black stew pot on the dirt inside the glassed cold frame, and, presto, it heated up just like a crock pot. Could I eliminate some of these irritating outdoors machines? What about getting rid of that frustrating tiller? What about getting rid of the noisy weed whacker? I already let my goats trim the ragged weeds along the edges of the fence. Then how to eliminate trimming and mulching with bark around the base of trees?

I began investigating permaculture and read books by Bill Mollison, the "father" of the movement in Australia. Permaculture is an integrated system of design that attempts to create a total ecological environment. It doesn't just tweak one thing: how to dehydrate tomatoes in the most efficient

way. It encompasses not only agriculture, horticulture, and architecture, but also economic and legal systems. I found the work of Mark Shepard in Wisconsin, closer to home, in my same growing zone. Shepard took Mollison's ideas and made them work in the American Midwest.

I began thinking on a larger scale. How could I make my whole small acreage more ecological, more integrated, more energy efficient, more productive, less costly, and with ultimately less work? How could I position my outbuildings, for example, to better use solar energy to heat themselves? To collect rainwater from the roof to eventually water the garden? How could I use my livestock for better pest and weed control?

With a larger, broader design in place, I understood how small techniques could be implemented to build a larger ecology on my acreage. Want to stop trimming and mulching with bark under your trees? Eliminate the noisy, gas-eating weed whacker and time and energy spent on hauling wood chips from the city dump? Mark Shepard mulches his fruit trees with a ring of irises, daffodils, and comfrey. The flowers keep weeds down and draw pollinators. The comfrey, with a healthy NPK (nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium) ratio, enriches the soil and becomes its own fertilizer. Shepard uses his free-range chickens to check garden pests.

Want to stop mowing and take advantage of the land between the spruce trees in your windbreak? Plant blueberries. Want to stop pulling weeds and tilling the garden? Get rid of another noisy machine—that tiller? Plant a cover crop of white Dutch clover as a living mulch in the garden. Cover every inch of naked dirt with the clover, a legume that crowds out weeds and enriches the soil with nitrogen. Mow the clover once a year. Plant seedlings down into the living mulch. A no-till system. Gone is the need to rototill and amend the soil with large quantities of garden compost. Gone is the need to address soil erosion and compaction. Gone is the need for a large irrigation system as the living mulch helps retain moisture. Small steps add up to fill in the broad brushstrokes.

Bit by bit, my acreage is becoming more ecological and more beautiful. Ground covers, chestnut trees, apple and pear trees, raspberries, and Jackmanii clematis vines are taking root, budding, and bearing. Catbirds,

cardinals, goldfinches, jays, juncos, chickadees, and downy woodpeckers appear at my feeder. Wrens move into their tiny house swinging from the eaves. Bats take up residence in their house near the garden, where they control pests.

Slowly, my machines are fading away into the back corner of the tool shed. The lawn mower and weed whacker are used less and less. The no-till garden system has completely retired the tiller. Quiet and stillness are once again reclaiming my little piece of the countryside. A more functional design is taking over my acreage. In turn, my ecological worldview is expanding. If I can do this on a couple of acres, what could be done on a small farm? How could this concept be applied in a town or city? Couldn't we design whole communities this way? What if the whole nation became a permaculture experiment? What if all the nations of the world joined together in this movement? Could we secure a local food supply in a growing world population? Could we address global climate change?

Now there is less struggle in my life, less toll taken on my body, less worry about breakdowns, and less time spent in counteracting this and that stress in a narrowly focused way—whether from pests, weeds, or even an overabundant harvest. Now I have more time to sit on my back porch and savor the blossoms on those clematis vines, to sip a cup of raspberry leaf tea, and listen to the songs of the wrens carrying twigs through their narrow, quarter-sized opening to their house to build a nest inside. And it all began in my own garden with my own lowly dehydrator—just a heating coil and a little fan—the hum and whirl of a simple machine, my machine, that shriveled my vegetables down to tsantas, and expanded my mind to fill an ever-enlarging space on the globe.

Old Iron

A Restoration



Ken Quade (author's father) with Cockshutt tractor. Photo by Mary Quade.

Antique engine shows aren't exactly secret, but if you didn't know about them, you'd probably never stumble onto one. On some rural road, there's a hand-painted sign at the entrance of a gravel drive that leads to the grounds—a large field and some weathered buildings. Pull in, and an equally weathered older man in feed cap and money apron will take a few dollars from you, offer you a program describing the exhibits and advertising local businesses, direct you to another older man who flags you into a patch of grass partitioned for parking. No ticket or hand stamp or wristband. I've attended these shows all my life, and even my earliest memories are vivid, but maybe that's because nothing has truly changed over the years.

In one memory, I'm four or five, with Dad and my big sister, standing on beaten-down grass in front of a roped-off display, watching an engine about the size of a Labrador retriever rhythmically sputter and hiss as the pair of heavy flywheels flanking it spin and spin, amber liquid splashing in the glass oiler. It's on a little wheeled cart, which shakes back and forth as though it might take off, worrying me. Steam pours out of the water hopper. Occasionally, the engine pops, and though this firing is predictable, I'm always startled, blinking when the loud clap interrupts the smooth clatter of the wheel. Dad calls these the "putt-putt engines," but their real name is "hit-and-miss engines." I'm entranced by the repetitive motion and a bit lightheaded from the exhaust and the summer heat. All around us, similar engines whir and blat. Most just spin their flywheels, but some have belts that run water pumps or butter churns or washing machines, jobs they would have performed on the farm. An old man in overalls sits in a lawn chair behind the engine; occasionally he gets up to adjust something on

the machine. He looks past us as though we're invisible. Dad asks him a question, so now Dad's not invisible. I wish I knew something to say.

I've always liked the putt-putts, the smooth mechanical noise of their toylike work, but now, sometimes seeing them all lined up for display, flywheels turning against no resistance, they seem purposeless, cheerful anachronisms innocent of their uselessness.

When I was a kid, we'd visit the show put on by the Sussex Antique Power Association in Sussex, Wisconsin. In addition to the hit-and-miss engines, there were antique tractors, collectible cars, a sawmill, a thresher, and crowds of what my dad called "old-timers," which is to say, elderly men, more than a few of them missing parts of fingers. I was fascinated with these amputations, how the stubs cooperated with their other fingers to hold tools or adjust things on the engines. The grounds had a dirt track where the daily parade of tractors and collectible cars took place. Pictures from the show forty-five years ago look pretty much like pictures from recent shows—men standing around tractors with their hands in their pockets, or driving tractors, or holding small children while driving tractors. Though in the old photos, the men wear brimmed hats, not feed caps. In the old photos, visitors' cars parked along the edge of the grounds look just like the antique autos of the collectible car displays in newer photos. In the old photos, most of the tractors are steam traction engines.

Though they're often informally called steam shows, today gatherings feature mostly gas engines, from the big stationaries to the putt-putts to the farm tractors. At even a large show, there aren't dozens of steam traction engines—or steam tractors, as they're often called. For one thing, they're huge and heavy, with five-foot-tall iron wheels that make it impossible to drive on asphalt without gouging the surface. You can't tow one with your F-250 pickup truck. And there just aren't that many of them around anymore. Most of the old steam tractors were scrapped during World War II, more valuable as metal than tractor, and transformed into the war machine.

As a kid, I was drawn to the steam tractors like I was drawn to the missing fingers. They smelled of calamity and danger. It didn't take an expert to comprehend that they held inside the power of obliteration, that their

giant iron wheels were indifferent to obstacle. Though it slightly resembled one, the spinning flywheel was nothing like my box fan, into which I once, out of curiosity, stuck a pencil and pulled out a piece of splintered wood. No, it wouldn't just break your arm off; you'd never be that lucky. A steam traction engine has a shape similar to a steam train engine—a firebox and boiler, a puffing stack—and they range in size from several tons to quite a few tons more than several. They're Old Testament machines—soot, fire, water, and wrath.

When I study today historical accounts of steam tractor explosions, they often note how high the tractor, its parts, or its operators shot—a horrible flight of a hulking, flightless monster. Enormous flywheels thrown over houses; engines catapulted into the air; workers tossed fifty feet; boilers buried partway in the ground from the force of their falling from the sky; bodies disemboweled, unlimbed, decapitated; flesh burned or boiled away. Even restored, the engines need diligent attention to control catastrophic forces. Steam tractor operators rely on a mess of release valves and flues and water tanks and pressure gauges to keep their tractors whole and grounded. In 2001, a 1918 J. I. Case steam tractor exploded at the Medina County Fair in Ohio. It killed five people, including the engineer, injured forty-seven others, and lifted the eighteen-ton tractor fifteen feet into the air.

Besides the occasional boiler explosion, other accidents punctuated the era of the big steam tractors. They had, for instance, a tendency to succumb to gravity on bridges not meant for such heavy travelers. It was difficult to determine how heavy was too heavy until it was too late. Also, the tractors and threshers had many exposed wheels, belts, gears—things ready to grab and grind.

In his book *The Harvest Story: Recollections of Old-Time Threshermen*, Robert T. Rhode argues that the stories of horrible accidents clearly didn't represent the typical experience of engineers, or else no one would have used the steam tractors on farms or celebrated them today at steam shows.¹ He's obviously right, I know. Steam tractors were commonplace. Still, I find myself reading and rereading the chapter in his book full of firsthand accounts of disasters, because stories of suffering and devastation sometimes

seem to be more meaningful—a deception—than stories of plain old work. One story that sticks with me is about a man whose legs were blown off in an explosion. One leg was found seventy-five yards away. Needless to say, he died. The undertaker accidentally swapped left leg with right, and he was buried that way, parts reassembled, disorganized. Surely, I think, in this deconstruction lies a lesson to be learned, about fragility or hubris or absurdity.

Even small gas engines have the potential to self-destruct. The part of a hit-and-miss engine that regulates speed is called the governor, a set of hinged, weighted wings spun by gears connected to the drive shaft, wings that cause the engine to stop firing and coast or to begin cycling again. Cycle, coast, cycle, coast. It's a hit-*and*-miss, not a hit-*or*-miss; it needs to do both things. If it fails to hit, at least once in a while, it stops. If it fails to miss, the engine will go faster and faster, speed unregulated, until it flies apart. The engine needs that rest to keep itself together. Even with a great deal of effort, I only grasp the mechanics when I'm watching it work. If I step away, I can't quite remember the way it all fits together, and it returns to a state of semi-mystery, to that simple message of cycle, coast, cycle, coast, which I can comprehend. I muddle through the elements that resonate with me, half-informed, missing the specifics.

In the same way, it's not my understanding of the technology or even usefulness of the steam tractors, exactly, that draws me to them, but something they evoke. Maybe it's the palpable, present metaphor of the balance between power and doom that attracts me. Maybe this is why I can't look at steam tractors without thinking *The End*. But maybe it's more about what's hiding within all that iron.

Tractors of all sorts made this country what it is, good and bad. When a tractor plows a new plot, each blade slices through the roots that were holding the turf to the earth underneath, and then rolls the sod over, exposing its underbelly. It's a kind of surgery, opening up a fertile strip of soil, then another, and another, until a uniform pattern covers the landscape, leaving nowhere for the eye to settle.

I'm a descendant of Kansas farmers on both sides of my family. My paternal grandparents grew up on farms, as did my maternal grandfather. My dad was raised farming, but not on one particular farm; his family moved from place to place, renting land, and my dad lived in over a dozen different homes before he went off to college. By the time I was born, however, his parents had moved to a small town. My maternal grandmother was from a small town, and my mom was raised in town, though her father had inherited family land and grew wheat on it until he died at the age of ninety-one; he was buried with a bundle of stalks from his last harvest. I had maternal and paternal great aunts and uncles who farmed, but my own aunts and uncles don't.

Some of the farms my family has owned still function as farms but belong to someone else. One of the last things I did with my grandpa before he died was drive him out to check on his wheat and to see his family's and his brother's former farms. At the farm where my grandpa grew up, a muscly black dog blocked the driveway, barking aggressively. I remembered visiting my great-grandma at the farm, but, watching the dog, I couldn't recognize the place, the buildings in disrepair and trees cut down. At my great uncle's old farm, a recent storm had shattered the tops of the huge shade trees surrounding the house, the thick trunks ending in lopped-off branches.

I didn't grow up on a farm. I grew up in rural Wisconsin, in a tiny subdivision near a lake, surrounded by farmland. Today any farmland in the area where I lived is surrounded by subdivisions. A few years ago, I visited the area for the first time in almost two decades, searching for familiar landmarks. One field I used to ride past on my bike now sprouts an 18,000-square-foot, twenty-four-bedroom villa that squats over the acres, an enormous trinket. Some people are from places they can return to. The place I'm from has been replaced. I can't quite get there, except through memory and stories. The land has become something else.

In 2002, my husband and I moved from a house in Portland, Oregon, to a former dairy farm in rural northeast Ohio. We wanted a little piece of land. Our place used to have at least a hundred acres, but now we own

just over four. We've got a vegetable garden the size of our entire lot in Portland, where we grow more tomatoes than we can possibly eat; one summer we planted 120 and canned hundreds of quarts in the fall. We have some apple, cherry, and peach trees, and have raised chickens, ducks, and quail. But it's not really a farm in any real sense of the word. It's a pastime, not a living. There's nothing crucial about the work we do with the land. I call it the Farmette.

Two tractors live in an old pole barn on our property—a Farmall Super MD and a McCormick WD 9, both manufactured by International Harvester—but neither is mine. They belong to our neighbor, who grew up in our house when it was a farm. Like many tractor people, he's accumulated some equipment over the years. Tractors are happier out of the rain and snow, so we give his a little shelter with roof and walls (though not doors; those fell off years ago). They share company with a pile of wood needing to be split, an old goat stall pieced together from pallets, various cages we built for raising birds, and groundhog holes now occupied by skunks. The Super MD sinks into the sandy floor of the barn, three tires flat and cracked and one missing altogether. The seat is gone, as are more critical parts like the clutch. It's rusty, but you can still read the make and model painted on its side. The WD 9 is in much better shape—looks to me like it's ready to go, with maybe just a little air in the tires. They're from the late '40s or early '50s, I think, though I'm not sure.

Every year or so my neighbor says, "I've got to get those tractors out of your barn," and I always protest. I'd never want my own tractor, which would require those limited resources of time, money, and knowledge that I've dedicated to other passions. I also simply don't need one; I have no work for a tractor, no wheat, no hay. But I appreciate the presence of these tractors. They tie my barn to its past, and in some ways they tie me to this land that I share with the past, to the tractors my family used to shape their farms—land now lost.

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I want to get the story right, so I call Dad, as I have many times before, to check the Cockshutt model.

“Forty?” I ask. I always think it should be a forty.

“No, thirty.” He’s patient.

Then I ask him when my grandpa got rid of it.

“Nineteen-sixty, I think. You should call Leroy. He’s got the whole story written up.” Dad can’t remember all the details either.

“It was a good tractor,” Dad tells me. “We’d use it twenty-four hours a day, taking turns.”

I try to imagine this—the red tractor, headlights beaming, in the middle of a Kansas night. I’ve seen the places Dad lived; there’s not much out there but land. When you have one tractor and it’s time to plow, you get as much done as you can. You couldn’t work a horse that way.

“A good tractor,” Dad says. “It still is.”

In the end, Dad writes Uncle Leroy an e-mail asking him if he can send me a copy of the story. I don’t hear anything back, so Dad gives him a call. Turns out Uncle Leroy only has a hard copy of it. And the hard copy is in the tractor toolbox. And the tractor is out at the old farm property he owns but doesn’t live on. So he’ll get it next time he’s out there. I think of it in the toolbox, with the crescent wrench and pliers.

A few weeks later, I get a copy in the mail. The story begins, “It was on December 6, 1995, that my older son, James, and I were up early to go deer hunting, but first I had promised him that we would deliver some auto parts to a fix-it shop in Burr Oak, Kansas.” While driving around Burr Oak, a town of only a few streets, Uncle Leroy spotted a couple of Cockshutts. He and my cousin stopped to look at them for a few minutes, then left.

After Uncle Leroy visited Burr Oak, the tractors nagged at his mind, and he asked my cousin to call the auto-parts guy to get the name of the owner. Then he drove back to Burr Oak, but the owner was taking a load of scrap iron to Nebraska. Uncle Leroy writes, “I took a closer look at the two tractors and found identifying marks on one of them that had been done by my dad while he owned it.” My uncle recognized its unique alterations

and scars. There were bolt holes in the right fender where a sprayer control valve had been fastened. It had a broken hitch, which Grandpa had repaired with pieces of scrap metal because he couldn't afford a new part. And the clincher was the stop that kept the oil can from falling off; it was carved from a wooden broom handle and still stuck in a hole in the chassis after all those years. The tractor was about to be sold for scrap.

My uncle had found the family tractor, a machine he hadn't seen in over thirty-five years. My grandpa had bought it new in 1947 and sold it in 1959 when he quit farming. Uncle Leroy had the owner's number, so he reached him and got a price, then called my dad in Wisconsin. They'd buy the second tractor, too, for parts.

"You're going to get them, aren't you?" Dad asked, offering to split the cost.

Uncle Leroy writes, "We bought the tractors for too much money, but we had our old tractor to fix up the way we last remembered it."

I hear this kind of story again and again on tractor websites and at tractor shows: someone out searching for the family tractor. The Holy Grail of tractor people. Travel down almost any country road and you'll see old tractors, rusty and waiting to be found.

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In my search for more stories of Cockshutt tractors, I stumble on an article about a young woman named Molly Bradley who's been restoring Cockshutts since she was seven. She got hooked on them by a close family friend, now passed away. There's a photo of the nineteen-year-old leaning on a bright red Cockshutt 20. She looks strong and sweetly sassy, her hip cocked to one side, her blond hair catching a breeze. I find her name on the website for the Minnesotans Go-Pher Cockshutt Club, so I contact her. She tells me tractor shows have taken her all over, which I find interesting because tractors themselves aren't distance vehicles; they're meant for acres, not hundreds of miles. She says the difference between a new tractor and an old one is the stories. An old tractor "has dings and dents but they all

have a story behind them. The stories are worth sharing.” As for Cockshutt people, she says they’re special because it’s a rare brand. You can’t just go anywhere and buy parts for them, like you might a John Deere, so Cockshutt owners rely on one another to find or make parts to fix up the machines.

Because I’m a writer and not an engineer, the history of the Cockshutt company is easier for me to absorb than the way the tractor itself functions. Cockshutt was a Canadian manufacturer that sold tractors built by the American Oliver Corporation under the Cockshutt name in the 1930s and ’40s; the Olivers and Cockshutts were essentially the same tractors with different paint jobs. In 1946, Cockshutt started building its own design and came out with the 30, the first tractor ever to have an independent live power take-off, which meant that a farmer could send power to attached equipment—baler, mower, etc.—while the tractor was parked. In 1962 the company was sold to White Motor Company of Cleveland.² My husband teaches high school on what was once the White estate. He eats lunch in the school’s dining hall, which occupies the ground floor of the White house. In the days when it was the White estate, it was also a working farm, with even its own dairy herd. Apparently, rich industrialists in the 1920s liked to play farmer.

A Cockshutt person can collect a lot more than tractors, I discover. Hats, lawn chairs, checkbook covers, coffee mugs, T-shirts for people and for dogs, key chains, belt buckles, teddy bears, aprons, bumper stickers, mouse pads, pet bowls, calendars, wall clocks, Christmas ornaments, book bags—all adorned with the Cockshutt logo: a black, yellow, and red bull’s-eye target with a black and yellow arrow. There’s even a one-sixteenth model of a Gambles Farmcrest 30, my family’s tractor. Toy tractors make me a little sad. I had a nice die-cast International when I was a kid that I liked to play with in the dirt. You could steer it! I can still feel the weight of it under my hand as the wheels turned, see the little dusty tracks left by the tires. It disappeared; I think a neighbor boy took it and then moved away. No chance of ever getting it back.

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My dad's grandpa, my great-grandpa Ehlers, farmed in north central Kansas. The ground was hardpan or gumbo, poor soil that water wouldn't permeate, forming gullies. In the 1940s, he had a Caterpillar D2, a bulldozer tractor with crawling tracks instead of wheels—a tidy, stout machine, smiley-face yellow. He'd break up the ground with a subsoiler or "rooter" so the water would soak in and stay in the soil. He used the blade to create terraces and small ponds. In the winter, he'd haul silage, corn, and sorghum out to the livestock using a wagon on the Caterpillar. The D2 is steered by adjusting the speed of its two tracks with two separate clutches. If the left track stops but the right keeps moving, the tractor spins to the left. As long as both tracks move at the same speed, the tractor travels in a straight line, even if no one is controlling it. My great-grandpa would put it in gear and, as the tractor rolled across the field, hop on and off, unloading feed from the wagon, working alone.

In the 1930s, they nearly lost the place several times, but somehow managed to keep on going. Dad tells me of a time a prairie fire came through. The horses, tied up, were caught in the flames and their hoofs fell off. They had to put the horses down. I've visited this farm a number of times, though it's now another family's land. As the years go by, the abandoned stucco house falls apart. My grandparents spent their wedding night in that house. Someone has used its walls for target practice. Last time I was there, the living room had dropped into the basement. No other houses within sight; just grassy pasture hugging the hills. No plowed fields, no crops, no tractors.

It's hard to know what went wrong, exactly. One winter day in 1948, my great-grandpa was out alone, using the Caterpillar to feed the cattle. The D2 had a bulldozer blade and a fender attachment over the track, and Dad says they think that when my great-grandpa was hopping on and off to get the feed from the wagon, he stepped on the track instead of the fender. The tractor pulled his left foot between the toothy grouzers of the track and the frame for the hydraulic cylinders connected to the bulldozer blade. Somehow, he managed to get to the throttle to shut off the tractor. But he was stuck and mangled, and no one came looking for him for several hours. His leg was too bad for the local hospital, so they went to Great

Bend, which even today is almost a two-hour drive. He'd been working in pasture, and because of the unsanitary conditions, gangrene set in. They had to amputate his leg to save his life.

After the accident, my great-grandpa kept farming, using the same D2; he had a machine shop and was inventive, so he manufactured a handle in order to operate the left brake by hand. Eventually, though, they sold the place and "moved to town," as Dad puts it. The town—Downs, Kansas—today has a population hovering around nine hundred people, one of those plains towns that popped up when the railroad was built. My great-grandpa bought a few empty lots and sunk wells on them. He built up a business truck farming—raising tomatoes and other vegetables—and growing irrigated alfalfa. Dad says he had a wooden leg but usually wouldn't wear it. He recalls his grandpa in a hurry, throwing off his crutches and hopping across the field on one leg. I remember a photograph of him somewhere out west, sitting on a ski lift, lone right leg dangling.

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With just a lot of hard work, tractors can be resurrected from all kinds of damage. The pictures Dad took of rebuilding the Cockshutt engine reveal polished metal parts I can't name, cylindrical and smooth. The engine case has been repainted bright red. The tools spread out amidst the scene suggest coercion against time—mallets, wrenches, a product called Gunk Engine Brite, bottle brush, oily rags and wads of paper towel, Lucas High Performance Assembly Lube, cans and cans and cans of WD-40, a case of Busch beer.

All this hard work to keep the memories of other hard work—hard work long past—from fading. In the 1940s, men who years before had threshed using steam tractors began to form organizations and hold reunions to celebrate the machines. Equipment that was once simply a means to get hard work done became relics to restore for the re-creation of hard work, if only for a few days each year. Compelling, this urge to hang on to usefulness. Eventually the then-new tractors with internal combustion engines, like the Cockshutt, aged into antiques as well, acquiring—with their dings and dents—stories.

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My family cultivates a plot of stories. Grandma teaching in a one-room school. The pet raccoon Dad kept for a while as a boy. The crazy local bachelors and their antics. How Grandpa, as a toddler, accidentally shot off his brother's thumb. The time Dad killed the pig with an angry kick. Dad's stints on the combine circuit. The family tractor, found and fixed. These stories surface when the occasion calls for them, and each, in its own way, is a story of survival in hard times. Others, like the story of my young Uncle Johnny freezing to death in a field after his car broke down, stay mostly buried, needing a blade to turn them over.

I was once told that a story must contain loss to be meaningful. Loss defines value. A thing has no value unless it can disappear. And we don't always know what that value is until the thing is gone, if we know it then. So what does it mean when a story itself is lost? I have to pay attention.

I call Dad. He sighs. He knows what story I need to hear. The one I've never really heard—only traces on the periphery of other stories, a hint of a part missing from the whole. But I've been digging around its edges with the D2.

In the end, it was a surprise, Dad says. My great-grandpa had suffered from phantom pains since he lost the leg. A missing foot he couldn't scratch, a feeling of something persisting beyond the body he possessed, a thing lost but still connected to him. Maybe this absence was the reason, or maybe, Dad suggests, he just felt he couldn't do all the things he'd done before. In 1960, when my dad was in his first year of college, Great-grandpa rigged up a shotgun clamped to a vise and killed himself. This tractor story isn't one my family tells.

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I've driven the Cockshutt with Dad's coaching: a jolting, growly ride. The body itself isn't repainted, so it's the dull dark red of dried blood. Dad and Uncle Leroy take it to shows and to tractor parades, events where folks on tractors meander their way along a rural route, passing through

little towns, moving at the pace of patient progress. It's a straightforward narrative, this adventure. The tractors either travel along or fail to travel along, depending on their condition, which can be unpredictable. It's OK, though, if things go wrong. They've been restored once, and chances are, they'll be restored again.

I don't know if restoration is an act of preserving history or of erasing time. I'm not sure why I need the stories of both the Cockshutt and the D2, except that I worry what would happen if I didn't harvest them. The engine, I know, needs both hit and miss.

On a tractor parade in Kansas, Dad sends me pictures via his cell phone. To be honest, it's hard to tell if the tractors are parked or rolling; it's not the stuff of action photography. More and more, Uncle Leroy resembles the old-timers—gray hair, feed cap, overalls—and though Dad isn't in any of the pictures, he does too. The tractor doesn't really change. If anything, it's getting younger as they tinker and toil over it, returning it to smooth usefulness. If it had to, it could perform the job it did when it was new—dig into the turf and turn over the land, transform the view into fertile emptiness, each groove deep and fleeting, demanding perpetual work.

NOTES

1. Robert T. Rhode, *The Harvest Story: Recollections of Old-Time Threshermen* (West Lafayette, IN: NotaBell Books, 2001), 129.
2. I've heard the history of Cockshutts from my dad and tractor friends. Particulars about the origin and development of the Cockshutt brand can be found at the website for the International Cockshutt Club, www.cockshutt.com.

All Flesh Is Grass

Maureen Stanton

Workingman's Cottage

In 1988, when I was twenty-seven years old, I bought a house with so little forethought that it was almost a whim. I'd called an ad for a rental house, and the man who answered, a realtor, said, "If you can afford to rent, you can afford to buy." He showed me six houses, and I bought one—a two-bedroom, nine hundred-square-foot, pale-yellow bungalow in Lansing, Michigan, where I'd recently taken a job with The Nature Conservancy. The house cost \$33,000. For the down payment, I used \$4,000 bequeathed to me by my boyfriend, Steve, who'd died of cancer eight months earlier.

My house on Denver Street was built in 1929, one of hundreds constructed for General Motors workers. In 1940, General Motors was the largest and most profitable manufacturing corporation in the history of the world.¹ The Lansing Car Assembly division of GM was a few miles from my house, and at its peak fifteen thousand people worked there. Denver Street dead-ended at a berm, which had once been tracks for the Lansing Manufacturers' railroad, its cargo of workers shunted to the GM plant and disgorged right into the factory. The workers lived in houses like mine, which were called "workingmen's cottages."²

It wasn't complicated to buy a house. I'd lived in houses, and I knew how to operate them (open the door, walk in, paint, furnish, decorate). But this house came with a yard, which was covered with grass, which needed mowing. I needed to buy a lawn mower, which proved to be the most difficult consumer decision I'd faced—or at least the one over which I most agonized.

Lansing Is an Industrial City

When I bought my house, I knew nothing of Lansing's history, but it seems apropos that my most significant relationship with a machine took place in a city known for machines. Lansing's unofficial motto in the late nineteenth century was "Lansing Is an Industrial City." Unpoetic, but true—Lansing was home to over two hundred manufacturers, some of which were the most productive in the country. In Lansing, E. Bement & Sons produced the world's largest number of bobsleds. Lansing Wheelbarrow Company manufactured the second highest volume of wheelbarrows in the United States (a total of ten thousand in 1890). Hugh Lyons & Co. built the nation's largest quantity of store fixtures. Maud S. Windmill Company was America's top manufacturer of windmills, and W. K. Prudden made more car wheels than any other company in the United States.³

Lansing's industriousness was sparked largely by the genius of one man: Ransom Eli Olds. In 1896, R. E. Olds invented the world's first internal-combustion gasoline automobile, called the "Motor-Cycle," which had four seats and sold for \$1,000. Three years later, R. E. Olds sold his company, Olds Motor Works, to General Motors, and it became the Oldsmobile Motor Division of GM. Meanwhile, Olds founded his second automobile company, REO Motor Car, where he designed the first pickup truck, the REO Speedwagon. Olds also formed supply companies—Michigan Screw Works, National Coil Company, and Atlas Drop Forge. Olds's business acumen beyond automobiles may be why most people have heard of an Oldsmobile, but no one knows of the Clarkmobile: a model invented in 1902 in Lansing by a man named Frank Clark.⁴

Steve and I might have fared better with a Clarkmobile than our Oldsmobile; Clarkmobiles were called "unbreakable" by a Lansing reporter.⁵ In 1984, Steve and I met and fell in love in New York, where I worked as a bartender. He was a union electrician, part of a crew of travelers—tradesmen from all over the country—wiring a new IBM plant near Poughkeepsie. When we moved to Steve's home state of Michigan, we bought a 1980

Oldsmobile Omega. The Omega had a trim exterior and luxurious plush upholstery, but the car was a spectacular failure, plagued by mechanical problems. I have an image of Steve spending one whole day underneath our car, soldering on some exhaust-system part that had fallen off. Over the next three years of our ownership, the Oldsmobile Omega broke down repeatedly.

Just two weeks before Steve died on a sticky, humid day in early August, I started my job with The Nature Conservancy in East Lansing, an hour away from our apartment near Ann Arbor. I needed a reliable car. One day after work, I stopped at a Honda dealership and put money down on a Civic. When I came home and told Steve, he was upset because I hadn't bargained, hadn't played one salesman off another for a better deal. "Nobody pays sticker price," he said. Our fight was fueled by an unspeakable issue: Steve was dying. He was frustrated that he couldn't help me, and I'm sure he was hurt that I hadn't consulted him. He must have been pained that I'd gotten rid of the car we'd purchased together and replaced it with a vehicle we wouldn't share. I'm sure he saw that I'd already begun to live as if I were alone. My new car would drive me into my future—without him.

I felt stupid for buying the first car the salesman showed me, for not knowing there was a process or ritual for buying a car. I was angry at Steve for pointing out my naiveté and my incompetence; I felt colossally incompetent anyway because I'd already failed Steve. I could do nothing to help him with that most complex of machinery, his body. I see now that we both worried I would not fend well for myself in the world. The next day, I canceled the contract with the first Honda dealer so that I could negotiate with two other dealers. I wasn't very successful and only convinced one dealer to throw in a set of floor mats for free. This was the last fight Steve and I ever had, brought about by our Oldsmobile Omega, a model name that means "final." Maybe that's why I was intimidated about buying a lawn mower, another machine with a gas-powered engine and four wheels—because there were things to know about buying lawn mowers, things that Steve was not there to teach me.

Denver Street: A Street That Thinks It's a City

Denver Street was lower-working-class, its twenty or so homes half owner-occupied, half rentals, some with asbestos siding, most on narrow city lots roughly thirty feet wide by one hundred feet deep. On one side was a house so close to mine that in summer when the windows were open, I could hear a man cough. Directly across the street lived Ray and Arlene and their daughter, Chastity, who in spite of her name became pregnant at fifteen. Catty-corner were two bachelors, childhood friends who'd moved in together after their divorces. Nearly every night all summer long, they sat on their front porch in cracked-vinyl easy chairs, drinking beer and smoking until after dark, when all I could see were the lit ends of their cigarettes like fireflies.

Wilda and Shelby Davis, retirees from the General Motors plant, lived on the other side in a neat brick house—the gem of the neighborhood, on a double lot. Wilda was petite and energetic, with coiffed white hair and a bright smile with perfect dentistry. Shelby was tall and lean. He wore glasses, and on his nose was a patch of bleached skin where a cancer had been removed. Wilda and Shelby pronounced my name Murine, like the eye drops.

“Murine, is that you?” Wilda would call to me from behind the stockade fence that separated my backyard from theirs.

I'd come around to the front to see Shelby smiling and Wilda holding an African violet.

“Say, I had this old thing on the porch, so I said to Shelby, ‘I wonder if Murine would want that for her front room.’”

I always accepted their plants because they wanted so much to give them, but most of them died. I offered them water and whatever light my windows afforded, but at Wilda and Shelby's, the plants were used to being groomed and fed. Wilda could grow anything. Her and Shelby's yard was landscaped with tidy gardens: vegetable, flower, herb, and rock. Shelby was in charge of the lawn—and what a lawn it was, edged and trimmed like a boy just out of the barber shop. His grass was green and thick and so tightly

thatched you could have dug in with your fingers and hung on during the storms that skidded low and fast across Michigan's landscape, with winds that threatened to lift homes from the flat squares of lawn.

Often on summer evenings, Shelby and Wilda invited me to sit on their back patio. They'd offer me a can of Red, White & Blue beer, a brand I'd only seen at my grandparents' house, the beer choice of the elderly. Wilda shared neighborhood gossip, with their police radio crackling in the background, or we talked about gardening.

In my Ann Arbor apartment with Steve, I'd had a flower box on our second-story veranda in which I'd planted some annuals and, absurdly, one head of broccoli. One night I said to Shelby and Wilda, "I don't know why people grow broccoli. It takes up so much space and water, and you only get one head."

"We get several heads a summer, two or three at least," Wilda said. Shelby nodded. Turns out I'd pulled up the broccoli by the roots instead of cutting the florets to let more grow.

"The package of seeds didn't have instructions for harvesting," I said.

They laughed. For the first time in months, I made people laugh. I was funny, I thought, but Shelby and Wilda were an easy audience.

The Michigan Noiseless

While I had no problem buying a house by myself in a city where I knew no one, after I moved in, I spent a month agonizing over lawn mowers. I must have looked at thirty mowers: cheap ones, electric ones, self-propelled, mowers with bags on the side, bags on the back, and ones with tall back tires like old-fashioned baby carriages. When I shopped at Meijer's Thrifty Acres—a superstore where you could fill your cart with tomatoes and underwear and printer paper and a hammer—I'd find myself in the Lawn & Garden section looking at mowers, hoping I'd know which one to buy. There was never a salesperson, but even if there had been, I doubt I would have asked for help. I thought a twenty-seven-year-old homeowner

should not be ignorant about a machine that even a teenage boy could operate.

I'd never considered using a lawn mower before, much less buying one. Mowing was a man's chore—my father, my brothers—as it has been since the invention of the mower. In his patent application in 1830, Edward Beard Budding, the Englishman who invented the first mower, wrote: "Country gentlemen may find in using my machine themselves an amusing, useful and healthy exercise."⁶ Budding's mower was not an engine per se, but an implement with a rotating blade that was pushed and pulled by laborers or horses. In 1842, a one-horse-power mower was pulled by one horse, the creature's hooves clad in leather boots to prevent unsightly divots in the lawn. Later, in 1893, James Sumner of Lancashire, England, invented a steam-powered mower⁷—but its reign soon ended in 1914 when good old R. E. Olds of Lansing, Michigan, invented the first gasoline-powered mower.

Olds's model was so successful that in 1922, he founded the Ideal Power Lawn Mower Company, originally located just two miles from my house. Ideal sold gas and electric mowers, a manual push mower called the "Michigan Noiseless," and in 1922, the first-ever riding mower, the "Triplex." When Ideal folded in 1946, its personnel moved over to REO Motors, which in 1950 was the largest manufacturer of power mowers in the world. About one thousand mowers a day rolled off their production lines; in 1951, they produced their five hundred thousandth lawn mower.⁸

In the late 1980s when I lived there, Lansing was still an industrial city, blue collar, masculinist—an evocation of machines and the men who invented, built, and operated them lingering in the city like a scent: oil and smoke, sweat and muscle. (The minor league baseball team, which arrived in 1996, was called the Lugnuts; their home field was Oldsmobile Park.) Perhaps my trepidation about buying a mower was because I intuited that without Steve—a man's man, tall and lean and graceful in a way that connoted body confidence, clad in Carhartts and steel-toed boots for work, driving his distinct iridescent-green pickup truck to industrial job sites, new GM or Ford plants, where he "pulled wire," his back strong, biceps bulging—without Steve, in Lansing I was a little lost.

Bill's Tractor Sales

After I moved into my new house, that first Saturday my boss, Tom—an exuberantly optimistic but somewhat unkempt man (his hair always a tad long, his suits ill-fitting)—showed up with his mower to cut my grass. He didn't even knock on my door; I just heard the engine kick in and saw him mowing, a cheery look on his handsome face. I can't recall how he knew I hadn't bought a mower yet, but two weeks later he showed up again on a Saturday to mow. I feared he would show up a third time; I could not bear his chivalry—or my dependence—any longer. I figured I had two weeks to make a decision on a mower before Tom returned.

Every day on my drive home from work, I passed Bill's Tractor Sales just three blocks from my house. I'd seen the deluxe mowers on Bill's lot, but I was intimidated because "tractor" was in the store name. Bill's seemed like a place for farmers, for men in coveralls, men with acres of land. Before he met me, when Steve was married, he'd owned a house with a two-acre lawn that he cut with a John Deere riding mower. When he divorced, he sold the house and the mower, too. For the nearly four years of our relationship, Steve and I lived in a second-floor apartment. We had no yard to tend, but Steve had done all the other traditional male chores—fixed our Oldsmobile, repaired our leaky sink, assembled our stereo system.

The Saturday before Tom was sure to show up again, I walked into Bill's Tractor Sales, the doorbell jangling my awkward presence. Often in that first year after Steve died, I felt a hyperbolic self-consciousness; embarrassment overtook me like a fever, leaving me flushed and disoriented. I felt sometimes as if I no longer belonged on earth, that I was a dour, morbid intruder crashing a party. My very presence, my continuing life, seemed an affront to Steve's death. Why should he die—leaving his three small children fatherless—when I, who had nobody depending on me, should live? I didn't understand why I was so raw, so exposed, so very aware of myself, and frequently felt mortified just *to be*.

But there I was, apparition-like, in the entryway of Bill's Tractor Sales with the goal of buying a lawn mower that wouldn't embarrass me. I had

visions of yanking the mower's starter cord again and again, as I remembered my father doing, with the divorced bachelors eyeing me from their easy chairs. I didn't want to draw their attention, to need their help, to show my weakness. I didn't want to burst out crying, as I did often then, sloppy and out of control, especially when I couldn't do those manly chores that Steve would have done. Once, I bought a picnic table at Meijer's Thrifty Acres and had the guy who worked there load the box into my hatchback. When I got home, I realized I couldn't lift the box out of my car. I felt panic rise. I imagined driving around with the picnic table in the back of my car for months, years perhaps, until I met someone whom I felt comfortable asking for help. In Lansing, I had no friends and knew none of my neighbors except Shelby and Wilda, who were too old to help. I could not possibly prevail again on my boss, Tom.

Growing up, I'd never learned how to ask people for help. In our family of seven children, my mother taught us to be self-sufficient. "Fight your own battles," she reminded us. Even when I was taking care of Steve for the year and a half that he was ill, asking for help seemed like imposing. Steve's parents visited once or twice a month, and his sister stopped by weekly, but most of the time it was just him and me in our apartment, bunkered. And then it was just me, with a picnic table stuck in my car. Eventually I thought to open the box and carry each piece separately to my backyard. Feeling clever and triumphant, I sat on the hot cement patio scrutinizing the instructions, then assembled the legs for the table and four benches. When I went to attach the legs to the table top, I discovered that I had screwed all of them together backwards. I ran into my house, threw myself on my bed, and sobbed like a girl. Later, I dismantled, and then re-mantled, the legs properly. I sat my new picnic table in my new backyard and ate my dinner alone.

At Bill's Tractor Sales, I bought a shiny, candy-apple red Snapper with a bag in the back for clippings. The Snapper cost \$400 and was the first purchase I ever made with a credit card. I chose the Snapper because the salesman—who had a burning cigarette stuck to his lip, a guy who could smoke a cigarette with no hands, a guy who could sell me a lawn mower in

the time it took to smoke a cigarette—promised it would start up on the first pull, every time.

The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Power Lawn Mowers

In 1988 when I stepped into Bill's Tractor Sales, I was entering a man's milieu. Even in 2011, twenty-three years later, 71 percent of people who bought lawn mowers were men.⁹ From the moment of their invention, lawn mowers have been advertised to men. If you saw a woman in a mower ad, the message was to a male audience about the machine's lightweight quality. There were a few exceptions. In 1927, Coldwell Electric targeted an ad for their small electric mower to women, promising it was "as easy to handle as a vacuum cleaner." In 1940, the Jacobsen Manufacturing Company sold a model called the Lawn Queen. Their ad was either quaintly naive or intentionally erotic: "Get a Thrill Mowing Your Lawn."¹⁰ I can't help but think of Nicholson Baker's novel *The Fermata*, in which a character uses her riding lawn mower as an enormous sex toy. My friend Doug confessed to me that his wife does all their mowing. "She has," he said, "a complicated relationship with the lawn mower, almost erotic." It seems odd that a mower could be considered erotic, but the link between lawns and bodies is obvious in a World War II-era *Better Homes and Gardens* article: "We have lawns for their good looks and what they do for the whole place. An un-mowed lawn looks as bad as a man without a shave."

A 1952 Homko ad lacks all subtlety in eroticizing lawn mowers. In the ad, the woman pushing the mower wears a cleavage-revealing blouse, her skirt lifted by a wayward breeze to reveal a glimpse of underwear. The text teases: "There's no better way to turn lawn work into play than with a Homko Power Mower."¹¹ Apparently, the ad was too risqué. In a later version, the woman's neckline is raised, her skirt hemline lowered.

In spite of the exceptions, most lawn-mower ads reinforced traditional gender roles, such as in a 1950s ad from Goodall Manufacturing Corporation: "Mowing is a man's job . . . but here's a tip for wives whose husbands are

about to buy a mower.” Help select the machine, these ads urged women, in case they had to operate it when “hubby just can’t find time to mow.” A 1952 *House and Gardens* article, “The Intelligent Woman’s Guide to Power Lawn Mowers,” reassures women, “You don’t have to be mechanically minded in order to operate a power lawn mower. It’s no more difficult than running your vacuum cleaner or learning to drive the family car.”¹²

Fast-forward a half-century and not much has changed. A 2009 survey found that in 63 percent of heterosexual couples who owned homes, the man was responsible for mowing the lawn.¹³ And lawn mowing might be an aphrodisiac after all. A 2013 study published in the *American Sociological Review* found that married heterosexual men who perform traditional male chores—mowing the lawn, changing the oil—have sex more often than men who do traditional female chores such as laundry or washing dishes. The lawn-mowing guys had sex an average of 4.8 times per month, whereas the housecleaning guys had sex only 3.2 times.¹⁴ Writing about the study, one reporter quipped, “Hey, fellas, put down the vacuum cleaners and pull out the lawn mowers.”¹⁵ Correcting for possible influential factors, these sociologists concluded that we cling to deep-seated stereotypes about what behaviors are masculine or feminine—and thus tied to sexiness.

If Steve and I had been subjects in the study, we'd have been on the edge of the bell curve, tossed out of the "norm." Steve was traditionally masculine—he sparred with a body bag for exercise and loved to watch boxing, a sport I hate for its glorification of violence—but he was also domestic. He liked to vacuum, wash dishes, clean—and he did those chores more often than I did. We didn't have a washer and dryer in our apartment, so we went to the Laundromat together. That Steve shared the household chores was a sign of respect for my time, for the traditional work of women; in turn, I admired him more for being man enough to do "women's work." To me, Steve was sexy wielding a wrench or a dishrag. Study aside, Steve and I were young and lusty, and regardless of the division of household labor, we made love an average of 6.5 times a week, at least until he fell ill.

The Snapper

When I brought the Snapper home and took it out for its maiden cut, Shelby came over to inspect.

"Nice rig," he said.

He stood on the sidewalk for ten minutes, admiring the machine as I mowed my lawn. The next week Shelby bought the same mower from Bill's Tractor. He already had two mowers, a small push mower and a fancy riding one. Shelby mowed the front of his yard with the riding mower and the back with one of the push mowers—most often the new Snapper—to maneuver around the bird bath, the miniature windmill, and Wilda's gardens. He mowed his lawn at least once a week and often twice. He kept the grass short, like a putting green. He fertilized; he watered.

That summer, whenever I was out mowing, Shelby would take a few steps in my direction and mouth, "How's the Snapper working out?"

I'd cut the engine to hear him. "Mine isn't starting on the first pull like the guy said," I'd tell him.

"Try pushing that button under the motor," Shelby would say.

Our Snappers looked the same, but maybe Shelby had a more deluxe

model, because mine didn't have this button. Shelby was sure that the button was there but that I just couldn't find it. To start the mower, I'd have to yank the cord two or three times—an anomaly for Snappers, reputed to be top-of-the-line machines. Quality is so important to Simplicity, the company that acquired Snapper, that in 2006 the CEO, Jim Wier, rejected a deal to sell Snappers in Walmart's 3,811 stores. Walmart wooed Snapper to be its flagship mower, the way Lowe's sells Cub Cadet and Home Depot sells John Deere. In the proposition to bed with Walmart, Wier saw a company death spiral: Walmart demands lower prices, which forces manufacturers to go overseas for cheap labor, cheap parts. In order to squeeze a profit, they'd have to build shoddy machines, the antithesis of Snapper's ethos. "Once you get hooked on volume, it's like getting hooked on cocaine," Wier said about declining the Walmart deal. "You've created a monster for yourself."¹⁶

Instead, Snapper continued its tradition of manufacturing mowers in its ten-acre factory in McDonough, Georgia—as they'd been doing since 1951. During an eight-hour shift, every ninety seconds a bright new Snapper—one of 145 different models—rolls off the assembly line. Each mower is injected with a splash of gasoline and oil and the engine is started before it's shipped to independent dealers, such as Bill's Tractor Sales in Lansing.¹⁷ I'd bought my *crème de la crème* Snapper in the hopes that I wouldn't have to confront problems I had no idea how to resolve, and for which I had no particular aptitude, so that at least mowing the lawn would be easy.

The Lord's Handkerchief

The word "lawn" evolved from the Welsh *llan*, which once meant enclosure and then later "church." My neighbor, Shelby, was one of many Americans whose lawn obsession does suggest reverence, devotion, ritual: planting, watering, fertilizing, aerating, edging, weeding, and mowing. On any given weekend, some fifty-four million Americans will be outside mowing their lawns, more people than will be inside at a church service (fifty-two million). We love our lawns, even worship them. "Grass," Walt Whitman wrote, "is the handkerchief of the Lord."¹⁸ Aggregated, American lawns

would cover an area the size of Florida, thirty-seven million acres—a mighty large handkerchief.

Maybe our lawn affinity is not just spiritual but biological. Evolutionary psychologists have hypothesized that our attraction to lawns is genetically encoded—a vestige from when our ancestors roamed the African savanna, where short grass allowed humans to spy predators from afar. One biologist surveyed people from around the globe to determine what “scene” they preferred to see out their back door. From Nigeria to India to the United States, people predominantly selected short grass with scattered trees. Another study showed that patients in hospital rooms with a view of grass and trees recover more quickly than other patients, and still another survey found that office workers with a view of nature—including lawns—reported less job stress.¹⁹

And yet the suburban lawn as we know it is a twentieth-century invention, imported from Great Britain. In eighteenth-century England, landed aristocrats fancied a “naturalistic” look—paths winding through cropped lawns, dotted with clusters of trees. The evangelist for this style was a landscape architect named Lancelot “Capability” Brown (he viewed land in terms of its “capabilities”). Brown demolished walls, uprooted trees, and diverted streams to create park-like terrains.²⁰

Thomas Jefferson, while abroad in the late 1780s, admired British landscape design and imported this fashion to Monticello; Jefferson is considered the first American to have an English-style lawn.²¹ George Washington, too, hired English landscapers to design the grounds at Mount Vernon, which included a British-style bowling green protected from wildlife by a “ha-ha,” a ditch encircling the green. Although the wealthiest Americans had manicured grounds in the late eighteenth century, most Americans had no lawns. Their homes were situated too close to the road, or their small front yards were packed dirt or native vegetation growing wild.²² After Charles Dickens visited the United States in the 1840s on a lecture tour, he wrote that the “well-trimmed lawns and green meadows of home are not there; and the grass compared with our ornamental plots and pastures is rank, and rough, and wild.”²³

America’s “Capability Brown” was horticulturalist Andrew Jackson

Downing, who promoted lawns in his 1841 *Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening*, a book so popular it was reprinted five times. Downing, who designed the public grounds for the White House and the Smithsonian, advocated lawns “softened and refined by the frequent touches of the patient mower.”²⁴ Since his wealthy clients hired workers to scythe their lawns, whose patience was Downing talking about? Downing’s protégé, Frank Scott, took up the landscaping call to arms in 1870 with his own book, *The Art of Beautifying Suburban Home Grounds*. Scott thought it “un-Christian” to have an unmanicured lawn.²⁵ Like cleanliness, lawn-ness was next to godliness, a virtue. In 1900, when Kansas City hosted the Democratic National Convention, the city offered cash prizes for well-kept lawns, and in the 1930s, *Better Homes and Gardens* magazine sponsored “More Beautiful America” contests, with points awarded for “maintenance of the front lawn” and the “lawn on the strip between the sidewalk and the street.”²⁶

After World War II, suburbanization fueled American’s obsession with lawns; short green grass now signified status. Levittown, New York, the largest housing development in American history—by 1960 there were eighty-two thousand residents—required by deed that homeowners mow their lawns once a week between April and November. Lawn obsession was so prevalent that during the 1960 presidential race, Senator John F. Kennedy was asked, “How do you stand on crabgrass?” The reporter quipped, “If you will come out strong against it you’ll have all the suburbs behind you.”²⁷ The next spring when President Kennedy noticed crabgrass on the White House lawn, he ordered the gardeners to “get rid of it.”²⁸

Such lawn perfection is not easy to achieve. In a 1981 survey, four out of five homeowners were dissatisfied with their lawns.²⁹ It’s this dissatisfaction that drives Americans to spend \$40 billion a year on lawn care, not much less than we spend on childcare (\$47 billion)—though only half what we spend on beer (\$96 billion).³⁰ Most of the workingmen’s cottages on Denver Street had small front yards of dirt, patchy weeds, desiccated yellowed turf, or overgrown “wildflower” gardens. Only two or three houses, like mine, had recognizable grass, but it wasn’t uniform or edged or weeded or fertilized. That summer, keeping the grass alive and mown was about all I

could manage. My neighbor Shelby, though, had achieved a handkerchief of green, unmarred by dandelions or clumps or the bleached spots of pet urine. His lawn was perfection.

A Thing of Beauty and a Joy Forever

If it's a happy historical coincidence that I bought my first lawn mower in a city in which the gas-powered mower was invented—near the factory that once sold more lawn mowers than anywhere else on earth—then it's a double coincidence that my first lawn was proximate to one of the country's first and premier institutions for studying grass. On my way to my job every morning along Mount Hope Avenue, I'd pass Michigan State University's Turf Grass Research Center. The first published research on turf grass was in the 1890s by Dr. William J. Beal,³¹ a professor of botany at Michigan Agricultural College (later renamed Michigan State University). Beal published a book in 1887 called *Grasses of North America*, in which he waxed scientific (“there are about 300 genera and 3,100 to 3,200 species of grass”) as well as poetic (“What view surpasses a field of waving grass, or a closely shaven lawn? Grass is ‘a thing of beauty and a joy forever.’ It even beautifies the grave, spreading a green carpet over the remains of friends gone before”).³²

In 1888, the year after Dr. Beal published his book, the U.S. Department of Agriculture began to maintain experimental “grass stations”—the same year golf was introduced into the United States. Soon after, golf and government officially joined forces when the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Division of Agrostology (the study of grasses) and the U.S. Golf Association collaborated to find grass species that would thrive in American climates.³³ Since then, over six hundred varieties of turf grass have been tested. Of these hundreds of varieties, there is one that could end mowing for all time. In 2012, scientists at the Salk Institute for Biological Studies in California discovered a gene that limits grass growth. They hope to manipulate the gene to create a variety of grass that will stop growing at a specific height. If they are successful, millions of people will be freed from the task of mowing

their lawns. Who knows how many people might then on the weekend find themselves in church?

Steve and I were not churchgoers; the only time we were in church together was for his grandmother's funeral—and then, later, his. In some ways, though, my yard became my church, or at least the place I bent to my knees, prayed, sought absolution, found some peace. Inspired by Wilda—whose blood-red climbing roses spilled over the fence that divided our lots and beautified my backyard—I began to rip up the sod along my fence to plant flowers: poppies and daisies and coneflowers and blazing star and hollyhock and coreopsis. I had a fantasy of turning my entire yard into a garden—eliminating both grass and mowing. On weekends, I spent hours digging and planting. I had the time. Gardening was more than creating beauty, more than landscaping. Planting seeds was an act of birth, tending seedlings an act of love. My grief was released into Michigan's rich black loam, as Steve's body had been interred in the earth. "I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love," Whitman wrote in *Leaves of Grass*. "If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles."³⁴

All Flesh Is Grass

In early to middle summer in Michigan, it rains weekly, and you have to mow your lawn every third day. Shelby and I began to complain about the bag attached to our Snappers. "I have to stop and empty that bag five times," I said. I'd bought the model with the rear bag because I remembered as a kid having to rake the clippings after my father mowed, a torturous task. I couldn't remove the Snapper's bag because grass and chewed-up sticks and pebbles would shoot at my face, but with the bag attached, I had to push the mower plus a load of heavy, wet grass. I made the job more strenuous by wearing ankle weights to build calf muscles—at least that's what I told myself, though I suspect the heaviness of the weights just made me feel outside the way I felt inside.

One day, Shelby went to Bill's Tractor Sales and bought a plastic attachment that allowed the grass to spew out of the side of the mower. "You

should get one,” he insisted. “It only costs eleven dollars, and you know, short clippings are actually good for the lawn.” All the effort I’d spent to avoid raking, and it wasn’t even necessary. Still, I was deterred from buying the attachment by the prospect of having to lift my mower into my car. Much later I realized that Shelby had brought the attachment home and installed it himself, but I didn’t think like that in those days. Simple tasks befuddled me; in my grief, every small project seemed monumental.

In late August, there was a drought, and the grass dried up and stabbed my bare feet. For weeks, I didn’t have to mow, so I saw Shelby and Wilda less often. Sometimes when I was in my yard, Shelby would glance my way. If he caught my eye, he’d wave and call out. “Say, Murine, awful dry, isn’t it?” At times when I saw him approach with that big, yellow-toothed smile and those tan hearing aids, I thought, *Oh no*, because I knew I’d have to stop whatever I was doing and take ten or fifteen minutes to talk with him. Aside from mowing and lawns, Shelby and I had little in common, so we had the same conversations over and over.

But just when I thought our lawn-mower conversations had dried up like my grass, when I thought that no more could possibly be said about lawns and mowers, I got a letter in the mail from the Snapper manufacturer. My model had a factory defect that made it difficult to start. I couldn’t wait to tell Shelby. I’d told him more than once that I’d selected that expensive mower because it was supposed to start easily. Shelby was my witness that life was unfair. I rigged a ramp with a couple of two-by-fours I found in my garage and rolled my mower into the back of my car. Steve would have been proud of my ingenuity, I thought. I drove the three blocks to Bill’s Tractor Sales, and when the salesman saw the official letter from Snapper, they fixed my mower for free. After that, the Snapper started on the first pull every time, and for a short while, Shelby and I had a new angle in our lawn-mower talks.

Winter came sooner than I thought it would in those long days of missing Steve, mowing my lawn, raking leaves. I saw Shelby sporadically when I was shoveling and he was snow-blowing. He waved cheerfully but we never conversed. Shelby died that winter of a heart attack. “All flesh is grass,” Isaiah tells us in the Old Testament. Like grass, we wither; we fade.

I didn't miss Shelby until the following spring when the first long grass needed cutting. *I'll go over and offer to mow Wilda's lawn*, I thought. But before I could, I saw Wilda climb aboard the riding mower and shear strips of grass in a pattern she never deviated from after. She offered a little wave, and I thought, *When did Wilda learn how to operate the riding mower?*

Aftermath

Centuries ago, the word "aftermath" referred to the second or new growth of grass after the first mowing. In the sixteenth century, people ate "aftermath cheese," made from the milk of cows who'd fed on the aftermath, which was thought to be richer in flavor. With the slippage of time, "aftermath" came to mean "aftereffects of a significant unpleasant event."³⁵ Steve's death was a significant unpleasant event, but there was no clear aftermath. There was just a long period of learning how to live without him—but also learning how to live with myself, to tend to my life. In 1990, about three years after Steve died, I began to feel something opening up inside me. I turned thirty that June, and I remember thinking, *This is going to be a good year*. I felt lighter, as if I'd taken off the ankle weights I'd worn mowing. Every August, though, when a certain sticky heat rolled into Michigan, when the grass dried up and I didn't have to mow for weeks, I'd feel a wave of sadness. This was the same weather in which Steve had died, and my body always remembered that loss.

I lived in my house on Denver Street for five years, and then I decided to move east to be closer to my family. My sisters were having babies, and I wanted to be part of my nieces' and nephews' lives. I sold my house and gave the Snapper to my friend Nancy. Thereafter followed nearly a decade of renting and freedom from mowing, until 2001 when I bought my second house in Maine. This house was even smaller (eight hundred square feet) and cheaper (\$17,000) than my house in Lansing. A true "camp," the house was built in 1910, and over the decades its previous owners had added electricity, heating, and plumbing; the original outhouse was still standing when I bought the place. In the falling-down shed, I found a scythe.

Perfect, I thought, *I shall scythe my lawn*. I wanted to reduce my carbon footprint—in one hour, a single gas-powered mower can emit the carbon dioxide of eleven cars.

With my scythe I would be like the Scythians, I thought, a people of antiquity who grew hemp in the region now known as Chechnya. They harvested the hemp with scythes, though their tool was far more sophisticated than mine, with poetically named parts: snath, toe, tang, ring, beard, heel, grips, and chine. Antithetical to the notion of turning swords into plowshares, the Scythians turned their scythes into battle weapons. Perhaps this is why the grim reaper harvests souls with a scythe. My scythe was rusty, but still sharp enough to shear tall grass and dandelions cleanly with a golf-club-like swing. I found the quiet pendulum action satisfying—“my long scythe whispering to the ground,” Robert Frost wrote in his poem “Mowing.”³⁶ But the scythe frightened me, too: canted wrongly, I could catch my shin or toe.

But then another death brought me another lawn mower, a second Snapper, red like all Snappers. My Uncle Jack had died of a heart attack, so when my Aunt Miriam sold her house and moved into a retirement community, she gave me their mower. My uncle had kept the instructions intact in a box with an extra blade and a molded-plastic form, just like Shelby’s, that fit snugly into the chute. There was a small orange-handled screwdriver wedged into a notch to replace a broken lever that adjusted the mower body for a shorter or longer cut. I left the “make-do” screwdriver in place; it worked well, and it reminded me of my uncle, a gentle, kind man.

My uncle’s Snapper has a choke button; you push it five times to prime the engine, then yank the cord to start the mower. I wonder now if Shelby was right and there was this button on my original Snapper after all. My uncle’s Snapper—mine now—is probably twenty years old, so it doesn’t start on the first pull anymore, but in the decade that I’ve owned the mower, it has never failed to start. One day, though, the mower will quit—as will all machines, as will all bodies—and if I need to, I will buy another Snapper. I am loyal to the brand because their machines are well-crafted, because I admire the manufacturer’s ethos, and because they are red; but mostly I remain loyal because Snappers remind me of longing for Steve—of having

loved him in body and now in spirit—that tender summer when I first learned how to mow a lawn.

NOTES

1. Gareth Garrett, "A World that Was," *The Saturday Evening Post*, 8 June 1940, 13.
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Driven

Karen Salyer McElmurray

The second car I ever owned was a Dodge Dart, a pale yellow 1967 automatic with a slant six engine, a big, boxy trunk, and four doors. I got the car in about 1977 and had it for upwards of a dozen years. It had vinyl seats and an AM radio that I cranked full volume as I drove some hallucinatory dream of snow and mescaline along Route 180 to the Grand Canyon, where I worked for a while as a cook and on trail crews. The car was my shelter at one time or another, with everything I owned in its back seat. I stood beside its open hood when the engine caught fire, en route from Kentucky to my new life in Virginia. Over the years, I slept in that car, lived in it, loved in it. I learned its ins and outs. Spark plug gap. Correct timing-light mark. The oil's correct viscosity. My Dodge Dart took me everywhere. It was my savior in its day.

• • •

Am I dreaming of this car, my body full of itchy light, one day in late 2008? I am sick with cancer, tied down by morphine and arm tubes and a monitor that keeps time with my heart. I want to sleep, but words, ground to an irritating powder, drain from an IV into my blood. I think of my list of things to do back in my office, two hours south of the hospital. *Applications. Proposals. Thesis students. Defenses. Offenses. Submissions. Guidelines. CVs. Cover letters. Reference letters.* When I do sleep, I'm talking to someone only I can see. We are girls again and we are riding on back roads in a yellow car I used to love, on a road trip up Jenny's Creek with the windows down and summer air scented with coal. Hours pass. My mouth, dry and bitter-tasting, is open, and I am whispering, in delirious conversation. *Riding like this,*

I say, *we could go anywhere. Who is it?* John, my husband, asks. *Hush now.* He feeds me ice chips.

• • •

I have often dreamed of my mother, of the driving lessons I've given her in the cars I've owned. The Dodge Dart, its bench seats and the wide floor space on the passenger side, made her most comfortable as we visited Walmart and Save-a-Lot, her favorite spots. On the way, she asked me about traffic lights, the speed limit, passing lanes, road signs, and I patiently answered her. That was as close to driving as she ever got.

My mother never learned to drive, but she always kept the *Kentucky Driver's License Manual* sitting out on her coffee table. She'd underline key phrases about parallel parking, caution signs, and turn signals. She'd wave the manual in my face. *I just might learn how to drive*, she'd say. *I ought to.* For almost forty years she has told me she wished she'd done something with herself after high school. *Gone on to business school. Learned to be a secretary or a nurse or a kindergarten teacher.* My mother. The keeper of rules, the OCD's relentless laws of clean. *Can't you do a thing right?* she'd say to my father when I was a child. She'd call to him through the vents in the winter as he crawled underneath our house, looking for that one stray speck of dust in the furnace. When he'd finally had enough, he took her back to her parents' house, where she remained as their caretaker until they passed.

In the last years before she went to a nursing home, I'd drive up to Kentucky from my job in Georgia to visit her. Lying awake in the room next to hers, I'd hear her in there breathing. Talking a little in her sleep. *You girls ready to go, now?* She dreamed of one long highway, the way out she never took.

• • •

I myself didn't learn to drive until I was nineteen, but even before that, I took every highway out that presented itself. At fifteen, I became a runaway on the streets of Columbia, Missouri. If I count that apartment where I

lived with a bunch of junkies and other runaways, if I count all the other apartments, trailers, and rental houses I've inhabited over the last decades, I've lived in thirty-seven places. Jobs? Cook, maid, secretary, landscaper, sporting towel folder, greenhouse worker. Since the '80s, I've signed up for MFA programs, MA programs, and doctoral programs. I'm visiting assistant professor, writer-in-residence, assistant professor, associate professor, professor-on-her-way-to-the-stars. Books are written. Papers mount on my kitchen table. I cross genres and state lines. I am climbing an invisible rope that burns my hands. I am traveling farther and farther away from a self I no longer know.

• • •

When I got my 1967 Dodge Dart, I'd been living on the edge. At my father's insistence, I'd married, pregnant and fifteen. Children ourselves, we'd relinquished our son, divorced. Since then, I'd been teetering on the brink between jobs—maid, retail, secretary. Before the Dart, I'd owned a 1969 Olds Cutlass, a heavy monster of a car that sucked gas like it was water, but I'd parked it beside a creek near the house friends rented in the country. Torrential rains came and the creek rose, flooded my transmission. I was left afoot for a while in the town where I'd moved to attend classes at a small liberal arts college.

The route most all of my family had taken—my stepmother and my mother's sisters and her brother and my grandfather and on into the generations—had been the work of hands. Coal. Farming. Construction. On my father's side, his father had been a service station man, and his mother, a wife, a quilter. I was the first woman, except for an aunt on my father's side who taught elementary school, to go on to college. I applied for grants and work study. I was dreaming big, about poems and stories and classes with vague names like Contemporary American Women Poets. It was a first for someone like me, a girl, and one with no money, no clear plan, no home of her own, to want to do anything as simply not done as study words and, on top of that, long to pluck them out of the air and make them her own.

When my father gave me a photocopied payment book, with interest, and the keys to a 1967 Dodge Dart, I was being given more than one form of license. I might, just might, have the wherewithal to do what he and his brother had done, earn a degree at a college. If I was careful and got the oil changed and regular tune-ups, this car could keep me going for years. A five-hundred-dollar Dodge Dart would do me until I made something of myself. He'd wanted me to learn shorthand, typing. How was all that poetry going to help me achieve my goal? Art, my father told me, was a sadly impossible dream. If you didn't publish by the time you were thirty, he said, the chances were slim in the writing business. But he handed me the keys to the Dodge, and I started the engine.

• • •

I have always been, as one of my best friends tells me, driven. Owner of that shiny used car, I cut loose from Kentucky again and again. After I graduated from Berea College, I drove out west to work at the Grand Canyon. Back east, I drove from Kentucky to Virginia, for graduate school. I drove from my second part-time job in Charlottesville to my first classes in composition. I drove right from my Adult Education night class to a part-time job at a country store, where I weighed deer on a machine outside for the hunters who stopped by for coffee. Part-time jobs pushed for full-time jobs. Part-time teaching led to more teaching, enough teaching to get me by, get me on the road to more and better everything.

One night, when I was still living in Charlottesville for graduate school, I drove to a party for writers and I parked my Dodge outside, backed into the space beside the front door of the house so that it would roll forward and start in what had been a winter so cold it hurt to breathe. I was wearing thrift store jeans and a sweater with beads on it, and I ranged around the room full of black cocktail dresses and thin ties, feeling insecure. I made small talk about the novel I'd loved most of late, *Wise Blood*, and that preacher, Hazel Motes, who'd also had a good car, one that'd get him anywhere he wanted to go.

I was at the cocktail party with my then-boyfriend, a greenhouse employee I met at one of my jobs. He was ruddy-cheeked from the cold, and his hands were square-fingered, strong from days of shoveling, hauling flats of plants, nailing new shingles on an outbuilding roof. One of the cocktail women raised her eyebrows at my boyfriend's flushed face and the denim shirt he was wearing, one buttoned up to his wind-chafed neck. *Does he beat you?* she asked. The boyfriend wanted to leave early and we did. The Dodge Dart complained as it started, coughed and sputtered, and sent out clouds of smoke into the open doorway of the sleek room full of glasses and spike heels. We argued on the way home, about whether he thought I was pretty enough.

Oh, how I was driven. Driven to the next town. The next state. The next school, degree, boyfriend, lover. As the years passed, I owned a 1969 Volkswagen Beetle. A 1982 Nissan Pickup. A 1999 Honda Civic. A 2005 Toyota Matrix. Car upon car, life upon life, all of it with the persistence, the stick-with-it-ness of that 1967 Dodge Dart. How I drove that Dodge into the ground, really. Rode it into the sunset. Drove it on retreads and recycled oil. Drove with rusted-out holes in the trunk and a coat hanger to wire the hood shut. Let it take me upwards and over, backwards and forward, always forward, never satisfied with where it took me, or who I was, or why.

Hazel Motes says that no one with a good car needs to be justified. Back from the service, he is sure he needs nothing from his religious upbringing, needs nothing much at all but a no-account Essex that he keeps going with sheer will. I understood that willpower. Where I came from, women just didn't go and do. *The woman who looketh not after her own household is worse than an infidel.* The Bible said that. But my car gave me the power to do and become all on my own. I could go anywhere. I was on a dance floor and my legs wouldn't let me be still. I was dancing and reaching and becoming even when my Dodge Dart was, at last, hauled off to the junkyard, one hundred bucks for parts.

• • •

I drove myself to my office the day before my cancer surgery to plan ahead. I wondered if I'd be able to make it over there in a wheelchair a couple of weeks after the surgery to hear my students defend their theses. Already I'd had chemo, radiation, and the months of illness and treatments had left me with a heightened awareness. I felt this awareness in my body, most of all, fatigue and nausea part of me, but at a great, calm distance. As I lay on the table beneath the quick red lights of radiation, I felt myself floating on an enormous sea of detachment, a peaceful sense that included both fear and possibility. In some ways, I felt the clearest I'd felt in my whole life. Cancer had opened a crack in the road in front of me, and the earth beneath that shifted, roiled even, but the silences in those moments after the six daily exposures of light, the spill of chemical into my mouth and chest, were both bitter and wonderful. I had two surgeries and months more of chemo ahead of me, but I had reached the bottom of something. What could it matter, the jealousies and rivalries of academia?

Rather than self-understanding, I fell subject to even greater self-scrutiny. How behind had this pesky illness made me in my professional life? The lists of things to do—publications, conferences, courses—all grew longer and longer, and my fatigue left me both incapable of accomplishing the next task, and indifferent. The script I'd learned for this life I'd struggled to achieve no longer fit me, and yet it was the only one I seemed to know well. What to do? *Be more assertive? Less? Speak up more? Say things more carefully?* Think, as a friend of mine says, of this internal dialogue as a bit of mental lint. Those last weeks before my surgery I became both more aware of the face I presented to the world, the faculty meeting, the Internet posting, and less satisfied, by the day, with that self. Who was I, after all?

• • •

Mercy, my granny would say when I went to visit her in the home before she died. *Just who are you, anyway?* She was my father's mother and my closest family member, another woman who never learned to drive, but she could identify wild greens by the dozens. Polk. Cressy. Poor man's bacon.

She recognized ginseng, Solomon's seal, and yellow root. She sewed quilts with names like Trip around the World from thrift-store cloth, colors so delicious they made my mouth water.

Headed out to the coal pile, hatchet in hand, she'd say that fetching coal and burning it warmed you twice. She was a child of the Depression, and she saved sharp slivers of soap, slag coal to burn, saved the least bit of fatback for the next pot of greens. She hauled slop and baskets of cans and bottles, pitched it all down into the muddy creek by the house. She pinched pennies, dressed herself out of the Mountain Mission store, was an independent woman for thirty-odd years of widowhood. As she grew older, her house was overrun with silverfish and water bugs I could hear crawling at night, their tiny legs shuffling over the quilts that kept me warm. *Them bugs are mine*, she'd say, and no one could tell her any different. When told a public highway was taking her house, she stayed put until signs warned of the last date for exiting public domain.

• • •

My great-aunt Della, my mother's aunt, fixed brakes, changed oil, fried eggs, paid the bills. It was the 1950s. Della, they said, was odd-turned. *Contrary*. I've written stories about her, her big hands, black-streaked and strong from the hard work they did. I imagine her reaching down into some vat of soaking spark plugs, some geography of wires and hoses. Later, when I learned to gap plugs and change the Dart's oil, I thanked my memories of Della. She was strong enough to run a business, manage a garage and a restaurant. Strong enough to lock the doors when my uncle Russell came home drunk. He fell asleep one winter night with his truck's engine running, and they found him dead.

When I was little we'd drive home to Eastern Kentucky and sit in the booths at Della's place, a service station and diner called The Black Cat. The only photograph I have is one of the soda cooler and a shelf full of cartons of Winstons and Salems above it. But I remember faces not pictured. My great-grandmother, Beck, who lived in a room off the diner until she passed. Della. Her sun-browned face and her sad, fierce eyes. On Sunday

afternoons I'd sit under the tables while above me the women talked and exchanged news about their eyeliner and lipsticks and husbands. Those were my first stories.

• • •

Even while I'm still in the hospital, I feel longing. I have begun to want to be myself again, to be more than myself, but I'm not quite sure who that is. Maybe, I think, I'll be her again, the girl brave enough to cross whole countries in an old Dodge Dart with a sleeping bag and a tent; but this time, I'll slow down enough to see the landscape. I do know that what I want is to speak honestly, frankly. I tell myself I'll base my life on compassion, trust. I'll try out my personal work ethic, which has already begun to teeter somewhere between being a responsible academic citizen and breaking all the rules.

The truth is, I will not be back in the department where I work more than an hour when one of my colleagues encounters me in the halls. *I'm so glad you're back*, she'll say. *We need allies*. Allies? I'll ask. *Think of it as coup*, she'll say. I'll try, for a while, not to think of it at all, but soon find myself caught up in the same intrigues and collusions, allegiances and factionalisms. I will tell myself that I will remain clear in my thinking. I will be honest with myself and others and base my changed life, my new course of action, on compassion and honesty. Eventually, another colleague of mine, one who is acting division head, will tell me more than I want to know about his route to tenure and about his lunch-meeting attempt to gather information and put out political fires right and left. I'll feel phrases like *resist hierarchical thinking* forming in my mouth. We will send each other angry e-mails and, remission or none, I'll head home to hide in bed with Earl, my orange-striped cat.

• • •

There were two roads the women in my family took. My aunt Ruth, sick for over twenty years following her son's shotgun suicide, has seldom left her trailer. Illness has traveled from place to place in her body—gout in her legs,

arthritis in her arms, diabetes in the blood she checks with a little at-home glucose kit. She has suffered from migraines, alopecia, fluid retention, and sleep apnea. Out her trailer's back window, in the small family cemetery, she can see her son's grave. She is one of the women, like my mother, who has remained carless, licenseless, bound to a world that hurts.

On the other hand, there were the women who headed west, took the hard road out. There was my uncle Roy's second wife, Betty, the one who up and left for Detroit to become a go-go dancer. There was Della, who could gunk an engine and set the points on a 1966 Chevy Malibu without even looking up the gap. There was Della's granddaughter, the one who became, as the family said, a Big Lawyer and moved away to some northern city and never came back. Me? I've been to so much school, my grandfather said he wondered when it was going to start working on me.

• • •

In the days following my surgery, I blow into a plastic tube and watch a rubber weight rise when my breath comes out strong enough. I press a button for the morphine drip again and again and drift. I find myself waking up laughing, answering voices so real I feel hands stroking my hair. Sweet muses, the women I come from, singing me to life. They urge me to ride the crests of waves of this illness, to follow the flash and bleep of my heart on a screen.

They take me along highways I have almost forgotten. Highway 40 West, forty-eight hours straight between Kentucky and Arizona with coffee and my yellow Dodge Dart, its engine block patched with stove cement. The drive between the Grand Canyon and Flagstaff, Arizona, at night, electrical wires over the road, tentacles made of snow, me on acid and the iced roads rising and falling. Back roads between Tallahassee and St. George Island with the truck driver I loved, a pistol on the seat between us to fire between shots of vodka and the scurry of armadillos into a ditch. Drives to airports, drives to cities linked by outdated maps, drives all night to get to lovers who aren't really mine. Drives and drives until I am so tired, morphine stings as it enters my blood.

But just suppose, these women I have loved say. Suppose you reached in, way back inside you, and found it. *A yellow car?* OK, they say. Start there. And because this is sleep, a morphine dream in which anything is possible, I go with them to that car, that magical Dodge, and we step inside, all of us. We drive for a while on back roads I used to love. I crank the car windows down and let the air blow in, cool and sweet. It is a hot Eastern Kentucky night, and we pass house after house, lights on, families sitting down to supper. We pass roads whose names I have forgotten, but I take them anyway, by instinct, knowing that they are different now. They are made of blood and memory.

We drive until we come to the quarry where I used to go swimming, years and years back. I used to drive out there by myself, just me and the big red hound dog I used to own. She'd ride shotgun in the Dodge, hanging her head out the window, her ears flying back. I'd lie in an inner tube and float in the still summer waters. We lie there now, all of us, me and my memories of their voices, all the women who made me who I am. There are hours and hours of stillness in this memory. There is me dreaming of who I wanted to be, the words I wanted to write, the stories of my life until now. It is almost morning, between light and dark, between memory and possibility, but I can still see it, where I've come from, voices I remember. My mother, my father, their hands held out, full of what love they know how to give. I float and dream and wake just before dawn, in time to see the stars disappear.

Blacktop can sing, the women say, if you listen. It can urge you home.

• • •

Does this story have an ending? Woman wakes from morphine dreams believing in the possibilities for redefining her life. She holds her belly's seam when she stands, hurts as she walks step by step toward the end of a hall. She watches the choices of her life precede her, papers and deadlines and the faces of students clinging to the sleeves of her hospital gown. Later, she sits on the edge of a bed and cannot untie her own slippers. She is all right with that, this simple failure of her fingers to produce the correct

result. Words elude her. She imagines a window opening, clean air pouring in. Everything she has been, all the pages of herself. Vanishing. She studies a bedside table. Mirror. Comb. Water glass. Her life is so small it can fit in a palm, on an empty plate she can accept or refuse. She curls herself around pillows, slides into what is possible. She dreams of lives she just might have. Other roads to take, if she is wise.

More Than Noise

A distant chainsaw sounds like a woman screaming for help, but as you move closer, it sounds more like a full-throated tenor. To a bystander, a chainsaw stinks like gas fumes, but to the operator, it smells like pungent wood: cedar or pine or cottonwood or fir. The weight of a saw in your hands—a familiar saw, say a Stihl 026—feels like a toddler, and you hold it like a toddler too: firm but not tight, cautious and attentive and sometimes playful, always in motion; you must triangulate your own body movement with that of the power head and the tree you will cut. The generic image of the chainsaw is big and loud and dangerous, a tool for destruction, but up close it's more intimate.

For much of my adult life, I ran a chainsaw daily as a backcountry trails worker in national parks and forests—clearing downed trees from hiking trails and building bridges and shelters and picnic tables. Sometimes, but not always, I was the only woman on the crew. A woman running a chainsaw might surprise hikers or strangers at picnic-table dinner parties who only associated women-and-chainsaws with the sexy models in early Stihl catalogs—women straddling saws, women on swings with saws. But after fifteen years, my gender made little difference. I loved my job, and I did it well, although I don't do it anymore. I miss it—not just the satisfaction of so-called honest work or the astonishing alpine beauty or the achy buzz of being hyper physically fit, but the saw itself.

That sound. The scream, the song, yes, or often a high-pitched whine—louder, harsher, teeth-gnashingly so—dulled by my yellow foam earplugs to a jet-plane roar. Then an octave drop. The sound of the saw bogging down, losing power, the air filter or the muffler clogged, or more likely the tension in the log shifting, threatening to pinch your bar. Or worse. Once a friend sawed a log that had fallen across the trail from the downhill side—never

saw from the downhill side—and the cut round rolled toward her. She hit the ground flat and fast, and the log bounced right over. Luckily she wore a hard hat. I never did. No hard hat, no safety glasses, no chaps. What was I thinking? Three people I know cut into their own legs. Ragged flesh, lots of blood, stitches, a chip of bone.

In all those years, I never got injured—unless you count the walnut-sized bulge along my spine at the bra line, not from running the saw but from carrying it on one shoulder—the right, always the right—for hours every day, for miles, with the chain brake on, the steel teeth in my leather-gloved hand. I know. I know. I should have switched shoulders, and I should've used a plastic sheath or wrapped protective chaps around the bar, but the chaps were bulky and the sheath would slip, and I felt more in control holding the teeth in my glove, even if they sat there on my shoulder, day after day, inches from my carotid artery. Once I watched a friend saw barefoot—balanced on a log across a creek. Once I stood sock-footed on a tall friend's shoulders to cut a high limb. We took crazy risks and laughed about them later, but we never bragged about them, ever. I'm not bragging now, but trying to remember—the way you try to remember a friend who's left or died, a friend you didn't know you cared about so much.

We felled live trees, sure, but rarely. Usually the trees we bucked had already fallen; they were just in the way. Sometimes the logs were suspended, wedged between standing trees, and the resulting tension could cause a log to spring back or drop down or even stand straight up, Lazarus-like, if the weight of the dirt clinging to the roots was enough to pull it upright. (Sometimes weekend volunteers would tell stories of this happening as if it were rare, magical, shocking. We'd never correct them. We'd never say: that happens all the time. Better, always, to let stand a belief in a marvelous phenomenon than to insist it's mundane.) Fresh-cut chips—white, yellow, and orange—lay in the dirt long past when the tree was gone, like piles of hamster bedding, like fat lines of cocaine. I could walk a trail on my days off and tell how recently it'd been worked by the brightness of those chips on the ground.

The guys always wanted to run the 044—the bigger, heavier saw that cut faster and burned through gas like a hummingbird through sugar water. The guys liked the power. They liked the fact that they did not have to bend so far to cut a log lying on the ground. They did not mind schlepping the extra weight, but I did. The 026 was my size (10.7 pound power head, 2.97 cubic inches displacement, 20 inch bar, $\frac{3}{8}$ inch pitch chain). After a while, after a few years and a few hundred trees, the 026 began to feel like an appendage.

The only machines I've known as well as chainsaws are cars and computers. I can fix neither of those to save my life, but I could repair the 026. I could change the filters, air or fuel; replace a sprocket, careful not to lose the c-clip when releasing it with needle-nose pliers; replace a pull cord or muffler. I could adjust a carburetor. And I could sharpen. I sharpened the chain many times a day, at a workbench or, more often, on my knees in the dirt, counting the strokes—you must file each tooth the same number of times or, well, you are screwed—in the sun, in the bugs, while the crew talked, or actually didn't talk; they knew better than to talk or I'd lose count. We used the saws so hard and sharpened the chains so often that in a month, a tooth the length of a pencil eraser could be reduced to a fingernail snip. If you let it get to that, the tooth will break. You have to know when to give up on a chain.

Long before I ever ran a chainsaw, I used a crosscut saw. The Forest Service, unlike the Park Service, allows nothing motorized, nothing mechanized, in the wilderness. A crosscut requires more patience and care; if you get the saw stuck, you'll have to chop it out with an axe. The cuts take longer, so you make fewer of them, and as a result, the rounds you cut are bigger, so you want to think about where they'll drop and roll. There's a hint of historic reenactment—two sawyers on either side of a log taking turns pulling; you may as well wear a pair of suspenders—and there's commitment to an ideal, a rejection of the screaming, whining roar of modernity, especially modernity in the woods. But even those who love the crosscut most, even those who use it best, will admit: the crosscut is nonsense. If you want to get work done, you need a chainsaw.

Here's how you start: you pull until you feel the resistance, then drop the saw fast to break the compression. Sometimes, when the saw won't start, on a hot day there might be vapor lock or too much soot on the muffler. Or you might've flooded it. So you wait, then pull some more. Back when I was learning, a friend gave me a used copy of *Barnacle Parp's Chainsaw Guide* by Walter Hall, copyright 1977, that covered the basics of operation and maintenance. Barnacle Parp was an alter ego for the author, a faux-wise woodsman, and the campiness put me off. I flipped through the ragged-cover copy as necessary, usually only when something was broken. Mostly I sawed. Learning to start I bloodied my fingers, and I never looked back.

The chainsaw has wreaked havoc, undeniably, in Pacific Northwest forests even more than in Texas massacre films. But it's not so simple, not all one thing. On trail crew, we built things, too: benches and bridges and shelters that would last decades—not as long as the trees would stand, not even close, but still. We'd scribe the logs, then notch them—make parallel cuts and chip the chunks out with an axe—then run the saw across the grain quickly at half throttle, working it like a sander. When the notch was deep and smooth as a salad bowl, you could start the next one. That way you could fit the logs together snug and right as bodies entwined in sleep to make something sturdy and functional, sometimes beautiful. Everyday acts of creation to balance the destruction.

Part of me knows I'll never be that close to the chainsaw again, inside the roar, right inside of it, where the worst we humans do meets the best we do, and one wrongly timed move can hurt you so badly, or hurt others. Hell, a car can do the same. Ditto a ballot or a dollar or a series of mouse-clicks all in a row. The chainsaw may be louder and sharper, but at least you know what you're up against; you know what you're capable of, what you're responsible for, and anyway, we all know the truth: it's not, in the end, what tool you use but how you use it.

Once, outside a cabin, I spur-climbed a Douglas fir and hung from my lanyard, limbing the tree with a very small saw while, without my knowledge, a woman inside the cabin was getting a massage. Bad timing.

Later, the massage therapist, a friend, told me her client did not mind, that she'd said she could hear no aggression in the noise. The client could not have known that a woman was at work, not a man, but I wondered: was that the difference? God knows testosterone plus a chainsaw sometimes equals aggression. (Ditto for the car, ballot, and dollar, you might say.) But it's not all gender. Even if you've never run a saw, you can hear when someone is forcing the issue, fighting the wood, revving past the time for an undercut. The grain is tightening, and the sawyer doesn't know enough or is not paying enough attention to pull out the bar and saw upwards to meet the downward cut. It's rare to cut in only one direction and make it work.

A decade ago, I decided to put down the chainsaw. It would be easy to say I'd had it, that I wanted to live a life less dirty, less loud, less smelly. That is not true. Nor was it my biological clock ticking, though that is the reason many women stop. In my early twenties, I'd hitched myself to another woman, Laurie, who also worked in the woods, and we'd long since decided our seasonal lifestyles and our lousy paychecks and our conservative rural town would not make it easy to raise children. The truth was that I was tired and restless, eager to try a new path, a more conventional path in a way: writing and teaching. But I never regretted the hard labor I did because of the rich life it opened.

The chainsaw allowed Laurie and me to make men's wages, which outpace women's work in our rural town by at least threefold. The chainsaw gave us the confidence to build a house, to use other tools. By the time our house was complete, Laurie kept a bandsaw in the living room. She used it to make cabinet handles from apple prunings and to cut frozen bacon for soup, much to the amusement of houseguests.

The chainsaw gave us entry into a club of sorts. We know a guy who ran a two-person chainsaw, one of the first chainsaws ever made, an original from back in the 1940s when they needed a mule to carry the thing. It was worth it, he says, with a grin: to do something the hard way to prove it could be easier. Another neighbor, Wally, a generous curmudgeon, kept a collection of saws, the cheap American ones you could buy at Kmart. The

best saws are German (the Stihl) or Swedish (the Husqvarna), but Wally had neither. He had Homelites from the 1960s and McCulloughs from the 1970s. When he died, his brother cleaned them and lined them in a row in the attic of Wally's shop, organized by the year of manufacture. A crowd gathered with beer by a campfire, and we took turns climbing the ladder to admire them. We nodded approvingly, whistling through our teeth as at a museum display. Or maybe a wake.

Mostly the chainsaw got us—Laurie and me and so many other suburban refugees—*out there*. Bar oil stained my pants, and gasoline soaked my pack, and many nights in camp I picked wood chips from my eyes with a Q-tip and a handheld mirror. I slept tentless in the dirt and stared up at the sky where tree limbs crisscrossed my view of the stars.

From the outside, this is the irony that rankled most: how can you love this tool that kills what you love best? There's no easy answer, not for me, not for Wally, not even for Barnacle Parp. Not long ago, I picked up Parp's chainsaw guide, outdated now by four decades. I'd forgotten about his last chapter—or maybe I never read it. There Parp rails against clear-cuts and derides corporations and argues for better communication and tolerance between loggers and hippies. Barnacle Parp says what I have tried to say many times but could not for fear of sounding girly or sentimental. "This is a tool that can either take us further away from ourselves by increasing each individual's circle of destruction, or can help bring some of us back, close enough to relearn the language of the trees." He also says this: remember to take a break.

Maybe, in the end, that's all I've done. I've taken a break. It's not that I can't run a chainsaw anymore. If I want to start a saw right now, there's a 026 in the woodshed waiting, Sharpie-labeled with my name. But these days, I only use it for firewood, and I have lost some strength. After cutting firewood, the next day my spine walnut will swell to a softball, but it's worth it when the muscle memory kicks in, and the concentration, the Zen-like mindlessness, paying attention without paying attention. The chips still fly, but I wear safety glasses now. There's no danger except my own weakness

or fear or carelessness. The bucked rounds pile up around me, heartwood exposed.

And when I shut off the saw, I don't hear silence. I hear the absence of noise. I'm aware of every gentle sound in the air: a squirrel taunting a housecat, a pickup rumbling down the dirt road, water in the river. After a while I hear only the wind in the still-standing trees like voices conversing, close and familiar and just out of reach, barely indecipherable. If I sit long enough, sipping water, stretching my back, I might make sense of them.

Stage and World

The Microphone Erotic

Debra Marquart

Tired of not being heard in a crowd? Tired of your *hellos* and *excuse mes* getting lost in great waves of small talk? Want to be heard above the roar of social chatter when you step up to sing? Well, let me introduce you to the high-performance Electro-Voice PL-80 dynamic supercardioid microphone.

With its equalizer-friendly sonic contour, its pro-line electronics and increased proximity effect, the PL-80 stands ready and willing to satisfy. Known for its big, brown, and forward sound, the EV bulks up your chest tones and enhances breathiness. It delivers that nice bottom end and brings out the raspy when you're ready to get nasty.

Put it in your hand. It feels heavy there. Bring it to your mouth. Not all the way. That's for later. Say, "check." Say, "check, check."

Tap its bulbous head. Hear it *pop, pop* through the room, but don't get too close. You know it's on the verge of squealing. Oh, oh, those 600 ohms, that dynamic neodymium magnet structure. It's just waiting for an excuse to feed back.

Stand at a safe distance, say, "Is this thing on?"

It's you in the machine now. Through the windscreen, your breath touches the sensitive membrane of circuits and wires that converts your sound to current. Oh, sweet mystery of electromagnetic induction.

Then, down through the tunnel of casings and cables your voice rushes, through soundboard relays and out through the speakers, returned back to the cavern of the room—a new you, only bigger. Electric you.

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It's true, microphones come in all shapes and sizes, from large diaphragm condensers to solid-state ribbon technology, but bigger is not always better. And singers won't be shy about stating their preferences. The Shure SM-58, for example, that short and sturdy microphone—ever-present on stage sets. Ninety-nine dollars and built for rough play.

Rockers will swear by the gamey SM-58, tell you how the Shure just *loves* abuse. You can swing it on a mic cable, bounce it off the stage—the SM-58 bounces back. It likes to be manhandled. Known as the forgiving mic, the SM-58 makes a bad singer sound good. But it also makes a fantastic singer sound good. It averages. It forgives.

You don't want forgiveness. You want crystal clarity and cruel precision. You want your voice played back to you, as close and true as it sounded when coiled inside your inner ear. For you, it has always been the Electro-Voice PL series.

Who can resist ogling those options—phantom power versus battery-operated, recessed on-off switch? How many times have you approached the climax of the song, your clumsy hands in dangerous proximity to the on-off switch? But no *notus interruptus* for you. Because the hotshots at Electro-Voice knew to bury the switch deep in the shaft of the mic, out of reach of your slippery fingers.

And speaking of hot. The PL-80's signal positively sizzles. With its famous bass boost, it grabs everything from a whisper to a scream without feeding back. *How do they do it?* Well, the supercardioid's polar pattern and enhanced isolation zone eliminate cross-bleeding from exterior sound sources. Super sexy.

Just stand close to the PL-80. Hear it listening. Something silent grows audible inside you. It can almost read your thoughts.

Now step up to it. Say, "Check." Say it again, "Check, check."

• • •

Dear Electro-Voice: Each morning, I woke up hoarse in hotel rooms during my years as a female singer fronting rock bands. And the first sound I'd make, the first thing that came out of my mouth was a light note on the vowel *eeee*, just a breath to open up the vocal cords, a sound like wind blowing through a harmonica.

I'd hold the *eeee* through a scale from the deepest notes in my lower register up through my middle register and chest voice navigating the narrow *passaggio* that leads to my head voice, then following the notes up into my falsetto and whistle register.

Each morning I'd unzip my voice from my body like this, doing an inventory to test the damage I'd done from hard singing the night before. Sections were always missing; notes fell silent and reedy or thudded hollow as a broken piano key.

These were the places in my vocal cords that I'd pushed too hard, or the sweet spots I relied on too much, failing now from overuse. All afternoon, I'd smooth out these splinters and honky spots with hot tea and honey, preparing for another night of hard singing.

On stage those nights, the EV was my only friend. I'd roar and labor over it. I'd close my eyes and push hard to carve out a pocket for my voice to live inside the avalanche of sound coming from the drums and the amplifiers of my guitar players.

This was the drama I felt when singing rock music—the epic struggle of the human voice to be heard above the noise of electric sound. And a struggle made more complicated by the fact that my voice was female.

Those years, I moved as if behind enemy lines, with my band mates as my trusted companions, but aware that only my skill with the microphone allowed me access to these male encampments. On stage, it was just me and the PL-76 working out the terms, my hands grasping its

solid length, my fingers cupping its mesh head to coax one more inch of volume out of it.

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Microphone Tips and Techniques:

- **Mic Stand or Handheld?** Some singers are more active. They like to drift and roam. If that's you, then handheld might be best. Experiment to find your optimal hand. But, experts caution, if the mic gets too heavy in one arm, practice swapping sides to minimize interruption while singing.
- **Proximity and Position?** Keep the mic two to three inches from your mouth, pulling closer or pushing farther away depending on your volume. The mic should be slanted horizontally toward your mouth, so your voice doesn't skim over the top. Remember, it's not a lollipop. The pickup pattern of the cardioid's electronic field is shaped like a heart. Try to sing into the center of it.
- **Windscreen or No Windscreen?** These flexible rubber socks pull tight over the head of the microphone to keep wind from blowing down its gullet. Especially good for reducing fluffing wind sounds at outdoor concerts, or for singers with popping sounds or sibilant voices. Most singers prefer not to use windscreens, observing that it numbs the sound, reduces sensitivity.
- **To Grip, Bend, or Brandish?** Handling the microphone roughly will have no effect on the sound your voice produces, just as exaggerated facial gestures will not improve your singing. But that doesn't stop singers from grimacing and thrashing around with their microphones. This "violent repertoire of tactations" (as one critic has referred to them) is more for visual effect and mostly impressive to audiences.
- **Practice, Practice, Practice.** In your free time, practice handling the microphone. Experiment. Nothing screams rookie like the sight of

someone fumbling to get the mic out of the stand or stepping on the cord and getting unplugged midsong.

- Care and Ownership. These days, most mics are phantom-powered, but if yours is battery-operated, be sure to turn it off at the end of the night. No use wasting precious juice. Unplug the mic from the cord and pack it away at the end of the night as you would any other beloved instrument. There is no more tantalizing sight on an unguarded stage than a long, lean PL-80 holstered in a gleaming microphone stand.

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Dear Electro-Voice: One indiscretion I've been meaning to confess—the time I spent alone in the recording studio with a Neumann U87. It wasn't my choice. The engineer described the Neumann as a studio workhorse. Retailing at \$3,500, it's a Rolls-Royce microphone, twice the PL-80's width and length, with a dual-diaphragm capsule, and a variable switch below the head grille to choose between an omnidirectional, cardioid, or figure-8 polar pattern. So fancy.

The engineer buttered me up by telling me the female voice has more harmonic complexity than many male voices, so the U87 would be my new best friend.

I spent one long afternoon isolated with the Neumann in a sound booth that can only be described as a sensory deprivation chamber—just me in a tall chair with the lights down and headphones on to feed the instrumental mix back to me.

The U87 hung in the center of the dark room on the telescoping arm of a mic stand, suspended before me in an aluminum shockmount, a kind of crisscrossing sling that resembles a cat's cradle. A special mic for a special purpose.

The band was mostly finished with the CD. The guitar and drum tracks, the keys and the harmonies were done. The rest of the band had already gone home, but I stayed behind to finish one vocal track that I hadn't been

able to get right. A quiet song about the aftermath of my first husband's violence. *Do you remember the first time, the last time, you really messed up my face?*

I sang these words into the Neumann from behind a pop filter, a five-inch mesh circle positioned like a confessional screen between the mic and the singer to reduce plosive sounds. All afternoon, I made vocal tries as the instrumental track piped through the headphones.

The song required a delicate balance of whisper and singing, a sound between wound and resilience. After each take, the engineer's soft words came over the headphones from the control room, coaching me on pitch, timbre, phrasing.

The problem was maintaining the tensile fragility of the whisper voice. On the track, things broke down during the descant line—*all the people that you break*; these words were sung in a cascade of descending notes that crossed the *passaggio*, the rupture zone in the vocal cords where the head voice turns into middle register.

Each time I tried to cross over, I ran out of breath, or my throat clutched up into full singing, or the whisper held but the note deteriorated. It's a terrible intimacy to be alone in a room with all the chips and breaks of your voice played back in high fidelity.

I stopped the tape several times in the darkness. The voice of the engineer came through the headphones. Maybe we should stop for the day, resume in the morning. "No," I said, "we won't get back to this place again."

Eventually, I was able to sing the descant line in the whisper voice as I heard it in my inner ear. The memory of violence translated into notes. The U87 hovered nearby in its silver shockmount, capturing the overtones and resonances. But in truth, Electro-Voice, I never put a finger on it. The Neumann never touched my lips.

Perhaps I was able to confess these things to the U87 because we were strangers destined to never see each other again, or perhaps it was because of the U87's neutral and ultraprofessional listening presence—all those things that are so unlike my normal confidante, the livewire PL-80.

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A whispered conversation is thirty decibels. A normal conversation is 65 dBs. A jackhammer is 95 dBs, and a full drum kit played hard and fast is 115 dBs. Add two electric guitars and a bass with double-stack amplifiers rifling away at 125 dBs and you have reached the world of hurt, 130 dBs and beyond. Only shotguns and jet engines are louder, but no one, not even robins or bluebirds, tries to sing in their presence for four hours.

The situation of the human voice in electric environments is singular.

So small and fragile, this instrument of the human body with its valves and crevices, its cavities stretched tight with sinews and muscles that flex and push breath like an accordion through passageways.

Then the exhale of the notes across the strings of the vocal cords, up through the larynx to the soft and hard palates that conspire to generate sound, into the staging area of the mouth, and rushed across tongue and teeth into the small domestic rooms where sung notes live an auditory moment, then disappear into the ears of time.

For singing practice, living room acoustics are good enough—like riding bareback, this singing in rooms without microphones. Sometimes singers move to the kitchen for the resonance of granite surfaces, or to the bathroom for the reverb of porcelain and ceramic tile. Sometimes, only the bedroom will do. There, singers may push and breathe, whimper and growl in private.

But for the performance, for the amphitheaters of the world, the singer requires an appendage of amplification, the microphone's electronic field, to reach in and capture the uvula's vibrations.

Each note, each measure that was practiced to nuance and preserved inside the crucible of the singer's body is caught in delicate proportion by the microphone, then translated to greater scale, amplified into the ears of listeners. It's an oxymoronic act, intimacy made public, made possible by the device of the microphone.

And with so many intimacies occurring—between singer and listener,

between listener and music—it's easy to miss the other drama, the one that singers know. How the body plays the voice. How the voice plays the microphone. How the microphone plays the body back to itself. The endless sixty-nine. The microphone erotic.

• • •

Dear Electro-Voice: Just as bullet trains resemble the beaks of kingfishers for improved aerodynamics, and Velcro employs the nasty hooks of a burdock burr for enhanced grab, so engineers have learned the art of biomimicry.

But what of our unconscious designs, the way that cancer cells as seen under a microscope resemble aerial photos of urban sprawl; and motherboards of computer chips resemble endless, uniform neighborhoods of suburbs. And everything that blows up in the world—including shotguns and H-bombs and uncorked champagne bottles—resembles ejaculation. And the way the microphone resembles the penis, a handy device for reaching into tight places. Does it need to be said that a man designed the microphone?

A world invented into the shapes of things we hold most dear.

And I could interrupt this message to mention the homoerotic appeal of so many male singers in rock bands handling their microphones—bearing down on them in concert, stroking them for softer notes, swinging them wide like dangerous weapons on cords.

Or the peacock strut across stage, carrying the extended phallic apparatus of a mic holstered in the mic stand. Or the rock god pose—the ecstatic lean back as if drinking the microphone in angled silhouette against golden locks of hair.

An invention made by men for men.

But I, too, have held the microphone dear. Played it and been played by it. I have cupped the head of my PL-80, stroked its long, firm shape in public. Standing in smoke and strobe light, I have stretched the umbilical of the mic cord in tight bondage across my bare midriff and thrust the prize of the microphone high in the air with my female hand.

Oh, necessary appendage. Indispensable prosthetic. Each night on stage, surrounded by musicians grinding away loud at their electric instruments, I have climbed atop the scrap heap of electric noise, put my trembling lips to the microphone, and raised my female voice. And like a co-conspirator, the PL-80 has been there to boost my song, send it loud and clear above the noisy fray.

I, Phone

Elizabeth MacLeod Walls

For the first fifteen minutes I was transfixed by my bile, shown on a screen to my left and made incandescent by radioactive tracers as it dripped into my liver then doubled in size—something like a stream as it thaws, I thought, evolving from rivulets to rivers in the custody of spring.

After that my interest dulled. Every few moments the screen refreshed and I searched its alien face for some hint at my pathology. But the image was disinterested. Eventually it pacified me the way that sleep comforts those in grief, a temporary succor.

I shifted my gaze and stared into the big machine just above my face. It and the monitor on which my seeping bile glowed like lava at night were all I could see. My arms slid against the straps that bound me to the stretcher. I bent my knees to one side so that my torso presented to the radionuclide scanner in half-spiral, feeding miracles of Fibonacci data into the abyss. I emptied into myself.

I would for another seventy-five minutes.

• • •

In 2010, I was made president of a small, hospital-owned health science college.

At thirty-six, my career felt good, much in the way a paperweight satisfies the palm of your hand. I had joined the administrative team several years before and served a wry, intelligent nurse who loved books and ideas—our first president. My job was to husband the accreditation process; then I developed the general education curriculum, pairing music and literature with anatomy and nutrition. Through these efforts, my inside-out knowledge of the school's mission enlarged. My friendship with the president, who had labored for ten years to build our collegiate identity behind the drape of hospital officiousness, became verdant and full. When she announced her retirement, she asked the board to name me acting president. They were unanimous in their approval.

Over the succeeding six months, I routed budget crises and grew programs and assuaged faculty and attended events. New talents emerged; dormant talents revived in me, which I enjoyed spinning into professional gossamer. Hospital leadership asked me to apply for the permanent job. I did.

During the interview process, I managed the presentations, all the bloodless conversations, with relative ease. But my *vita* followed me, I thought—like a secret. Could they not see my age, the limited scope of my work to that point, my weightlessness? I marveled at their charity.

Two nights later, my children romped in the tub as the phone rang. My husband was out for a meeting. My boys were disorderly. I raced away to answer, shutting the door against boisterous, clanging life, and feigned serenity as I listened to the astonishing offer and felt my mind cleave like ice dropped into hot water. My oldest son, the otter, slipped from the tub, searching for me and finding the locked door—which he kicked. When his effort yielded nothing, he slapped it and called out to me. “Mom!” The caller paused: *was everything all right?* “Mom!” I yanked my body from the room and shut another door, the closet door, between my naked, dripping, yelling son and me, and conveyed such superior calm to the caller that one would suppose I was unfettered, a woman without promises.

When I hung up and opened the two doors that had barricaded me from my son, I found him coiled and sobbing against the floor. “I couldn’t find you,” he said.

On Monday, after the announcement had been made to my colleagues (now my staff), I received an unannounced visit from IT. They insisted I accept and use a company-owned HTC Ozone cell phone, which would allow the hospital administration to reach me at all times via calls, e-mails, texts. “Just part of the deal,” they said. Smiles and squinting eyes and clipped newspaper announcements left in my mailbox, handshakes. The job was mine. I drove home that night unaware that my phone, now charged, was ringing.

• • •

The scanner’s proximity above my face unsettled me. I could see around it to the ceiling, so I looked there. I saw stains in places, and shadows from the equipment stacked like metal pillow forts around my body. The technician visited once and asked how I felt. I wanted to shout and kick at my restraints—*Where have you been?*—but suppressed all that. “Just fine.”

Satisfied, she checked a box on her chart and left.

By then I was expert at shifting my arms and legs until I discovered a position that interrupted the pain caused by staying still for too long. This usually sustained me for three or four minutes until my muscles became stinging bullies and I relented, extending my legs forward, subordinating my arms to the supremacy of the fabric.

Then all my diversions vanished, and panic—lithe, insurgent—captured me. I surrendered to the dead, enclosed space of the room. I became reflexive of its riddle, a spirit haunting the agnostic machine. My head (the only free part of me) swiveled as I quashed a riot of tears.

I opened my mouth and drank in sterilized air. My body expanded within the straps. With the influx of oxygen, my chest, abdomen, calves relaxed, loosening my balled-up-fist anxiety—and I opened my eyes, freeing two patient, waiting tears.

I inhaled again, then several times. I tilted my head left toward the glowing monitor, which revealed an even larger collection of bile gathering in my liver. My heart regulated. I could think again. And then I remembered it once more as I had so often since it happened. I felt the strength of all my experience lift fear away like a mother heaving her child up off the earth and into her arms. I smiled inside the antiseptic calm of that awful room and knew that nothing mattered, nor would anything else ever again, but the journey I had completed the year before, which had saved my life.

• • •

For the first few months of any new experience, we, all of us, tend to notice details; we stretch time so we can study the angles of our reality, turn it over in our hands, intuit it like second life. It's driving to an unknown destination. Getting there is slow and a bit magical, because it can't have existed before I saw it (could it?). Yet on returning home, I trace maps in my head and feel the hour contract. The onslaught of routine ends all novelty. I glance at my watch, or my phone. Time to move on.

By summer 2010 the miracle of my being president had become fable. I could examine my own surprising history from the perspective of storyteller rather than wide-eyed innocent, naming all the elements: enchanted scenery and wise animals, the hero laboring to understand her indefinite adventure. I watched for the trickster (always obvious, a python or cuckoo), but discerning no such creature I emerged the clever elephant, the tolerant leopard, spying shadows in the forest before they moved.

It wasn't that I lost faith in that grand American mystery, ascendancy fueled by hard work and aptitude. I believed too much. I met with community leaders and board members and executives from every part of my new world, who assured me, time and again, that I wasn't too young; I wasn't undeserving; I was ready; I signified. Claim it, they murmured beneath bites of grilled salmon at the charity luncheon and sips of gin martinis at the Country Club. Then the HTC Ozone would graze my hip

with an importunate buzz. *Look over here.* Get a housecleaner, they said. *Pay attention to me.* Hire a nanny. *Read this now!* You need to learn to make yourself a priority for a change.

My hand would flit to the phone and release it from my purse or pocket or just under the table where it lived most of its short life. I would peek at the text and feel warmth, the kind that floods through my lungs when I drink whiskey too fast. It advanced a mild despotism. *That impossible donor will meet me,* it would say. Or, *revenue is soaring.* Or, *management is hosting drinks with the Governor.* Then I would look up, glance across plates and cups, guilty about my distraction, only to see my companion cradling her own phone, reversing my Mona Lisa smile like shadows inside glass.

• • •

Every couple that stays together long enough lives through some kind of crisis. I reflected on this as I submitted, peacefully this time, to the tyranny of the scanner. In the absence of diversions, my mind traveled. I recalled a feeling of general disquiet inhabiting my marriage like regiments of quartered soldiers. For well over a year, we tangoed uncomfortably around contrapuntal cadences—feeling joy for the marvelous opportunity, hatred for so many new and anemic loyalties.

He cultivated a wounded petulance that emerged whenever I had to attend last-minute cocktail parties or donor recognition events. In return, I enmeshed with work, never relinquishing the phone. When I was forced to set it down (for sleep or family meals), I simply couldn't tolerate the slowness, the absolutism, of life. Executive fundamentalism became my religion and my salvation. I was supposed to be augmented by success, the culture said, and I clung to that axiom. I cloistered myself in the passageways of influence and control. I was attentive to the powerful. I feigned interest in the uninitiated. I basked in the false kindness of those who wanted my benefaction. I paid homage to hollow statues and gazed with admiration at blank landscapes. The rest of my life, which once had

been resplendent with color, shrunk to a kaleidoscopic pinprick inside all-gray skies.

I recalled the slow curdle of our mutual stubbornness. Every text that shot through the HTC Ozone punctured our domestic space. He would scowl and issue predictable, angry comments; I leaped to answer every message, responding to the inhuman dinging in compulsory fashion—well trained—knowing, always and already, how it bothered him.

• • •

Amid the shadows and slate blue draperies, outside the crowding of machines, my body lingered in artless space. I felt again the ache of those days, but with some distance, so that my old anxiety became unreal, a series of confused images shimmering against the horizon. It was an odd juxtaposition of pain and beauty. But so is a cathedral, I thought. My eyelids whisked away moisture, and opened. I stared into the machine. So are train stations and galleries; so are woods far from home, like the ones I walked into at night in a place many states away, when I was young, when I could smell the spring flowers under the frozen earth, when I could sense but not imagine the person I am now, as though I were to emerge someday as an uninhabited place, neither truly conceived of nor supposed.

• • •

The morning he called, I was in an executive meeting in the hospital's boardroom.

I saw his face—an old photo of my husband as an undergraduate, blissful and astonished by our unexpected love affair—appear on the HTC Ozone's screen. None of my colleagues, wearing monochromatic suits and watching the world with unvarying eyes, noticed; the sound was off. Like any officer of the institution, I had cultivated a halting dance routine any time the vibrating machine made demands: looking at the phone and seeming both surprised and annoyed, shaking my head and gesturing to

the group in apology, moving my body out the door as though halfheartedly stamping out fire.

“What?”

He was unaffected by my impatience. He spoke. Plain, resolute speech.

I said: “I had to leave the meeting, the executive meeting.”

On the other end of the line, I couldn’t discern a grace note of the man whose love for me had always trounced our differences. And I thought, unbidden, of Honolulu. We had been looking for a restaurant after landing. There were no doors or windows, no insects. We ate pancakes and I drank Kona coffee on the street in the city, before we had children or money, and when our largest expense was devotion.

At the hotel we drank mai tais alongside the beach, and we became tipsy from the alcohol and the sea, and the jet lag. The next morning I opened the window shades before he woke. It reminded me of London when I was a child, opening onto an outlandish world that stole my first breath in the new morning light. I saw the mountains layered with mist. I smelled earth at its origins, fruit and leaves and lava, and clouds guilty with rain.

He said, at last, “I wish you’d come home.”

By then I had migrated to a hallway fecund with the hospital’s steady odor.

Though every day I returned from work, ate, read to the children, talked with my husband, I lived elsewhere. When the phone summoned me, I would leave, or at least my attentions did, until I became a person whose spirit, whose natural claim on the human, somehow became camouflaged by this life defined entirely by the phone, which signified a world that owned me. I had stepped across some unseen threshold into a universe that paralleled mine, but one quite bereft of home.

His plaintiveness, his simple need to restore our once rare and matchless notion of that home, startled me. Nurses passed in the hallway and I bent away from them, cupping my ear. *I couldn’t possibly do that now.* A desiccated patient making her way to the PET scanner looked directly into

my eyes as I apologized to my husband in a brusque and meaningless way, pressing “end” to avoid hearing anything else.

Back in the boardroom, no one looked at me as I shut the door, returned to my seat, placed the phone neatly to one side of my notebook. We were discussing death, or rather the statistics that delineated some mysterious relationship between patient care and mortality. My colleague slid a packet toward me, which my fingers began stepping through. Numbers substituting for people. Data standing in for the cycles of light and darkness when breath ceased to filter through patients’ lungs and their faces became indifferent to the world and everyone in it. Sometimes people who were dying saw other things, other worlds. They stretched their fingers toward them, raised their voices in greeting to them, before they left ours.

The man who passed me the papers leaned over and tapped my shoulder. The data showed a downward turn in our metrics. “Makes you sorta glad you work at the College,” he whispered.

I nodded, but then I realized that I wasn’t sure I knew what he was saying. The College and what I used to love about it, my mentor and friend who had brought it to life for me, the heroic women and men who lifted its curriculum into practice, who read poetry and told jokes to patients, who listened to stories and asked questions while they measured out care as generously as they could: it had all become so distant as to be imaginary.

At someone’s signal, we turned the page and greeted a longer list. By then my thoughts seized, and the smirk on my face, acknowledging his dark joke, disappeared. With all of life consigned to these otherworldly numbers drifting across my vision, I realized: *He had called to tell me he was leaving.*

Look at the dead on this page next.

Then it was as though my heart was pummeling me. It grew in size and leaped against my rib cage. The long table wobbled. I began to let go of consciousness—so I stood up. All their eyes swiveled toward mine, as though moving on linked hydraulics.

“I’m sorry. I have to go,” I said. “I’m not well.” I scrambled to gather my things.

“OK,” someone murmured. “Take care.”

Their heads rotated back toward their packets soaked with numbers.

• • •

My breathing stretched out under the machine. I meditated, becoming insubstantial. Buoyant. I wandered.

I thought about the library at graduate school in which I maintained intellectual vigil, daily, inside a slender room that stored all the international newspapers. At its center was an oversized chair. Few people ventured in, and I can’t remember now how I found the room except to say that it appeared to me one day and I decided to live there after that, walking from our bungalow in hundred-degree heat in the summers, descending into the chair so deeply refreshing as it wove its clean, cool fabric around me. Never before or since have I thought so much. I encamped in the chair. I left every now and then, an envoy seeking intelligence. Then I read and wrote, and a lunacy of impressions overtook me, carrying me on giant shoulders into the night and the following day, and the day after that. I lived on ideas.

Over the next twelve years, my ability not just to concentrate but to revere silence diminished. It was as though my mind had developed small holes through which all my contemplation and imagination emptied. I had long suspected that abandoning my ability to reflect, to think, meant that I was loosening my hold on life—actual life, the experience of living, the magnificent confluence of humanness and wonder. There, nothing lacks significance: preparing food, changing diapers, driving in traffic, filling out forms. It all happened without ceremony, but somehow siding with life’s surprise, its artistry and melancholy. Even in the tedium I was listening, always, for the thin hum of our collective miracle—the ability to understand, to believe, to create—that encircles all of us every day, seeding our souls. I would nestle in my chair. I would find a way to make knowledge.

Then, somewhere in the data and the lunches and the half-conversations nudged sideways by cell phones and discrete thoughts—our original insights managed by proxy, our dead lost to a wilderness of digits—it all just stopped. My hope nurtured within the little creases of existence vanished. I became unmoored from routine astonishment, from everything I loved. Instead I found myself looking always to the phone and longing for nothing and everything given me all at once and as fast as possible, asking *what can divert me now?*

• • •

It was a few days after I left the boardroom that I was washing my hands and staring at myself in the bathroom mirror at home. I knocked the HTC Ozone, resting on the edge of the sink, into the toilet.

Before I resigned from the presidency for good in that same hospital boardroom some months later, I returned the phone, scorched by its ablu-tion, to a bewildered member of the IT department. Under the scanner I remembered the young man's face as he accepted the crippled device. He wore a mixture of scorn and curiosity as I told him that I had been helpless to stop it, that I watched the hospital's phone tumble away from me, out of my world and into another—the only place that it could go.

• • •

I imagined and, in a way, wrote this essay during those ninety minutes as I lay under the scanner. Ninety minutes of peering into the eyes of a machine that listed toward me, picturing my interior, lit up like a city; ninety minutes that brought me to a place where I could remember and confront and reimagine myself—which I didn't want to do, not at first. I did other things with my mind so I wouldn't have to think about it, because distraction is easy, and so alluring.

In the end, though, and in the purity of my aloneness, the interference ceased and words found me. My silence crammed with all the thoughts I had subdued for more than a year. The gloom regressed. I came alive to the dormant gift of sense. I came alive, again, to purpose.

• • •

The technician flipped on the lights. She released me from my restraints and gave me time to change. Then she shuffled back into the examination room, checked the monitor, and made some notes. She revealed nothing.

I picked up my belongings and felt a deep vibration, a beckoning, within my bag as I slipped it over my shoulder. My hand flitted into its core and brought forth the glowing machine, my own phone. I looked into its face.

The room was empty, dull and bright. It was time to go home.

Body, Camera, Self

Noted photographer Edward Weston claimed in 1932, “Man is the actual medium of expression—not the tool he elects to use as a means.”¹ His sensuous photos of nudes, shells, vegetables, landscapes, and even a toilet emphasize curves and textures. Something about the artist, his vision and technique, is clear in Weston’s body of work, yet critics have commented, too, on the effect of Weston’s tools. In *Weston’s Westons: Portraits and Nudes*, Theodore E. Stebbins Jr. writes,

Weston had carried his exploration of nude form as far as he could with his small Graflex camera. Charis Wilson recalls his saying that he had been frustrated that he couldn’t work more precisely with the nude until he had better equipment. Thus, in 1927 he set the subject aside for a time and, working with equal intensity, turned to an exploration of growing natural forms as he began his famous series of shells, peppers, and other vegetables.²

Had better equipment been available to Weston in 1927, would he have continued his focus on nudes? Would he have turned his camera to vegetables? Would he have taken his famous *Pepper No. 30* in 1930? Of course, no one can answer these questions definitively, and surely the subjects and objects of Weston’s photography were influenced by factors—the people in his life, where he lived, the work of other artists, luck, and more—beyond his tools. But his equipment (its quality, size, weight) certainly had an effect on his art.

The first time I looked closely at, and reflected on, Weston’s work was when *Pepper No. 30* was chosen as the cover art for Susan Griffin’s *The Eros*

of Everyday Life: Essays on Ecology, Gender and Society. A suggestive black and white, the photograph presents a green pepper as strangely sensuous, with lighting and curves that mirror some of Weston's photos of nudes. Light, shadow, curves, vegetable flesh, a close-up with little context—Weston's photograph, for me, was now informed by Griffin's questions: "How and what do we choose to see? What do we value, celebrate, anticipate, mark? By what measure do we express our love for the living?"³ In asking these questions, Griffin was not referring directly to Weston's photograph, but more generally to a divide between the sacred and the profane, and the ways in which that divide narrows one's vision.

In 1943, Weston expressed a more nuanced view of the relationship

between artists and their tools, acknowledging, “Each medium of expression imposes its own limitations on the artist—limitations inherent in the tools, materials, or processes he employs.”⁴ Here, his focus shifts from an earlier focus on the artist as the means of expression to the limits imposed by the tools.

More than sixty years later, as I reflect on the place of photography and particular tools, especially cameras, in my own life, I want to erase the divide between the artist’s (sacred?) vision and the (profane?) limits imposed by tools. Rather, through personal reflection, I wish to consider the multidirectional interaction of physical body, personality and preferences, and the limits imposed, as well as the possibilities created, by available technology. The focus on either the artist or the tools, to the exclusion of the other, limits rather than expands knowledge.

Kodak Moments

Pocket-sized cameras have been available my entire life. In 1972, the year I was born, Kodak introduced five different Pocket INSTAMATIC cameras, and eight years later—the year Kodak celebrated its one hundredth anniversary—they introduced the camera I used to document my late elementary school years.⁵

This camera was a Kodak Ektra 200, a black rectangle that used 110 film cartridges easy enough for an eight-, nine-, ten-year-old to load. It debuted in 1980, retailing for \$24.50. Eighty years earlier, another Kodak camera, the Brownie—which sold for one dollar—was marketed for personal use with the promise that “Any school-boy or girl can make good pictures with one of the Eastman Kodak Co.’s Brownie Cameras.” Kodak’s early advertisements often featured children, girls and boys, to demonstrate the camera’s ease of use.

The print advertisement for the Ektra featured Michael Landon—to me, Pa from *Little House on the Prairie*—holding the camera but not obscuring his familiar face: the wide smile, his brown wavy hair not quite

touching his shoulders. Advertised as “big on convenience, smaller in size, new all around,” the Ektra was perfect for my petite hands. It came with a wrist strap, too, though I carried it in a navy blue crossbody bag, outfitted with pockets on either side for the plastic film cartridges and a front pocket in which I carried Orange Crush- and Dr. Pepper-flavored Lip Smackers. Each 110 cartridge held just twenty-four exposures, so I was selective, taking pictures only of what was important to me: my dog, my baby cousin, school friends, and Niagara Falls.

For two decades, and through a series of thirty-five millimeter cameras that I remember far less clearly than my Ektra, I believed strongly that photos should either be of loved ones (and not shots of them opening presents) or landscapes. I puzzled over the men in my family who took pictures of vehicles, the women who took pictures of food (especially birthday cakes) and who wanted to document every gift-opening experience (to the point that some already opened presents had to be opened again and a look of surprise approximated for the camera). Birthdays and Christmas, I hid behind gifts, embarrassed, trying to avoid the electronic eye that seemed to demand a performance.

I didn’t understand that my parents were doing what I was doing: seeking to preserve what mattered to them. My father, an auto-body man, can name the year and make of any car that passes; his pleasures in life are antique car shows and motorcycle rides. My mother plans for Christmas much of the year, and when the day passes, she leaves her tree and decorations up until late January. At least one year, she left the tree up until Valentine’s Day, when the dry, brownish limbs and needles could be replaced by pink and red construction-paper hearts, boxes of chocolate, and valentines for her children’s classmates spread across the kitchen table.

This past year, my mother asked if I was putting up a Christmas tree, and when I said “no,” she went silent for several seconds before saying, with a note of sadness, “Well, I love you.”

“Even if I don’t put up a tree?” I asked, simultaneously confused and amused.

“It just hurts my heart,” she responded wistfully.
To each her own Kodak moment.

Still Life

After two decades of dog, friend, family, and landscape photos, I was surprised when—after buying my first home at the age of twenty-nine—my taste in photographic subjects and objects shifted dramatically. My approach to life was changing. Instead of moving from one rented space to another, I was creating home, *my* home. I had little money; I had yet to transition from graduate-school, particleboard bookshelves to handmade cherry furniture, from framed pages from art calendars to original art. Yet I imagined each room as its own work of art: a still life in which each pillow, each vase, collections of stones and feathers, and the texture of linens mattered.

One day, I looked at the grapes in a ceramic bowl resting atop the antique drawing table I used as my kitchen table. I nearly cried. *So beautiful*, I thought and immediately drove to Target to buy black-and-white film for my thirty-five-millimeter-of-the-moment camera. I had never before shot in black and white. But then, I had never before been nearly moved to tears by a bowl of grapes. I shot an entire roll—thirty-six exposures—of grape photos, got back in the car, drove back to Target, put my film in the processing envelope, paid extra for two-hour processing, and browsed the store until my photos were ready. I then sat in my car and ripped open the envelope to reveal photo after photo of greenish-gray, blurry orbs. Perhaps the processing for black-and-white photos is different than color, and the trusty Target technicians did not see what kind of film I had used; perhaps I didn’t focus properly. Whatever the case, I had failed that time. But I didn’t give up.

In the decade that followed—during which I made the switch from thirty-five-millimeter-film cameras to digital—I continued to be moved by produce, especially the tomatoes, peppers, eggplants, and basil I grew



Cantaloupes. Photo by Melissa A. Goldthwaite.

in pots or in my front flower beds. Like that first house, they were mine. I loved their colors and shapes and how they grew and changed. I watered, tended, and photographed with care and a sense of wonder.

By 2009, the whole world, the living and dead, seemed potentially beautiful through the lens of my camera: a fallen leaf in a rainstorm, just-harvested garlic drying, a loaf of fresh bread and peaches, a painted turtle on a dirt road, the first spring buds, a pile of cantaloupes—even disturbing finds like the hind quarter of a fawn dropped in front of me by a startled coyote, a fallen fetal bird that would never know life, a large collection of slugs. I took pictures of it all.

The Power (Shot) of Memory

The move to digital changed my approach to taking pictures. With advances in memory-card technology (in terms of how many photos each could hold) and consistently decreasing prices for large amounts of memory, there was

no reason to limit subjects or objects “worthy” of being photographed. Although the memory card on my first digital camera held only eight photos, I could quickly delete the pictures I didn’t like and download the others to my computer. Today, I can buy a thirty-two GB card for twenty-five dollars; this card will hold over nine thousand photos taken with my 10.1 megapixel Canon PowerShot.

Such abundance, such possibility. Eleven pictures of my dog eating her birthday treats? Why not? Twenty of the dog opening her birthday squeak toys? Seems reasonable. I’m aware of the irony, how I’ve gone from the child who simultaneously dreaded and scorned birthday-cake and present-opening photos to the adult who wants to capture every changing expression on her dog’s sweet face. It’s about love, yes, but also about a technology that allows for such abundance at such little cost.

Perhaps the greatest change—aside from the number of successive photos I will take of the same subject or object—is that I now have a record of things that, for one reason or another, have struck me as funny: preserved meat with the label “Mini Jesus”; wine sold in small boxes remarkably similar to the juice boxes we have for children in the United States; sugar made by a company called “Daddy”—all of these in a French grocery store.

Despite what the previous examples might seem to suggest, my approach to, and thinking about, photography has not become more casual, even as the number of pictures I take and subjects and objects of interest multiply. Some, like the sugar daddies, are little more than silly snapshots, but a greater number involve more serious artistic intent.

In a 2013 article for the *Wall Street Journal*, Ellen Gamerman writes, “With 4,000 photos snapped every second in the U.S., more than four times as many as 10 years ago, photography has morphed into a second language, a form of note-taking, an addictive habit from cradle to grave.”⁶ She writes of individuals who take photographs without artistic intent, but whose work is sometimes used by artists. Gamerman preserves a sharp distinction between snapshot taker and artist.

I would like to suggest, however, that advances in technology have allowed individuals to expand their range, to use cameras (whether digital



Daddy Sugar. Photo by Melissa A. Goldthwaite.

point-and-shoots or cameras on their phones or iPads or more elaborate equipment) for “note-taking” *and* for art. As is the case for writers who often keep an informal commonplace book (or computer file or stack of Post-it notes) for random lines, ideas, overheard conversations, images, and thoughts, many photographers (amateur, professional, and somewhere in between) keep a photographic version of a commonplace book.

The impulse to take many photos (whether it’s an “addictive habit” or not) may be part of the process of practicing artistic awareness—an awareness that the potential for artistic subject matter is everywhere: in grocery stores, airports, homes, on the street, in the sky, or in the peeling bark of a white birch. Not everyone with a camera—as evidenced by the nauseating number of flash-in-the-mirror bathroom selfies one can find on social media sites—*practices* artistic awareness, but the technology helps create that potential for those who are inclined to recognize it.

Size Matters

The first Canon PowerShot was marketed for the general user in 1996, and since then more than two hundred different models have been released.⁷ All of my digital cameras have been PowerShots; my most recent camera, the ELPH 530 HS, which was released in March of 2012, weighs just 5.75 ounces. It's roughly the size of a pack of playing cards—small enough to use one-handed. I can literally shoot from the hip: pull it from my pocket, press the “on” button, look down at the screen, and take a photo. Its size, portability, relative quiet, and the fact that I don't need to hold it in front of my face make it possible for me to take photos without drawing attention to myself. The camera does make an electronic “bling” sound when turned on, a slight beep when focused, and a click when the photo is taken, but in a noisy world, the sounds hardly register. And I never use a flash.

The camera's name—“PowerShot”—seems incongruous with its size. “Power,” to some, might suggest something larger. “Shot,” perhaps, suggests violence. But for me, the compact size of the camera provides a different kind of power: the power of near invisibility. It allows me to remain largely unnoticed as I take pictures. I am not an in-your-face, large-lens, aggressive-stance kind of person. I'm a quiet observer, someone who stands back, sits alone, listens, seeks to “capture” (more violence?) both what others fail to notice and what might be seen when a person is not posed.

Roland Barthes, in *Camera Lucida*, writes eloquently about the effects of being photographed knowingly, explaining, “Once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of ‘posing,’ I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image.”⁸ It's that process of transformation, of posing, that I wish to disrupt through photography—both in my position behind the camera (rather than as the subject of the photograph) and in seeking to remain, as much as possible, unnoticed as I take pictures. Each time I notice someone taking my picture, I feel discomfort and either try to obstruct the camera's eye or revert to a familiar pose: head tilted, a weak, closed-mouth smile.



Sits Like a Lady. Photo by Melissa A. Goldthwaite.

Even the day my family celebrated my second birthday, I felt the intrusion of the camera. In a photo from that day, I am lying on my stomach, wearing my pink party dress, arms protectively surrounding my gifts, tears in my eyes. According to my mother, this was a familiar pose, one that continues to trouble her. “What were you thinking?” she asks, shaking her head; “Did you think we were going to steal your presents?” I don’t know what the two-year-old me thought, but the photographic evidence from two years later suggests that I still did not like having my photo taken while opening gifts. I took my presents to my room to open them alone. My perplexed parents stood outside the partially opened door to take a picture.

I understand that silence and invisibility are not always seen as positive goals, especially for women who seek to have a voice. But there’s something freeing about not being noticed, especially if one has a camera—or a pen or a computer—in hand. That less-than-visible position makes it possible to see something beyond the conscious pose, beyond either performance or avoidance.

Shifting the Focus

The question I’m asked most by friends and acquaintances who view my photos is this: “Wow, what kind of camera do you use?” And in every case, the questioner has seemed disappointed when I name some version of the Canon PowerShot.

I’ve identified two sources of the disappointment. For some, the disappointment comes from realizing that the equipment in and of itself will not create a good photo. Often, the friends who ask about my camera are disappointed because they already have a quality point-and-shoot digital camera and are unsatisfied with their own photos. They want a technology that will automatically correct the faults they see in their own photos. It’s true that some equipment is better for taking photos in low light or from a distance, but no camera or lens will make an artist. The right equipment provides options but not the skill, talent, or artistic vision to make the best

use of those options. This is the point Weston was seeking to make in 1932 in focusing on the artist rather than the tools or the medium.

Yet Weston also understood the limits of certain tools, an understanding that comes with practice and experience. For those who take photography as an art seriously, the disappointment with my “PowerShot” answer is partly a response to my inability to engage “tech talk.” I can see the difference between photos taken with different cameras and lenses and understand something about depth of field, shutter speed, exposure, and other photographic terms, but I cannot talk about the strengths of the Nikon AF-S DX NIKKOR 35 mm f/1.8G versus the Sony E 50 mm f/1.8 OSS. With experience, interest, and significant financial investment, I could certainly develop this literacy, but at this point, I wish for different kinds of conversations.

One of my favorite questions came from an experienced photographer. After viewing a series of my photos, he asked, “Are you nearsighted?” It wasn’t a critique; he wasn’t finding fault. He was curious. And right. I *am* nearsighted. He was seeing something in my photographs that goes beyond the camera I use. I rarely wear glasses and can’t see far ahead without them, so I get up close to things. And my camera happens to work well for up-close shots. Both kinds of equipment—the camera and the body using it—have an effect.

Photography as an art necessitates two kinds of artistic vision. My camera doesn’t replicate what I see, but it does allow me to share what I notice, what draws my attention. What Edward Weston observed well over eighty years ago remains true: “The camera not only sees differently with each worker using it, but sees differently than the eyes see: it must, with its single eye of varying focal lengths.”⁹ The technology shapes the photograph, yet the person—body and mind—using the camera and her or his habitual ways of seeing and being in the world have an enormous effect on what is created.

I see the well-dressed man with his pant leg unintentionally hiked up, caught in his cashmere sock. I see how the bridesmaids’ dresses resemble a Degas painting. I see the tiny ant at the center of a pink wild rose. I see the



Rose. Photo by Melissa A. Goldthwaite.

shadows, the fading light, the snail among stones. Annie Dillard writes in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*: “Beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will or sense them. The least we can do is try to be there.”¹⁰ Being there, of course, does not require a camera, but having a small camera at hand helps me document those moments, the flashes of beauty and grace and humor in an imperfect world, moments and photographs shaped by my body, my camera, my self.

NOTES

1. Edward Weston, *The Art of Edward Weston*, ed. Merle Armitage (New York: E. Weyhe, 1932), 7.
2. Theodore E. Stebbins Jr., *Weston's Westons: Portraits and Nudes* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1989), 19.



Snail and Stones. Photo by Melissa A. Goldthwaite.

3. Susan Griffin, *The Eros of Everyday Life: Essays on Ecology, Gender and Society* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 152.
4. Edward Weston, "Seeing Photographically," *Complete Photographer* 9, no. 49 (1943): 3200.
5. Details about cameras in the section "Kodak Moments" come from Kodak.com.
6. Ellen Gamberman, "How Our Camera-Phone Nation Is Inspiring Artists," *Wall Street Journal*, 12 December 2013, <http://www.wsj.com>.
7. Details about Canon cameras come from www.canon.com.
8. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 10.
9. Edward Weston, "Photography—Not Pictorial," *Camera Craft* 37, no. 7 (1930): 315.
10. Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper's Magazine Press, 1974), 8.

Lebanese Airwaves

I was born in the south of Lebanon, in a hospital close to Al Mansouri, the town where both my father and mother grew up. Al Mansouri, cradling Lebanese hills, is neighbored by the sea, by olive and lemon groves, and, at the time I lived there, by Israeli missiles.

Lebanon, grappling with the trauma of a civil war, an Israeli occupation in the south, and soaring unemployment, was my parents' home, but a home that could offer nothing. One of my father's uncles lived in Congo at the time and encouraged him to go there and open a business. In 1997, we moved to Congo, only to have to leave about a year into our new lives due to a coup d'état. We left my father and returned to Lebanon.

For my parents, the war, the occupation in Lebanon, was something they could understand. But what was happening in Congo was foreign; they couldn't understand it. It seemed logical—in the logic of war—to send us from a conflict zone that was unfamiliar to a conflict zone that was as familiar as the taste of mother's milk.

We spent 1998 in the south of Lebanon, sharing a house with my grandmother (*teta*), my grandfather (*jiddo*), my youngest uncle, Kasem, my aunt Samar, my uncle Mohammad, and my grandfather's caretaker from the Ivory Coast, Hasan. My mother, my sister, Sara, and I shared one room.

Perhaps that year has commanded such a presence and occupied so much territory in my memory because it was a year of firsts. It was the year I fell in love with poetry through jiddo's radio. The year I learned about love from black-and-white Egyptian movies and Mexican soap operas. The year I picked lemons from groves and chased snakes. The year I learned to steal one thousand lire bills from *teta's* purse and run with Sara to the

*dukkān*¹ to buy “Uncle Jiha” chips. The year I first tried a cigarette. The year I discovered death. And the year I learned how to worry.

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I can often recall places or times in my life simply by the sounds that were in them. That year, the sound of jiddo’s radio was omnipresent.

One could almost tell what my grandfather, *al hajj*² (as he was respectfully called by his friends), was doing at certain hours of the day by the radio program that was on. If there was Arabic music, that most certainly meant

that my grandfather was asleep, because as a pious man who was deeply fearful of god, he wouldn't listen to music. If he was listening to the *Azan*,³ then it was prayer time. If the news was on, then he was probably having lunch, or rolling cigarettes and drinking Arabic coffee.

My grandfather's radio was his companion and in some ways his wife. My grandmother had at that point become more of a mother, or a nurse, or an assistant to him. He spent more time with his portable, battery-operated Sony than with her. He would wake up and turn on the radio immediately, even before having his coffee and cigarette, the other two things most dear to his heart—after god, of course. He would even take the radio to the bathroom, where he spent an hour or more at a time. I learned then that if I went into the bathroom right after him, no one would ever suspect that I had made a habit of puffing a couple of cigarettes a day, because it was a known fact that al haj never used the bathroom without his cigarettes and radio. Once, however, my uncle Mohammad noted that the bathroom always smelled like cigarettes, and that he suspected that “the girls” (referring to my sister and me) might have been smoking in secret. My fear of him was bigger, deeper, and stronger than my newly acquired love for cigarettes, and so I stopped.

When I think about the first time I heard music, my memory is drawn to images, snippets, sounds, and the smell of jiddo's radio. My grandfather's radio smelled of dried tobacco leaves. The radio spent its days inhaling smoke and the glorious smell of Arabic coffee. Its plastic casing had been transformed into an embodiment of all the elements that made up my grandfather's life in its last decade. A life lived by starting the day in bed with the radio, moving to the living room with the radio, and going back to the bedroom with the radio at night. It could very well be that I first heard music through lullabies sung by my mother. But my memory persistently takes me back to jiddo's radio and the sound of Fairouz⁴ coming out of it as she sang about Beirut, about love, about nostalgia, about loss, and about war.

When my grandfather would nap on those long Lebanese summer afternoons, snoring in different rhythms depending on what he ate and

how deep his sleep was, the music would come on and I would listen, not knowing then who was singing or even what they were singing about. But the sound of it brought me a kind of happiness, of love, of joy that I didn't experience often that year. I would rarely listen to a song in its entirety, because jiddo would, inevitably and unannounced, wake up to the buzzing of a fly, or the abrupt sound of a loud motorcycle zipping by on the nearby street, and realize that music had come on. As if the radio were a part of his body, he would reach out with his two fingers that were stained yellow from decades of rolling tobacco, softly cup the dial, and keep turning until it settled on the sound of a Qur'an recitation or the news.

I think of my grandfather during that year as a sponge—he absorbed sounds and smells, and ingested food, all in the company of his radio. I don't recall having any conversations with him that didn't involve god or bribing me to go buy him candy without telling teta. I loved my grandfather, though he irritated me with his excessive love for god and what seemed at times an imposing presence. He irritated me with the way he controlled the house television. Even his radio irritated me when it only followed his commands.

Yet.

I remember his kindness; his delicate, wrinkled hands rendered almost translucent with age; his incessant cough that told of decades of smoking; and the respect he commanded from not only his family, but anyone who lived in the south of Lebanon during his lifetime. He was always the first to lend a helping hand to whoever was in need. The door to my grandparents' home was never closed. In fact, jiddo didn't allow it. It had to be left open as a symbol of welcome, to anyone, whether in need or just visiting. Everyone had to feel welcome in his home, even before entering it.

But who my grandfather was perceived to be and the house he built were created through my grandmother's toil. Before it became fashionable for Lebanese women to have Filipino or Ethiopian or Bangladeshi housekeepers, teta, like many women of her time, woke up each day at four in the morning to make bread for her nine children, cook breakfast, lunch, and dinner for a husband who would invite—with at once a generosity of spirit and total disregard for his wife's well-being—dozens of people to join him.

In a corner of my memory I preserve moments with my grandfather that harbor all the contradictions of loving someone who is imperfect. There are days now when I allow my love for jiddo to exist alongside my irritation with him. I am learning to love him with a compassion that embraces all his contradictions.

• • •

Jiddo had his radio, and mama her tape recorder.

That year, mama kept in touch with my father (baba, as I call him in Arabic) through cassette tapes. She would sit on the edge of the bed facing the tape recorder and talk to it for a long time. She would call Sara and me to sit next to her and “talk” to our father for a few minutes. Sara, always happy and outgoing, would effortlessly share information about her days, her school, her friends. I envied the ease with which words poured out of her and into that cassette. Sometimes when my mother would call us to record something for baba, I would sneak out of the room while one of them was talking and hope that they’d forget that I hadn’t recorded my part. But my mother would always call me back.

I dreaded those few minutes.

I felt uncomfortable with my own voice. What if my father hated the sound of it? Unlike Sara, I never possessed the imagination or the memory to share things that I thought could interest him.

But the truth is, I was deeply unhappy without him, and I didn’t know how to tell him that with my mother around. Would I have told him if mama hadn’t been there, urging me? A part of me wasn’t sure he ever received those tapes, because during the long nights when I would try to go to bed, thoughts of baba being dead kept me awake. It wasn’t the how of his possible death that preoccupied me. I just imagined him not existing in the world, and that was enough to render me sleepless.

The one time I angrily told my mother that I wasn’t happy living with her parents and was thinking of running away, she slapped me so hard across the face that I never said a word to her about it again. I resented her for slapping me, but mostly I resented her for not being like baba. He

was always calm. Never yelled or slapped. But what could mama have done any differently? What could she have done with no college education, no job, two girls, no money, and two wars? All she had were her tears and isolation. “When you’re poor, even your own family gets tired of you.” She always repeated those words.

• • •

I fell in love with poetry through the songs on jiddo’s radio. I just didn’t know that’s what I had fallen in love with at the time. That year, I discovered the poetry of Nizar Qabbani through a song that kept playing on the radio. The lyrics of the song were adapted from a poem of his, “I Bear Witness That There Is No Woman But You.” The title is a provocative alteration of the Muslim testimony “I bear witness that there is no God but Allah.” But at the time this escaped me, since I would watch the song’s music clip⁵ on television and be infatuated with the handsome singer Kazem al Saher. In the music clip, one minute he is braving a storm as a valiant sailor, and the next he is riding a white horse on a secluded beach. Between those scenes, a beautiful woman stands by a window, worrying about him.

The same year that Qabbani’s poetry entered my life through the radio was also the year that I watched his funeral procession on television. I recall spotting Kazem in the cortege, wearing a black suit, his head bowed, his face looking so unlike the one I was familiar with in the music clips. I recall watching Qabbani’s funeral with this inexplicable sense that, even though I didn’t know him, I had lost someone, or something, I loved.

When we rejoined my father in Congo after that year, I would search for Qabbani’s poetry on the Internet, but found only a handful of his most famous poems in Arabic (the rest were English translations that made his poetry sound like Michael Bolton songs). I didn’t end up visiting Lebanon again until my early teenage years, when I was fourteen or fifteen. It was not until my first summer back as a teenager, when I was there less as a Lebanese and more as a tourist, that I would first encounter Qabbani’s poetry on the page in Arabic.

My mother had bragged to my uncle Mohammad that I loved reading,

and so upon my return to Lebanon he took me to a bookstore to buy me Arabic books that I could take back to Congo. My uncle was at that time the only one from my mother's family to have graduated with a college degree. He was a lawyer, and took pride in his ability to read classic Arabic prose. At the bookstore, he picked out Arabic texts by writers like Al-Mutanabbi, a tenth-century poet considered one of the greatest in the Arabic language. To my teenage self, grappling with hormones and confusion, Al-Mutanabbi's words were not only incomprehensible, but also detached and removed from what preoccupied my mind.

Even then, long after the year when I had discovered Qabbani and watched him die, I still needed his poems. In their minimalism and modern form, they challenged the rigid classic rules of Arabic poetry. I needed Qabbani's poems to befriend me, to keep me company during the awkward teenage years.

At the bookstore, while my uncle picked works that he thought I ought to read, I stood immersed in Qabbani. I picked up a book, browsed the pages, picked up another, browsed, picked up another, browsed. I didn't want to attract too much attention by grasping every volume I could find, so instead, I chose a few thin poetry books and tried to nonchalantly stack them on top of the ones my uncle had carefully selected for me.

He looked at my book choices and narrowed his eyebrows in a manner that was entirely familiar.

"Khalo, forget about those books. It's all about love. It'll give you ideas. Return those, khalo, return them."⁶

• • •

My relationship with the radio, and even with the cassettes, was not by choice. The radio, like the walls, the windows, the underground shelter, was part of the house, and so it was inevitable for it to weave its way into all our lives. But my relationship with the television, that was my choosing.

My grandfather watched the news with a devotion that almost matched his devotion to god. During the news hour it was absolutely out of the question to even get close to the television or suggest changing channels. The

news was read in *fus'há*,⁷ which I liked the sound of, but didn't understand much of. The anchors never seemed to report on anything good. The images were always of people standing amidst the rubble or armies fighting or politicians giving speeches in angry voices. What I retained from hearing the news over and over were the words that were most often repeated, and with those snippets I would try to make sense of the world around me: Today the Israeli Enemy. Al ihtilal. Twelve Wounded and Ten Killed. Moukawama. Al jaysh al loubnani.

But jiddo's devotion to the news was rivaled by teta's devotion to Mexican soap operas, dubbed in Arabic.

When soap operas were aired, the men and women of the town parted ways. The Mayrams, Fatimas, and Khadijas of the town left the Mohammads, Ahmeds, and Alis to go spend an hour or two in the company of Maria Mercedes and Juan José. In the privacy of the town's living rooms, hidden away from the men, they prepared Arabic coffee, lit the *sheesha*, and removed their headscarves. The town, aging alongside its inhabitants, mirrored the events on the soaps: marriages, births, divorces, remarriages, broken hearts, secret lovers, deaths (some sudden, some too early, some that should have come sooner).

I couldn't tell you exactly why each woman watched the soaps, but I remember how. Some leaned forward as if about to jump into the television when Fernando got shot, yet again, by Mercedes. Others loudly disapproved as Maria cheated on José and got pregnant out of wedlock. And some watched in silence. And though I watched those soap operas with them, I often found myself watching them watch the soaps. I was watching the spectacle of all these women shedding their own lives and absorbing the lives of tv characters so unlike them, perhaps imagining themselves with unveiled hair, in sexy tight dresses, with lovers and careers.

Their collective alter ego, it seemed, was a Mexican soap-opera heroine.

I watched soaps with teta, but watched black-and-white Egyptian movies alone. No one seemed to be as interested in those movies as I was. I loved how overly feminine the Egyptian heroines were: their dresses, their elegance, their hair. I wanted to have their grace, their finesse, their

delicate voices, and their dreamy eyes. My heart desired the songs in the Egyptian movies; my ears longed for the Arabic language; my body yearned for the feel of silk against my skin. But most of all, I was irresistibly attracted to the simplicity of a black-and-white love story—the allure of a poor city girl loving a famous artist and overcoming the social obstacles, the tragic simplicity of love between a peasant and an aristocrat. Life in my grandparents' home was nothing like those movies. Our life was colored with fights, war, violence, isolation, and a cruel loneliness.

Maybe teta and the women of the town watched the soaps because their stories were similar to their own: the pain of heartbreak, the secrets of households, the lives of in-laws, the disappointments of men. The fights, the tears, the violence were mirror images of their homes, even if the Kareems didn't have Alejandro's hairless chest, or Jamila didn't have Maria's lustful curves. And perhaps it was all this noise, all the complexity of color and characters and problems in Mexican soaps, that made me love the old Egyptian movies more.

But then came the pain of recognizing my own life even in the seeming simplicity of a black-and-white movie. There were uncomfortable moments sometimes in the Egyptian films when I wished to turn away: a slap, reminiscent of the day Uncle Kasem would have slapped teta had Hasan not stopped him. Mean words uttered to hurt, like when Uncle Mohammad compared my eyes to those of a cow. Fights, like the fights in our home when one of my uncles would get into screaming matches with teta, often resulting in objects recklessly flung in indiscriminate directions.

That year, in that daze of confusion, I could only be certain of baba's love. Watching all those Egyptian movies in Lebanon, I was, I think, searching for baba. They reminded me of the way he laughed, with his whole body and his deep voice. They reminded me of the infinite tenderness with which he loved Sara and me. Baba was my home. My ten-year-old self wanted to be transported home by sitting in front of that television. Back in Congo, when my mother would insist that I be sent to bed early, baba would wait for her to go to bed, sneak into my room, and call me to join him to watch a black-and-white Egyptian film. Watching those movies with him, I never

noticed the men, their meanness, their aggression. Baba seemed different, fantastical, incapable of inflicting such pain.

That year in south Lebanon, I learned to spend a lot of time thinking and worrying. Worrying that I might never see my father. Worrying that I might never go back to Congo to my room, where baba had bought all the teddy bears in Kinshasa's markets and arranged them, by size, on my bed. I worried that I might never be home again. I worried that I would never be able to love my father in the same way again. I wanted to insulate that love from the Mexican soaps, from the black-and-white Egyptian movies, and from jiddo and teta's house. I wanted to keep loving baba in the same way I loved him before coming to Lebanon and discovering the men in the town, the men in the soaps, the men in the movies. I wanted to keep loving him with the same fascination I had when I'd stare at his giant hands. The same hands that brushed my hair. The same hands that carried hot towels between the kitchen and living room when I first got my period. The same hands that would seat me on his lap so that he could bury his face in the nape of my neck and breathe in, continuously.

When we returned to Congo after that year, I worried that I would start seeing the Ahmads, the Kasems, and the Alejandros in my father. And I did. But I didn't want to hear his fights with my mother; I didn't want to see them breaking things; I didn't want my love for him to change.

I have tried to accept the fluidity of my world and its unstoppable changes. The losses of war I can leave behind; friends can be forgotten and new ones made. The sound of missiles can be muted; the smell of underground shelters fades with time. The sound of the radio can become foreign; love I can recognize as painful and complicated. But my love for baba, my love for the memories of who he was before that year in Lebanon, needed to remain untouched, unchanged, forever the love of a ten-year-old. He is my anchor to the language. He is the sound of Fairouz. He is the kindness of the land. He is the tenderness of love. If I lose the anchor, I lose everything that could bring me back. I could perhaps even lose myself.

I watch those old movies now in an attempt to recall my ten-year-old self, sitting in front of that television, missing her father, angry at her

mother, hating all the men in the house, loving the radio, and trying to make sense of a world burdened with confusing contradictions: veiled women watching Mexican soap characters love and hate in ways foreign to them; men in movies and my life loving in confusingly similar ways; cassette tapes recorded for what I thought was a dead father.

• • •

Though my parents tried to instill in me the sense that I should feel a belonging to (and longing for) Lebanon—its fruits, its people, its traditions, its culture, its language—my sense of being Lebanese, of being Arab, stems from a different place. This place looks like jiddo's corner in the living room, where he sat in the afternoons to roll his cigarettes and sip his coffee with the radio by his side. It looks like his bedroom with the radio next to his ear. Like the couch where I spent hours watching old Egyptian movies. Like the crammed bookstore where I first held Qabbani in Arabic and sneakily read words that I was told were inappropriate, words that would give me ideas about boys, about love, about my body. Words that shape. Words that expand. Words that thrill. Words that tingle. Words that excite. Words that confront senseless contradictions. Words that anchor.

Where I come from, a woman's body can be a taboo subject. And Qabbani knew how to flirt with taboos. He knew how to speak their language. Through Qabbani, Arabic became the language through which I felt the erotic, the sexual. My sense of Lebanese-ness or Arab-ness is rooted in a place of love. Love for language in all its forms, whether in movies, in song, in poetry, or in prose. When we left Lebanon after 1998, I had to abandon a language that was perhaps the first thing I ever fell in love with. I had to learn to live with that sense of loss for many years without realizing it.

When we returned to Congo, I attended a British school run by an Indian family. There I picked up an Indian accent and read books from the school library that carried only abridged versions of Western classics: *Anna Karenina* in one hundred pages, *War and Peace* in two hundred pages, Dickens's novels in one hundred pages, or possibly fewer. A couple of years later, I moved to the Arabic School of Kinshasa, where I was primarily

educated in Arabic, with a few hours of English classes a week; but soon my parents began to worry about my future schooling opportunities abroad. They decided to move me to the American school for my final three years before college.

My confused spelling, unconsciously oscillating between British and American, tells of the nomadic instability of my education. An instability produced by war, inconvenience, need, and necessity.

A year into the American school, I was receiving, absorbing, synthesizing, analyzing, and understanding information about the world in English, by day. By night, I was communicating in Arabic with my parents about a world that was no longer speaking to me in Arabic. Translating was hard.

My thoughts, which were now being formed in English, couldn't simply be translated into Arabic—they were different languages, different worlds. Even Arabic prose, which I loved, started sounding wordy, embellished, and indirect. English, in contrast, seemed simple and straightforward. For a long time, I couldn't write or read in Arabic.

I had lost my language. I had lost my voice. I had lost my words.

When I did start to write creatively, as an undergraduate in the United States, I wrote in English about the Arab culture that I knew I should, I ought, I must belong to, but wasn't sure how. And so it was in English that I began to explore where I came from, in a language that bore no resemblance to my native tongue, and in that process I was writing from a sense of loss, a sense of hypocrisy, and a sense that a lot had to be left unsaid because there were no words.

While at the American school, mama crammed whatever free time we had with private Arabic classes to teach us a language that we didn't use much. The urgency with which she imposed those classes on my sister and me was unclear to us. But to my mother, the need, the urgency, and the duty to learn one's native tongue required no explanation.

Somewhere between high school and college, I abandoned Arabic because, like my summers in Lebanon that were dotted with cans and can't dos, I started associating Arabic with being confined, being constricted, just as I had naively associated Qabbani's words with easy, liberating eroticism.

The language that was at once the source of identity was also the source of struggle. A struggle that was essentially about being unapologetically the woman I knew I wanted to become.

Mama understood something about language that I struggled to understand all my life—language is identity; language is home. Home, in the physical sense, can be unwelcoming, like the Lebanon I knew in my early years. But language is always home. No war can destroy or take it from you. Language is your history—the history of your family, and all those who came before them. Yet language is not limited to our history and what we inherited from it. Language is malleable. Language breathes. It grows. And though it ages, it can modernize. It can adapt. Language can be challenged. It *must* be challenged.

• • •

War does not treat everyone equally.

The experience of war varies from house to house, and within a given house, from individual to individual. That year in Lebanon, I didn't lose a limb to a mine; I didn't lose a family member, direct or extended. We didn't lose a house, or have a relative indefinitely detained in an Israeli prison. But we experienced the occupation in other ways.

War is destruction.

But even war is limited in what it can destroy. It disrupts, in the physical sense, children from going to school, but it cannot destroy knowledge. It can disrupt children's afternoon trips to the *dukkan*, but it doesn't stop them from playing with their friends in the underground shelter. It can destroy houses, and it did that year, but not the airwaves that carried Fairouz's and Kazem's music, in sneaky increments while jiddo napped by his radio.

I carried that year, that war, in my suitcase when we went back to Congo. I then carried it in another suitcase when I moved to the United States as a teenager. I carry it in the Arabic books that I buy every time I visit Lebanon. I carry it in the Qabbani volumes that sit on my windowsill befriending the dust. I carry it in the Arabic tobacco that my paternal

grandfather gifts me and urges me to use only in times of stress. I carry it in the scars on my knees from trying to build a tree house with my sister in the avocado tree in teta's garden. I carry it in the garden that I started outside my house in the United States, where I plant herbs, much like my grandmother did in hers.

NOTES

1. *Dukkan* is a corner store that can be found in every town in Lebanon. A *dukkán* is more than just a store that sells goods. It is a meeting point for kids, teenagers, young eligible brides, old men and women. Essentially, a *dukkán* is a meeting place for everyone in the town. Where else could you gossip, spy on your neighbors, and buy house supplies on credit all at once?
2. *Haj* is a pilgrimage to Mecca that Muslims are supposed to undertake, if they can, during their lifetime. It is also the title bestowed on a Muslim man who goes on the pilgrimage. *Hajjeh* is the title for women. This title can also be used as a sign of respect. My parents, neither of whom has gone to *haj*, for instance, are sometimes referred to as *haj* and *hajjeh* as a sign of respect, which is commonly done in Muslim communities.
3. *Azan* is the Muslim call to prayer.
4. There are countless differences among Arabs, but Fairouz is a singer known throughout Arab countries. It would be difficult to meet an Arab who hasn't heard of Fairouz or doesn't know at least one of her songs. She embodies, in many ways, what makes Arabs feel Arab, or a Lebanese feel Lebanese.
5. In Lebanon, a music video is referred to as music clip. In French, a music video is called a clip. The term *music clip* is probably a product of English and French fusion à la Lebanese.
6. In Arabic, *khal* means uncle. When talking to someone who is younger, my uncle would start his sentences by referring to himself as *khalo*. Starting his sentence with *khalo* is his way of imposing his own authority over the younger person he's addressing. My uncle isn't the only one who does this. Parents also often do it when addressing their own children. My own mother sometimes starts her sentences with *mama* when addressing her kids. "Mama, don't do this. I told you to listen to me!"
7. *Fuṣḥá* is Arabic for Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and Classical Arabic. Though each Arab country has its own dialect, *fuṣḥá* is formal Arabic that is commonly used in print and on television shows such as the news, political shows, etc.

Remembered Is Misremembered, Then Turns

Monica Berlin

Dwell Time

Sometimes when we grew up, we grew up in houses. Sometimes, in those houses pressed tight side by side in a city now almost unrecognizable, the rooms were the same rooms where our mother also grew up—a history held there, held in us, almost holding us in those days we pressed our foreheads to the windows, staring out, thinking *someday*. Thinking *let it unravel. Let it end here, this lineage, this inheritance*. Ours: a house full of girls, the end of the line.

At the Station

No, we really were the end of the line, just a few blocks from the last stop of the Ravenswood el, and in that house where we grew up, no matter the season, we learned to tell time by listening for the screech of the last trains coming into the station each night. In summer, the windows opened wide,

we could sometimes make out the conductor's final call. Mornings, too, defined by the shape of those sounds.

Read in Le Corbusier's *Vers une architecture* (1923)

"The house is a machine for living in."¹

If a Masquerade

And in that house where we grew up, the rooms held machines disguised as furniture. Sometimes furniture masqueraded as useful, utilitarian: a turntable housed inside a living room console on top of which books would stack, or the five hundred-piece puzzle would be sorted, holiday cards decorating its surface, or, in another season, school photos in homemade frames; an antique Magic Chef oven, no longer in working order, turned into cupboard, countertop, near-island—not in the center of the room, but pushed up against a wall, near the sink, and of course, not surrounded by water, not a landmass integral to the geography of physical landscape, but that place in the kitchen where everything would gather, where we'd stand shoulder to shoulder cutting vegetables, making dinner; a White Brothers sewing machine, made by Montgomery Ward circa 1946, handed down to our mother in 1963, that folded inside a small wooden desk and doubled as an entryway table, a catch-all where the mail collected, where our mother would toss her keys or handbag, where we'd drop our mittens or slip off our backpacks to gather at its legs; an old-fashioned "Ma Bell" in an oak box—turn crank on one side, earpiece on the other—where our mother tucked the bills to be paid, her box of index cards filled with addresses, children's birthdays, little histories of each person included, where she kept postage stamps, where beneath, in a stack, the onion-skin-paged phonebooks towered, now also obsolete.

Against Obsolescence

Every year, the news. Every month, the news. Every day, and where likely began our particular attention to things built coming undone, coming apart. A bridge collapses in Minnesota. A bridge collapses in China. A mine collapses in Utah, in Chile. A submarine *gone quiet*, turns too deep, then is lost to itself. A highway caves. A sinkhole swallows up a house. The levees built topple. The spillway breached—that dam blown open. Always the news. Always this vulnerability, inevitable. We read these reports because the whole world is dear. Because what is dear always seems to turn fragile.

Remembered, Possibly Misremembered, from the Catalog for Rachel Whiteread's *House*

We live in a grid of coordinates.²

At the Station

Those trains kept time and made time. Every machine more process than object. Those vehicles, hulking though they were, felt an intimacy of our urban childhood, our coming of age. Even now, if we step on a platform, our hearts race, filled so deep with longing for those days we'd ride and ride all the way around the Loop and back again. The windows opened then, and those doors, like accordions, the drivers would sometimes not close if the cars were empty enough and the heat had built all day.

Against Obsolescence

In that house, every machine was itself and also something else. Here, metaphor begins. Here, our thinking about metaphor begins, a foundation

established firmly amidst function masked by form, even as the particular—that most essential tool—blurs. For years, the sewing machine brand mistaken, its color misremembered. For years, the turntable larger, louder; the telephone still held its dial tone—impossible though that must have been.

Remembered from the Catalog for Rachel Whiteread's *House*

“The house is the primary unit of measurement and point of reference for a spatial politics, a human scale which determines the nature of our relationship to the immediate environment and beyond that to the culture as a whole.”³

At the Station

How we loved the rush hour, all those people being carried high above ground, all those lives being carried home. How their bodies would move with the train, lean and sway. How everyone would fit, somehow, in that confined space. How everyone would arrive safely at the right destination. And the proximity of bodies, no one shy about pressing up against another, everyone always mostly kind, somewhat apologetic. At rush hour, at stations where anyone could transfer to another train, the doors would open and out would pour the people—so many different lives held in that one thing, and for so little a time, and every day the same.

Overheard, a Definition

A living body, especially the human body. In general or an individual. Now chiefly figurative. The body, chiefly figurative. The body, its own machine.⁴

Dwell Time

At once, the machine becomes both decorative and functional, both passive furniture and active vehicle. The machine-turned-other-than-sometimes turned back-to-machine shapes our thinking. The machine's ability to tuck into itself, an industrious shadow, shifting through memory's fluid imprint, casting against streets below and passersby, sometimes making its own voice heard and sometimes letting speak only what it held.

Overheard, a Fragment

The machine a temporality.⁵

What We Keep Thinking after Reading the Catalog for Rachel Whiteread's *House*

How much the places where we live are like those machines we grew up with, like those machines that were and were not themselves. But we are also here thinking again of Le Corbusier, his house. That machine for living in.

Overheard, a Definition

Now rare: "especially the fabric of the world or of the universe; a construction or edifice."⁶ In memory, as in literal function, the solid object of machine turns not quite elastic but flexible, testament to the changing times, which are always changing, and the evolving role of technology's place in domestic realms, in the fabric of the universe. The machine remembered is misremembered, then turns into something else that also turns into something else.

January 28, 1986

We are still small, in a classroom, where a television has been wheeled in on a cart. All of us crowd around to watch the first teacher-become-astronaut. We say her name over and over, have written reports about her, letters we plan to send after her return. For the first time we believe that we can grow up to become anything. At launch, some of us hold our breath. Some of us mouth her name. Seventy-three seconds later, she is gone.⁷ The Space Shuttle Challenger becomes cloud, becomes smoke, becomes ash, becomes part of the sky, then rains down to become part of the land, the sea. We will watch that footage a hundred times, over and over, disbelieving. We will never stop seeing that shape in the sky. It will define a future for us. It will almost foreshadow the future. We will remember this moment all our lives. We will always be sorry. We never before saw a machine fold into itself like that, destroying itself and all it held. It is the first time we see the sky become a grave.

Without Space

NASA put a teacher on that flight to try to reignite the country's passion for space exploration and to encourage a new generation of children to see its possibilities. We believed the Challenger a kind of classroom, imagined ourselves aboard. But the Challenger-turned-schoolhouse, turned disaster, turned sky and ocean, turned national grief, shaped a different-than-intended future for us. We learned to be afraid of machines, what they are capable of erasing. We learned to be afraid. The fabric of the world, unraveling. The fabric of the world, now rare. Malfunction after malfunction.

Against Metaphor

In another century, we will be reminded over and over of that collapsing.

Space, Redefined

Years later, although we have now confused many details, we still recognize Christa McAuliffe's face, can recite the details of her life as we knew them then. Years later, although we barely remember 1986, do not remember what grade we were in, what school even, we can still see the explosion. Years later, we think of how easily our own classrooms could turn disaster, turn grave, turn grief. We watch that footage, too. We worry every day, look for the escape hatch, think about the windows, how far down.

Against Metaphor

In another century, we will be reminded over and over of that over and over.

After Space

Everyone we talk to about the shuttle disaster is roughly our age. No one gets the year right. No one can name all six other astronauts on the mission. No one is entirely sure why we were watching the launch in school, but everyone recalls the televisions brought in, then crowding around the box, their necks craning up. Someone says, "Cold War." Someone says, "The end of my childhood." Someone remembers coming home from school and having to explain it to their parents, who hadn't watched, who didn't know. For years we will believe Christa McAuliffe would have been the first American woman in space, but then Dr. Sally Ride dies, and we realize

we were wrong, never knew. There were others, first, who survived, and others, first, who did not. What we do not misremember or mistake: the silence in the classroom in the minutes after, and then the replay looping, again and again, until someone walked over to the set and turned it off, wheeled it away.

Against Metaphor

Always, the explosion. Again and again, the sky turned grave.

Overheard, a Fragment

All the loose wires of catastrophe.

Overheard, a Fragment

Space has a history.

Again, Le Corbusier, a Fragment

“Machines, breaking through millennia of history.”⁸

Overheard, Some Examples

A staircase is a simple machine. A clock's gears. If they open or were meant to open: casement windows, transom windows, awning windows. A doorknob is a simple machine. A door with a hinge is a simple machine.

A doorway is not, though we sometimes pass through as if we are changing the direction of a force.

Misremembered

The house at the end of the line. Almost everything inside it. All the things no longer ours. A few years ago, we drove down our childhood street and kept going, beyond the street, all the way to the alley, and couldn't find the house. Never even an address.

Mistaken Transcription from a Documentary on Rachel Whiteread

On her regret that she never really saw *House*, Whiteread explained that she had to put on a disguise to be near it. From the film's transcript: "[I] would go and see the piece, that sort of go into skies and you know, sitting in the car and with a sort of hat on and sunglasses. And just sort of, just trying to figure out and trying and watching people, watching it."⁹

Against Obsolescence

That White Brothers was what it was—a sewing machine—even as it was also something else. It wasn't *like* a sewing machine. It was a sewing machine. It repaired clothes, made Halloween costumes, matching dresses with pockets. It could easily be hidden away. It was also a table, not *like* a table, but one. On its flat surface, life accumulated.

Misheard

The turning machine has an unlimited memory. At any moment there is one symbol in the turning machine.¹⁰ The correction, when it comes, *Turing*, feels less accurate, but when we read about Alan Turing, we are ashamed, apologetic, and spend an evening trying to make sense of his hypothetical machine. Maybe all machines are hypothetical.

Against Obsolescence

We think of none of this for many years. On a trip to the city we hardly recognize, we board the el, ride out and up above the buildings, and then, as the elevated tracks gradually lower, the train turns subway. Suddenly, below ground, we remember that White Brothers. It shouldn't still be so mysterious, this sewing machine. How it fit inside something else that was not itself, not similar to itself. Even now we remember the weight of it as we lowered it into its table. We can almost still feel it in our hands.

At the Station

In the city where we now live, the freight trains always—their rumble deep. Here, they make their own horizon. These trains, spatial, carve out a different sky, cross back and forth this country so wide, so long.

In a Notebook after Reading the Catalog for Rachel Whiteread's *House*

"All the specific provocations of memory have been deleted. This is a field of voluntary amnesia."¹¹

Crossed Wires

We will never hear the word *disaster* without thinking *shuttle*, thinking *mine*, thinking *towers*, thinking *over*. Over and over, the word *collapse*. The failure and malfunctions and heartaches of a century of progress, both stalled and stunning. The machines brought in sometimes responsible. The machines that sometimes pry the bodies free. The machines that sometimes cave everything in. When we watch the twenty-five-hour rescue of each of the thirty-three Chilean miners, we hear that NASA helped design the rescue capsule *Fénix 2*—the Phoenix—which brought them up to the surface, one at a time after almost seventy days underground. We read and reread their note, translated and sometimes mistranslated: “We are well in the shelter, the 33.”¹² We wonder how the machines that save also sometimes destroy, how they’re in defiance of the natural world, how they aim to domesticate it, and thus endanger it and us, so many times over. We believe that it must take as much courage and intelligence as it does ritual to survive catastrophe. Sometimes luck or fate. We know the appropriate response to repeated banging on the steel of the drill is to call back, “Hello in the mine.” We know in each miner’s lunch pail, a note tucked inside in case they don’t return. We remember that old-fashioned telephone in the hallway of our childhood, and it occurs to us, now, that it never worked. We think about all the ways we fail each other, all the ways our machines fail us, every day. We think about how many times we picked up that earpiece, expecting some voice on the other end. We only ever heard nothing pressed to our ears. We are always trying to understand what is relic, what monument, what memorial, how any one thing can become any other thing, and how quickly, and without warning.

Overheard, a Fragment

What isn’t a machine for remembering?

At the Station

Trains not unlike the record player, beasts of objects taking up so much space, and keeping safe all those voices.

More on Turing

Although not in our lifetime, most machines were once hypothetical. Some will only ever be.

At the Station

On hot summer days, on bitter cold days, on days without school or plans, we'd head toward the station. It was safe to do so. For less than a dollar, we could board, find a seat, loop the city over and over, and always return to where we began. Unimaginable to do anything else some days. Unimaginable that every child didn't grow up being sent toward the station. To ride and ride—our coming of age: to learn how to map the days this way, to learn how to read a place and its people, to learn how to know—eyes closed—where we were, to learn to trust how we'd get there, that we'd get home.

In a Notebook after Reading the Catalog for Rachel Whiteread's *House*

"Home is a fiction, a concept we carry around with us, but a house, the yardstick, a pathos of memory."¹³

Then the Matryoshka Principle

A set of Russian nesting dolls are supposed to be made from a single block of wood, a quality inherent and essential to their character. We love saying the word *Matryoshka*. Translated, a diminutive, *Little Matron*. Object-within-similar-object. If there's a word for object-within-not-similar-object, we don't know it. Although some would argue that they imply infinity, Matryoshkas are not infinite. The smallest one does not open. The smallest one holds only itself.

NOTES

Thanks to the *New York Times*, Reuters, and the Associated Press for their vast archive of articles on the Space Shuttle Challenger and the Chilean Mine accident and rescue at Copiapó in 2010.

1. The Le Corbusier quotation is from *Vers une architecture* (1923), in *The Ideas of Le Corbusier on Architecture and Urban Planning*, trans. and ed. Jacques Guiton and Margaret Guiton (New York: George Braziller, 1981), 17.
2. Rachel Whiteread, James Lingwood, Jon Bird, eds., *House: Rachel Whiteread* (London: Phaidon Press, in association with Artangel, 1994), 119. Whiteread's *House* was a temporary public sculpture installed in East London in the fall of 1993 and demolished in January 1994. I read and misread, remembered and misremembered, transcribed and mistranscribed from the installation's catalog off and on throughout 2013. My notebooks, while usually accurate, rarely designate separations between where my ideas begin or spring from and what I've read. I assume, most times, that these are not my original thoughts, that the writer I'm reading is responsible for *all* of my thinking about a subject. In this case, my notebook takes a question asked on the aforementioned page, "Where do you live?," and combines it with a later part of that same sentence, "how we answer determining our place within a grid of coordinates which plot social subjectivity."
3. Whiteread, Lingwood, and Bird, *House: Rachel Whiteread*, 119.
4. This quotation is from a conversation on which I was eavesdropping, or in which I was a participant, and which, either way, was referring to an entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.
5. About all of the sections called "Overheard": I spend a great deal of my days listening to other people and scribbling down things they say that move me, that feel relevant.

To my mind, the serendipity of listening, for writers, is most organic this way, even if they are hearing only themselves.

6. Again, this comes from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, but here, in particular, rather than overhearing, I was reading the following: “machine, n.,” *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), December 2013, *OED Online*, <http://www.oed.com>.
7. The exact timing of the Challenger breaking apart is a fact I attribute to the *New York Times* and it is corroborated by Reuters and the Associated Press, as well as many other sources available via the Internet. In the subsequent sections in my essay on the Space Shuttle, any factual details would have been from the same special “Science” section of the *Times*, an online archive of all articles related to the Challenger disaster and its aftermath, accessed throughout the fall of 2013 and early winter of 2014, including on the twenty-eighth anniversary of the explosion.
8. Again, Le Corbusier, this time in *Le lyrisme des temps nouveaux et l’urbanisme* (1939), and again quoted in and translated from Guiton and Guiton, *The Ideas of Le Corbusier*, 109. Le Corbusier’s punctuation is different, as the sentence goes on, even as my note-taking trailed off, thus introducing the fragment. The entire passage is “Machines, breaking through millennia of history, replaced the *traditional speed* of men on foot or horseback by *the twenty or a hundred times faster* speeds of railroads, cars, steamers, and planes.”
9. This entire section, *Mistaken Transcription from a Documentary on Rachel Whiteread*, refers to the documentary film *Rachel Whiteread: Illuminations*, dir. Sam Flynn (N.p.: Kino International/Alexander Street Press, 2001). Here, too, I also refer to the film’s transcription, which does not take the form of subtitles, but instead runs parallel to the screen, so that one can pause the film and go back and read, making the discrepancy even more startling.
10. These sentences, “The turning machine has an unlimited memory. At any moment there is one symbol in the turning machine,” were read to me on the phone by a friend. I have no idea what he was reading, but I know that he was reading about Alan Turing, and that I misheard him, and was, ultimately, very ashamed.
11. Again, this quotation comes from Whiteread, Lingwood, and Bird, *House: Rachel Whiteread*, 18, although this was written by a contributor, Ian Sinclair.
12. Here I refer to information gathered from memory—that faulty thing—of watching the rescue at Copiapó in 2010 on CNN, but also from the *New York Times*, Reuters, and the Associated Press’s archives. Images of the miners’ note, found on day seventeen, “Estamos Bien en el Refugio los 33,” and written in what appears to be red marker on spiral-bound graph paper, torn out and attached by the foreman to a drill that was sent to probe, can be found easily and from numerous international news sites on the Internet.

13. This quotation is taken from the Whiteread catalog, Whiteread, Lingwood, and Bird, 119. My notebook collages several key phrases: “Home is a fiction, a concept we carry around with us” is Bird, as is “pathos of memory,” whereas “but a house, the yardstick” is my own interruption of these ideas, my trying to think through Bird’s observations about Whiteread and the home, a house. In this particular case, though, I was taking notes on Whiteread, Lingwood, and Bird’s book, while also reading selections of the book aloud to some other writers, who at the time were reading other books, among them James Agee’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Lacy M. Johnson’s *Trespasses*, and Susan Neville’s *Fabrication*—and that our conversation influenced what I conflate here is inevitable. So it goes with collage.

The Writer's Studio

Swingline Nine

1.

Every time I use my tiny Tot 50 Swingline stapler, I have to thank my sixth-grade teacher, Mr. Ermando Simmons, who had nine fingers. The tenth, the index, was a half. He blamed a Samurai sword fight. He blamed a bread factory accident. When he yelled and flailed his hands, which was hourly, we stared at that amputation. We were terrified.

While no one knew the truth about what happened to his finger, what happened to lazy and messy students was legendary. Homework turned in with edges torn? Thrown away, followed by an inquisition against the spiral-bound. During the first week of classes, I thought I would be in the clear with my new sheaf of loose-leaf paper, but I quickly learned that appearances weren't a guarantee of success, just a guarantee that our teacher would at least grade our papers. When Mr. Simmons handed back the papers he hadn't dumped in his trashcan, he often mocked them, especially failures of vocabulary. Add to all that the inspection and condemnation of desks, the denial of recess, the threat of repeating sixth grade, the trembling of lips.

Mr. Simmons was old as attic air. He wore a wiry black toupee, had a huge nose and heavy glasses, and was my first male teacher. He owned a wooden paddle and had for his entire teaching career used it on "idiots" until times changed and parents complained. For our class, which I remember as one of the first in our school protected from corporal punishment (though I have classmates who swear they were swatted), Mr. Simmons made sure to prop that paddle up against the chalkboard, a reminder of what he would like to do.



Swingline Tot 50 stapler. Photo by Jen Hirt.

“He’s an old-school disciplinarian, the last of his kind,” said my dad when, after the first few days, I tried to beg my way out of his totalitarian regime. (I assumed I could switch over to the other sixth-grade class, where Ms. Linder was assigning papier-mâché pyramids and being messy for the sake of art.) My dad’s assessment of Mr. Simmons is my earliest memory of someone using *old school*. I liked the phrase, despite the fact that Mr. Simmons being *old school* was going to make my school year harder. Why? I just liked the sound of it, the long o’s, the heavy l’s that felt like black-and-white photos in my mind. I was also intrigued by the fact that if there was an old-school methodology, then there was also a new-school approach, and I could learn about them both and then cultivate an opinion. I desperately

wanted to have opinions, ideally before everyone else even knew there was a debate. Finally, I liked the phrase because I heard nothing but admiration in my dad's voice, so I settled in and ran that old-school academic gauntlet, my sheaf of loose-leaf paper like lucky armor.

My paper was no advantage, though, when Mr. Simmons handed out mimeographs of multiplication tables. They were timed, failed, timed again, and then failed a little less spectacularly. Mr. Simmons's rule was that you had to keep retaking the multiplication test until you earned a passing score in the allotted time. And if your handwriting was messy and he couldn't quite make out the number? Red X.

It seemed impossible.

It seemed unfair, until I did it.

Under Mr. Simmons's iron fist (he could hide that half-finger in a fist), our class won a three-school math competition at the end of the year. We didn't just win it—we obliterated our opponents, each of us acing our math problem, which was worked out neatly on an overhead projector while everyone watched. The way we had been taught.

I graduated from elementary school, my synapses branded with *be neat, be smart, and don't make excuses*, all because of Mr. Simmons. The summer before I entered seventh grade, while shopping for school supplies, I picked out what I thought Mr. Simmons would say was the most important supply for a brand new junior high student to have in her locker: a lavender Tot 50 Swingline stapler, no wider or longer than a half finger, a fact I realize only now, twenty-seven years later. It came with paperboard boxes of miniature staples, like supplies you would find in a playhouse office.

I don't know why I thought Mr. Simmons would want me to have a tiny stapler, but I did. I don't recall him ever saying anything about staplers, even though he prized the clean-edged loose-leaf paper that would have required paperclips or staples if homework exceeded one page. And if he did have a stapler (he surely did!), then I'd wager it was a heavy black desk model, not a tiny lavender tot. I don't know what kind of stapler he had because I was terrified to approach his desk, and when I did, I'm sure I kept my eyes down.

Had he seen the first stapler I ever purchased, would he have admired my initiative or ridiculed my aesthetic? Probably both. He was that kind of person—complex.

The night before junior high started, I wrote my name on that stapler in black marker.

More than two decades later, my name is still half there.

2.

There's a famous taking-the-stapler moment in the movie *Office Space*, when the evil office manager, Bill, steals the gorgeous red Swingline stapler that belongs to Milton Waddums, the office weirdo behind thick glasses. It's the climactic insult to poor, nerdy Milton—management has already moved his desk several times without his permission, and each move has aggravated him. So when Bill takes the stapler (just to be a jerk), Milton mutters that he will burn down the entire building if Bill doesn't return the stunning red beauty to him.

Milton incinerates the place by the end of the movie. He speaks the truth, but no one listens.

Can I relate to Milton? He, like me, owns a really nice Swingline stapler that people ask to borrow. Part of the appeal is the color—the cherry red of his, the Easter lavender of mine. But regarding those colors, it's a well-known bit of Hollywood trivia that the red Swingline staplers weren't available prior to *Office Space*. Staplers were black or gray or beige, because they were utilitarian office supplies, not accessories. The director of *Office Space* knew that Milton's stapler needed to be a character in its own right, so it needed to stand out. To give it character, he commissioned a one-of-a-kind red stapler. As a result, the red Swinglines became popular only after people saw the film and began to identify with Milton. Today they are known as Swingline's Rio Red 747 series.

I'm as fond of my Swingline as Milton was of his. I feel it was manufactured just for me, even though it wasn't. When people ask to borrow it,

I say, “Make sure you give that back,” thinking of consequences as deadly as Milton’s threat to put strychnine in people’s guacamole. I wish I could say those words like an old-school disciplinarian, but I know Mr. Simmons would have never said them because he would have never let anyone borrow his stapler in the first place. *Get your own*, I can imagine him growling, that half-fingered hand like a paw over whatever stapler sat on his desk.

3.

On the first day of junior high, while other girls were taping to their lockers photos of Poison and Def Leppard, while some were sipping vodka stashed in hairspray bottles, and others were already laying eyes and hands on the boys they would kiss in the cornfields, I set that smart little Swingline Tot 50 on the top shelf of the locker. I was ready.

Ready for what? To be organized? Neat? Not a problem for my busy teachers? Independent? Reliable? Nerdy? Grown-up?

Grown-up. I was so tired of being a kid—that’s what I’d learned from Mr. Simmons. Kids failed tests. Kids had messy desks. Babies cried to their parents about mean teachers. He’d said as much. Mature students memorized their vocabulary each week. Mature students earned perfect scores on their multiplication tables and then got free time (the ultimate reward for the trifecta of knowledge, speed, and readable handwriting).

I can imagine him saying this: Mature students should, by junior high, own staplers.

But should said students keep that stapler for decades? Is that what grown-ups did?

4.

As I write this, I often pause to look at my Tot 50 stapler, purchased in 1988. I can’t retire a stapler like this, even though most attaching these days is

done via e-mail, even though it won't staple more than ten pages, even though I'm running out of the original miniature staples that came with it.

When the time comes, however, I think I will buy more staples for it, and part of my motivation has been a recent retrospective on the history of the stapler. In 2013, the *New York Times* reported on the stapler industry. The feature article included a photo of the Tot 50 with the caption "Stapler models from the previous century," then concluded that the stapler business in general was threatened because "people who grew up with staplers are going to retire and die."¹

My stapler and I have grown up together. We've come a long way from the previous century, from that seventh-grade locker. We've been to high school and college, and grad school, and grad school again, and four states, two dorm rooms, seven apartments, two houses. Three teaching jobs and the tenure track. One memoir whose chapters were each far too thick for the Tot 50, but it's been there to supervise the big gray Bostitch brought in for anything over ten pages. My Tot 50 is actually one of the oldest things I own. My stapler and I are going to retire and die together.

When that happens, everyone will know it's mine because part of my name is still on it, for god's sake, an impossibility, the right half of the H. The silver-embossed "Swingline," in cursive, has been worn away too, right under the spot where my thumb rests when I press down. But "Tot 50" still catches the light like a silver greeting on a holiday card. "Tot 50," in quotation marks, as if it were someone's brilliant phrase.

5.

There's another important phrase on the base: "Made in U.S.A., Long Island City, New York, 11101." Jack Linsky started the Swingline business there in 1925, first calling it the Parrot Speed Fastener Company. I imagine the name change came about because of a need for simplified branding—"Swingline" must have sounded better to the typical 1940s secretary. "Parrot Speed" just sounded weird. Linsky didn't invent the stapler (lore attributes that

to King Louis XV of France), but he's credited with the discovery of the adhesive that made all the staples stick together in a convenient, loadable line. Under Linsky's leadership, the stapler—and especially miniature staplers—became an accessory, not only something you needed, but something you wanted. In the 1960s and 1970s, he focused on making the staplers less angular, less blocky, and easier to load. They looked lighter, like they would lighten your workload, and somewhere in those decades came the Tot 50 innovation—the stapler was trendy, easy to use, *and* could fit in a briefcase pocket.

By the late 1990s, the 450 Swingline employees were a proud group at the Swingline factory with its red neon sign and its product line of all-sized staplers. But then, the familiar story: the factory closed in 1999 (the same year that *Office Space* was released) and it moved to Nogales, Mexico, where, with a nonunionized work force and no minimum wage, they saved an estimated \$12 million a year. They shipped a lot of gorgeous red staplers back to the offices of America. Those Rio Red 747s actually crossed the Rio Grande.

The building on Long Island was sold to a maker of accordion envelopes, but they too left. When the Museum of Modern Art needed temporary warehouse space during its renovation, they chose the old stapler factory, and for a few years, priceless modern art sat in the space where my stapler came to be. I love that a bright Warhol print or a brooding Cézanne still life ended up in the same corner where, perhaps, a box of shiny new Swingline Tot 50s once sat. Or maybe the MOMA workers stashed Duchamp's ready-mades—the urinal, the bike wheel on a stool—in the areas where staplers had been assembled.

You would think the two categories of objects, modern art and staplers, are as diametrically opposed as any two things could be. Think again. The stapler is to literature as the warehouse is to great art—they keep everything together. The stapler bites through the pages you've sequenced. It's not as necessary as, say, black-and-white film was to Ansel Adams, nor is it as sacred as Cézanne's wooden palette as he stared at the French countryside, but it's in on the process. With a stapler, books begin.

I didn't know the history of the Swingline factory until recently. Now I'm glad I've taken care of the little stapler because of its provenance alone. Certain staplers deserve to be kept for decades. Does the old Swingline factory deserve what is, at this point, a third or fourth life? Of course. But my stapler would hardly recognize one part of it now—the Cityview Racquet Club has taken over the upper floors, a place so exclusive and expensive that they don't even list their membership rates on their website. The lower floors might still welcome my stapler. They're the offices of a direct mailing company. Lots of staplers there, I bet.²

6.

The stapler is a simple machine, in the same category as pulleys and axles. The back end, where the top is hinged to the base, is the fulcrum. The staples are the load (or resistance), and your fingers (desk models) or thumb (handheld models) pressing on the other end is the effort. There have been no major advances in stapler technology, especially when compared to advances in phones, computers, and cars. Even when staplers went electric or morphed into heavy-duty staple guns, it was always just fulcrum, load, effort.

The name, however, has changed—staples used to be called Bostitch pins, and Bostitch is still in business making staplers. But the word “staple” comes from one of those unchanging Old English words—*stapol*, which means strong, masculine.

It's telling, then, that my first significant academic purchase, a stapler, came after a year with my first male teacher, one who drilled into my consciousness a connection between organization and success. I wonder now why Mr. Simmons did not require us to have staplers in sixth grade. It seems like the kind of school supply he would have mandated. But maybe our assignments were usually too short, or he assumed we had staplers at home—my parents, business owners, certainly did. Perhaps we used paperclips because we were not ready for machines.

Now, a confession: I don't think I used my Tot 50 stapler in junior high. It was, at best, a hopeful purchase. And despite all the old-school preparation at the hands of Mr. Simmons, I still sometimes forgot his lessons. It was in junior high that I "earned" an "F" on a pronoun test. My English teacher was so unnerved by my failure that she wrote me a note on blue paper.

I shaped up after that, for the most part, except that in high school I so hated my music instructor that I failed a test, on purpose, by answering entirely in Pink Floyd and Metallica lyrics, prompting the principal to call my parents to inquire about drug abuse. In college I marred my transcript with a glaring C in eighteenth-century British literature because I didn't think Samuel Richardson and Alexander Pope worth my time; then I scored a half-assed 560 on the verbal part of the GRE because I wanted to spend my time painting my parents' house instead of studying. Then I received rejections from eight graduate schools. I thought I'd exerted enough force. I hadn't.

But I did use the stapler correctly, in college, a lot. Looking back through my files, I see the miniature staples in my papers on *Jane Eyre*, *The Faerie Queen*, Emily Dickinson's bird imagery, a comparison of minor transcendentalists, and countless heady attempts at creative writing. In all those papers, I had angled the staple so it was pointing down to my first paragraph—a decision I see only now as I look back. Papers stapled by other people, with their longer, standard staples? That staple was always parallel to the top edge of the paper.

Recently, I had a college student who was a terrible, terrible writer, still learning how to write a complete sentence, and I noticed that he turned in papers whose pages had been carefully taped together in a tidy, obsessive layering of the top left corner. I'd never seen this before. Most students folded the corner of their pages. A few had their own stapler. A select few used the stapler at the library. None of them used tape. When I pulled the terrible writer aside and suggested stapling, he just stared at me.

I had to wonder what Mr. Simmons would have done with him. Or with me. I have to admit that I, too, once found staples inadequate for certain papers. Through my senior year in high school, I snubbed the

little stapler when it came time to secure my creative writing assignments. I opted to braid embroidery floss and knot it through holes (sometimes made with a hole punch, other times with a needle, as if I were binding my own books).

Mr. Simmons would have gone ballistic. About me, I can hear him stammer, *What is this thread? Why are you spending your time on this?* About my terrible writer with the tape, I can almost hear—and see—Mr. Simmons hauling the poor kid to the front of the room for some Oscar-worthy humiliation. With me and the thread, it was about trying to express creativity at all costs; I hadn't yet learned what Mr. Simmons probably knew—that literature was all about the words, the sentences, not the thread or fancy font on colored paper (another favorite trick of mine). With my terrible college writer, I can only imagine that tape was more forgiving and more flexible, responses he probably needed before he was ready for a staple. I wish I'd understood that at the time—it can be so difficult to know whether a student needs the old-school approach of rigor or the blue-note approach of friendly encouragement. I need to remember that it took me a long time to learn how to let the staple do its job.

7.

I have a lot of trouble with the studies about how creative people have disorganized desks and messy workspaces, or worse yet, the studies that suggest that to *be creative* you should *start* being less organized. I can't imagine it. I surround myself with project charts and calendars and carefully labeled files. I make tables like this:

A COMPARISON OF TWO OFFICE ITEMS, ILLUSTRATING
A FUNDAMENTAL POINT ABOUT THE WORD "STAPLE"

<i>Object</i>	<i>Contents</i>	<i>Action</i>
Pen	Ink	Write
Stapler	Staple	Staple

The stapler uses staples to staple. The same word can be a noun or a verb. It's magic. It's organized.

I love the moment of stapling something—the crunch as the staple folds in the little area called the “crimp pan” says *this is done, these items are together, they are ready for the world. They are prepared.* One word for all of that.

8.

Mr. Simmons retired in 1989, two years after he taught my class. He moved to Florida and golfed, and a golf course was where he suffered serious chest pains on May 12, 2010. Someone put up a “Pray for Ermando Simmons” Facebook page within hours of his being admitted to a hospital. Every post lauded his notorious old-school tactics. One of my classmates cited the epic math competition as a defining moment in his life. Someone thanked him for throwing wet sponges at sleeping students. Another praised him for kicking her out of the classroom for talking, making her sit in silence in the hall. I commemorated his anti-spiral-edged paper rule. Post after post: “I was scared to death of you but I thank you for everything.” He died the next day, heart failure, age eighty-three. The obituary mentioned only one job: sixth-grade teacher at Liverpool Elementary in Valley City, Ohio.

9.

The Linsky family got rich off Swinglines. They collected Fabergé eggs and European art, then donated everything to the Met, which named a gallery after them.³ I've yet to visit the gallery, but my guess is there's no reference to staplers, so mundane and unornamented.

The most expensive small stapler I could buy right now is not a Swingline. It would be a gold El Casco Luxury Stapler, four inches tall, two inches wide, three inches long, engineered with the precision the company once

used for their rifles (the concept of loading a barrel was taken from pistols and applied to staplers). With all mechanisms exposed, the El Casco could be a prop at a steampunk conference. There's even a large gold knob to fancy up the action of stapling. When last I checked, it was selling for \$280, and the company recommended a matching gold pencil sharpener for \$575. I'd feel bad about writing my name on them, and they'd inevitably be stolen. Whole business parks would burn by my hand.

Over on eBay, my tribe of Tot 50s, many from the original Long Island factory, go for \$5 to \$9. There's one still in the original package, with a box of staples, for \$12. Good deal.

But none are lavender. Even so, I wonder if I should buy one, as if my stapler needs a companion. The possibility makes me dig around in my desk for the little box of Tot 50 staples. I start counting them, thinking, as I do, how distinctive they are, smaller and slightly dull. No one has ever commented on those little staples, which I guess means they are doing their job.

I finish my inventory—about three hundred left out of the original one thousand.

I think it will be enough.

NOTES

1. Vivian S. Toy, "The End of the Line; As the Swingline Factory in Queens Closes, Veteran Workers Wonder What's Next for Them," *New York Times*, 17 January 1999, <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/01/17/nyregion/end-line-swingline-factory-queens-closes-veteran-workers-wonder-what-s-next-for.html>.
2. The history of Swingline comes from Phyllis Korkki, "The Attachment That Still Makes Noise," *New York Times*, 23 March 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/24/business/staplers-the-attachment-thats-still-making-noise.html?_r=0; and Daphne Eviatar, "After the Factory," *City Limits*, 1 June 2000, <http://citylimits.org/2000/06/01/after-the-factory/>.
3. Korkki, "The Attachment That Still Makes Noise."

The Qwertyist

Sue William Silverman

In my senior year of high school, my mother signs me up for a class that teaches girls how to type. After all, she went to secretarial school and earned decent wages—enough to help pay for her two brothers to attend college. My mother buys me a manual typewriter, a Hermes, housed in a cute green plastic case. I place it on the desk in my bedroom in Glen Rock, New Jersey, overlooking lilac bushes and our suburban backyard. I roll crisp white paper onto the platen. I put one pinkie on the “A,” the other on the quotation marks. My index finger, which once rested on middle “C” when I played piano, now settles on the letter “F,” the other on the “J.” But how easy to slide one index finger onto the “R,” the other the “V,” while they also confidently type “Y” and “M.” Each finger is assigned its own letters, its own responsibilities, within a neatly confined space. No need for fancy hand movements such as on a piano. Certainly no distant pedals for the feet—feet that could, however, be used to operate a Dictaphone if I become a secretary—but that’s another machine and class altogether. Here, all you need are ten fingers, each assigned a specific spot.

Before the invention of the QWERTY keyboard, the teacher tells us, early typewriter keyboards were arranged alphabetically and numerically like this:

3 5 7 9 N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z
2 4 6 8 . A B C D E F G H I J K L M

Could the top row be considered the black keys on a piano, I wonder, the bottom row, white?

If typewriters still used this configuration, maybe I’d be able (like a sorcerer) to resurrect my piano career by typing music.



Watercolor by Fay Silverman (author's mother).

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I first play the piano in fourth grade on an upright in our home in the West Indies, where I'm raised. There I am, sitting on the bench facing the wall, my back toward windows overlooking the verandah and the Caribbean beyond. Above the piano hangs one of my mother's watercolor paintings, which, years later, will adorn the wall in my study. It portrays me, or a version of me, playing the piano.

In the painting I'm dressed in green, while I (when I think of myself in the West Indies) wear red French madras. In the painting, a cat curls beside the piano bench. In real life one of our cats might sneak inside the house, but usually they roam our jungled yard. In the painting, the walls are blue-green, the color of the sea. But that color is a flight of imagination because the actual walls of our house are tan and white. Both in the painting as well as in real life, however, my hair is pulled into a ponytail.

Sheet music, bought by my mother, is propped against the stand. But my head angles away from it in the painting, just as in real life. I perch on the bench, bare toes pressing cool brass pedals. My fingers hover on the keys, ready for action.

My mother's easel and watercolors are set in a sunny alcove between the living room and verandah. Here, as I play, she can see both inside and out, watching me, cats, Charlotte Amalie, sea, sky. She paints in the same manner as I play the piano: fanciful and untrained. I play solely by ear; in her case, I suppose you could say, she paints by eye.

Adding to the unprofessional sound is the fact that my beloved piano is out of tune, warped by humidity. Termite tunnels crisscross the instrument causing small echoes whenever a key is pressed. The bench beneath its veneer is likewise almost hollow, making the wood softer, more fragile. But the piano's condition enhances the sound—a sound that can only be mine—rather than diminishing it.

Regardless, I can't even imagine how you could formally study such legerdemain, the way a song I hear on the radio or a record player channels from ears to fingers to keys to music. My untrained fingers sweep the keyboard in search of calypso rhythms—the *pong-pong* of steel-drum bands. *Day-oh, daaay-oh. . . . Mary Ann down by the seashore sifting sand.* I love show tunes as well, particularly the theme to *Kismet*. I've never seen the movie, but associate the lyrics, "a stranger in paradise," with myself, born in Washington, DC, but now living in the tropics.

Transported, I feel as if I no longer just play music. Surely my fingers plunk keys, but I daydream until sound itself shimmers the air, conveying melodies of *my* island—just as my mother paints a vision of *her* island. Notes float . . . *I* float across our living room, out through the Danish Colonial windows, screenless and always open. It's as if I play the actual rustle of palm fronds, the *shushing* of waves. When I sense an opalescent shift in light, I don't turn toward the windows. I don't need to see what I already play, a *day-oh* veil of rain gusting from the horizon, afternoons showering ashore, piano keys sticking, slowing sound. I grow muggy, druggy, *coquí* frogs shivering beneath bromeliads, skin emerald and damp. A foam-white sun births from water, drizzling lemon in its wake. The world gusts through

my skin until music appears blue, yellow, green, red—as if I really do dwell inside my mother’s painting. All this occurs when my fingers arch over ivory keys, conjuring sound.

During everlasting tropical afternoons, my mother paints—I play—as if under a juju spell.

. . .

On those days when my fingertips desire to create another kind of music, I type on my mother’s black metal Underwood. It perches on a table in the sitting room, reached through an archway from the front parlor where the piano is located. I type for hours, though I don’t yet know how to spell many words. Undeterred, I fill page after page with lines such as wieheike aidnapew z owothes,. . . fan. theiw thelwppppwjwjet qpzqqzzzxx()() ,,mxk wbv eiet 4opi;.?adfuz)1 tiehw wi123445 5oi 988 ** ** **&&&&####\$\$\$\$%%%ai !!1? sgh rwe nclk???siehtie woiejsue suesuesue . . .

While this appears to be gibberish, who’s to say that these letters and symbols don’t contain specific, urgent messages? Perhaps this rush of private words boiling across pages of onionskin paper, spreading like an ink stain, are exactly the right ones in order to slip through pinhole-sized punctuation marks that pierce the paper when I strike the keys as hard as possible. Through these apertures I reach an everlasting *somethingness*, where *lm.pljui* explodes past galaxies to black portals in outer space before slamming to the end of a sentence where *eiwjlspl.gn* beams white as the moon, or where cryptic *ioegxnl* remains embedded in indelible ink for future civilizations to decipher. Typing isn’t much different from playing the piano. Regardless of which keys I tap, I invent my own confabulated universe.

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After we move from the West Indies to suburban New Jersey, my charmed, albeit termite-riddled piano remains on the island, left behind. We purchase a brand new, shiny upright. Now, because of the expense, my mother forces me to take lessons, even though she, herself, still doesn’t consider

art classes. Nor does she have an alcove in our brick ranch house. Instead, she sets her easel in our windowless basement refinished with linoleum floors, fluorescent light, and sheetrocked walls. On one side of the easel are the modern washer and dryer—no more hanging clothes outside in the Caribbean sun! On the other side of the easel—now needing machines to warm us during long winter months—are the furnace and hot-water heater. She paints while waiting to transfer clothes from the washer to the dryer.

My mother drives me, after school, to Mrs. T.'s house for weekly piano lessons. Mrs. T. provides a red-covered copy of *Thompson's Teaching Little Fingers to Play*. I struggle to follow her instructions. Her voice seems muffled by gray light seeping through windows. The radiators in her house clank. I would prefer to play *their* rhythm, translate the rattling pipes into the ponging of a steel drum. I hunch in a wool skirt and sweater. The back of my neck, exposed below my ponytail, feels too thin, too cool. It will never support my head. My head will never support my mind. My mind will never support all these strange notes and these stranger directions.

Only when urged, I tentatively press an index finger on middle C.

Before, I never knew the importance of middle C, never noticed that pianos contain eighty-eight keys.

"All the notes you need are right here." She points to the sheet music. "On the staves."

I see only meaningless black dots precariously balancing on parallel lines. "If you hum it, I could play it," I whisper.

She doesn't answer.

Maybe she doesn't understand me any more than I understand her. She paces the floor back and forth like a metronome. I stare at the sheet music while she tries to seduce me with the vocabulary of music, the dialect of sound. The more she explains things like diatonic major and natural minor scales, the dimmer my mind grows. Before, in the West Indies, notes tumbled from my ears to my fingers—sound meandering the way I followed winding donkey trails up/down volcanic mountains. Now notes seem too organized—no detours—like straight suburban streets: *Walk to this corner, turn left, and you will reach this destination*. I don't want to reach

a destination. I want to wander, explore my own paths. In the West Indies it was the detours themselves where I discovered—not the instruments of location, but the black magic of the subconscious, a sound that peeled back the skin of the earth to reveal, it seemed, the inner workings of life itself. Back then, the vibration of the felt-covered hammers plonking the strings traveled up my fingertips to my elbows and beyond, as if I constructed the world, *my* world, with each strike of a hammer.

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Frustrated, Mrs. T. orders me to sit up straight. I do, on this hard, termite-free bench, until my spine feels rigid, almost paralyzed. My fingers freeze, brittle as ice.

“You’re a stubborn little girl, aren’t you?” she says.

Past the piano, I stare at Mrs. T.’s floral wallpaper. The pale flowers smell like nothingness, like December.

“You will perform in the spring recital, and you won’t want to embarrass your parents,” she says, “or me.”

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One afternoon, listening to the radio in my bedroom, I hear “Autumn Leaves,” sounding as colorful as Caribbean flowers. I never much noticed the leaves themselves, our first fall back in the States, but now I absorb them, even though it’s winter. My fingers tap my wood desk. I rush to the piano in our dining room where I play red, gold, orange, bright.

At the next lesson, I urge Mrs. T. to listen. “Just listen.”

“No,” she says, after I play a few chords of “Autumn Leaves.” “We don’t play by ear. We play what’s in the book.”

My fingers feel distant, as if encased in gloves. My feet, in stiff leather penny loafers, are rigid and awkward as they press the pedals, barely able to differentiate among the *una corda* pedal, the *sostenuto* pedal, and the damper. How much easier to play barefoot, as I did in the West Indies, my toes discovering sound by caressing cool metal.

One Saturday morning, when my mother asks me to retrieve clothes

from the dryer in the basement, I go over to her easel in the corner. While the wintry scene could, ideally, convey sun-dazzled snow and glittering icy trees, the light, instead, seems to implode on the white paper. I glance through other paintings, discarded on the floor. In one, autumn leaves are blocks of static color. And here is an image of me playing *this* piano. But the background—an ocean of synthetic, wall-to-wall gold carpet in our New Jersey living room—fades to the color of tarnished doubloons that a pirate lost deep beneath the sea.

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Over the weeks and months before the recital, I force myself, like an automaton, to read music, memorize keys, learn songs: “Comin’ through the Rye,” “When Johnny Comes Marching Home Again.”

I don’t feel as if I’m playing the piano—but rather that the piano is playing me.

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For the spring recital, I wear a pink cotton dress with ruffles along sleeves and hem. I sit before a polished baby grand on a stage in an auditorium filled with parents. I place my fingers on the keyboard. Halfway through the number, my mind stalls. I can’t remember any more notes. Not one. Every memorized chord evaporates. I stand abruptly and walk off the stage.

I never play again.

In truth, no one seems to care.

Certainly Mrs. T. is relieved that my lessons are canceled, although I suppose she misses the income. In order for the purchase of the piano not to seem a complete waste of money, I sometimes lie to my mother, telling her, “Oh, yes, I played this afternoon when you were out shopping.” But soon she probably forgets I took lessons in the first place. Given the recital, no one is under the illusion that I’d have been a professional pianist anyway. “Better to focus on a career path,” my mother says, “one more practical, more in keeping with your skills.”

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In typing class, in high school, I type one practice exercise after another, following the textbook. The instructor tells us we should feel lucky because, pre-QWERTY, the original placement of keys caused routine jamming. Consequently, around 1870, Christopher Latham Sholes, inventor and newspaper editor, improved the keyboard to the one we use now. Sholes, according to my teacher, wanted an arrangement whereby the letters for the words “Type Writer” would all be situated on one row.

After a few weeks my fingers, of their own accord, know where each key is located—much easier than memorizing notes. They like the sensation of pounding small plastic letters. I even begin to hear a rhythm to the *tap, tap, tap*. I convince myself that this black-and-white clarity contains its own form of beauty. Proudly, I turn in all my English assignments neatly typed, while most of my classmates’ work is sloppily handwritten. I love the *Qwertyness* of it all. I love the word “Qwerty” formed by the letters aligned side by side on the top line. I think of myself as a professional Qwertyist. I imagine getting a reference in the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* for coining this word to describe someone who learns a practical skill. Unlike a *pianist*.

For our final paper of the school year, my English teacher, Miss C., requests that we each compose a three-paragraph essay, with six sentences in each paragraph. I type the first two paragraphs as instructed. When I reach the third, however, I know only one sentence belongs, will fit. How do I know? Why am I confident? It’s my fingertips that are sure of the rhythm, certain of the number of syllables that belong in this one perfect sentence. Letter by letter I write what I’m certain is a sentence that successfully completes the essay.

But the next week, after our essays are graded, Miss C., in front of the class, after praising other papers, turns to mine. She claims you can’t have only one sentence in a paragraph. “It isn’t acceptable,” she says, sounding as rigid as Mrs. T.

For the next few years, shamed, I type only what’s practical, as if I—or my typewriter—have lost our magic, have lost our way.

I major in communications in college, though it's not a subject that particularly interests me. But I'm such a good typist it seems logical—at least at the time. I now no longer remember what, if anything, I actually tried to communicate. I simply type my way through college.

Mainly, I'm proud to pass the typing test with flying colors, a test all third-year communications majors need in order to graduate. I even take the exam a second time for a friend who can't type fast enough. We could both be expelled if caught cheating—but we aren't. By now, I type so quickly that sometimes the keys jam, probably like on the pre-Qwerty typewriters. I enjoy separating them, allowing each to plop back into its allotted position. I feel relaxed, typing—maybe even slightly drugged—as each finger automatically, without thought or imagination, reassuringly strikes the correct key.

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One Christmas vacation, home from college, I visit my parents where they now live in an apartment in Weehawken, New Jersey. In these quarters, smaller than our suburban ranch, there's no room for my mother to set up her easel and paints. The upright piano has, however, made the trek, somehow hauled up three flights of stairs. The piano cover is closed. My mother has arranged knickknacks on top of it.

I sign up with a temporary job agency to earn money over the holidays. I'm assigned to work in a bank in Manhattan. Down in the basement, I spend eight hours a day in a cubicle punching the keys of a clanking adding machine until my fingertips feel numb. Hour after hour scrolled paper, full of numbers, spews from the machine—numbers that must be meaningful to someone.

What I only sense then (punching in rows of numbers, or bent over typewriters at various jobs after I graduate college), but won't fully know for over a decade, is the difference between being a natural pianist and a musician . . . or the difference between being a typist and a writer. I don't yet know that I must define the machine as I wish it to be, instead of allowing the machine to define me. As a Qwertyist, I simply bide my time waiting

for my fingers to finally hear the rhythm of typing, urging them to hear the paradisiacal colors, the scents of my termite-riddled piano long ago left behind on my Caribbean island.

But, for now, I'm still trapped in a bank basement decorated with plastic garlands and silver-tinseled pine, where the air smells of metal and money.

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One day, when I arrive home from the bank, my mother sits in the living room, her sewing basket on her lap. She wants to fix a hem on a dress. "Here," she says, handing me the thread and needle. Even wearing glasses, she can't see well enough to slide the thread through the eye.

I myself don't need glasses and easily fix it for her.

As my mother sews, I sit beside her. I gaze at all her paintings hanging on the walls—all those images from the West Indies. I see that young version of myself perched on the piano bench, fingers on the keys. But who was that girl? Where is she? In the painting? In the past? Maybe she's inside me, waiting to tap out all her stories. All *mine*.

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I don't currently own a piano. I could say it's because a piano wouldn't fit into my drafty Victorian house, split into small rooms with incongruous windows. I could say it's because I don't have the money to purchase one sufficiently grand. I could claim *this* is the reason. I could claim *that*. The truth, though, is that I have forgotten how to play. The truth is that I still refuse to take lessons. The truth is that I no longer hear music as I once did, years ago, when my fingers conjured piano keys into sound. Yet the larger truth, the real truth, is that I no longer need a piano. Finally I learn, without directions or instructions, as if it *is* kismet, how to voodoo a piano into a typewriter, a typewriter into a computer keyboard, with black-magic power as if it, too, has felt-covered hammers to strike strings, vibrating words and worlds into sound.

On Typing and Salvation

I was not going to be a secretary, so why did I need to learn to type? Typing was “woman’s work,” I argued, and judging from every movie and “Help Wanted, Female” listing, I wasn’t the only one who thought so. Hadn’t my mother heard of Women’s Lib and job equality? Yes, but she believed more strongly in a Mother’s Rule: “Do as I say.” My mother and I were experiencing a tense transit through my adolescence, and I resisted her influence with every fiber of my teenage being. But in this instance, she won. So despite the fact that I had boycotted home economics and refused cooking lessons, along with most other attempts at what I deemed my mother’s plan to domesticate me, I acquired one traditionally female skill: I learned to type, reluctantly, in 1978 during my senior year of high school. This is a story about resisting what was good for me.

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Few machines have had a more significant impact on women’s social and financial—and by extension, emotional—lives than the typewriter. The modern typewriter was invented in 1866 by Christopher Latham Sholes, along with his business partners Samuel Soule and Carlos Glidden, and patented in 1868, although historians believe at least fifty-two versions of the modern typewriter had been invented in the one hundred years before that time.¹ Sholes, tall, bearded, with sharp features and a gaunt but kindly

looking face, wears a slightly perplexed expression in an 1885 portrait. Perhaps much to his surprise, his deification had begun even then, only eleven years after his typewriter hit the American market. In 1873, he had sold his invention to Remington Arms, which successfully marketed it a year later. By all appearances, women were the target audience. The machine was covered in flowers and attached to a sewing machine stand. Early operators of the machine, in fact, were women known as “typewriters,” their existence interchangeable with the machine itself. They were eventually dubbed “typists,” perhaps to distinguish woman from object and to clearly define her limited function. Nonetheless, the two were inextricably connected as the acquisition of typing skills transformed the nature of a woman’s work life. Before long, Sholes was regularly trumpeted as the “savior” of women, and an illustration from a 1923 book attests to this idea: Sholes is seated before a typewriter, gazing dreamily as a line of women spills toward him. The first woman in line is clearly angelic, in a long, white gown, the subtle suggestion of wings in both the shadows behind her and in the shape of the mountain peaks flanking the line of “Grateful Ladies,” as they are known in this illustration.²

Indeed, typing skills became a salvation for many working white women by the early 1900s (its promise came a bit later to women of color). A sure path of escape from bleak factories, typing skills became for women a means of access not only to real careers in comfortable office settings, but to middle-class lives. As a child in the 1960s, I recall watching movies about single career girls in the typing pool who could afford shopping sprees and theater dates and other forms of entertainment while they awaited marriage. I recall also the many typing and secretarial schools in business at the time. My parents and grandparents expected their children to pursue college degrees, but when my aunt balked, claiming college was “just not her bag”—in 1968 speak—there was a collective sigh of relief when she announced that she would consider typing school. There was a recognized measure of security in those typing and shorthand skills she would acquire, the promise of a good middle-class life and a clear identity.

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In 1978, the weapon of my implied salvation was a Smith-Corona electric. Perched on a rickety typing table near my father's walnut desk at the back of the family room, the typewriter was white, mostly plastic, and relatively heavy, its front edges bulbous. What distinguished it was an interchangeable ink and correction cartridge system. You simply hit an eject button to pop out the ink cartridge—which resembled the shape of a gun—and slid in the correction cartridge to make quick work of erasing your mistakes. Pop out, pop in, pop out again. Over and over and over. I wore that correction cartridge thin, my father shaking his head at my miserable progress. I banged on that machine as if my fingers were hammers, hating it all the while, and vowing to use my typing skills as little as possible.

By then, I was not the only woman wary of acquiring typing skills. Journalist Carla Baranauckas recalls:

By the time I was entering the workforce, in the late 1970s . . . women who had aspirations beyond the typing pool were encouraged to avoid learning how to type. Or if you had already learned to type, you were advised not to admit it—that will keep you tethered to the typewriter and keep you from being promoted.³

Typing was dangerous, a stultifier of a woman's true identity. My father's secretary, Claudia, for example, a woman whose background was nearly identical to mine, was by all accounts a gifted musician. A college grad, she had married the captain of her college football team, given birth to two daughters, and then found herself divorced and in need of a job. Her mother, too, had insisted she learn to type as a teenager, convincing her that typing would keep her fingers strong for playing the piano. So, when she needed a job as a newly divorced mother, Claudia fell back on those typing skills. This was a pitiful story of subjugation, in my mind—a college-educated woman, a musician no less, ending up no better than a secretary. It was a trap I simply would not fall into. After all, I had been taught to

dream bigger. When I told my mother I wanted to be a high-school guidance counselor, she had carefully suggested, “Why not a psychologist?” So from the time I was eleven, I proclaimed to every teacher, every relative, every boyfriend that I was going to be a child psychologist and would not even consider marriage until twenty-nine, after I’d gotten my doctorate and established my career. It sounded radical to more than one boyfriend, but I lived in a time of big dreams and uprisings.

When I was born in 1960, women lived somewhere between the myth of the happy housewife and the era of bra-burning feminism. The world would spin and whip around us for a decade, zooming from those hopeful days of John Kennedy’s New Frontier through the pitched fervor of civil rights to the gut-wrenching days in 1968. I was too young for the free love, drug-induced 1960s, but even as a child on the outskirts of that era, I became radicalized. I marched with my parents. I wore “Free Huey” and “Free Angela” buttons. I knew firsthand that gang violence and police brutality happened around me. I pretended to write news stories about it all on my mother’s portable typewriter, a compact burnt-orange machine that fit neatly into a carrying case. She had taken it with her to college and then to graduate school. I would happily bang out gibberish, playing against the keys the way I played the piano, a bit haltingly but with what my music teacher called “depth of feeling.” It was a dreamy game of newscaster, a diversion for a rainy Sunday afternoon. But budding radical that I was, it never occurred to me to learn how to actually use the thing. I was content with its locked mysteries, the nonsensical arrangement of its keys.

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When Christopher Sholes and his partners Soule and Glidden invented their typing machine, they laid out the keys in logical, alphabetical order. They soon discovered a problem: the letters nearest to each other were too often used together. Imagine typing the word “used,” hitting keys quickly and in proximity, the “e” key followed by the “d” key beside it,

both reaching for the page at nearly the same time, colliding and tangling, flummoxing the typist and making a mad smudge of the page. And so, Sholes commissioned a business partner to study the letters most often used in combination so that he could devise a keyboard structure that separated those keys. The QWERTY keyboard was born. In other words, the natural order and intimacy of language was disrupted deliberately to slow down the typist, to avoid those awful collisions and mistakes of speed. Ironically, for modern users, typing is all about speed—what good, after all, is a slow, inaccurate typist?

I learned this lesson most vividly in college. By that time, I understood that a young woman needed to be more than cute and clever. I did not know, however, that boys had figured that out, too. A boy valued a girl with some tangible skill that could be counted on to improve his life. I noticed right away that certain of my friends were more sought after than others. Jo, for instance, could cook up a storm. She had grown up in her father's soul-food restaurant, and cooking for a crowd came naturally to her. I can still see her standing at the stove in the dorm kitchen, some guy sidling up to her, hungry, gazing at the curve of her wrist as she flipped hotcakes or stirred dirty rice. But it seemed to me that Evie had hit the mother lode: she could braid hair. I still feel the cold ribs of envy as I recall her hard at work, braiding. She would sit on the edge of her bed with some boy (usually one who made me weak-kneed) perched on the floor in front of her so that he settled back between her legs, his arms flung over her bare knees, his shoulders pressed against her thighs, his head bowed to her. I began to reexamine all I believed about gender politics.

I was not without suitors—one in particular was sweet and innocent—but I was hard to pin down and wary of anyone who might deter me from my plan: PhD in child psychology first, marriage second. For reasons I am loath to examine, I was attracted to boys who sought out a girl's credentials as if a dowry: Could I cook like my friend Jo? Could I cornrow like Evie? What, in other words, could I do for them? I could not cook. I could not cornrow. But I could type, in a fashion.

When did I first say it: “I can type your paper for you”? To whom did I offer myself? Ah, but a girl of the 1970s didn’t offer out of eagerness to please; I charged by the page. A casual mention in the dining hall, “I can type,” flung carelessly onto the table like old pearls. How ironic to imagine that I would try on, even for an instant, that retro identity “typist.” The first knock came late in the night, the trembling call of desire: a boy leaning into my room, panicked, a paper due the next day.

There was, however, a problem: I wasn’t very good. Two boys had final grades lowered on their papers. “Too many typing errors!” one teacher wrote in red ink. My business, my budding power and seduction, were short-lived.

You might imagine that I would practice then, pull out my typing notebooks and dig in. But I had for too long shunned typing, shunned the idea and commerce of it, to suddenly claim it beyond a momentary lust. And it did not escape my notice that boys did not type their own papers; they delegated that task to us. I must have known a half dozen other girls who earned money by typing boys’ papers. Perhaps I might have seen it as a kind of power, but I could not escape the idea that it was a trap—how long might you be subjected to a boy’s whims? At what point would a boy insist, “We’re friends; you can’t charge me.” So instead of practicing my typing, I was secretly thrilled that I had failed at it. Because this typing nonsense still did not come naturally; it was not “me.” It was not intuitive or particularly creative; if you think about it too much, if you try to really see where those blasted letters live on the keyboard, if you look down, you will fall off that tightrope.

I did not type my own research papers. I wrote them by hand, impeccably, copying over my final draft after scrawling out a first draft that included handwritten edits around the margins and arrows that led to inserted text written on the back. I was not satisfied until the page was nearly illegible, full of the kind of hieroglyphs I had seen on museum walls or the blackboards in the math department. This, too, was how I wrote fiction, densely, intimately, my pages overflowing with language in a way

that, frankly, a typewritten page seemed unprepared to offer. If you typed over your letters they became unreadable black blobs, and eventually the strike of the keys ate away your paper, obliterating itself, erasing you. But with my pen, I could give the page a sense of “muchness,” the slanted lines of a writing frenzy, the well-thought-out edits of a revised draft, a complete history of a story’s becoming right there at my fingertips.

Later, after college, when I briefly worked in food stamps for a social services agency, I had a schizophrenic client who covered every inch of her intake form with scrawled notes and caricatures and arrows and accusations against the government. The pages were heavy with her pencil, embedded with parenthetical mentions (*that Tricky Dick Nixon!*), so that the paper curled and sagged with the weight of all that turmoil. And yet the pages were beautiful, her handwriting at once wild and reserved, in some places taking on the look of scribbling and in others careful and lovely with long strokes and full round o’s. I followed the changes of heart, the constant revision of this troubled mind in the flowering skulls and daggers that filled her corners. No typewriter could achieve that artistry, that anguish, that full-throttle explosion of emotion.

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I entered adulthood in the early 1980s, and therefore my work life was upended by the introduction of personal computers. I had become an English major, abandoning my dreams of psychology, and my subsequent jobs as a writer and editor meant spending nearly eight hours a day at a computer keyboard. Did my mother smile smugly about that? Perhaps; I choose not to recall. The fact is that the traditional accuracy and speed needed as a typist barely mattered to my work. I edited; I created graphics and layout; I produced publications. But that work, you see, was always tangential to me. My “real life” revolved around my short-story writing, and that still could only be done longhand. No matter that nearly every famous twentieth-century writer had a favorite typewriter that he or she considered nearly an appendage. I fell into Pablo Neruda’s camp: “The

typewriter separated me from a deeper intimacy with poetry, and my hand brought me closer to that intimacy again.”⁴

I wrote longhand with a fountain pen, cool and thin against my fingers, offering the satisfaction of moody blue-black ink on a crisp white page. The nib conformed uniquely to my stroke, to the odd way I held my pen—thumb and first finger pressing it against my middle finger—odd enough that my young cousins noticed and mimicked me. Quirky, uniquely formed by my own stroke, the nib bent to my touch, to the very intimate idiosyncrasy of my writing. I composed most often while perched on my bed, a sprawl of papers and books around me, my work cradled on a small hardback tablet in my lap.

I resorted to a typewriter strictly during revision. I could not yet afford a computer, and anyway, I had been warned in more than one writing workshop that the “finished” look of pages written on a computer could lead to a false sense of security, so that a writer could mistake a ragged draft for something more complete. So I stuck to the evil I knew, the typewriter. Evenings after work, I would type one complete draft from the various versions of my stories, sifting through pages replete with cut-and-paste paragraphs, arrows followed by notes like “see insert A,” and scribbled passages on stapled loose-leaf pages. The small storm of handwriting produced an updraft that enveloped me, heady and lovely, turning the spray of ideas into a formal being as I typed.

You see, the move from the bed, where I composed, to the desk chair, where I typed, signaled a shift in my writing process. Moving to the typewriter was a kind of coming out from the freewheeling darkness of creation into the structured light of revision. It was the very physical distance from the work—no longer cradled in my lap, but away from me, at the keyboard—that made revision possible. Those moments of creation during the first draft, the time in what my father might call my “Upper Room”—the place of meditation and solace and communion with an Almighty—could not happen amid the clack and clatter of the typewriter or even a computer keyboard. It was the difference between a sensual conception and the Sturm und Drang of actual birth.

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At forty-two, I decided to quit my job and enroll in an MFA program in creative writing. I didn't imagine I could possibly get my long-suffering novel completed any other way. During the year before my move, I hoarded paper, fountain-pen ink, vats of staples and paper clips, and my first laptop. It was a whim. I had tried using PC laptops for work and been unimpressed. But the brand-new iBook was just too cute to overlook. It featured a translucent white case that was at once modern and retro, the Apple logo glowing quietly beneath its skin. I began using it as if it were a typewriter, with a certain distance and reverence. It lived on the desk of the imposing office armoire in the corner of my bedroom, and I would sit dutifully in front of it while I used it, then power it down, close the laptop lid and the doors to the armoire, and leave it behind. I wish I remembered the first time I moved that iBook from the massive office armoire. But this I do recall: the absolute thrill of placing that laptop in my lap, of pulling it close to me as if returning something to the body. I thought then of my college friend Evie, and the intimate skill of hair braiding, her knees tight around some boy's shoulders as he sat in front of her, the close labor of it. My laptop warm on my thighs, it ceased to be an "other," which is what the typewriter had always been to me, a finisher of thought, a contraption not unlike an iron that had smoothed out my ragged ideas, made the connection in each story more crisp, clean. I had viewed the typewriter eventually with some affection, the way you view an irksome relative who nonetheless resembles your grandmother and therefore holds some key to your past.

The iBook was something different, and the sudden bloom of love I felt for it rivaled my feelings for my fountain pen. Once I brought the laptop close to me, nestling it against my belly, I discovered perhaps what a generation of writers before me had discovered in their typewriters: Freedom. What had taken me so long? I put aside the Mont Blanc, even as I wrestled with a gnawing guilt about abandoning it; I would leave it untouched for so long that the nib would clog, the feeder tube forgetting how to supply it with ink.

At this late stage, I found myself rethinking so much of exactly how I operated. It left me feeling I had lost something of myself, but what I gained seemed to offset that loss. Typing quickly, sometimes with eyes closed, with that channel in me opened as it only was when I wrote with my fountain pen, I traveled the long, winding path through the bramble that led to words, my fingers sensing their mistakes and hovering above the keys, then backtracking—*delete, delete, delete*—and starting again, reclaiming the idea, leaving no clear trail. The laptop and I started a love affair then. I sat with it on my lap even when I was too tired to work on my novel. When I was too anxious about my impending move for grad school, the laptop perched beside me, pressed against my hip on the sofa, and reminded me of my purpose. I bought leather bags to carry it with me through airports and train stations, a soft-sided case to cart it from room to room. It was never far from me, its cool body spending nights tucked beside me so that I could record dreams or the restless chatter of my novel's characters. I would reach for the iBook in the middle of the night, flip open its top, and record the stories and revelations that simply could not wait.

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Like my iBook, he had not been my first love. In fact, he was that sweet boy I had snubbed in college, despite his month-long campaign to woo me by offering a present each day. Of those gifts, I recall a set of stuffed kissing monkeys, a college sweatshirt, and a poster that read "Patience Is a Virtue." It was lovely, thrilling, if a bit intense. I nearly gave in. But he was younger than me and achingly innocent, and far too clingy and traditional about gender roles. He was intent on finding a partner in a way that seemed unnecessarily earnest. We were on parallel, but not overlapping, paths. So when I saw him again, thirty years later, I was positively gobsmacked by the wave of emotion I felt for him, a swelling heat and joy at seeing his face, at the memory of his youthful, sloppy kisses in the moonlight and the way he had taken my hand one evening, enfolding mine swiftly in his own, claiming me, as we walked among a loose group of people across campus.

It's easy to be overcome by the idea of one's past. "Everybody loves the sound of a train in the distance / Everybody thinks it's true," so the song goes.⁵ It sat hard with me for weeks, the way I was shaken by having seen him, by the idea of having missed him. He called me two months later. I promised to call back. I didn't, deliberately, thinking, *Let him live his life; don't go dragging up the past*. But if you believe the past rides the current of life with us, the ghosts at our ankles, there is no letting it go. A door opened now, he pursued, I retreated, we talked—friends, after all—then let time pass until finally there it was, that open room awaiting us. It was a simple turn of the body, it seemed, turning toward the thing you have tried to look past. Ultimately, facing each other, there was joy in the finding.

There was so much I had not known about him, and by that I mean *recognized*, when I was young. "You weren't ready for me then," he would say, and I believe he was right. I had worn my youth like comfortable clothes, heedlessly, unaware that they would shred, grow out of fashion, or simply fade. Perhaps it was this reclamation of a moment from our past that joined us in late middle age. But not only that. I was drawn to the gray speckling his temples, the building furrows on his brow, the old and new of him mingling. And there was between us an ease, a feeling of homecoming. The same jokes shared, the same penchant for old-standard songs, the same ironic worldview, the same movie lines quoted over and over and responded to anew each time, the language between us—the thing that has mattered most deeply to me, *language*—and we seemed a sudden, perfect fit. I was happy, genuinely happy, yet I spent much time weeping, fretting over the thirty years I had spent without him: why hadn't I seen him back then? I had simply misunderstood who he could be to me, and I had to reexamine all the ways I had been on guard against the awful danger of losing myself.

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I had learned not to share my fiction with lovers. It's a dangerous pursuit. They look puzzled after reading it—as if it's your dirty laundry they have

been handed—and they say things like, “So this happened to you?” or “Is this right? ‘Whose’ is a word, without an apostrophe?” or “These people seem crazy to me.” No relationship survives that. I did not share my actual writing with my lover, but it became part of us nonetheless. We discussed my character Dixon so often that my lover might say to me, “I think Dixon wouldn’t want to read that book you mentioned. He’d read this one.”

More important, my work lived with us, quite literally. By this time, I had a MacBook Air, a sleek, featherweight aluminum beauty. I brought the laptop into bed with me most nights, and on the nights when my lover was with me, I began to do so as well, sliding it under my pillow or alongside me. In the middle of the night, when I awakened, I would roll over, grab it to my chest, and transcribe the dreams or sudden plot turns that sprang up in the night. There would be the familiar gong of the Mac powering on, the bluish light of the screen, a beacon in the night, and then my clumsy, irregular plucking at the keys, fast spurts followed by quick punctuations of the delete key—I retain some pathological resistance to typing well—and the staccato of my peculiar typing rhythm simultaneously thrilled and calmed me. My lover did not share my glee. The first time I awakened him with my typing, he simply stared, groggy, and made some comment about having been warned about being involved with a writer. The next time, he asked whether I still wrote longhand. But his tolerance grew thin, and he banned the laptop. I imagine I must have felt the way a mother feels when her husband bans their sleepy child from the bed. Not just the child’s comfort is lost, but the mother’s too, the father sitting up, hand outstretched and pointing the downcast child back to his room. I placed the laptop on the floor beside my bed. I needed to see it, at least, and I began to get used to its absence, to allow my lover to fill that space around me.

This sharing, as much as anything, melted my resistance to a man I had once rejected, and over the course of a few months, I gave over completely to the sheer wonder of having found him again. And then one night, as we were preparing to visit his sister—a kind of coming-out for us as a

couple—he e-mailed me a love note, as he did each evening when we were apart, he went to sleep, and he did not wake up.

When you lose someone who has not lived with you, you are not left with many remnants of their existence. They disappear from the world almost totally. So I gathered crazy things on my own. There was that spot on the rug where we had made love, the fibers matted where he had rug-burned his knee. It must have held his DNA. I snipped the fibers, placed them in a plastic bag. In front of my house, by my car, I noticed cigarette stubs the day after he died. *His*. Another plastic bag. A friend took my hand, her face betraying a paralyzing sadness and fear. “Karen. Karen,” she said, as if begging me back from the brink of madness.

There was so little of him to hold onto, and the space around me echoed with that loss. So I retrieved my MacBook Air, placed it on my lap, and began to spill memory. “Us,” I wrote. Each day I sat, eyes closed, spewing sadness, laughter, sketching him—that scar above his brow, the way his face lit up in a smile, then tried to contain the large, unwieldy guffaw of laughter that was his. The way he would rise suddenly in the middle of dinner, walk around the table toward me as if I were a second helping of mashed potatoes, and kiss me. It didn’t matter if we were at home or in a restaurant; the gesture was the same unabashed, surprising move. I wrote about the time lost, the time gained, the time unknown between us.

For days, weeks, months, I came home from my sleepwalk through work, crawled into bed, and grabbed my laptop. In one of the darkest moments of a life not immune to death, I turned to my keyboard to capture his voice, to retain our story, to voice the sorrow and anger that swirled in me. It was the very precision of typing, the clicking sound of the keyboard a Kaddish, the rote nature of using the QWERTY, that calmed me and brought pardon into my life over the complicated choices I had made. I closed my eyes and let flow through me the weight of language and thought and feeling, and because I did not need to keep track of the tightrope of pen on paper, I simply got out of its way and let it flow. The sleek silver laptop took on the weight of my burden, an impartial therapist, a medium.

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This channeling, perhaps, is what even the earliest inventors of the typewriter intended. Of the fifty-two predecessors to Christopher Sholes's modern typewriter, the first that was known to actually work was invented by Pellegrino Turri in 1808. Not simply a machine, his invention was an interpreter: he had created the typewriter for his friend, Countess Carolina Fantoni da Fivizzano, who was blind. This would be her channel into an otherwise closed world. How fitting. There is something about the reliably stationary existence of the keyboard that offers order to the disorderly.

In the end, our lives, our work, are all about sight—foresight, hindsight, insight, salvaged sight. As a teenage girl, I could not foresee in any way what I would truly need in my life.

I think again of my father's former secretary, Claudia. Suddenly divorced with two young daughters, she could not have considered her ability to type a damnable thing; it was, in fact, her salvation. Not only because it led to a secure job—senior secretary to the agency's chief—but because of the outlet it offered: the physical nature of typing, an unemotional tug at memory, a respite from the painful realignment of her life. What a relief to come back to the keyboard and find things exactly as she left them.

What our mothers—Claudia's and mine—had known was about the ebb and flow of lives, about the sturdiness of regret, about survival, about the surety of putting one finger beside the next, about having the means to start anew.

NOTES

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2. Herkimer County Historical Society, *The History of the Typewriter 1873–1923* (New York: Herkimer Society, 1923).
3. Carla Baranauckas, "The Typewriter: That Clakety-Clak Machine That Defined So

Many Lives," *Women's Voices for Change*, 17 May 2011, <http://womensvoicesforchange.org/the-typewriter-that-clakety-clak-machine-that-defined-so-many-lives.htm>.

4. "Pablo Neruda: The Art of Poetry No. 14," interview with Rita Guibert, *Paris Review*, no. 51 (Spring 1971), <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4091/the-art-of-poetry-no-14-pablo-neruda>.
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Inquisitor and Insurgent

Black Woman with Pencil, Sharpened

I was a small-town girl with a big love for writing sticks. My birthday fell at the end of August, the last week of summer, the first week of the new school year. My early birthday celebrations were always tinged with a distinctly educational theme, but my love for pencils was bigger than any classroom.

One of the earliest rituals of my life was waiting on the front steps of our small white house at 311 West Oakland Avenue, Sumter, South Carolina, for the sight of my father driving up after work. I was his “Lovechild,” and he the man who warmed my pillow on the heater grate in winter and cooled my forehead with ice cubes from his lemonade glass in hot, unforgiving August. Ours was a mutual adoration society that was fed, steadfastly, by spontaneous afternoon walks and drives out in the world together.

My birthday week always set the stage for one of our special outings. My main order of business, that special week of August, was always the procurement of pencils for the school year ahead. Daddy would scoop me up from the steps, drive us across the tracks, pull in at the foot of the Southside bridge and park just in front of the Manning Avenue Drugstore and Grill. Once inside, my father turned and headed in one direction, and I turned and headed in another.

At the grill’s barstool, Daddy would order a half-pound of cheeseburger, seasoned and hand-spanked by the pharmacist/grill master himself, Dr. Wilson Deas. I was on the other side of the store near the front door, parked over a cigar box full of pencils. There I would stand, until near closing time, studying the barrels and wooden nibs of pencils like some kind of mad

child scientist that had never seen one before. While I deliberated, Dr. Deas and Daddy caught up on the news of the day. They were close friends. They were young black professional men in small-town America with growing families. We were neighbors. Dr. Deas was the only black pharmacist in town and my father the only black attorney.

The two entities that made up the Manning Avenue Drugstore and Grill were not in opposition to each other. The barstools that sat in the middle of the store were the line of demarcation. On one side of his shop sat the grill, where Dr. Deas was the master chef of a two-item menu board, French fries and cheeseburgers. The burgers came with more black pepper than should have been legal in the state of South Carolina. They were the juiciest, most delicious cheeseburgers I have, to this day, ever tasted. On the other side of the store was the pharmacy. As soon as a customer walked in with a prescription to be filled, Dr. Deas would turn the flame on the grill down, walk across the floor, shed his over-the-head grill apron, and don his long-sleeved, perfectly starched, pearl-white pharmacist's jacket, all in one fluid motion.

My side of the Manning Avenue Drugstore and Grill, the pharmacy side, held the one-shelf school supply section and therefore was the home of the oversized cigar box spilling with a high tide of pencils of all sizes and colors. Some were No. 1 lead but most were No. 2. The men left me alone to do my pencil choosing, never rushing or hurrying me. I would turn my back to the store and the grill and study my long fingers lifting and separating almost every pencil in the box. There was something private about it for me.

I preferred No. 1 lead even then. Dark and glossy, it added polish to everything I scribbled. I preferred the deep gold pencil barrels with the wide, peanut-brown band up near the eraser. My love of pencils was not arbitrary.

I was raised in a land of pencils and pencil users. I was reared around people who worked with their hands: seamstresses, tailors, carpenters, teachers, butchers, coaches, painters, farmers, electricians, plumbers. These small-town folk were close inside my life and within my eyeshot. I noticed them and how they did their work in the world. As they kept an

eye on me, I noticed their pencil habits. Pencils were a part of their tool belts and jewelry. It was not unusual how they kept pencils so near their lives, just inside a purse, in an overalls pocket, on a cash register, on a string dangling from a nail in the wall, over an earlobe. As a girl, not only did I like to write with pencils, but I also liked to read them and imagine the places they represented: Jimmy's Hog Heaven, Dent's Undertaking Establishment, The Silver Moon Café, Johnson's Nursery, Miss Mable's Frozen Pies and Custards. Pencils got me going about words and the work worlds of human beings. Pencils in my girlhood were tiny handheld billboards; they were jumbo pencils with knife-carved points; cigar-size pencils with teeth marks speckled all down their backs, evidence of a nervous mouth; early morning computation; or an evening with lunations found in the almanac.

As a girl, I tied pencils to sweat and hard work. I associated them with calculations and contemplation. People who worked with their hands and their heads used pencils. People who made mistakes and understood the power of second effort reached for pencils. City folks used pens. With a fancy pen you could say anything you wanted to say; you weren't as accountable. A pen's ink was so effusive, sudden, and unchangeable. A pencil could be said to have a mind of its own. The dark, sweet mind of a pencil had to be nurtured and lured out into the sunshine. Sometimes the tip of a pencil had to be licked in order to start it up after a long night's sleep. You could sign your life away with a pen and never know what happened to your life. Slick-talking salespeople pushed pens into my father's and mother's hands. Insurance men, car dealers, appliance salesmen, newspaper reporters were all pen users. A pen wrote things out easy and smooth. Drawing the delible blood out of a pencil took more effort, more deliberateness, more muscle and intention. A pencil came with an eraser, that ever-so-thoughtful attachment, that the inventor of the pencil must have jumped for joy once made and put there on the end. Pencils were the most honest writing instrument I had ever met. Consequentially, I chose each one as if it were a magic wand.

The first time I saw Barbara Jordan speak, she was sitting at a congressional hearing, and she had a pencil in her hand. I was sixteen. It was 1974. The impeachment hearings for Richard Nixon were underway. Barbara

Jordan, the brilliant black congresswoman from Texas, was speaking about the significance of her role in the hearings. Her voice rolled out like thunder and stayed in my ear like honey: “I—Am—An—Inquisitor,” she said slowly on camera. “I will not be an idle spectator.” Her voice made me stand up in the middle of our family room. Her words made me reach for the nearest dictionary. I grabbed my own pencil and wrote the words down, *inquisitor* and *idle spectator*. I liked these words. They reminded me of a word that I had written down and put in my pocket a few years before: *insurgent*. I wondered, how many ways were there to inquire? How else might a human being concerned with words and truth-telling conduct an investigation?

Three years before Nixon’s impeachment hearing, in 1971, a professional black theater company announced a tour of small towns in the South. The play they were touring was entitled *To Be Young, Gifted and Black*. It was the dramatic presentation of the life of the black woman playwright Lorraine Hansberry.

Hansberry’s play *A Raisin in the Sun* was the first play written by a black woman to be performed on Broadway. Her uncompromising words took America by storm in 1959. We had read about, and kept up with, her amazing success by way of our national black publications, *Jet*, *Ebony*, and *Black World*, mediums that kept black people across the country on the same page. At the young age of twenty-nine, Lorraine Hansberry was an activist, intellectual, and acclaimed American writer.

Professional black theater companies were few and far between, and they rarely visited the small-town South. When my community heard one was coming our way, it was as if Dr. King himself was returning to earth for one night only. It meant a lot to us. Two hundred families must have crowded into the small Morris College auditorium and gymnasium in Sumter, South Carolina, that hot summer night. The floor seats were all taken when my family arrived. We scattered and made do in the nooks and corners of the cavernous room. I found my seat in a windowsill. The house lights fell, and everything in my life since has been colored by the well-lit words that sparked off that darkened, dusty stage.

I had never heard a black woman talk about writing with such verve before. The monologues and scenes played out on that stage—of the young Lorraine and the older Lorraine, the girl and woman, holding tenaciously to sizzling questions, well-chewed pencils, and smoldering cigarettes—changed my world. Some of the deepest breaths of my girlhood came and went that night. I began to understand what I had come to do, whispering over and over the most important words I had heard all night: *I am a writer. I am going to write.*

During the intermission I kept looking down at my hands, stared at them in the half-light. As others got up from their seats to get water and share small talk with neighbors, I stayed glued to my windowsill and staring at my hands. I wondered, could I take the same twenty-six letters of the alphabet that Hansberry had taken, that writers of so many generations had taken, and make my own stories and poems and create my own way of saying what needed to be said? So much of what Lorraine Hansberry believed, that the actors had so brilliantly dramatized, spread out into the night air, throwing itself over and about me like a second skin. In her most flatfooted, no-nonsense voice she wrote, “A classical people deserve a classical art.” As she battled cancer for her life, an old reminder to herself and a new directive for fifteen-year-old me, “I am a writer. I am going to write.” Near the end of the play were the words that Hansberry spoke just before she died in 1965 at the age of thirty-four, words that would live inside me forever: “Before ’tis done, may I trust that all my commas and periods be placed and someone will complete my thoughts. This last should be the least difficult since there are so many who think as I do.” Something was handed over to me that night, something monumental and personal, something on the end of a pencil. That was the night that I started to figure and configure, contemplate, and compute just how I might leave my delible mark on this life.

On our way home, I asked my father what an *insurgent* was. It had been the word used in the play to describe Lorraine Hansberry at the end of her life. He looked down at me. He looked away from me. He looked out the window. He knew what it meant. He didn’t want me to know, not yet. He

could see how smitten I was by the play and its message. He wasn't ready to let me go, to become what the dye of the pencil box and the dye of the play had already cast me to be. This was the same man who had walked me to the pencil box instead of the candy store, the same man who never went on a trip without returning with a gift of books written by black writers, the same man who bought tickets for his children to see off-Broadway plays about what it meant to be black in America. I was growing up. The South I was growing up in was flaming with change, hatred, and new, higher hurdles. I was his only daughter. He was afraid of the fear he could not find in my face, afraid of the light and flame that were there instead.

- *Inquisitor*: A person whose official duty it is to inquire or examine, matters of crime, taxation. An investigator.
- *Insurgent*: A person who rebels or rises in active revolt against authority. A rebel, revolutionary.
- *Pencil*: An instrument for marking, drawing, or writing, which leaves a delible mark on a surface.

I was born inches away from the sea at the bottom of a fiercely Confederate state, in the small coastal town of Conway, South Carolina, on August 26, 1957. The backyard of our first family house was all sand and seashells. Hundred-year-old oak trees with their canopies of Spanish moss dotted the entire street of tiny wooden houses. The lilting Gullah voices of the children of pure Africans were the first air I ever breathed and the first stories I ever heard. There were postcards sold near the beach that spoke of the legend of the live oaks and the Spanish moss that blanketed them. These cards told a history and held a story that the moss of the live oak was the hair of a Southern maiden who had lost her Rebel sweetheart and hung it there hoping for his return. But there were others of us whose great fathers had fought against the Confederacy and believed otherwise: the moss was thought to be the braided hair of all the Africans who had run away and been caught and hanged there. To us the live oaks were said to house the spirits of the slave dead. I learned as a girl there were indeed

two sides to every story. More and more I knew that I wanted to be one of those telling and passing on the infinite dark, sweet side.

I was a black girl born in America in the middle of the twentieth century. Because of this fact I was set on a journey to live a writing, self-examined life. It wasn't one thing that set me sailing in this direction. It was everything. The geography of the sixties and seventies—a toasty milieu of upheaval, violence, lies, brilliance, inquisition, revelation, pride, and art—was my connective tissue. I didn't know the words to describe what tribe I belonged to as a curious, creative girl, but as soon as I could hold a pencil, I began to recognize what moved me to action and to tears, and I paid close attention. I remember scribbling furiously in private notebooks, hoping to join that band of inquisitors and insurgents that refused normalcy and popularity. I wanted to decipher hatred and benevolence, study state documents that said one thing and study the human mouths that interpreted them in whatever ways they pleased. I wanted to wonder aloud on paper about the dinosaurs that mystified me, that had once walked the same earth as I. I wanted to devote myself to pencil-journaling out the intimate details of why all the women in my family protected their mean streaks with such pride and reverence.

I wanted to be a writer.

The Black Arts Movement of the 1970s helped rocket my wild, tender heart to the page. Black art, culture, music, intellectual thought, was being posterized, packaged, and celebrated in the North, East, and West, and in its purest form, still created and crafted in my schizophrenic South land. From my working- and middle-class neighborhood, I subversively signed up for and received packages of black-consciousness newspapers, and boxes of broadsides from newly formed black publishing houses. I read the Black Panther newspaper and Frantz Fanon. I read Communist and Socialist manifestos and the new black poetry of Giovanni and Sanchez, Madhubuti and Baraka. For hours on end I would sit with notebook and pencil in my father's Buick Electra 225, rewinding Curtis Mayfield's eight-track tapes, hoping to dissect exactly how he mixed the political with the beautiful, in search of my own particular way of saying.

I chose the college that I attended, Talladega College, in Talladega, Alabama, because of its quiet, luminous landscape. Its hundred-year-old oaks canopied the campus like brown and green umbrellas. I knew I could write beneath its trees. My work-study job at Talladega was to accompany various notables to campus during the annual spring arts festival. During my senior year, Nikki Giovanni came to campus. My English professor, mentor, and the human being who first introduced me to Zora Neale Hurston and Toni Morrison was the writer and scholar Dr. Gloria Wade Gayles. She encouraged me to show Nikki my work while she was visiting campus. I laughed. Was this not the most ridiculous idea in the world? It was one thing to show my work to my ninth- and tenth-grade English teachers. It was quite another to show it to the most popular and outspoken black poet of the day. The poems stayed hidden under the seat of the college van for two days. Finally, on day three, the day we were driving her back to the airport, I took a deep breath and pulled them out. She was gracious and accepting. Two weeks later she called and asked for me on the public phone booth that was standard fare at the end of every dorm floor at Talladega College. She said she was calling to warn me that she was sending the poems back and that I shouldn't be afraid of all the red that I would find on them. "Beneath all the red," she promised, "was something beautiful trying to happen."

After Talladega days I moved to Atlanta. I had one name and one address on an index card that Dr. Gayles had given me as she hugged me goodbye and pushed me out into the wind. Toni Cade Bambara had started a writing workshop at her house in Atlanta. It was open to anyone in the community who had a pencil and was interested in the power of the written word. I was terrified to go. The word had long been out: Toni Cade Bambara did not play. You came through the door with your most serious pencil on your ear or you kept moving. It took several months for me to work up the courage. I was twenty-one years old when I finally walked up to her Simpson Avenue door with my sweaty pages under my arm. I was expecting to knock, but the door was already wide open; black folks of all ages were sitting on sofas and on the backs of chairs and on the floor, all talking about writing. I was welcomed, but I was also an aside. It wasn't personal. It wasn't about

me. It was about the work. The work held center stage at all times. After reading from my work one Sunday afternoon, Bambara looked up from my xeroxed pages that were deep in her hand and said, “So—so you can write—so you can write pretty—so what—so what’s the plan?” The two years that I spent sitting on Toni Cade’s floor, listening, learning how to talk about words, and making a plan for them, were the most important years of my writing life. I found my voice in that writing circle: the voice of the Insurgent Sensualist. I learned that it was never enough just to write it out pretty. I had to follow it through with action. At all times and in all ways, I was accountable to my words.

Toni Cade Bambara died in 1995, another black woman writer silenced by cancer. She was a passionate community activist and a brilliant American writer. She was spirited and egalitarian in her approach to everything. She believed that writing should be as beautiful as it was political. Her definition of a writer in the community wasn’t just someone who wrote about the fictitious lives of imagined people, but someone who stepped into the real lives of real people and lent something tangible and concrete. She said out loud with words and also with the way she lived her life: “The responsibility of the writer is to make revolution irresistible.”

Soon, it will be fifty years of life that I have lived, and I feel that I am only halfway there. In this lifetime of many moments and many influences, I have come to understand the power of words, but there is so much more to discover beneath this landscape of nurturing and alphabets. The more I pencil-dig down, the more frankincense I turn up from the shank and shale of this life, the more I understand that there is even more bounty to field into the air. I proceed. I am accountable to truth and beauty. I am the Insurgent Sensualist.

Contributors

MONICA BERLIN's work has appeared in *Crazyhorse*, *Cimarron Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Cincinnati Review*, *TriQuarterly*, *Ninth Letter*, *DIAGRAM*, *Third Coast*, *New Orleans Review*, and *Passages North*, among many others. Her collaboration with Beth Marzoni, *No Shape Bends the River So Long* (2015), was awarded the 2013 New Measure Poetry Prize, judged by Carolyn Forché. An associate professor of English at Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois, Berlin also serves as associate director for the Program in Creative Writing.

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NIKKY FINNEY was born in South Carolina, within listening distance of the sea. A child of activists, she came of age during the civil rights and Black Arts movements. At Talladega College, nurtured by Hale Woodruff's *Amistad* murals, Finney came to understand the powerful synergy between art and history. Finney has authored four books of poetry: *Head Off & Split* (2011), *The World Is Round* (2003), *Rice* (1995), and *On Wings Made of Gauze* (1985). She has also authored *Heartwood* (1997), edited *The Ringing Ear: Black Poets Lean South* (2007), and cofounded the Affrilachian Poets. Finney's fourth book of poetry, *Head Off & Split*, was awarded the 2011 National Book Award for poetry. For over twenty years, she taught at the University

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JEN HIRT's memoir, *Under Glass: The Girl with a Thousand Christmas Trees*, won the Drake University Emerging Writer Award for 2011, and her essay "Lores of Last Unicorns," published in the *Gettysburg Review*, won a 2010 Pushcart Prize. Hirt's essays have also received the 2012 Gabehart Prize for Nonfiction from the Kentucky Women Writers Conference, an Ohioana Library grant, a Pennsylvania Council on the Arts grant, additional Pushcart Prize nominations, and two notable essay mentions in *Best American Essays*. Hirt is an assistant professor of creative writing at Penn State Harrisburg.

E. J. LEVY's essays and fiction have been featured in *Best American Essays*, the *Paris Review*, *Salon*, and the *New York Times*, among other places, and have received a Pushcart Prize, among other honors. Her debut story collection, *Love, in Theory*, won the 2012 Flannery O'Connor Award, a

2012 ForeWord Book of the Year Award, and the 2014 Great Lakes Colleges Association's New Writers Award; it was also named a Best Indie Book of 2013 by *Kirkus Reviews* and a French edition, *L'amour, en théorie*, is available. Levy's anthology, *Tasting Life Twice: Literary Lesbian Fiction by New American Writers*, won a Lambda Literary Award. She holds a degree in history from Yale and is an associate professor at Colorado State University.

ELIZABETH MACLEOD WALLS is the author of critical articles on English literary modernism, and she is the coeditor, with Mary Lago and Linda K. Hughes, of *The BBC Talks of E. M. Forster* (2007), as well as, with Jennifer Cognard-Black, *Kindred Hands: Letters on Writing by British and American Women Authors, 1865–1935* (2006). MacLeod Walls is the dean of University College and holds the rank of associate professor of English at Nebraska Wesleyan University. A graduate of Hiram College and a former student of Joyce Dyer's, she has explored creative nonfiction as a way of translating the historical soul and story of a place, particularly as that place inspires women's journeys of self-discovery. MacLeod Walls lives in Lincoln, Nebraska—her hometown—with her husband and two sons.

DEBRA MARQUART's books include three poetry collections—*Everything's a Verb* (1996), *From Sweetness* (2002), and *Small Buried Things* (2015)—as well as a short-story collection, *The Hunger Bone: Rock & Roll Stories* (2001), which draws on her experiences as a female road musician. Marquart's work has received a Pushcart Prize, the Shelby Foote Nonfiction Prize from the Faulkner Society, the Headwaters Prize, and a National Endowment for the Arts Prose Fellowship. Marquart's memoir, *The Horizontal World: Growing Up Wild in the Middle of Nowhere* (2006), was awarded the Elle Lettres Award from *Elle* magazine and the 2007 PEN USA Creative Nonfiction Award. Marquart teaches in the Stonecoast low-residency MFA program at the University of Southern Maine, and she is a professor of English and the director of the MFA Program in Creative Writing and the Environment at Iowa State University.

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KAREN SALYER MCELMURRAY's *Surrendered Child: A Birth Mother's Journey* was an AWP Award Winner for Creative Nonfiction. Her novels are *The Motel of the Stars*, Editor's Pick by Oxford American, and *Strange Birds in the Tree of Heaven*, winner of the Chaffin Award for Appalachian Writing. Other stories and essays have appeared in *Iron Horse*, *Kenyon Review*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, and *River Teeth*, and in anthologies such as *An Angle of Vision*; *To Tell the Truth*; *Fearless Confessions*; *Listen Here*; *Dirt*; *Family Trouble*; and *Red Holler*. Her writing has been supported by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the North Carolina Arts Council, and the Kentucky Foundation for Women. Her essay "Strange Tongues" was the recipient of the Annie Dillard Award from *The Bellingham Review*. With poet Adrian Blevins, she has coedited a collection of essays, *Walk Till the Dogs Get Mean: Meditations on the Forbidden from Contemporary Appalachia*. During 2015–16, she was the Visiting Professor at Gettysburg College.

KAREN OUTEN's fiction has appeared in *Glimmer Train Stories* and the *North American Review*, among other publications. She has taught fiction and writing at the University of Michigan and St. Mary's College of Maryland.

MARY QUADE is a graduate of the University of Chicago and the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop. Her poetry collection, *Guide to Native Beasts*,

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SUE WILLIAM SILVERMAN's memoir *The Pat Boone Fan Club: My Life as a White Anglo-Saxon Jew* (2014) was a finalist in *Foreword Reviews*' IndieFab Book of the Year Award (essay category). Her two previous memoirs are *Love Sick: One Woman's Journey through Sexual Addiction* (2001), which is also a Lifetime television movie, and *Because I Remember Terror, Father, I Remember You* (1996), which won the Association of Writers and Writing Programs award in creative nonfiction. One of her essays appears in *The Touchstone Anthology of Contemporary Nonfiction*, while others won contests with *Hotel Amerika*, *Mid-American Review*, and *Water-Stone Review*. Silverman's poetry collection is *Hieroglyphics in Neon* (2006), and her craft book, *Fearless Confessions: A Writer's Guide to Memoir* (2009), won Honorable Mention in *Foreword Reviews*' Book of the Year Award. As a professional speaker, Silverman has appeared on *The View*, *Anderson Cooper 360*, and *CNN-Headline News*. She teaches in the MFA in Writing Program at Vermont College of Fine Arts.

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