

Walking the Branches

by

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For my sister, Kellie M. Reynolds

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Salamander: “The Sound of Nightcrawlers”

Walking the Branches

Introduction

Grief, the grief process, and the active form of grieving vary from person to person and circumstance to circumstance—there is no map. The landscape of grief is not one-dimensional, just as active grieving does not take place in a linear fashion. How one grieves loss in general is still a mystery, but how one grieves multiple losses is a complete enigma. The following poems and essays explore the sense of complete annihilation of one's personal world through the successive and respective deaths of a mother, sister, and father. The collection begins the poem, "Traceries," which sets the tone and opens the inquiry followed by a short prefatory essay, "Searching Bone," in which ruminations on an old photograph of the narrator's parents not only compares the vigor of their youth with the sickness of old age, but also presages events in their near future which alter their happy young lives. Other poems appear throughout the individual essays, or between essays operating as preludes or codas.

The second essay, "Field Notes," begins with several individual pieces that explore the grief process and at the same time uncover the complicated relationship between mother and daughter. I begin with a visit to my mother's grave and move back and forth in time, episodically, in order to show how grief changes one's outlook, behavior, and memory. Some of the pieces are very small and others longer; some are very experimental and use a variety of literary techniques. Included are the use of lists, the literary apostrophe for addressing others, spacing and breaks in the narrative to show the discontinuity of the grief process, punctuation and the lack of punctuation to convey chaos, different kinds of type face and ellipses to evoke a sense

of shadow and echo, as well the implication of an interior or other self-questioning voice.

This other layered voice gives the intentional impression of the surreal and is present in the use of the prose poems and the verse poems. In addition, the point of view and tense purposely varies from piece to piece, which not only allows for the necessary distance needed to write objectively, but also involves the reader more engagingly as he/she navigates the back and forth and in and out of the narrative landscape. Some of the pieces containing dialogue allow the reader a glimpse into the action and help to reveal the characters more satisfactorily than mere commentary. The back and forth movement between action and reflection has been a deliberate attempt to mirror my experience with the grief process—one minute I am involved with the concrete necessities of coping and other times I slip into the meditative world of abstraction and memory.

The third essay, “Gathering Name,” explores the complication of the grief process when, one year later almost to the day after my mother’s death, my older, somewhat, estranged sister dies of a brain aneurysm rather suddenly. As a result, the grief for both my mother and sister becomes entangled in memory—thoughts of my mother produce thoughts of my sister—so it seems logical to have these two essays in close proximity of one another. As in the first essay, most of the narration weaves in and out of memory and back and forth between voices in an attempt to illuminate the helplessness in trying to bear up under an ocean of overwhelming emotions the narrator experiences in the wake of two such recent losses.

This essay opens with the arrival of the narrator at the home of the dying sister on the one-year anniversary of their mother's death. Accompanied by a younger sister, the narrator initially resists the emotional pull of the situation, appearing rather cold and uncaring. This tone is magnified in an inserted meditative piece, which declares, "Then speak so I don't have to and no one will suspect that I am deprived of speech," to illustrate the tension between the inner and outer selves of the narrator, the problem of speech, when to speak and when to remain silent, and the resulting need and use of metaphors to deal with the issues related to this particular death. The placement of this specific meditation operates as a signifier and a digression into memory ensues, offering an explanation to the charge, "she better be really dying this time."

The narrator risks reader loyalty with her quirky and unexpected behavior, and is ultimately compared and contrasted to both sisters. This is a conscious attempt to portray the complexity of the sibling relationship and the underlying tension between them in relation to the precarious mental and emotional state of the narrator. This essay wants to put pressure on the narrator to find out what her role is, where she sees herself fitting in, how she will accomplish her task, and how much she is willing to sacrifice. Devices used in this essay consist of layering: memories, thoughts, meditations, prose poems, lists, sub-lists, lessons, arguments, italicized text, and various fonts and sizes. The use of these forms provides the necessary freedom to explore various voices, both internal and external, which, in turn, lend a creative distance from the difficult experience of participating in the dying process.

The final essay, “Walking the Branches,” captures what can only be described as complete despair from the overwhelming personal tragedy of the last or third experienced death—the narrator’s father. The techniques used are changing points of view, embedded poems, meditations, lists, charts, Morse code, and the ever present interior voice that asserts, argues, wonders, and drifts in and out of the speaker’s consciousness. The background present of the piece is the September 11th terrorist attack on the World Trade Towers in New York City, which operates on several levels to anchor the narrative, to underscore the shock and overriding sense of devastation and powerlessness, to reveal the mind in process and how it focuses and defocuses when confronted with a traumatic event, and to explore the associative and tangential memories that arise amidst such an event.

The essay contains three parts. The first part deals with the moment of the father’s actual death, the second encompasses the historical, September 11th event with a narrative that digresses into distant memories of the father and his military career, and the third attempts to move away from the September 11th disaster with a digression into the recent past and the father’s reaction to the death of his wife.

The final poem, “Absence,” is meant to act as a coda for this essay and the collection as a whole. It feels especially significant at the end of the essay because of the repeating refrain, “While you were gone [. . .] /” which wants to resonate with the enormity of the September 11th event, and is an appropriate poem to conclude the collection because it metaphorically represents the survival of the apocalyptic events that have happened in the speaker’s life. The speaker is finally able to stand alone

“reconfigured into nature” and presents herself as someone who has transcended the oppressive weight of grief, her life ultimately “a dream / walking the branches.”

*

Traceries

*No more saying this or that—
this clutter, that distance*

*because right now, as I speak
the seen-world falls into twilight*

*headfirst, while a sickle moon curls
into view above a shoulder of dusky trees.*

*Right now, a breast-plate of darkness
bulges forth its wild intention*

*caught at last over Mendon pond
where fish bubble up one by one*

*quick to gulp the life that flickers
there, or nudge the small pebble*

*with its attendant wish that drops
right now, from a woman's hand*

*leaving only a ringed tracery
that wheels and drifts on a plane*

none of us can understand.

*

Searching Bone

Odd things keep happening to my hands and feet: I wake expecting to put my feet, one in front of the other, on the floor, and walk—a simple thing—but they will not bend, remain stiff resenting gravity. My hands aren't much better, palms sore, dented with half-moons, evidence of fingers curling toward themselves, digging soft mounds, searching bone.

*

In a photograph, my parents are young and smiling. My father's hair is thick and wavy, side-parted, short. He is tall and lanky, knees slightly bent to accept the weight of my mother, who, with both arms around his neck, appears to have jumped on him—both of her legs straddle his. Something unidentifiable hangs off the elbow of his shirt. A shadow, distinguishable in the dirt, covers the foreground—an arm, a sleeve, a dress.

It hardly seems possible that my parents were that young, that happy. Their later years spent enclosed in smoke filled rooms of their own making, prisoners of their infirmities, reduced to names of diseases: cancer, stroke, heart attack. I think the only time my parents looked remotely pleased, and only for brief moments, was when I came over to the house on weekly, soon to be daily visits to the house. My guess is, after I left, they went back to the trance of the television, or the stupor of medication.

Above my mother's dark curly hair, a white sky opens out into the frame with a small—is that a flagpole—just to the right. Further to the right, an aberration, ghostly and ethereal, pushes into the scene, approaches the image of my mother who is wearing trousers—bold for her day. My father holds her on his leg like it takes no effort at all; there is no evidence of strain or tension between them as they both hang on. Behind my father, a dark cluster of trees presses against him while below, the bleached ground stands empty.

*

Harpooner

*In the middle of my own history I dream of escape
feeling like the toddler whose response to the day's*

*in-put ends with a hiss of s's—goose, snake, steam
—leaving lips finally calm enough to consider*

what is real, what is half-starved

*while under my pillow rush pods of whales,
herds of walrus, and I think*

*how intimate harpooners must be
with the hearts of these mammals*

*and how easily we put our grief away in a box
marked Faith.*

*Warning: it's not about angels this time
or a second flowering born of dead doubts—*

*these lines come from the earth's foremost part
from the pulpit burning low at the mild stage,*

only to be looked at with an injured eye

*that glows like a dull red lamp hanging
in the midst of a cave-in.*

*

Field Notes

The outline of her recent grave was still visible because the sod had been newly placed—the lines as apparent as a hem or a cut-line on a Butterick pattern. In the middle, inverted into the ground, an aluminum cylinder waited for the flowers we brought, lilacs and lily of the valley—her favorites. It was too soon for her marker to have been placed—June maybe.

*

I panicked because I didn't know where to stand, so I tiptoed around the edges. Where was the top, was I standing on her head, or was I standing on someone else's? My sister pointed to where the marker would be placed and told me to stand just below it. "Now, imagine standing at the foot of her bed, that's how she was buried." What a relief. At least I had a way of picturing it. At least I could put my feet down. We stood and stood, circled and circled, inspecting every blade of grass, every detail of the scene: nearby tree, flag pole, fence, surrounding graves—grandfather, uncle—until finally, exhausted and somehow satisfied, we sat down.

*

Sister, do you remember sitting on the edge like that, the flowers a centerpiece, our mother below?

*

I want my mother back. And while I'm asking, I want all of my deceased and missing pets back, too. I want the dogs and cats, birds and mice, even the goldfish and turtles. I want every cat that was hit by a car back. I want the baby mice I found in the garbage, their eraser pink bodies covered in bits of lint and paper—I want them all back. And, I especially want my dog, Shorty, back—the one who was poisoned. The one who suffered on the cold floor of the laundry room while I watched through a rectangle of louvers at the base of the door, because my mother felt that death was something a door should be between.

*

My mother died a little after six in the morning exactly fourteen days after her seventy-eighth birthday on March 24, 1999. March—a difficult month. The nurse said my mother was awake when she completed her six a.m. rounds, but when she went back into her room fifteen or so minutes later, she was gone. Gone—what a word. Why can't they just say, "Your mother is dead?"

The Field

*A lengthening rectangle of light draws me to the edge
of memory, its ringed borders complicated*

*by design. I repeat and repose a question:
how to live out*

*the rest of my life? What if
I put my past away in the wrong drawer?*

*Up ahead a field, in it a bird,
a flower, a flame, a stream—Put it down*

*in this field next to the stream, a voice says, make it
a bed of leaves and moss, put a stone at its center*

*to mark its place, its passing. But you know
you'll never find its location again. It will*

*become like the grave of a pet you buried
in the woods and swore you'd never forget,*

*only years later to have a dim recollection
of the general location: the woods themselves,*

*maybe the north end, X number of yards
from the pond, a rise off the path. But which*

*way after that? Right or left? Near what
kind of tree? What kind of rock?*

*You should remember but you can't.
It all looks different now.*

My mother was weird about death. She was respectful and distant—rather matter of fact in regard to other people. In fact, when she called to tell me the next door neighbor passed away—laid right down in his garden and died—and I lamented about his children, she said, “Well, honey, life goes on.” But when it came to family, she was often inappropriate; however, not the way you might think. She wasn’t overly emotional, given to wailing or thrashing—was not that demonstrative—but she often embellished and even fictionalized the facts to fit her world view.

Several years before her own death when her older brother died, she told my sister and me that he most likely committed suicide—overdosed on pain pills to avoid a dreaded “death by cancer.” Both of my parents had an irrational, obsessively, shame-based fear of getting and dying from cancer. It was an undignified way to die and contracting it was somehow a mark against your character. My mother preferred to think of her brother’s death as something of an escape—that he had had a choice. Of course, more than likely he was so drunk that day, he probably couldn’t remember how many pain pills he had actually taken. But there was no use in challenging her because if we said, “Mom, Uncle Vince was an alcoholic and he probably drank himself to death,” she would respond, “No, no, he had cancer and he killed himself before the cancer got him.” Or, if we said, “Mom, Uncle Vince had cancer, do you think he killed himself?” she would, no doubt, answer, “Well, you know, he *was* an alcoholic.”

*

Wearing a bright green

- sweater,
- pants,
- and socks

for luck she said, my mother laid out her

- turquoise necklace and
- turquoise earrings,
- bronze eagle necklace,
- beaded bracelets,
- medicine bag,
- and other assorted

Native American jewelry on the radiation table for the attendants to see.

The room was:

- very large
- and dimly lit

and in it was:

- a very large machine,
- various smaller machines,
- assorted carts, chairs, stools and gurneys,
- a very long steel table, and
- a large picture window
- that looked into the control room.

The air was cool, the smell, medicinal and there was a distinct humming that came from the large X-ray machine. “That’s Zuni,” she said to the technician, a tall black man who hunched over the table, “and that’s Navajo.” He held the two small rings in the cup of his hand. “See the difference in design?” she instructed.

*

As the last extremity of day drops in the heat and the smoky light of dusk settles over rooftops and trees, a woman stoops, or sometimes squats to pull and dig with a small trowel. She shakes the dirt from her sandaled foot making her way around the backyard. It has rained recently and the weeds, each a bad memory, give up easily and she is pleased. But soon thoughts of eternity thicken and everything comes back: a mouthful of heart, certainly the mark of a fearful end. And a voice too big, swallowed, that keeps humming the way bees newly carapaced in mud persist in mild movements, unaware of the confines of their own creation.

When she stands and straightens she knows that later her back will be sore, that she will need a heating pad, soft words, a reminder, "you did too much." But for now, she just stares into her hands husked by the dark bits of earth, sensing, by mistake perhaps, and only for a moment, the evidence of a contrary life.

*

You sit on the floor with your sister looking at small cards. A minute ago you were sitting in a proper chair, in a proper room, before a proper desk, speaking in proper tones about the proper burial of your mother.

Do I have this right? Yes, this right.

A few minutes ago you were discussing other things:

thechurchtheservicethetimethecemetarytheobituarythelimosine

thechurchtheservicethetimethecemetarytheobituarythelimosine

The limousine. The limousine comes in two sizes, service for six or service for ten. You hear someone ask if there is a difference in price. No. You count on your fingers: father, sister, brother-in-law, nephew, self, partner, daughter, son-in-law, daughter.

Is that everyone? Yes, you think so.

In a day or two you will ride sideways in the ten-seater limousine feeling confused and disoriented. The once familiar streets and buildings, the straight-ahead view, will be blocked and you will think the driver is going the wrong way.

Will he drive too fast? No, he will drive too slowly.

The cards. You must pick out the funeral cards. Explanation: “these are for your guests to take with them after the service, a remembrance.” They are provided by the funeral home; they are complimentary up to a certain number. You are told that they will print your mother’s name, date of birth, and date of death on the back. You are allowed to pick from a box containing samples. This feels important, like the selection of wedding invitations.

You may select two from the following:

- Praying hands
- Sacred heart
- Baby Jesus
- Adult Jesus
- Suffering Jesus
- Mother Mary
- Father Joseph
- The Holy Family
- The Holy Trinity
- A Dove
- Pastoral scene

Your sister and brother-in-law are looking over your shoulder. *Is that Italian Renaissance?*

The cards are taken out for a closer look—spread out on the floor. You remember other times as children when you and your sister spent time like this on the floor playing games, drawing pictures, watching TV, listening to music, reading books, playing cards, curling each other's hair, talking, laughing. One year, on Christmas morning, we played under the tree with the bride dolls that were all the rage at the time. My mother made the bridal gowns and must have stayed up late nights sewing the heavy white satin with seed pearls and lace. The dolls themselves were slender and adult looking with dreamy eyes, rosy cheeks, and long dark hair. When we weren't playing with the bride dolls, they were positioned in the center of our twin beds with their full satin skirts arranged in a circle around them—fussy, shiny, elaborate.

A minute ago you were sitting in a proper chair, in a proper room, speaking in proper tones about the burial of your mother.

*

Below Reason

*There's no way to keep it up any longer—
better to sit and watch the snowfall*

*watching at first intently,
your eye catching a single flake*

*following its path up a little,
down, to the left, and down again*

*your eye not sure what it saw in the first place
yet, quick to pick up another flurry*

*over and over
until your eyes begin to flutter*

*like in REM following a dream
and you realize you're slipping a little*

*so you pull your focus back, eye
the whole scene.*

*But soon your eyes begin to trace them again
and no matter how many times*

*you raise your eyes up, they follow the movement
back down*

*below the view, because they have to,
because resistance: might stop the world.*

*

I don't know why I am so annoyed with my mother's friendliness. At the hospital she chats with parking attendants, strangers waiting for the elevator, secretaries, nurses, lab technicians, and the doctor. She loves to carry on with the doctor. And because I am the one pushing the wheelchair, these people expect me to take part in the conversation, or at the very least to acknowledge the conversation with a knowing nod or look. But, all I want to do is get my mother into the wheelchair, into the elevator, into the doctor's office, onto the radiation table, and back home safely. In fact, I have to get her to the oncology department for her radiation treatments every day for the next ten weeks.

But my mother has other ideas and expediency isn't one of them. What amazes me about these exchanges between my mother and these strangers is how willing they are to reveal themselves at the slightest invitation.

"Oh, I love your pin," my mother says to the oncology secretary.

"Thank you," the secretary will say, "my daughter gave it to me for my birthday."

"When is your birthday?"

"March 6th."

"Oh, we're both Pisces. Does your daughter live nearby?"

"Yes, but I don't see her much—she's so busy."

"I know what you mean. How old is she?" And on, and on, and on, while I stand waiting behind her. I am impatient but try not to show it because, inevitably, they always indicate how wonderful my mother is with an expression that says, *isn't*

she great? In my mind, I answer, *Yeah, but you didn't have to live with her growing up.*

Much later, I will struggle to remember every word my mother said on those occasions. Much later, I will weave all of these occasions into my grief and realize that my mother was a complicated woman. I will realize that she was, of course, heroic in the face of terminal illness, that she tried to make the best of a lousy situation, that she was, indeed, lonely in her illness and that her daily visits to the hospital for radiation were a welcome relief—a chance to get out of the house. Even though she was bone tired and getting weaker and thinner by the day, she actually enjoyed the visits to the hospital, enjoyed all of the special attention. At the time, however, I thought she was silly and trivial, not to mention insensitive about *my* feelings. What about *me*, I kept thinking. What about *my* feelings? She seemed oblivious to the rest of us—her family. Didn't we deserve more attention from her than we were getting? Why couldn't she talk to us about her pain, her loneliness, her fear? Instead, she found more and more irritating ways to be light and cheerful. She called the tattoo on her chest—put there so the oncology technicians would know exactly where to put the plexi-glass shield—her “artwork.” Never mind that every day I had to put a heavy ointment on the skin around the “artwork”—skin that ceased to look like skin; skin that became more and more shell-like—hardening and blackening with each treatment.

*

The Trait of Dread

*I don't want my mother to die—
more a confession than admission*

becoming rhythm, song, chant

*repeating slowly over and over
unfolding in a circular way:*

*a Magnificat that echoes, deepening
the silence between us—silent dread,*

*a dread that has its day, its night, its galaxies,
its end of the world—picture the scene:*

*an accident just before help arrives,
the slow, surreal actions of the victims,*

*the tension between already and not yet,
repelling all questions.*

But how to keep a silence that won't keep?

*Sleep maybe, but sleep puts dread to sleep
only partially—better to lie*

*face-down next to water, as close to the edge
as possible, then whisper the truth*

—let the water mirror it back to heaven.

*

After radiation, I accept my mother's invitation to lunch. My mother loves to "do lunch." Years ago, when I was a young wife and mother, she would find excuses to go shopping and out to lunch almost every Saturday. Neither of us drove at the time, so all I had to do was get my husband to take me over to her house and then we'd take the bus downtown. On special occasions or holidays, we might take one or both of my daughters along. My mother lived for these outings and I guess I did, too. Lunch was always "her treat" or she'd say, "this is on your father," waving a twenty dollar bill. I never argued with her about this—in fact, it was very welcome.

During lunch we would always talk seriously. She usually talked about my father and how damaged he was by his own father's suicide, "Your father was only fifteen years old when he found him, you know." Or, she would often talk about my grandmother and how terrible she was to my mother and her brothers growing up, locking them out of the house sometimes. She said her mother was a martyr and had a habit of sticking her head in the oven right around the time they got home from school every day. Once, my mother even admitted that she got married the first time just to get out of the house.

I always talked about my worries, that maybe my husband drank too much, or was too hard on the kids, or that the kids weren't doing well—one was skipping school the other had chronic headaches. My mother always told me not to put my whole life into my children. Of course, there were an endless number of other trivial topics, like the latest fashion, or newest hairstyle, which restaurant served the best

coffee, which store had the best deal—all while we lingered over coffee and cigarettes.

Later, as we shopped she would notice what I was looking at, like gloves or stockings, and most often she would buy them for me. Or, she would lead me to the perfume counter and tell me to pick the one I liked:

___ Obsession
 ___ White Shoulders
 ___ Eternity
 ___ Tabu
 ___ Knowing
 ___ Opium

“This is not a gift,” she would say, “just ‘a little something’ from me to you.”

I don’t remember when or why these lunches became such a chore for me. As I got older and more independent, the Saturday outings dwindled down to an occasional lunch usually around Christmas, or when I had to take her to a doctor’s appointment—she still didn’t drive. I was no longer married, the girls were grown and gone, and I didn’t smoke anymore either, all conditions that made my mother uneasy. “How will you get along in the world without a man,” she used to say, or “a woman without a man can never make it in today’s world.” My responses were equally, if not intentionally, aggravating, I’m sure. “When are you going to quit smoking? When are you going to cut down on the coffee? When are you going to eat right—when are you going to eat?” Toward the end, these were the questions I screamed in my head every single day that I saw her.

But today, we’ll have one more lunch together. It is a warm summer day and I don’t have to get right back to work, so we decide to find an outside café. We are

sitting under an umbrella at a curbside table. My mother has just ordered coffee and is lighting a cigarette. Her hands shake now—tremors, the doctor says, so watching her smoke is a tense experience. Will she drop the ash in her coffee, will she be able to get the cigarette to her mouth? I am very uptight. I should relax. After all, how many more times like these do we have left? The end is always looming, yet neither of us admits it, nor is willing to talk about it. Instead, we say the same stupid, trivial, and aggravating things to one another.

I am tired and depressed and don't feel like eating but order a salad anyway. My mother studies her menu for an inordinate amount of time with the waitress standing there, pen and pad in hand.

“Let's see [. . .] what shall I have [. . .]? I'm sooo tired of chicken.”

“How about a salad?”

“No [. . .] I think I'll have [. . .] the roast beef au jus.”

What a joke. She won't eat it. She has hardly eaten anything in the last few weeks and Dad says he doesn't know what's keeping her alive. But today, I refuse to ask her how much she weighs. Today, I will be good. Today, I will play along. It's a beautiful sunny day in June and I am having lunch al fresco with my mother.

But at just about the time her sandwich arrives, I notice a few bees hovering under our umbrella. By the time my salad is served, the number of bees has increased enough to be worrisome. My mother hardly notices. She shoos them away like flies. I am alarmed, but not for myself—they do not congregate anywhere near me—they are only interested in my mother. I check out the other tables for bees and when I

look back at my mother, I see that the bees have completely covered the shaky hand holding the sandwich. She is unconcerned and waves her cigarette around casually in protest while complaining about how my father doesn't do anything around the house. The waitress notices the bees and offers to seat us inside, but my mother won't have it, not on such a gorgeous day, she says. So I just sit there; waiting for her to swallow; one bee at a time.

*

Descent

*In the late afternoon, a curtain of snow falls
upon the shrubs and trees, otherwise bare and lean*

*against the slant of hills. Just now,
near the feeder, a white breasted nuthatch*

*jogs down a tree head first, joining
ground feeders and red-winged blackbirds—
epaulets in display.*

*Here and there a few cardinals, red
as papal vestments, ornament the thicket*

*darting to the feeder and back again
while zebra-backed woodpeckers*

*alternate between suet and seed, red heads
hammering a secret code, a history lesson:*

*how could I forget to live from the beginning
like the rhea and emu—birds who walked*

*the southern Gondwanaland, surviving
the break-up, the shifting landscape,*

*vulnerable to every misery, every predator
like the hawk attack at our feeder:*

life without peace—amen?

*How could I forget to live between
the silence and the solitude*

*set only inches away from the birds
who scatter instantly and so completely*

*that the mind can't comprehend
the sudden emptiness of the thicket,
or the small shadow*

*that drops to the ground in a faint
landing near a coil of barbed wire—*

*apricot beak perfectly silent
in the cradling snow?*

*

Gathering Name

And yes, it's true; I never look at the back of my knees—why should I?

They're none of my business, let someone else mind them, besides the ache is coming on again all over: legs, back, neck, head [. . .] feels like the flu hours away—not sick, but not right either. Did I mention I bumped my head today? Really cracked it. I tried to grab the cat from the heavy Dutch door kicking the bottom half closed, but the top stayed open, met my head at the corner. I can't seem to get things right, to work together, and I wonder how long the dead bird will lie on the porch before someone picks it up?

*

From the outside, it looks like the usual middle-class Florida house, one level, attached garage, Bermuda grass, palm trees, gardens, but as we get closer I see that in the gardens and around the trees are fake flowers—the plastic kind. They are unmistakably stiff in the prevailing breeze, not to mention overly colorful in a plastic way, and I can't help but remember, even now, how tacky my half-sister, Barb, can be. One year for Christmas, Barb made all of us wreaths from plastic six-pack holders that were spray painted and decorated with plastic flowers, pinecones, and such. She said she picked out the colors specifically for each family member. We were speechless. My mother defended her, but mine went right into the dumpster on the way home. That was a lifetime ago, but here are those damn flowers again.

Oh, for God's sake:

1. *Maybe she likes plastic flowers.*
2. *Maybe she was too sick to plant real ones.*
3. *Who cares anyway?*

As the taxi pulls into the driveway, I feel needy. I am sweating, have a massive headache, and need to use the bathroom. My younger sister, Kellie, is with me, and we have been on our cell phones trying to find the house, which, we discovered after we were already underway, was forty minutes from the Tampa airport. The cab driver doesn't understand English, but he does understand the near hysterical tone of our voices and gets us there quickly. In the driveway, we snatch our luggage out of the trunk.

Get it together will you?

Shut up!

*

Then there is Lori. Lori is Barb's partner, lover, espousal equivalent, whatever you want to call her. Lori greets us as we walk up the driveway and we ask the big question: "Is she still—alive?"

*

Barb has been near death before. About ten years ago she was lying in a hospital bed—condition: terminal. My mother called to say she had liver cancer. The rest of us, my father, husband, kids, sister, etc., weren't surprised. We had all just seen Barb at a recent family picnic after years of estrangement. She showed up with her daughter and granddaughter, and a new husband almost twice her age. She was only forty-three, but her physical appearance was shocking. Her skin and the whites of her eyes were the color of amber, and she had little red spidery marks all over her face. She seemed fine otherwise, laughing and joking, but at the food table a neighbor asked me in a whisper whether she had AIDS.

*

Gathering Name

*My name. Sometimes when I hear it
I am blank from unknowing.*

*Given to me partially: Jean from Regina
from a paternal grandmother*

*met only once or twice;
I know nothing of her habits,*

*passions, or demons,
and remain a derivation*

*of something implied—a bend in the river,
water diverted from the oak.*

*

I first met Barb when she was seventeen. We had come home to visit my grandparents—my father was in the military and we moved around a lot. My mother, sister, and I always visited my grandparents in between moves and my mother would invariably disappear for several hours at a time by herself. Sometimes she said she was going shopping but it didn't feel like she was going shopping. It felt like something else, it felt like a big secret. I used to sit on the edge of the big claw-foot bathtub and cry while my mother did her hair. She'd tell me to stop being so difficult, to find something to do, that she'd be back soon. But I hated being left with my elderly grandparents. My grandmother used to lock Kellie and me out of the house when we went outside to roller skate, but I didn't tell my mother. Instead, I just kept begging her not to go. Finally, on one of these trips, I learned that I was not the first-born that my mother had been married before, that I had another sister, older. I was only ten or eleven but felt ashamed and betrayed—somehow cheated. How could my mother have had another family before us? We were not allowed to talk about it much after the initial telling and Kellie delighted in remarking that I was no longer the older sister.

It was Barb's high school graduation, and she looked like a Barbie doll with brown hair. I don't know why I'd thought of her as my age because when I finally met her I was struck by how grown up she was. Her dress was bright green, tight at the waist with a big rustled skirt. She wore stockings and heels, her hair was done up in a bouffant beehive, and she even wore lipstick. She seemed nice. After the graduation, we all went to a cookout at my father's sister's house—an aunt and uncle

I barely knew. We ate steak, corn on the cob, and baked potato—my uncle put butter on his steak. Then Barb got a phone call and announced that she had to leave; I don't know why. Someone came to pick her up. We ate dessert in silence.

The next time I saw Barb was when we moved back to Rochester after my father retired early from the military—because of a medical condition, they said. He was away from home—in a hospital—for several months and when he came back, we moved. Something about an inner ear disease, I was told.

Barb had just gotten married to a man who rode a motorcycle. He reminded me of Elvis with his swept up hair and sad brown eyes. I was thirteen and I loved going over to their apartment—it felt so grown up. We saw them a lot in the next few years; they became regular members of the family, coming over for weekly dinners. Soon they started a family, and Kellie and I used to baby-sit regularly, but they drank a lot which upset my parents, and in time, we weren't allowed to go over to their house anymore. Eventually they moved out of the city to a trailer park with their kids; we only saw them on major holidays after that.

*

At the picnic we learned about the domestic abuse, the divorce, the boyfriends. It seemed logical that Barb had married an older man even if the circumstances were a little shady. Barb had become a nurse's aide for a community agency that worked with the elderly in their homes. It seemed that Barb took care of this man's first wife up until she died, after which, so the story goes, the man asked

Barb to marry him. “And a good thing, too,” my mother said, “at least she has a roof over her head.” I. Maxon Jones. Max, I don’t know what the “I” stands for, was in his seventies, a nice man with yellowy white hair and rather religious, and Barb was forty-five. They eventually moved to Tampa, Florida where Max died few years later—he was well into his eighties

*

The images at close range blur beyond the inner boundary. Shape becomes movement, all sound out of sync, dubbed like a foreign film, and color diffuses, more a feeling, an impression. Outside, the trees are already holy, and I imagine us being there worshipping the dark and light spots of each branch, offering up our grief until the flowers open, and give us their blessing.

*

Lori escorts us into the house. This is the first time I’ve met her. Kellie has been to Florida before to visit Barb and Lori—she is the good sister, and I am:

Please circle all that apply:

- a) not very friendly
- b) apathetic
- c) self-absorbed
- d) overly critical
- e) judgmental
- d) a bitch

Lori is a tall, heavy-set, light eyed, soft-spoken lesbian. She is relieved to see us; it is difficult for her to manage the situation. Lori has to leave the front door unlocked so

the hospice aides and the church people can come in when she's at work to take care of Barb. But recently, Lori has taken a leave of absence from her job as a security guard at the local hospital to be home with Barb full-time. She hopes she has enough sick/comp time to cover her expenses while she is out on leave, she tells us, as we drop our bags in the middle of the living room. This is the second partner she has lost to a terminal illness, and she looks ravaged and overwhelmed by her life. Before I have a chance to say a word, Kellie asks to see Barb and we are immediately ushered to her bedroom.

Wait just a second, hold on. I have a few questions, first.

Too late. We are in the doorway.

Kellie enters the bedroom with Lori. I do not—cannot—enter. I back out into the living room. She'd better be really dying this time. Not like last time when we all thought she had liver cancer.

*

Then speak so I don't have to and no one will suspect that I am deprived of speech, or desire, for that matter, that lies just beyond the music and slow talk, green with meaning. Go ahead, pick out the greens: maple, oak, sycamore, and pine—darker, much darker than the rest—frightening in its mimicry of the one great wound; the one we dream about falling into and wake up without.

*

From the moment my mother announced that Barb was terminal, we all suffered the long drive out to Barb and Max's rural house for birthdays, holidays, barbeques, and any other trumped-up reason, to

- a) partially alleviate our guilt,
- b) spend as much time with her as we could before she died,
- c) help Max carry the burden.

We endured overcooked pot roasts, bad wine, soggy salads, and the interminable game of sports on TV while Barb napped on the couch, the inevitable half-glass of wine on the coffee table next to her. I marveled at how heroic she was for not taking any pain medication. "No drugs," she insisted. "Promise me, no drugs."

When Barb went to the hospital, Kellie and I took turns going to visit; my mother couldn't go as often because her own health was not very good, and, like good daughters, we became her emissaries trying as best we could to help Max bear up under the unbearable—it hadn't been that long since his first wife had died. Max was at the hospital every day and we worried about his health, although nothing could keep him from Barb's side. We'd always get an update from Max on Barb's condition before entering her room: "She's had a bad day, she's resting comfortably, she wants to go home," he'd tell us. Sometimes I'd just sit there quietly keeping Max company, other times I'd sit on the bed, hold Barb's hand, whisper comforting sentiments: I'm here [. . .] you're not alone [. . .] we're all praying for you [. . .] it's okay to let go now [. . .] I love you. This continued for several weeks.

On one visit to the hospital, I ran into one of Barb's nurses when I got off the elevator. She rambled on and on about what a good girl Barb was, like she was a child, and how well she was holding up. I asked a few questions regarding her condition, her liver, her cancer, and the nurse looked at me strangely. She told me I really should ask the doctor those questions and sped off. I didn't think too much about it, but the next time I went to the hospital, I found Max just outside of Barb's room crying.

"What's happened?" I asked him, peering over his shoulder into the room.

"I don't know what I'm going to do [. . .] I don't know anything about alcoholism," he blubbered.

"What?"

The nurse I'd spoken to that day getting off the elevator, reported to the doctor that we, including Max, were under the wrong impression regarding Barb's condition. It turned out that Barb had an advanced case of cirrhosis of the liver brought on by alcohol abuse. She was indeed very sick and would have died from the toxic build up of fluid and ammonia in her blood if she hadn't been brought to the hospital. Basically, Barb was undergoing inpatient detox along with procedural drainings of her hugely bloated abdomen. I was told that the hospital staff had been routinely administering pain medication to keep Barb comfortable, the effects of which we had mistaken for near death delirium. Kellie said, "What difference does it make whether it's liver cancer or alcoholism, she's still sick, she still needs us." My mother took the news without batting an eye, and it is still unclear to me whether my mother knew

the truth all along—her story kept changing—or whether she was unable to believe the diagnosis, because, for years after, she insisted Barb was still terminal.

*

On this path words are just noise and I refuse to go any further, so I pick up a stick, draw a circle in the dirt.

*

In the living room, I take an inventory. Sofa, chair, end tables, coffee table, big screen TV, shelves, curios, and dolls. Dolls everywhere. Barb collects dolls. Some are large, some small. One rather large doll has a manufacturer's tag with the name Barbara on it, and another stands on an end table with a very large crocheted skirt. I don't like these dolls. Under a table, one doll, in particular, disturbs me; it is part of pair, a boy and a girl—brother and sister. They are both on toy tricycles and supposed to look like country kids with bare feet and calico clothing, but the boy doll, with his choppy hair and tiny white teeth, has a ghoulish air to him. I close my eyes for a moment, think about my father.

Yesterday. March 24, 2000. Yesterday—the first anniversary of my mother's death—I was in upstate New York. Kellie and I wanted to be together with my father to commemorate the day somehow, but all we could think of to do was to go out to dinner. It was a difficult dinner. My father really needed his walker, but refused to bring it, and Kellie and I spent most of the evening trying to meet his needs, getting

him from the car into the restaurant then to the table, getting his salad from the salad bar, pouring the cream in his coffee, repeating to him what the waitress was saying, helping him order, etc. No one really wanted to talk about the loss we were all feeling, but, of course, at some point, it came up and I thought my father was going to lose it, so I changed the subject. We talked about my divorce and how it was progressing, and the grandchildren. It was a relief to get him back home.

Now, a commotion from Barb's room. She is awake and wants to get up. Kellie and Lori are helping her up.

Why?

She wants to get up.

So? Tell her that she can't, that she has to stay in bed.

Taking small laborious steps, in a sort of a monkey-in-the-middle set up: Kellie in front, Lori in back, they inch out of the bedroom into the dining room, out onto the patio toward the pool.

This is crazy. A dying person doesn't do these kinds of things.

What are you, an expert on dying?

She can't be really dying.

I follow them out to the pool; stand over on the far side. Kellie and Lori help Barb sit on the edge of the pool. When she puts her feet in the water, from out of nowhere, a black and white dog bounds into the scene, barking, jumping, licking.

Party's over.

*

Nothing lasts forever, not even my bad mood, or my shock over Barb's condition, or the overwhelming anxiety that I am facing another death. I am here because I am Barb's family, and because Lori shouldn't have to go through this by herself. I am here because this is what my mother would want me to do. I am here to help Barb die.

*

TO DO LIST:

- ✓ *Make coffee*
- ✓ *Check medication schedule*
- ✓ *Prep meds for the day*
- ✓ *Wash dishes*
- ✓ *Write a grocery list*
- ✓ *Make phone calls*
- ✓ *Make appointment with Barb's social worker*
- ✓ *Talk to hospice aides about how to change bed linens*
- ✓ *Laundry*
- ✓ *Vacuum*
- ✓ *Feed dog*

*

Lesson # 1 – Pain Management

Pain—the number one concern of hospice staffers. It's important to understand the cycle of pain, and the need to get control of it, they tell us. The social worker and the hospice nurse impress upon us the necessity of pain medication and how it works to alleviate pain. “The body needs to be relaxed, in essence, comforted, in order to die and it is your job to administer the medication on time, no matter what. This is pain management.” Lori confesses that she has not been giving Barb all of her medication, that she didn't think she needed so much of it.

If you do not do this correctly, they warn us, Barb's pain may get to a point of no return, beyond any kind of management. “Believe me,” the nurse admonishes Lori, “you don't want that to happen.”

Lesson #2 – Comfort Care

- Keep the room warm and dimly lit, shades drawn. Bright light disturbs the dying.
- Play soft background music, or keep the TV on, or a movie running in the VCR. Back- ground noise is a comfort to the dying.
- Socialize in the presence of the dying. Visitors are welcome.
- Talk to and not about the dying patient, they can hear you even if you think they can't.

Lesson #3 – Physical Death

Each death is unique and individual and the following may or may not occur in order:

- Relaxing of the lower jaw
- Eyes partially open, pupils dilated
- Swelling of the hands and feet
- Apnea
- Possible incontinence
- Death rattle

*

What Must Come

*It is easier to carry my beliefs inside me
brooding
over them like counterfeit eggs.
I meant to say this,
and something else: that my moods make
owls and rabbits
who cannot speak, but send pictures
that arrive
in waking dreams, and sometimes
I hear trees
singing in accompaniment,
their songs
often in harmony and chant
then I know
a story is coming to visit
so I close my eyes
to what must come.*

*

I think I killed my sister. I think I killed my sister with a dropperful of palliative, yet lethal, medication given under the tongue every two hours. It arrived in a white bag paper bag from the drugstore, hand delivered. Our instructions were clear. I made up another schedule and we took turns; none of us were sleeping much anyway. It had been almost a week since Kellie and I arrived and we were agonizing over the decision to leave. How much longer could we stay? Another week probably wouldn't be possible. Kellie and I both had fairly new jobs, and we had both already taken a lot of time off during our mother's sickness. Our jobs, our families, our lives, were waiting. No, not waiting, they were calling to us more urgently every day, and still, Barb hung on, because, the doctor said, she had a strong heart and she was so young.

Apnea—one breath a minute—for days now. We sit on the bed with her, whisper farewells, hold our breath. Sometimes we watch movies. How many times have I half watched *Nunsense* and the sequel, the name I can't remember, with Whoopi Goldberg trying to act like a Catholic nun? And the singing. Christmas carols [. . .] in the spring [. . .] in Florida.

But before Barb becomes completely unresponsive, we take turns lying on her queen-size, sleigh bed and visit with the church friends who stop by every day, or just rest. Mostly, Barb is sleeping. It's awkward at first, lying on someone else's bed, a bed she shares with a partner, someone else's sheets, someone next to you, dying. But Lori calls it a slumber party, and sometimes all three of us lie on the bed together with Barb. Lori at the top, Kellie and me, propped up with pillows, at the bottom,

Barb on her side of the bed. Other times, we switch and I am at the top. We talk and talk and talk. I learn all about Lori and her life, her life with Barb. I listen to Kellie tell Lori all about her life, her husband, her son. I talk to them about my life, my divorce, school, new love. And in between, in the silence, Whoopi and her adventures play out before us. Whoopi with her habit on; Whoopi with her habit off. And Whoopi singing—singing with the choir. Of nuns. “Silent Night.”

And, leaning back against the pillows, the three of us exhausted, the white package still unopened on the kitchen counter, the church people gone, Barb’s breathing more labored, and with Whoopi on in the background, my eyes close for a moment. And, while my fingers finger the thin braid of a gold bracelet around Barb’s wrist, Whoopi begins the Christmas carols for what seems like the hundredth time. And, right before we begin the administration of the clear liquid, dropperful after dropperful—“Once you start this, there is no turning back,” the nurse says; before the rapid swelling of Barb’s hands and feet—evidence that the kidneys are shutting down; before the incontinence we were told about but fail to prepare for; before the gurgling in her throat that sounds like drowning—no, choking; before the snapping sound of her chest every time she tries to inhale and the gust and long groan of every exhale; before her pupils dilate and her irises—a blue I’ve seen only once in a glacier, in Alaska, when I was a child, when my father was stationed there—grow cloudy; before all that

B a r b s i n g s :

She sings: "Silent Night."

With Whoopi Goldberg.

"Silent Night / Holy night /

All is calm / All is bright [. . .]" The whole thing. Barb and Whoopi.

And then [. . .]

and then [. . .]

[. . .] just Whoopi.

*

Vigil

*Finally. Easter breathes lilies open
sticky with white*

*while knots in the tree-boles listen
with secret ears*

to a robin stretching a worm from its earth.

*Somewhere else—in town, maybe
a woman lies on her side*

*in a unmade bed, her back
dipping a little*

*into the cradling mattress
the way a river-bank meets water*

*the edges overlapping—
wet land in between.*

*In one hand, small beads move
a little at a time*

*each prayer rising like a delicate moth
from trembling fingers*

*while the other hand rests on a hip
holding back the calm desire*

to move on to something new.

*

Walking the Branches

Suppose on the 184th day of the year I decide to move to the country where I might notice the small things—the ground and how it dips then rises then dips again, the little blue flowers on the side of the road, and the crescent moon that hooks into a pinkening sky. And, up ahead a yellow sign flashes: Bump Ahead. Not much to go on [. . .] but the net impulse to move forward.

*

You wonder about people sometimes. You wonder why, for example, when you're driving, you sometimes see people laughing, smiling, or talking to themselves. Singing you can understand, but laughing—alone—it's too weird. You wonder about other things, too. You wonder why people spit in the stairwells of the college where you work. Must be men. Women don't spit in general, let alone in stairwells. So why do men feel compelled to spit there? Dominance, contempt for stairwells, contempt in general, a male thing? You wonder about alpaca who are known to hum softly, and who, unlike llamas, do not spit. You wonder why the hospital emergency staff cleaned the floor before you entered the cubicle to see your father.

*

August 1, 2001. The doctor explains the situation to us. It seems your father has had a massive cerebral hemorrhage. They have had to defibrillate him several times to get a heartbeat and your father is on a respirator. The outlook is grim; death is imminent. At the moment, he is being kept alive by the respirator, what do we want to do?

“What do we want to do? What do you mean what do we want to do?”

*

“We can’t keep shocking him. The excess blood in the brain has caused a neuro-cardiac reaction signaling the heart to stop beating. Do you have a living will or health care proxy?” My sister, Kellie, keeps my father’s living will in her brief case, which, at four in the morning, she has with her. She produces it; her husband shifts in his chair.

The doctor explains what will happen next. I should call someone, I think. My daughter Jennie, I suppose. She’s a nurse, and I could probably get a hold of her at this hour because she and her husband are in the process of separating, and she sleeps downstairs on the couch now. No answer. I leave a terrible message I know I’ll regret later. The doctor gets up from his chair.

“Wait. Hold on. So you will take him off the respirator?”

“Yes.”

“Then he will die?”

“Yes.”

“Right away?”

“Fairly soon. Do you want to see him?”

“Yes.”

“Ok. It won’t be long.”

We wait.

*

You wonder why you took time to make coffee before coming to the hospital. You wonder why you didn’t go over to your father’s house yesterday to make sure he was okay. You wonder why you were the one to hear the phone ring; you usually sleep through everything. You wonder why it’s taking so long.

The doctor appears with a security guard *why a security guard* you are escorted through a labyrinth of hallways finally a curtained place people are speaking sorry they say *why are they saying they’re sorry what’s happened* you rush to you father’s side head tilted back mouth open ears deep purple a misunderstanding life support has already been removed *myfatherhasalreadydied* you hold your father’s hand stare at the floor for a long time here and there you notice a few remnants swabs and gauzes hospital stuff and swipe marks you wonder if the last sound your father heard was the sloshing of a mop.

*

Morning brings industry, a plume of geese, yellow, the color of cowardice. I am a griffin made of stone and no emotion is the final one. Nor is this the end, a rumble of panic, a reflection of sky, and the anguish of never looking up from a list of things to do: post office, bank, grocery store. Now, grief branches over me, all time is local, and no objection is prohibited by God.

*

September 11, 2001. Twin towers. National tragedy. Forty-one days since my father died. *Thirty days has September, April, June, and November.* Forty-one days not including the day he died—the summer definitely over. Labor Day. Work. *Must go back to work.* No more time to fold the sweaters, shirts, socks, ties. *Should I keep any of these?* Bag up the rest: coats, caps, scarves, gloves. The Salvation Army—furniture in the driveway. Glider chair, end table, reading lamp, bed, desk. The rest to the curb.

*Yes, I see it—duff sparkling in the understory
at the very bottom of the forest.*

September 11, 2001. Still hot, leaves still green. I am at my desk at the College when I hear the first report. A plane has crashed into one of the World Trade towers. Rescue workers on the way. Not much else.

*Let's stop here, lie down on its sponginess
intoxicated for awhile.*

Near the mailroom, a few students gather around a TV. There it is: the tall blue-gray edifice—smoke billowing out of the top third of the building. Probably an aeronautical malfunction. Still, not much to go on, or talk about.

Go ahead, sprinkle some over me.

Then more news: another plane, the other tower. More televisions turned on. Speculation. Disbelief. Hubbub.

Further news: more planes—the Pentagon, Pennsylvania, the President in the air on Air Force One, the Vice-President: whereabouts unknown.

Evacuation. The College is evacuated. Chaos. The parking lots all jammed. It will be hours before we can get out.

Who to call?

What to do?

I need a cigarette. *Does any one have a cigarette?* Marlboro red. I'm in my car smoking a Marlboro red I borrowed from a student, who says I should set a better example. Students exit the building, high-fiving one another because classes have been canceled. I listen to the radio, try to remember the things my father taught me about emergency preparedness, try to remember my training as a military dependent.

I wonder what would happen if I put a handful

in a pot and watered it?

As a career military man, a “lifer” in the United States Air Force, my father’s main stateside duties included posts in Arizona, Nebraska (twice), and Alaska. In

order to move up in rank, he had to accept new positions as they became vacant, usually every three to four years. And always somewhere else in the country—of course, we had to move. That’s just the way it was. But I never got over it—always the new kid in a new school, new playgrounds, new rules, new pecking order. My mother, however, seemed to revel in her life as a military wife. She certainly played the part, reminding my sister and me that our behavior directly affected our father’s career, and that moving every few years gave us the opportunity to see new places—an “education” unavailable to most civilians. For the rest of her life, my mother never missed an opportunity to tell people that we were in Alaska when it was made a state in 1959.

*Here, let me put some in your mouth
and a little in each nostril,*

However glamorous this fact was for my mother, it was wasted on us because as children, my sister and I lived in constant fear of two things that overshadowed everything else: that our behavior—bad grades, insubordination, breaking the rules, sloppiness, any other conduct unbecoming of a military dependent—might tarnish our father’s reputation; that our father might be killed in a war.

*let me pack each ear gently
there—now let’s wait*

September 1958. Elmendorf Air Force Base, Anchorage, Alaska. The Eleventh Air Force, Alaskan Command. Size: 13,035 acres. Mission: House the Alaskan NORAD Region composite wing with F-15s, C-130s, E-3As, and C-12s;

NORAD Region Operations Center; Rescue Coordination Center; transit Air Mobility Transports Command. I begin first-grade, my sister, kindergarten.

until skin, hair, and bone fall

away like shriveling bark

January 3, 1959. Alaska—the last frontier—becomes the 49th state of the union. I learn to ice skate on a frozen parking lot in our housing quadrant. Winter: sixty-four days straight without the sun. My father has to plug his car into an electric post we share with four other families every night so it won't freeze.

revealing the mind-pink center

not gray, not jelly-like at all

January 1959. Revolution in Cuba. Fidel Castro and his followers are successful in overthrowing the Fulgencio Batista's regime. We are on yellow alert. My father works long hours and sometimes I don't see him for days.

more a flower, a delicate tea rose

curly around the edges

May 1960. American U2 reconnaissance plane shot down over Russia. Pilot Francis Gary Powers is sentenced to ten years in Russian prison. The amount of sunlight is increasing, soon another summer and eighty-four days of straight sun. We are on red alert and practice base evacuations—without my father. My father must stay on the base. My mother and the doctors agree that I should be put on tranquilizers for my nervous condition.

with its tightly compacted petals

just beginning to unfold.

It has been over an hour and the parking lot is finally clearing a little. Both of the World Trade towers have collapsed and hospital and rescue workers prepare for heavy casualties. In line now, I inch my car forward.

Will it always be this way:

body and soul, hardwood and pine,

I wanted my father to be with us every time we evacuated the base in Alaska, but he never was. I was in school when the civil defense warnings sounded, my mother always waited outside. We lived close enough to the school so that we could walk home to the awaiting car which was packed with the necessary survival gear:

- WARM CLOTHES
- BLANKETS
- WATER
- FIRST AID KIT
- IMPORTANT DOCUMENTS
- MONEY
- GASOLINE
- FLASHLIGHT/BATTERIES
- RADIO

We carpoled with neighbors who had second cars. I remember a station wagon, other kids, my mother's voice, the long ride. *Where did we go?* How far away could we have gotten from the Russians, or from their submarines, or their Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles? Any map will plainly show that the Russians could have practically walked across the narrow band of islands that almost

connected the continents. Did we drive straight north, all of the way up to Barrow? Or did we drive to Fairbanks, the state capital? *Wouldn't that have been one of the main targets?* Maybe we drove north, then east into Canada. I'm not sure, but I do know that at least once, we drove to a glacier.

and water

reflected on the underside of trees

There are only a handful of main highways, and over 10,000 glaciers in Alaska, so somewhere between Barrow and Anchorage, or east toward the Canadian border, we found glaciers. Big blue glaciers. But I was usually too traumatized on these occasions to get out of the car, like everyone else, to get a good look at them. I do remember that they were enormous and bright aqua blue. *And something else:* I was afraid that if I got out of the car, a piece of the ice would break off, the piece I was standing on, and I would be stranded, separated from the others, on an ice floe headed out to sea. In fact, I didn't want anyone to get out of the car. Especially my mother, who always tried to make a game out of it. I wanted to get as far away from the glaciers as possible. I wanted to go home.

frittering with the same old question,

one vowel at a time, gliding over rock

When I pull into the driveway, I notice some of the neighbors standing on their front porches, a few on their lawns. This is odd in the middle of the day, but then this is no normal day. What's most odd about it is that they seem to be just standing, almost pacing, around. No one is really talking. When I get out of the car,

it is quiet. The neighbors on either side are looking upward toward a milky-white sky. I look up, too. Nothing, except the rustling of tree-tops in the warm, close air.

that remains forever silent,

mute in response to everything

The autumn of 1962, in Omaha, Nebraska began this way—summer hanging on well into September and then, like a door slamming shut, October and a hard frost. That’s the way it is on the great plains of the mid-west. When the prairie is done with the heat of summer, it just lets go—no resistance to the changing wind that sweeps down from the north and then gusts straight across.

including the labyrinth of roots

clinging to the jagged edge

On October 16, 1962—the day before my tenth birthday—another civil defense warning exercise. They have become regular practice at school lately, although who can get used to the piercing sound of the siren and the ominous march, single file, out of the classroom into the hall. Crouched up against an inside wall, head tucked between my knees, fingers laced together behind my neck, I have no way of knowing that the Cuban missile crisis has just begun. No longer on tranquilizers—I burned my leg severely on a heat register in school without knowing and my mother said, “That’s it with those pills”—I regularly chew the inside of my mouth until it bleeds, and every time the news comes on TV, I hide under the sofa pillows pressing them hard over my eyes and ears.

of calm—the undesirable calm

in the name of which we keep still,

Every night for the next fourteen days, television audiences everywhere are educated about long-range ICBM's. Of course, I already know about them since I live on Offutt Air Force Base, headquarters for the Strategic Air Command for the United States of America. Translation: location of the largest repository of long-range ICBM silos in the country—we are a prime target.

waiting for a sign to grace us

a butterfly, a small toad.

The TV is the first thing I think about when I unlock the front door and enter the house. I watch the reports for hours, barely moving, except to open the windows and answer the phone—family and close friends only. I try to comprehend what is happening, to decipher the language of disaster. It's as if they're speaking another language. I know the words: terrorism, hijacking, plane crash; I know the locations: New York City, Pennsylvania, Washington, D.C.; I know the buildings: Pentagon, World Trade Towers. I just can't seem to make them all fit together. It's a problem of decoding.

Come, come closer, tell me a story.

My father was concerned about the codification of language; he was a radio operator during World War II. He translated English into Morse code and back again from the cavernous interiors of B52 bombers—probably things like coordinates or distress calls or command orders.

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("Routine night flight. Bad weather approaching. Please advise.")

I imagine him tapping out his messages high above the Atlantic and listening in his headphones for the rhythm of an answer.

*

My father wasn't the kind of man who wasted words. When he spoke, every word counted even if it was a language of military acronyms and slang:

ACRONYM/SLANG	DEFINITION	TRANSLATION
BX	Base Exchange	Grocery Store
SOP	Standard Operating Procedure	Rules
SOL	Shit Out of Luck	Too bad
FOB	Full of Beer	Drunk talk
OJT	On the Job Training	School
TDY	Temporary Duty	In between posts
NLT	Not Later Than	Used with time (NLT 9 am)
R & R	Rest & Relaxation	Recreation, vacation
Hit the sack, sack time	Sleep	Go to bed, bedtime
Package Store	Liquor store	Liquor store
Chief	My father	Nickname for himself
Little Corporal	My mother	Term of endearment
The Troops	Us kids	"How are the troops today?"
No Sweat	Affirmative	"No problem."
Don't Sweat the Small Stuff	Details unimportant	"You worry too much."
Up on the Roof	Aircraft carrier deck	"None of your business, or I don't know." Ex: "Where's Mom?" "Up on the roof."

*Teach me your language: the one
from before birth and after death*

My father was as spare with his emotions and he was with his language. During the Cuban missile crisis we saw my father only once. He was allowed to come home, see his family, get clean clothes, and return to work. Work: The USSTRATCOM Command Center—an underground complex, which housed the Intelligence Operations Center where my father worked—a specially-designed, two-level, 14,000 square-foot reinforced concrete and steel structure, able to withstand a high altitude nuclear blast. Later, I heard my mother repeat to a close friend what my father must have told her, “Kennedy is selling us down the river [. . .]”

To this day, I’m still not sure what he meant, but I do know that my father must have been very stressed to have said something like this. And I imagine that he was very worried about us, our safety, because there was no evacuation plan this time. All we had to rely on were the training classes: “How to Survive a Nuclear Attack,” that my mother was required to attend prior to the crisis.

*the mantra, the tone that calls us
to meditate—look, look up now*

I am dozing now, exhausted and depressed from the day’s vigil in front of the TV, from the news reports, the repetition of the ghastly images: terror stricken New Yorkers running down the street barely ahead of the tower’s concussion, the wave of dust and debris; the live footage of the actual explosions of airplanes and buildings; the shock on the faces of the hospital personnel who waited all day for survivors who never came; the overwhelming image of the rescue workers, insect-like, crawling

over the monumental mountain of smoking debris. How many horrific images can the eyes take in a day without the need to close them for a few minutes, knowing that closing them will not change anything, will not erase what has happened, but still needing to close them just the same?

a hawk circles the clearing

slowly, slower

We didn't have a basement in Omaha. A fact I kept in the forefront of my mind every single day. The military housing complex, Capehart, was actually not on the base, but more like a suburb of the base. It was very large and had two elementary schools. My mother worked as a secretary for the principal of one of them, a circumstance which was both comforting and embarrassing. Comforting because of my emotional state—we also lived in tornado country and embarrassing because of my age—who wants their mother present at school every day? The houses were either very large, four-bedroom duplexes with no basements, or single family ranches with basements. The duplexes were for families and the ranches were for couples. Every other house was a ranch. This is how it worked: in the event of a tornado or a nuclear attack, we were to take our emergency stuff and go across the street to the neighbor's basement.

But what if we don't get there in time?

We'll always have a warning.

see his head turning this way and that,

watch each long feather finger the air

Once during a tornado alert, we actually did go across the street to the neighbor's basement. It was like a party, music was playing and people were making drinks. Other families were there, too. But not my father. He was away somewhere in a hospital. It seemed like he was gone a long time. *A month?* When he returned he had presents for us that he had made—hand tooled in leather. For my mother: a leather journal with roses and her initials, VMK on the back. For me: a leather change purse with an Irish setter on the flap that snapped and my name, JEAN, on the back.

for a message only morning can send,

only morning can answer

Shortly after that, on August 28, 1964, at the age of 45, my father retired from the United States Air Force for “medical” reasons. My mother, sister, and I wore pastel linen dresses with white gloves to my father's intimate retirement party held in the general's outer office. I remember cake, full dress uniforms, a bullet-proof door with a small window, and two phones on the general's desk: one black, the other red.

or answer for.

*

It is dark when I wake up, the TV is still on and the news reports about the terrorist attack continue, but the first thing I think about is my father. It is like this every day. And, everyday since his death I have had to go over to the house to clear it out, prepare it for sale, although most of the rooms have already been emptied.

About a week after my mother's death, my father called to say he was throwing things out, to come over and take whatever we wanted—my sister and I. He was throwing away my mother's things. I didn't get there in time to get the perfume, make-up, hair things. I would have liked to have had one of my mother's lipsticks, maybe some perfume, a hair barrette. He knew enough not to touch the jewelry, my sister and I divided it between us, and we begged him not to touch the Christmas ornaments or any more of our mother's things. He agreed, but said, "Better hop to it." So my sister and I folded and bagged up all of our mother's clothes, coats, hats, shoes, and purses for the Salvation Army.

Her purses. My mother saved all of her used purses, enough to fill one of those large, green, plastic, leaf bags. She had every color: white for summer, brown and rust for fall, black and red for winter, beige and pastels for spring; every style: shoulder, hand, clutch, tote; and type: canvas, vinyl, leather, beaded, corduroy, denim.

My sister and I carted away box after box of our inheritance: art supplies, Christmas ornaments, china, linens, pictures, books, knick-knacks—things we couldn't bear to part with. We stripped her bedding, emptied drawers. *Should I keep my mother's curlers? What about her glasses?* It didn't seem right to throw them away.

Then my father stepped up the process. He cleared out the whole house—garage, basement, attic—everything—until just the bare necessities were left: some furniture, lamps, dining table and chairs, TV, etc. But nothing was left of what once made it a home. The bookcases were empty, the hutch and corner cabinet in the

dining room were empty, nothing hung on the walls, even the little chalkboard in the kitchen was gone. There wasn't so much as a vase or a candy dish or any other ornamental object anywhere in the house. Besides the newspaper, ashtray, letter opener, and remote control, the only extras my father allowed himself were the dozen or so framed family pictures that he crowded onto the coffee table. I wondered why he put them there instead of by his chair where he always sat, until one day, when I stopped by to see him and found him napping on the couch; I realized that he had arranged the pictures so he could see them when he lay down and when he woke. I was just beginning to realize the extent of his grief.

Within a few months, my father had the inside of the house painted and a new kitchen floor put in. He was on a mission. He said he didn't want me or Kellie to have to go through the horrible task of cleaning out the house like some children did when their parents died. We protested but it didn't stop him. And, when that was done, he went through all of his files and began shredding things—all of his military papers, my mother's divorce papers, personal documents. All that remained were his will, insurance policies, deed to the house, and burial information. I was afraid he was going to commit suicide.

*

At the window, a reflection, a caricature, treacherous and mocking. Outside in a field of snow, a dark figure drifts to the edge, opens a wrist, waits for the gush,

presses a thumb on the hose of it spraying a landscape in a controlled sweep, then, writing a name, falls face up into the center, into the thick of it—like before.

*

He slept on the sofa more and more frequently and refused all invitations to socialize with the family—even on the holidays. In the first year after my mother died, when I stopped at the house to see him and found him asleep on the couch, he would get right up and sit in his chair, but in the second year, after Barb died, he wouldn't make any attempt to sit up. In fact, if I went into the kitchen to get something, maybe make some coffee, he would go right back to sleep. Sometimes I would just sit there, sipping coffee while he slept, other times I would make use of the time and fill his medication box, or throw a load of laundry in. The doctor told me that in addition to having small strokes, my father was very depressed and losing weight. *But he'll only eat TV dinners.* The doctor warned me about suicide. *I know, I know, stop saying that.* Sometimes when the doctor called me into the exam room to see my father, I found him crying.

The doctor said his brain was like Swiss cheese from the onslaught of the strokes and he worried about his safety living alone. *But he refuses to leave his home.* Eventually he stopped eating anything more than bread and water.

It was toast—don't be so dramatic.

I tried to cook for him but he just wanted to sleep.

For God's sake, let him sleep.

The last time I saw my father was to take him for a routine follow-up with the doctor. I helped him into clean clothes, he had become very weak, and decided to try and shave his scruffy white beard. I went right out and bought an electric razor because he wouldn't let me shave him with a razor.

But you bought the wrong kind.

His beard was too long and I realized I should have bought clippers. I ended up trying to shave him with the sideburn trimmer, which pulled and pulled. He didn't seem to mind, kept his eyes closed. He instructed me to shave "up" against the grain.

Can't you do anything right?

I winced, wished I could make things easier.

At the doctor's office, my father could barely stand being in the wheelchair, he wanted to lie down. A nurse helped him onto the examining table, where he curled up and slept until the doctor came in. When the doctor came in, I could tell that he was appalled by my father's condition. He didn't bother to do much of an exam; instead, he woke my father, held his hand for awhile, and then told him he had to go to a nursing facility. "You don't want your daughters to have to go through the ordeal of finding you on floor at home, do you, Bob?" My father tried to protest but the doctor was assertive. My father stared at him for a few minutes and then he closed his eyes. As soon as the nurse came in to help my father back into the wheelchair, I rushed out to find the doctor.

What did he mean? What should I do? He wanted to die at home?

The doctor repeated his views about the nursing home. I said I would talk it over with my sister.

That's it! As soon as I get him settled, I will call my sister. He will just have to go—that's all there is to it!

I made my father some soup which he ate a little of and then I made him comfortable on the couch. He took off his watch and his rings and I put them on the coffee table next to the picture of my mother. I went out to the kitchen and started cleaning up. While I washed the dishes, I thought about the time I found all those baby mice on the garage floor, they must have been inadvertently dumped out of the garbage can by the garbage men. I was about 10 or 11 years old. I asked my father if I could bring them into the house to try and save them. He warned me that they probably wouldn't make it, but that I could try if I wanted to. I put them in matchboxes stuffed with cotton, placed them around the furnace with the little drawers partially open so they could breathe. I checked on them every hour until I went to bed. In the morning they were all dead. *Dumb mice.*

You're not going to call your sister, are you?

*

Absence

*While you were gone, hay that had been cut
and left to stripe the field*

*was baled up into spools
and dropped in no particular pattern
on the hillside
like golden loaves of bread*

*and clouds feathering a distant sky
turned first gold, then pink, then black
while corn tasseled row by row
in the rimming light.*

*While you were gone, the moon rose
almost full
and Mary and Joseph came back
to reclaim their child—
just in time
before the earth shook us to bits
causing the rivers to stop
even the creek behind the mill
shriveled—leaving fish to carry on
in their dry prison.*

*While you were gone, the world ended
and an "Angel of the Lord" appeared
saying, Here—here—
over here—
and some ascended into spirit,
into thin air, some
reconfigured into nature.
I became a tree—not a real tree,
but the breath of tree—a dream
walking the branches.*

*

Afterword

In the past if you had a story to tell, you sat down and wrote a novel. Today, we have the option of writing in another literary genre, often called the “fourth genre,” that is, creative non-fiction. Most often, this kind of writing is categorized as literary memoir or autobiography leaving little room for the kinds of artistic associations we are used to when we encounter the canonical genres of fiction, poetry, and drama. Recently, however, the creative essay has drawn the attention of critics becoming the focus of speculation, criticism, and wonder as writers shift their interest from one genre to another in order to revive what seems to have become the common impulse toward a storytelling narrative. Further defined, the creative essay, according to Vivian Gornick, is a “sustained narrative prose controlled by an idea of the self under obligation to lift from the raw material of life a tale that will shape experience, transform event, [and] deliver wisdom” (91).

Such is the nature of *Walking the Branches* as it attempts to tell a story of wave after wave of death and grief not so much from the perspective of hindsight as from the realized urgency of the present moment. These poems and essays explore a singular experience of an unusual grieving not found in contemporary volumes of poetry or in the current literature of grief. Because of the unusual timing of each death, grief was not fully experienced for one death before another death occurred, leaving precious little space for the kind of informed hindsight and physical distance needed to write poetry. In fact, the poems that were written during this period of time felt more and more restrictive and limiting as each death occurred, and, in reality,

stopped coming altogether. The creative essay was the most comfortable format in which to sort out the complicated feelings and tangled thoughts of such an experience, yet I longed for the inclusion of the poems as well as the other forms of expression. A conflict ensued resulting in a search within the current creative non-fiction literature for not only a similar experience, but for similarities in regard to issues of craft.

What I found was an entire sub-genre of essay writers who seem to understand the connection between poetry and essay. Annie Dillard, in *The Best American Essays* (1989), asserts that “the essay may deal with metaphor better than the poem can in some ways, because prose may expand what the lyric poem must compress. Instead of confining a metaphor to half a line, the essayist can devote to it a narrative, descriptive, or reflective couple of pages, and bring forth vividly its meanings” (Introduction). Many poets such as Naomi Shihab Nye, Jane Brox, and Mary Karr, to name just a few, have crossed or blurred the boundaries between poetry and the memoiristic essay at some point in their writing. Even fiction writers like J. M. Coetzee and Michael Ondaatje (who also writes poetry) have crossed over into memoir utilizing writing talents and devices from their genre to create a more personally distinctive voice.

These writers, and a host of others, are exploring their pasts through the retelling of memories to find out what they know about themselves, their relationships with others, and ultimately their relationship with the world. This is because memoiristic writing is as much about the process as it is about the product,

combining both memory and imagination. Cynthia Ozick, in “She: Portrait of the Essay as a Warm Body,” says:

An essay is a thing of the imagination. If there is information in an essay, it is by-the-by, and if there is an opinion, one need not trust it for the long run. A genuine essay rarely has an educational, polemical, or sociopolitical use; it is the movement of a free mind at play.

Though it is written in prose, it is closer in kind to poetry than to any other form. Like a poem a genuine essay is made of language and character and mood and temperament and pluck and chance. (114)

It is the process of recalling memory, and for a time reliving all of the emotion that goes along with it, that provides the experience of personal discovery. Patricia Hampl, in her essay, “Memory and Imagination,” confesses that memory “is not a warehouse of finished stories, not a gallery of framed pictures” (26). Hampl continues:

If I approach writing from memory with the assumption that I know what I wish to say, I assume that intentionality is running the show. Things are not that simple [. . .] the heart, the guardian of intuition with its secret, often fearful intentions, is the boss. Its commands are what a writer obeys—often without knowing it. (28)

So it would seem that the memoirist, like the poet and the fiction writer, has to pay particular attention to the relation he or she has with unconscious impulses when composing, no matter how well intended his or her own agenda might be. Hampl

says the riddle of her feelings is like a culprit who wishes to be apprehended; that her narrative self wishes to be discovered by her reflective self—the self who wants to understand and make sense of the half-remembered moments (29). According to Hampl, this kind of intimacy with one’s own writing produces the revelations initially sought at the outset; it is not simply the desire to relive an experience, but, rather, to discover the meanings that attach themselves in the process.

But what about the use of imagination and invention in memoir and essay writing, should we deviate from the truth? Hampl responds that “a reader has a right to expect a memoir to be as accurate as the writer’s memory can make it” (29), but also says that “memoir seeks a permanent home for feeling and image, a habitation where they can live together” (29). This, according to Hampl, requires some form of invention where “memory impulsively reaches out and embraces imagination” (31). The act of invention, Hampl says, “isn’t a lie, but an act of necessity, as the innate urge to locate truth always is” (31) when talking about the big issues of life and death, love and despair, loss and innocence, etc. According to Hampl, each of us possesses a created version of our past, that the “tangible, made of the stuff of a life lived in place and in history” is real, but that the sense of what is real is subject to our limitations and to the inevitable subjectivity of our own points of view (32).

If memoir is the intersection of narration and reflection as Hampl says, then it would seem that the memoiristic essay could present its story and consider the meaning at the same time. Indeed, because Hampl believes that memoirists must show and tell, she says the memoir form itself is:

a peculiarly open form, inviting broken and incomplete images, half-recollected fragments, all the mass (and mess) of detail. It offers to shape this confusion—and, in shaping, of course, it necessarily creates a work of art [. . .]. (33)

Vivian Gornick's *Fierce Attachments*, which details the difficult, if not impossible, relationship between the author and her mother, embodies what Patricia Hampl describes as memoir writing and serves as an early model for the essay about my mother's death. The book has an open form—no table of contents and none of the segments are titled or numbered—and relies upon the retelling of actual events coupled with the author's reflection of herself which clarifies only slowly, gaining strength and definition as the narrative progresses.

So powerful is Gornick's narrative that I barely notice the structure and technique of her style and tend to read as one would read engaging fiction—Gornick thinks like a fiction writer, but writes like a memoirist. But her writing evidences a certain power in its assertion of the actual truth in such a way that is more compelling than fiction. The facts are allowed to speak for themselves, and, in a way, clear away a certain amount of clutter. Gornick does not have to hint to us that her relationship with her mother is not good; instead, she comes right out and says it, "My relationship with my mother is not good, and as our lives accumulate it often seems to worsen" (25). Gornick does not hide behind a mask, nor does she try to soften the truth in any way; she just states her perception of the relationship as honestly as she can and moves forward from there. This technique makes room for the development

of the underlying and deeper structure of the mother/daughter relationship, which Gornick explores episodically in past and present tenses.

Although Gornick's mother is still alive in the text, the writing encompasses what I believe to be a pre-death grieving experience. Gornick carefully examines the mother/daughter relationship, its history and its present, for the purposes of understanding and letting go. Essentially, Gornick is preparing for her mother's death, the tone of which is apparent throughout the memoir. Gornick's technique, style, and craft models the treatment of episodic memories in a complicated relationship not unlike what one goes through in the grieving process. In fact, I found Gornick's fractured and untitled sections useful as a way to mirror grief, its instability, and how it triggers memory. However, because I was in the very early stages of grief over my mother's death, I found it too difficult to write about my own daughter/mother relationship in the blunt assertiveness of Gornick's style. Instead, I created an inroad into memory by way of poems, lists, meditations, etc., which created a space for the present, the surreal, and the varying emotions of grief. Like Gornick and other memoir writers, I became concerned with the "idea of self" which, as it gained its narrative strength, developed into questions like: who am I, who am I in relationship to these other family members, and who am I in relation to their deaths?

Gornick's memoir influenced my overall technique in terms of breaking the narrative into segments, and her honesty and simple diction gave me permission to talk about my mother candidly. But, nonetheless, Gornick's mother is still alive and

her grief is not as immediately palpable as mine. Her voice is clearly strong and singular while mine seems to drift in and out of actual events and the abstraction of grief. In addition, another deeper voice begins asserting itself. This deeper voice nags, questions, chides, cajoles, and insists itself into existence; this voice seems to have something to do with the development of an authentic “I.”

In “The Singular First Person,” Scott Russell Sanders says that “one speaks always and inescapably in the first person singular” (194) and makes a case for the essay by breaking the traditional literary taboo of using the capital “I.” In the process of writing from this point of view, Sanders notes that “whatever its more visible subject, an essay is also about the way a mind moves, the links and leaps and jigs of thought” (192). In effect, Sanders is also talking about writing in the first person as a writing process in which the author’s mind may move in various ways from subject to subject, object to object, and from one voice to another in search of just the right persona. Sanders asserts that whether “brassy or shy, center stage or hanging back in the wings, [it is] the author’s persona [that] commands our attention” (194). Rather than just a strict autobiographical “I,” Sanders is proposing the development of the persona through the use of the “I”:

The first person singular is too narrow a gate for the whole writer to squeeze through. What we meet on the page is not the flesh-and-blood author, but a simulacrum, a character who wears the label “I.” (201)

As a result of such development, readers accumulate not only the notion of the “I” who speaks, but the writer’s stance toward the subject matter. This is an important

distinction between autobiography and memoiristic essay writing because it implies a direct connection with the traditional, creative language arts in its conception and basic construction.

Embedded within the text of Michael Ondaatje's memoir, *Running in the Family*, is a creative writing process that derives from and, at the same time challenges, issues of ethnic identity. Ondaatje attempts to reunite himself, a native-born Sri Lankan, with his past, his family, his country and culture by means of some forms of recorded history, but mostly with stories, rumors, innuendos, and hearsay. The "raw material" comes from many sources which Ondaatje admits are family, friends, and colleagues. In fact, in the "Acknowledgments" section, Ondaatje confesses, "that the book is not a history but a portrait or a 'gesture,'" and apologizes to his family, friends, etc., for its "fictional air" (205). Ondaatje, in many instances, recreates his own history—and thus reinvents himself in the process—but he never quite clearly identifies himself as native or tourist in his own country, or family for that matter, preferring instead a kind of double vision. In this way, Ondaatje creates for himself a certain literary freedom in which to experiment with various forms of creative expression. However, by allowing himself the space he desires, Ondaatje places his audience in a double bind of attraction to, and, at the same time, distance from the narrator.

Ondaatje includes a map and photographs as adjuncts to his text, both of which are helpful given the difficulty, for Western readers, of the Sri Lankan names and places, and the fragmented style of his narrative. Ondaatje also generously mixes

genres using poetry, fiction, interviews, conversations, dialogues, journal entries, meditations, and a brief example of the written Sri Lankan language. Other devices such as epigraphs and passages, some anonymous, others by well-known authors, provide a Western contrast to the often quirky and exotic narrative that follows. But within the narrative itself, the reader isn't sure where the boundary between memory and imagination lies. Questions arise, for example, about whether Ondaatje has been faithful to the memories and stories told to him by others and whether he has recorded them with too much embellishment. For example, Ondaatje retells a story about his father in which he has escaped from a train and run off naked into the jungle. His father's friend, Arthur, was called to find him and persuade him back:

My father is walking towards him, huge and naked. In one hand he holds five ropes, and dangling on the end of each of them is a black dog. None of the five are touching the ground. He is holding his arm outstretched, holding them with one arm as if he has supernatural strength. Terrible noises are coming from him and from the dogs [. . .] All their tongues are hanging out. (181)

In addition, Ondaatje uses the haze of alcoholic behavior to exemplify the impossibility of his autobiographical task. Memories are blurred, exaggerated, and altered by his eccentric family's pathological relationship with alcohol. As a result, stories become legends, family members are mythologized, and genealogy becomes a stage for magical realism. In "The Passions of Lalla," for example, Ondaatje reveals

the fantastic life-story of his eccentric grandmother, Lalla, who likes to drink, play cards, and shock the family with her outrageous behavior. Lalla's great claim to fame was that she was the first woman in Ceylon to have a mastectomy and consequently a "false breast":

The false breast would never be still for long [. . .] It would crawl over to join her twin on the right hand side or sometimes appear on her back for 'dancing' she smirked. She called it her Wandering Jew and would yell at the grandchildren in the middle of a formal dinner to fetch her tit as she had forgotten to put it on. (124)

None of the devices Ondaatje uses are objectionable in and of themselves; in fact, they are stylistically well done, and aesthetically pleasing, but they do make it difficult to connect with the author because the reader isn't sure what's real. This may well be the intention of the author, or, perhaps, Ondaatje is merely presenting to us his own state of confusion. But nevertheless, Ondaatje, aside from his meditations and dreams, remains outside of the narrative text, preferring to remain hidden. He seems to want to keep his family at a distance, because of what, I suspect, might be an underlying agonized sense of loss. Unfortunately, because of his grief, Ondaatje does not connect himself to the stories concretely and the tales lack the necessary depth to make this text as engaging as it could be. Instead, Ondaatje lets us wander back nostalgically to a long-lost era of hedonistic privilege in which family history is presented as a private myth. This kind of privatization, in effect, displaces the reader from the foreground of the text, and in essence forces a kind of detached voyeurism.

This is partly because of Ondaatje's lack of response to what is discovered about the past, and it almost seems as if Ondaatje wants his audience to receive the text as a satire, and to remain passively non-participatory.

Ondaatje's constant focus on the physical environment of Sri Lanka provides a necessary sense of "otherness" and alienation upon returning to his native homeland, but too much of it lapses into exoticist travelogue lacking depth. The figurative forms of expression offer a sense of the "self," but often appear to occlude rather than illuminate the inner world of the author. As a result, the dialectic set up between the "self" and "other" often fails. In addition, the memoiristic form itself is dangerously threatened by so much fictionalization of the narrative. As a result, Ondaatje's memoir operates instructively in how to include an on-going conversation between an inner and outer self, in how to, or how not to, use other forms of expression, the need for balance between the literal and the figurative, and the danger of too much invention.

Another instructive memoir that deals with grief, and, in particular, the death of a father includes Paul Auster's *The Invention of Solitude*. This slim volume contains only two essays, of which the first, "Portrait of an Invisible Man," deals with Auster's experience upon being notified of his father's death and the subsequent memories and feelings attached to such an event. Auster must deal with his father's unfinished business affairs, sifting through fifteen years of personal effects and, in the process, reveals a father who was distant, unaffectionate, and seemingly uncaring. Auster's experience is fairly fresh; he has received the news just three weeks earlier.

An early Sunday morning phone call announces the “death without warning” (5) and Auster is immediately plunged into the grieving process. While taking care of the business at hand, Auster realizes out of obligation that he must write about his father: “If I do not act quickly, his entire life will vanish along with him” (6).

Because Auster’s loss is so recent, his essay reveals the immediacy of his grief. Auster describes his experience from the short distance of three weeks as a curious reaction:

I had always imagined that death would numb me, immobilize me with grief. But now that it had happened, I did not shed any tears, I did not feel as though the world had collapsed around me [. . .] what disturbed me was something else, something unrelated to death or my response to it: the realization that my father had left no traces. (6)

Auster continues in a narrative that tries to recapture who his father was for preservation purposes, but, in the process, whether intentionally or unintentionally, exposes the nature and process of his grieving. Some of the most instructive passages, which inform the essay about my own father, explain how Auster has to deal with the contents and disposal of his father’s house: “there is nothing more terrible, I learned, than having to face the objects of a dead man [. . .] the list is inexhaustible” (10-11), not to mention the condition of the house after so many years of solitary living. For Auster, the house becomes a metaphor of his father’s life which he feels is an exact and faithful representation of his father’s inner world.

Although his father kept it tidy, the house was in an apparent state of disintegration and obvious neglect:

[. . .] furniture covered with dust, the kitchen stove so encrusted with charred food it had become unsalvageable [. . .] languishing on the shelves for years: bug infested packages of flour, stale crackers, bags of sugar that had turned into solid blocks [. . .] every cup, saucer and plate covered with a dingy film of grease [. . .] the window shades, which were kept drawn at all times, threadbare [. . .]. (9-10)

In fact, Auster says that the house had become shabby and depressing and felt as if you were entering the house of a blind man (10). These stunningly honest details can only come from a person in the midst of a profound grief—a grief narrative written from a more distanced perspective would probably be much more censored. Auster's exemplary use of graphic details became useful in the narrative about my father and the way he disposed of my mother's possessions. Specifically, in a segment in which he talks about having to give away his father's clothing to the Good Will organization, Auster describes the culmination of his grief:

If there was a single worst moment for me during those days, it came when I walked across the front lawn in the pouring rain to dump an armload of my father's ties into the back of a Good Will Mission truck [. . .] More than seeing the coffin itself lowered into the ground, the act of throwing away these ties seemed to embody for me the idea of burial. I finally understood that my father was dead. (13)

Written in the same segmented style of Gornick and Ondaatje, and using letters, newspaper headlines, and quotes from other authors, Auster recalls the history of his relationship with his father. But Auster also does something else, something very different and important for the purpose of informing my writing: he reveals the immediacy of his grief and his writing process within that grief:

So great was my need to write that I thought the story would be written by itself [. . .] Again and again I have watched my thoughts trail off [. . .] No sooner have I thought one thing than it evokes another [. . .] Never before have I been so aware of the rift between thinking and writing [. . .] I have begun to feel that the story I am trying to tell is somehow incompatible with language, that the degree to which it resists language is an exact measure of how closely I have come to saying something important. (32)

Auster allows the reader to enter into his state of grief, and, in so doing, the reader is able to feel Auster's pain and confusion. Auster divulges that he suffers from a wound which is very deep, one which he thought the act of writing would help heal. However, the act of writing has kept this wound open and "instead of burying my father for me, these words have kept him alive, perhaps more so than ever" (32). Auster has been successful in sustaining a complicated narrative in which he examines his relationship with his father while at the same time remaining present in his grief. In the process, the reader is treated to a powerful piece of writing that

doesn't rely on sentimentality to convey its poignancy, while the writer is able to discover more about the nature of his grief in relation to his identity as a son.

Certainly, other authors have dealt with grief and loss in the memoir form, but none have had quite the same experience, nor have they used quite the same kinds of creative expression. However, of the other works consulted, Scott Russell Sanders' *The Paradise of Bombs* includes an essay, "At Play in the Paradise of Bombs," in which the narrator explores his childhood growing up on a government Arsenal in the mid-west. The story covers a twelve year period from 1951-1963, roughly the same political time period of my experience as a dependent in the military. And, although Sanders doesn't use poetry, journals, lists, meditations, and the like, the content of the narrative resonates with my experience and was, therefore, useful and worth mentioning as an influence on the narrative about my father and his military career.

Jane Brox's memoir, *Five Thousand Days Like This One*, is a traditional narrative about her father, his death, and the ensuing chaos surrounding the decisions to be made about the family farm. Brox's memoir is a collection of essays that encompasses her family's history, and, at the same time, chronicles the American farm experience in the New England area. Notably useful to me is how Brox is able to weave her own interior experience, which radiates from grief, outward into the larger landscape. Brox's use of the lyrical narrative form originates from a poetic sense of the deep image, which stems from the emotional loss she is feeling, and her romantic sensibility regarding the landscape. In this way, Brox is able to conflate time and idea through her use of episodic sections thus enabling her to place the

personal loss of her father within a series of other losses: the loss of the family farm to encroaching urban sprawl, the loss of the history of the region which needs to be reclaimed, and the loss of a way of life for the working women of the mills which somehow helps her to understand her father's work ethic.

Through this layering effect, Brox experiences grief in a profound way—a grief that culminates in a deeper understanding of herself in relation to her family, her sense of history, and location. Brox is able to place her own experience into a larger context thus preserving her personal heritage. The piece that I have written does not attempt to find a larger context for the lives of the people I have lost so much as it is an attempt to identify myself within a new context.

Sven Birkerts in "States of Reading," asserts that the most important and profound consequence of the literary experience, is the acceptance of a "self" at work. Birkerts believes that when reading "we agree to the core requirement [. . .] that we put ourselves in the hands of a self, a sensibility, that will front life with an original and uncorrected passion, [and] that we will allow this self to dictate its understanding of the world to us" (104). Greg Lichtenberg agrees and adds that "memoir is perhaps a stubborn rejection of post-structuralism's decentered, unstable self [. . .]" and that "perhaps it is the most effective tool yet for exploring those selves." Indeed, after the critique and the deconstruction, we still need to live out our lives, and, it seems, to have stories that describe those lives (105).

Whether we call it the "self," a "persona," or the "I" in a narrative, the voice clearly emanating from memoir is a writerly gesture that attempts to render into

narrative what lives are experienced to be like. *Walking the Branches* makes its gesture in a decidedly original and experimental way which attempts to capture, chronicle, and explore the immediacy of grief, the grieving experience, and what that might mean to the ever-shifting sense of self. While written to probe and uncover my feelings and sense of loss, the writing and shaping of this piece allowed me to understand something of the complex nature of grief, and its power to control. The three sections of this piece overlap providing continuity, demonstrating that all three losses are part of a larger sense of loss, but they also differ in unique ways revealing something of the nature of the person who has died.

In the section about my mother, for example, my reaction to her death is rather primitive and I can't seem to get a grasp on what exactly has happened. It's as if I am in an early state of shock and needing to get things in order with the use of lists so that I can comprehend her death. I do, however, allow myself lyrical moments within the prose and with the use of poems as a way to back away from the concrete reality of her death, inviting the deeper images of the unconscious to speak for the level of emotion that I am feeling at the time. Some moments, like the funeral preparations, are also surreal and I chose the second person singular to convey its unreality, again, adding lists to choose from. In addition, in order to get a grasp on the meaning of my mother's death and the nature of my relationship with her, I felt I needed to exemplify some of my mother's quirky behavior: insisting that I come into the x-ray room to see what it's like, taking her Native American jewelry into the oncology department to show to the staff, etc. Delving into some of her quirks somehow enables me to

understand my mother's enigmatic character and helps to define my often confused responses. The craft at work in this essay is a porous organizing principle, which acts like a fishing net, capturing the solidity of miscellaneous details while allowing the fluidity of grief and memory to flow in and out of the narrative.

The essay about my sister overlaps with the essay about my mother; in fact, it builds upon it, reveals more about the mother/daughter relationship, delineates the relationships with my sisters, and introduces the father/daughter relationship. Primarily about the difficulty of the sudden, yet not so sudden, death of my half-sister, this essay relies upon a constant awareness of self-questioning. I admit more directly to feelings of anger and ambivalence and there is a kind of brutal honesty which requires a specific technique—one that examines motives rather than responses. Listing is used to contain the hard reality of imminent death as if could be whipped into shape and controlled somehow; as if the impending grief could be avoided by a fore-knowledge of its stages. The focusing and defocusing of the present moment—a dying sister in a darkened bedroom with a movie playing—with memory digression and meditations, allows for the breathing space needed to deal with the emotional compression of the situation. The tone in this section is deliberately sarcastic and disbelieving, but the disbelief is different from the disbelief in the mother section. In the mother essay, the disbelief stems from the shock of loss, whereas the disbelief of the sister's death is one of suspicion: "Is she really dying this time?" The technique ordering this essay is a hard-pressed exploration of intention and duty, in which the "I" of the piece dispenses any notion of sentimental pretense

and deliberately risks reader sympathy in order to find a way to discover the truth which may lie underneath the conflicted feelings.

The last essay about my father utilizes an overlay of narratives some of which have been hinted at within the previous essays. These narratives are complex in nature and their purpose is to illuminate the complexity of my father's history and personality. It also seems logical for the third and last essay to appear more complex because it mirrors the complexity of my compounded grief. Thus the coincidental occurrence of the nation's tragedy of September 11th with the death of my father somehow aligns the culmination of private grief with a national community of grief, as though one could inform the other. In a way, the 9-11 event is somewhat tamed in conjunction with my father's earlier fears and how he dealt, or was unable to deal, with them. By sandwiching these two stories between the actual details of his death, a differing and distinct shape evolves when compared to the other two essays.

The issue of language also emerges as a topic of exploration, and how we perceive and understand its meaning somehow relates to the understanding of my father and the meaning of his death. For example, the misunderstanding with the doctors at the hospital, the various stages of military alerts, the use of military vernacular, the language of silence, Morse code, etc. Embedded within the narrative, time and the breaking up of time (linear narrative interjected with verse) mix with dates, history, and geography revealing the exact nature of my personal loss.

When I began this piece, I titled it *Field Notes* and it was a title meant to embody the idea of notations, as the connotation implies, in a realm of grief. Since I

wasn't sure where the writing would take me, I began the journey as one might undertake a hiking expedition—backpack, field glasses, spiral notebook, and pen—observing and recording the natural elements in the environment. After the initial and somewhat impersonal gathering of the data in notation form, the stages of revision started to reveal a more intricate and expansive shape. I needed a new title to reflect the change, one that indicated and delineated the various twists and turns of the mind on its journey through grief. Thus it has been renamed *Walking the Branches*, its connotation implying a rigorous climb upward beyond the safety of the solid trunk, one foothold after another, toward the swaying crown of interconnected branches at the top. I am not yet sure whether this piece will serve as a large prose section within a collection of poems, or whether it is the beginning of yet more experimental prose musings on a variety of changes and losses in my life. Whatever function this piece of writing may serve in a larger context, here it embodies an experimental linguistic foray into what most people never articulate, but what everyone must, at times, experience.

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