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THE HOUSE OF BLOOD AND BONE

Ashley J. Wakefield

The House of Blood and Bone

A Creative Thesis

Presented to

The College of Graduate Studies

Austin Peay State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

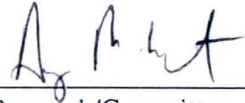
Master of the Arts

Ashley J. Wakefield

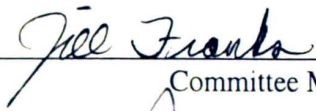
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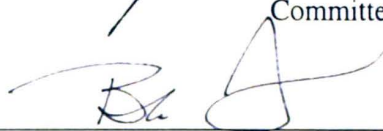
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Research/Committee Advisor/Chair



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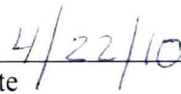

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6 AM

It's too early.

I always think that, no matter what time I wake,
but today,
dressing in the pre-dawn light that creeps in
under the window blinds, I mean it.

My hair, still wet from the shower,
leaves trails of water
in rivulets
down my neck,
a chilly parody of earlier dampness
left by your lips
and the shared heat of sweat-slicked skin.

We were a tangle of limbs then,
a love knot of clutching hands—
I held you against me
inside me
cradled in the bowl of my hips,
and you kept rhythm with the beat of my heart.

You are alone now

arms around my abandoned pillow,
curled up
in a
question
mark
shape,
as if even in sleep your body asks
where mine has gone.

I fumble in the dark
and draw a heart
in black ink
on the back of an old receipt,
and leave it on your bedside table.
It's small:
a scribble on a scrap of paper,
but it might be the first thing you see
when you wake.

You'll have to think of me then,
before you leave this room,
the way I am thinking of you

now

as I close the door,
and you'll know
though I will never say

that I

looked

back

before I left you.

That I always do.

Residual Haunting

The space is narrow and cramped. I concentrate on putting one foot solidly in front of the other on the gently twisting staircase that I can barely see in the enclosed darkness. I don't know how long I've been climbing; there isn't much room to turn around and look back, and there is nothing visible ahead of me in the gloom. A chilly dampness seeps into my left glove and I realize that the iron railing I have been holding is wet and rusting; there is a brownish stain like dried blood on my red fleece glove. It is too cold to take them off, but I don't want to ruin them, so I move my hands to the clammy stone walls that press in just a little too close on either side of me. My fingers grasp at the worn contours and slide over the smooth patches. It can't be much farther now.

The sky that greets me when I reach the top is grey and clouded, but still brighter than the stairwell I've left behind. The wind is a surprise; altitude lends strength to the cold breeze and I nearly lose my hat over the parapet. I snatch it back just in time and find myself halted by the sight of it, bright red and polka dotted, loud and out of place. Guy Tower, highest point in Warwick Castle, was constructed in 1395. I bought this hat a week ago.

There are slits carved into the side of the wall, meant for archers to fire their arrows through in battle. I press my camera, weapon of the memory-keeper, there instead and capture sights likely little changed since the last time anyone laid siege to the tower below. The landscape is made up of barren winter trees and patch-worked shades of green grass that give way to villages full of short, red-bricked buildings, and a church whose steeple towers above them. Beyond that, more modern constructions, squat and grey, sit stolidly in the distance, a firm but far off presence, as if they know better than to

drift too close. To my right, the River Avon, land of Shakespeare; to my left, a winter festival in the castle courtyard. They've brought in an ice-skating rink and a hot chocolate stand. I think they're playing Mozart on the sound system, and somehow it fits the moment. That's the beauty of time: it is unequivocal, immutable, and still so very fluid. Stand still in any moment, and you will feel the echo of all the others that came before, that lived their brief life in the place where you stand now, living yours.

Down Below

The air is turquoise, like the sea, and scented with orchids and salt. It is a living thing, a hot-breathed dragon chasing down the sails of the motorless boat, tangling the rigging, tangling my hair. Below us: water, quicksilver fish, and sponges so large I doubt I could fit my arms around them. I pull in air through my snorkel; the thin tube is all that connects me to my element. "It will feel like you can't get enough oxygen," the instructor said. A stingray casts shadows on the shifting sand below, and I struggle to breathe.

There is a familiar tightening in my chest, and the water disappears. I am ten years old, locked in a toy chest, someone's idea of a prank. I am pressed against the wall of an over-full elevator, cringing away from the crowd of tall bodies. "We're going to get stuck," a man laughs. I believe him and start to cry, pressing a hand against the knife-like pain centered just behind my rib cage.

Back in the water, I hyperventilate around the snorkel tube and thrash my head a bit too far, choking on the water that rushes in. We have been told not to be upright in the water; it's shallow here and our long flippers would harm the vegetation. I flip onto my back instead and gulp down lungfulls of humid air, looking around to see if anyone has noticed my trouble. I've drifted far from the boat; there is no one near. No reason not to try again.

The gummy plastic mouthpiece tastes of salt; I lick at it with my tongue, a distraction while I turn my face to the water again. Each exhale is a battle, the way you fight for air after running, after being afraid. I shut my eyes and force my breathing into a carefully measured rhythm, spreading my arms as wide as they'll go. Claustrophobia, someone told me once, is related to birth trauma, the horror of exiting the womb. My

mother's body never opened enough to set me free naturally; it was nearly a day before the doctor took me from her.

It takes a while before I notice that I'm not panting for air anymore. The buttery sunlight baking my shoulders is dimmer down here under the waves, and doesn't hurt my eyes when I open them. Tiny fish dart in and out of patches of sea grass, like they're playing tag, and I swim toward them slowly, enjoying my underwater weightlessness and the little waves that pulse against me, a heartbeat counterpoint to my own. Venus was born from the union of sea and sky; I wonder what all that space made her afraid of?

Learning Curve

I was very small the first time you died.
I dreamed lilies,
and family,
and rain.
I woke the next morning with a headache.
You cried all night, grandmother said.
I stroked your hair. It seemed to help.
I told her about the dream and thought,
Good.
A practice run.
Now I know how this is done.

I did not know that you would get it wrong.
There are no flowers here, no mourners.
It isn't even raining.
there is only you
and me
and that bed that I cried in.
I am not crying now.
I wonder if you are dreaming.

Later, when the body is gone,
I put my hands into the impression
of your head
on the pillow.

It is just how I remembered it.

The Elephant Graveyard

I have always been a maker of lists. I find them calming. Reassuring. There is something very zen about pulling my mind away from the chaos for a moment and taming it with a list. “I know it’s hard,” I am saying to myself, “I know it’s a lot, but if I do just these eight numerically organized tasks today, it will all somehow look better tomorrow.” I have even been known, when no one is looking, to add some unexpectedly accomplished task to my list, solely for the gratification of crossing it immediately off. There is little the world can throw at me that I cannot put on a list; there is little the world can throw at me that I cannot contain, control, or otherwise overcome.

I like to believe this.

~

Because for most people dementia is a chronic disorder, it is useful to view its course in stages.

1. *The first stage is a ‘pre-dementia’ stage, sometimes called ‘mild cognitive impairment.’*

Perhaps ironically, I cannot recall many early instances of my grandfather’s forgetfulness. I know they must surely have been there, because I *do* remember teasing him, gently, about it. We all did. Once, for his birthday, I bought my grandfather a blanket. It was a large, woven thing, big enough for him take his afternoon naps under and light enough to use year-round. On the front was woven in the caption “Genuine Old Person: Been There, Done That, Can’t Remember.” He laughed when he opened it and

playfully swatted my arm with one of the blanket's tassels in retaliation. Still, he used that blanket nearly every day.

2. *Short-term memory impairment is usually the most prominent early symptom of Alzheimer-type dementia.*

The first time I ever suspected that perhaps something more significant than aging was happening to my grandfather was sometime in junior high when my grandmother began picking me up from school. For years, the short time just before and just after school had belonged to my grandfather and me. We would meet at the breakfast table—bowl of Cheerios for me, bowl of Frosted Flakes with extra sugar for him. I was never allowed extra sugar on my cereal; I assumed this was a privilege one was granted with age and, as such, didn't begrudge him for it. (It was my mother who didn't allow the sugar; my grandfather, I suspect, would have. And that, I think, is the ultimate function of parents and grandparents: one to control and one to indulge. A pressure-release valve for all the rules we must obey.) After breakfast, my grandfather and I would head out for school in his ancient brown Mercury. It was a short drive—too short, I often thought, except when I was coming home again. So the cassette recording of Abbot and Costello comedy routines that my grandfather produced one morning took us several car trips to work our way through. It became a morning time favorite, and we slowly memorized that tape together. Aside from the classic "Who's on first?" there was one other routine on the tape that I rewound and listened to many times on those early morning car trips. It involved a story about how older elephants, when they begin to decline with age,

instinctively return to a certain spot to die. Costello's punch line at the end was, "It's the trip that kills 'em!"

When I joined the volleyball team in junior high, and practices lasted from 4:00 to 6:30 on every night but Wednesday, my after-school routine had to change. At first my grandfather would show up at 3:30, my normal school dismissal time, a few times a week and I would have to send him home. Later, he started forgetting to come back at 6:30. Not always, mind you—just sometimes. From then on, it was my grandmother, more often than not, who I saw waiting for me after practice. I worried. But, because I could not break my pattern of believing my grandfather to be invincible, I assumed he simply could not break *his* pattern, held for so many elementary school years, after all, of being outside waiting for me at 3:30. And so I worried—but not much.

3. *Most family members will realize that something is seriously wrong long before the person with dementia realizes it, but family members may also have greater difficulty in initially accepting the news.*

One cold, wet day after volleyball season had faded into basketball and I was free to leave school with all the other non-athletes again, it was my grandfather once more who was waiting for me. But it was not a return to our normal routine. Ten minutes from home, we slammed into the back of a car that had stopped somewhere in front of us. I never looked up until I heard the squealing brakes and that was far too late to see much of anything except the windshield and its rapid approach when my seat belt failed (it was, after all, a rather old car) and I went tumbling forward. My forehead left an impressive spider web of cracks along the windshield; my chin and the dashboard left matching

jagged holes in each other. Here the age of the car worked to my advantage; had the dash been less old, less sun-worn, it might have stood firm and broken my jaw.

There was a lost look on my grandfather's face as he fumbled through his wallet for all the necessary insurance information. When he got out to speak to the other driver, a faded yellow post-it note fell out of his shirt pocket and onto the soft brown fuzz of the seat next to me. There, written in his own handwriting, was his name, birth date, address, and home telephone number. Typical emergency information, nothing that wouldn't be contained on a driver's license. I wasn't sure why he needed this extra copy, kept so much closer to hand. And then, with a sickening inner jolt not unlike the crash, I *was* sure; these were things he could no longer be certain of remembering. I stared at the yellow post-it note, sliced chin seeping red into the sleeve of my thick winter coat, and wondered which of them, the paper or the blood, was making me feel ill.

On the way home, I made a plan. I wouldn't tell anyone about the yellow paper. I wouldn't let them think the wreck was my grandfather's fault, wouldn't let on how much my chin hurt. Grandmother met us at the door when we got home and listened to my story with few questions. My mother was still at work, so I called to give her the news, striving for nonchalance, certain, in a confident thirteen-year-old way that I had handled it perfectly and no one would worry. That night, after a trip to the hospital and a butterfly bandage for my torn chin, my mother told me that I'd sounded strange on the phone, almost happy. Manic. Later I learned that this is a thing called shock.

4. *Observing the gradual decline of a loved one from a competent individual to an incompetent dependent can be a harrowing experience.*

In high school I joined the choir and, since practice began early enough in the morning for my mother to drop me off before going to work, she became my morning ride. We were nearly always late. I sat at the breakfast table with my grandfather, hands folded, or fidgeting with a spoon, a glass, my backpack, my hair, trying not to sigh, trying not to complain, trying not to point out that Granddaddy was right there, couldn't he just take me so I that could be on time for once? My mother knew I was angry and I knew that she knew, and so we both said nothing, our little game of pretending that maybe today she would be ready on time, maybe today I wouldn't be late, and maybe today neither of us would notice that we could not make things be as they'd been before. I rode home from school with a friend who lived on my block, did my homework at the kitchen table, and if, on the weekends, I made sure to stay outside when my grandfather rode his bicycle, no one commented.

When I was seventeen, my family moved from my grandparents' home of more than twenty years to a new house in a new town about a twenty-minute drive up the interstate. By then I was old enough to drive myself anywhere I needed to go—and get there on time, to boot. I was nearly always the first to show up for choir practice my entire senior year, in retaliation for two years of lateness. My grandfather slept a little later than he used to; I ate breakfast alone.

At the end of my senior year, a boy who liked me, and who I thought I might like back, came to help me pack my car for college. We'd been dating all through the summer, cautiously at first, but lately he had begun to seem much more earnest. He wrote

me poems, came to my recitals. Sometimes he visited on Sundays to do nothing more than sit on my couch and visit with my family. Once he tried to hold my hand on a long walk; I made certain to always be holding my purse in the hand nearest him. I was glad of his help on moving day, but a lingering sense of anticipation—for what, I wasn't sure—made me queasy and anxious. As I walked past him with a box in my hands, my grandfather stopped me.

“He seems like a nice boy,” he said.

He *is*, I wanted to say back. Did you ever write a girl a poem? Is he *courting* me?

What do I do?

“Who is he? You two moving in together?”

My stomach lurched. I forced a smile, and shook my head, and walked away.

When I held the last box in my hands and started for the car, I felt safe, but I wasn't yet. My boyfriend pulled me aside in the living room and told me that he loved me. “I don't expect to hear it back,” he said. “I just didn't want you to leave without knowing it.” As I walked (nearly ran) out the door, my grandfather called me by my mother's name. The slamming of my car door drowned out their shouts of goodbye.

5. While the dementing person will dwell in the past, their reminiscences are repetitive and lack detail. Despite the caregiver giving an answer, the same question may be asked again and again and again.

The next two years were a minefield to which none of us had been given a map. We all learned, individually, how to speak to my grandfather, how to read his moods and his confusion. After being removed from his home of so many years, my

grandfather mistook our new house for a hospital, a retirement home. He would pack his suitcase; ask us when he could leave. When he could go home. Some days we could explain to him that he *was* home. Some days we could not.

Once, he buttoned his shirt wrong, and couldn't be told that this was an error, a thing to be fixed. He made up this elaborate and bemusing story about a shopping trip with my grandmother to an outlet mall, one of those "imperfect" clothing stores where everything is discounted because of some slight flaw. They bought shirts that day with uneven numbers of buttons and buttonholes. We let him wear his "imperfect" shirt; you learn to pick your battles.

There were days when he would ask questions and listen intently, nodding at all our answers. There were days when nothing made sense, and he *knew* that nothing made sense—and knew also that no one could fix it. He didn't ask questions on those days and we didn't correct him when he made mistakes; those particular battles weren't worth it for anyone. When he asked to see his mother—dead for more than twenty years—we told him she would visit soon. My mother and grandmother and myself, when I came home from college, were actors in our own polite fiction. My grandfather was Costello's elephant, lumbering ever further away on a trip we couldn't take with him.

Sometimes on good days he would find me upstairs in my room and we would talk. He was sweet but insistent, a kind-hearted detective determined to ferret out the secret of the girl upstairs with a face so like his own. He knew he ought to know, and knew that he didn't; he looked to me to fill in the missing pieces: Why was I here? How did we know each other? Oh, college? What was I studying?

I loved those times, and felt guilty for it. When I was small, and came home with a good report card, my grandfather would pull out his own faded elementary school report cards, dotted mostly with C's, and tell me that I was such a smart girl, that he was so proud. There in the white lamplight of my bedroom we engaged in historical re-enactment: I would tell him what I was doing in college, and he would be proud. "And...you're my granddaughter?" he would say, in a tone of utter wonderment, a pleased smile on his face. In those moments, I was. Could be again.

One morning my grandfather stopped me in the space between the living room and kitchen and, pointing to my grandmother seated in her armchair a few feet away, asked, "That's my wife, right?" She still brought him coffee every morning, much the way he had once brought me breakfast. She never let go of this routine. Later she told me that he had never once, in over fifty years of marriage, ever failed to say thank you—even when he no longer understood whom he was thanking. I like to think that this is simply who he was, something his illness could not take from him. Or from my grandmother.

6. Many dementing people die before they reach the stage of advanced dementia.

She was making him coffee the day he died. He never came to breakfast and my grandmother, thinking to take him his morning coffee in bed, couldn't wake him. I went in alone to see the body, and felt something shift inside, low in my belly, like gravity, like the drop from the top of a roller coaster. And then I felt nothing. I left the room, left my grandmother in the arms of my mother, and took from a drawer in the kitchen the square black notebook that contained the addresses and phone numbers of family and close friends. "I'll make the calls," I said, and retreated to my room. Once there, I sat cross-

legged on the bed, phone beside me, pen in hand, and made a list. Prioritize: who should I call first? Who can wait? Who will hear by word of mouth? I went through the book, writing down names, dialing numbers. I spoke to family. I told the story. I let them say comforting things—“It’s a blessing that he went at home.” “This way, it’s like he just went to sleep.” I said appreciative things back to them and did not cry.

The list fell apart before I did. The last name I’d written, Madeleine, was out of order. Madeleine was an old childhood and lifelong friend of both my grandparents, like a second grandmother to me (grandparent, think release valve, think permission-giver, think “It’s all right to...”). I dialed her number and, when she answered, simply said, “Granddaddy’s dead.” I told her that I’d seen the body and she asked, in a horrified tone I will never not be able to recall, “Oh, Ashley. Was he cold?”

“Yes,” I said, and choked on the word. He was cold now. Faint bruise-like patterns had formed where the blood had stagnated and pooled in his veins—on his right side, because he slept that way, was *still* sleeping that way, and didn’t he look peaceful? Wasn’t I comforted? I put down my lists and stayed on the phone with Madeleine till I had no tears left to cry.

7. The other major issue confronting caregivers by this stage of dementia is the grieving process.

I am still a list-maker. They have not entirely lost their power, and are still my daily security blankets, but there are moments when I look at my blankets and see *his* blanket, that Genuine Old Person throw, now tucked away in a closet somewhere. I have faced, watched others face, things I cannot easily quantify, things that terrify me still. I will rail

against it, force it into itemized, bullet-pointed perfection, but there's an elephant graveyard waiting somewhere for everyone, and it's the trip—over which we sometimes find we have much less control than we'd like to believe—that kills us all.

Greet the Dawn

Icicles hang from the eaves of the window where I sit and watch the snowfall,
swaddled in warm layers like a child.
I am restless for the touch of heat on frozen skin;
my anxious breath fogs the frost-rimed windowpane.
Outside, streaks of pink stretch slowly across the horizon;
dawn awakens, pressing rosy fingers towards the earth.
I hold my own hands out in greeting,
tracing the curves of clouds reflected in the window,
coaxing the sun higher, hotter.
The icicles shiver and start to drip on the windowsill,
their patter the beat of a heart, a rapid, rising pulse.
The snow is melting, stripped away like linen sheets from a dreaming lover,
leaving the earth damp and bare, yielding to Aurora's gaze.
The coming of spring is the promise of summer, of scorching heat and sun-kissed skin,
and we will embrace it, the earth and I, till the heat of dawn leaves us breathless,
begging for autumn's repose, the return of winter's slumber
from which Aurora will wake us again and again and again.

Augury

1

I found the blackbird lying
 on your empty floor.
 Its inky wings pulled in watery light
 from the window,
 reflecting it back in iridescent purple
 and green, a kind of colored magic.
 I had never seen a real bird so close before,
 the live ones being so skittish and all—
 I knelt beside it, turning my head this way and that,
 curious
 how long it had been here,
 how it had even gotten in.
 I was not allowed to touch it,
 though the feathers looked soft.
 My grandfather carried it away
 wrapped in newspaper,
 to be burned
 with the rest of the trash.

2

Gravel grey as the cloud-covered sky crunched
 under the car tires, a sound like the grinding
 of bone.
 I climbed out of the backseat,
 stepping carefully to avoid disturbing
 the stones.
 I asked my mother: *Are we supposed to be happy or sad?*
 She answered: *Both*,
 and opened the car trunk,
 bent as if to take something from it.
 I cannot remember what.
 As a child, I was certain
 that we had carried *you*
 in there, that my mother lifted your
 body, carried it to the grave.
 I know now that people do not do this,
 carry corpses in car trunks,
 and that there must have been a casket,
 a hearse, the accoutrement of every modern death—

but I have no memory of these things,
 only logical assumption.
 In the years since,
 I have asked my mother: *What did we really carry that day?*
Not a clue, she tells me. *Not a clue*.

3

In the photo, we are smiling.
 The both of us are snuggled into one chair,
 my baby-fat legs draped
 over your quilt-covered ones.
 Your hair is stark
 and white,
 pale as the cat draped in your lap,
 pale as legend says the raven was,
 before he stole the sun
 from greedy Greyeagle and hung it
 in the sky.
 The heat of it singed his wings
 to sooty black.
 I never saw your face unwrinkled,
 never knew the shade of your hair before
 time stole away its pigment.
 Your color is all in your quilts,
 hand stitched wonders, works of art
 spun from scraps of calico like gold
 from Rumpelstiltskin's spindle.
 My favorite is a lattice work
 of pale pink window panes,
 each of them framing little girls
 in bell-shaped dresses,
 their rounded hands resting neatly
 at their sides.
 They have no faces—
 only bonnets, with brims pulled forward
 as if to ward off sun or wind.

My grandmother's brother, your oldest child,
tells stories of you that spill
from his lips like liturgy,
forming a saint from the body of his mother,
as any good son will do.
The you in my mind is
more myth than woman now,
a ghost conjured from the voices of others:
Great Grandmother Blackbird,
whose story runs backward from death.
We move towards each other now,
age approaching agelessness,
walking a line
that is really a circle,
counting steps
like crows in a field.

Ourobouros

They love and eat one another:
cherish and destroy.
Sarcasm drips from venomous lips that tomorrow
will say *I love you*.
Mothers both,
familiar with the sacrifice
of one's own flesh to feed a family,
they are alike in their unselfishness.
Mother and daughter,
locked in their single nest
in an unending battle for dominance,
they are alike
in their unwillingness to yield.
Together they will craft
a third generation
infused with warring instincts:
to serve and to be free.

Marrow

*Bone to bone, blood to blood, limb to limb;
as if they were glued.*

--Merseberg Charm

They are the only two left. She is the youngest sibling; he, at 96, is the eldest. Somehow, within the framework of a White family reunion, with increasingly younger generations scattered to either side, their antiquity means more to me than usual. This is my grandmother in the context of her girlhood. I have known her all my life; it is easy to forget that I have not known her for all of *hers*.

I have brought with me a stack of properly documented family trees, the product of months of hard work; cousin Lisa, whom I've never met until today, has brought years' worth of faded photographs. We spread them out on a long table like holy relics on an altar. Some have been restored, copied onto glossy new photo paper, but many are creased and fragile with age. A school portrait of a girl with carefully brushed ringlet curls and a nose I am secretly glad I didn't inherit looks up at me; I superimpose her frozen stare over my grandmother's animated face, which shifts somewhere between a pout and a grin at some teasing thing her bother has said to her. He elbows my grandmother lightly and they laugh; older brothers are always older brothers.

I find another photo of my grandmother, next to one of her sisters; she is almost cadaverously thin. Lisa tells me she was recovering from rheumatic fever then. I am jealous that Lisa, whose eyes are dark like mine, knows stories that I don't, but the other girl in the picture is Lisa's grandmother. These are her stories too. I wonder if rheumatic fever is related in any way to rheumatoid arthritis, if either of the two is genetic. I don't share many physical traits with my grandmother, looking, I am told, far more like my grandfather. My fingers, cradling the sepia image, are strong and straight, but already

they ache with cold in the winter. I think about my grandmother's hands, gnarled and starting to twist, and imagine that our similarities must lie somewhere under the skin, waiting to emerge.

Where Music Comes From

It starts in the core.
Superheated sound; churning,
waiting. Magma is lighter
than rock or flesh—
it cannot help but rise.
The effort is inside—
heat pushing to be heard,
mountain giving way
to eruption: Wagnerian
earthquake, flow of legato lava.
Nothing is left untouched.
Volcanic soil is prized
for its richness and the way
it coaxes from the earth
things that were hidden.

Musica Universalis

Truly to sing, that is a different breath.

--- Rainer Maria Rilke

I didn't know how to breathe until I knew how to sing. I thought I did; I could pull air into my lungs, inhale oxygen and exhale carbon dioxide, but this is breathing in the same way that swirling in a bathtub is swimming in an ocean. Real breath, true breath, starts lower, down deep in the belly, in the gut where you keep instinct and churning acids and your center of gravity. Eastern philosophy says the *mainpura chakra* is here, distributing *prana*, the vital force of life, to the rest of the body. It's also the home of the diaphragm, an unpopular if important sheet of muscle. Diaphragms aren't pretty like biceps or abdominal muscles; no one shows them off or says things like, "Hey, check out my six pack diaphragm." But when you breathe, your diaphragm contracts and makes space for air expansion in your thoracic cavity. When the diaphragm relaxes, you exhale. And breath is so simple—but imagine a strong person with pretty biceps lifting weights. She brings the barbell up slowly and the strain shows a little in her arm; it's even more impressive when she lowers the barbell just as slowly, her muscles countermanding the tug of gravity. She controls how fast the weight drops. Now imagine you have an arm in your belly, pulling breath in, letting it out. It is yours to control. That singer on stage, belting out arias or Broadway ballads is lifting weights somewhere inside herself; the strength of one's music depends heavily on the strength of one's core.

The throat, home of the larynx, acts as a facilitator for all that air, much like an internal flute. Manipulating the larynx produces pitch and volume—all the sounds a human language can hold. When air is expelled, pressure drops in the larynx, causing the vocal folds to vibrate. Superstring theory is a postulation in the field of quantum physics

that attempts to explain all of the fundamental forces in nature by modeling them after tiny, multidimensional strings that vibrate in much the same way as the strings of a guitar, or the folds of a the vocal cords. The Christian creation myth holds that when God created the world, the “morning stars sang together” (Job 38:7). The throat, like the abdomen, is associated with a chakra, *vishhuda*, and it is said the secret to immortality lies there. Remember how your mother sang to you, how your father read you stories at bedtime, and you can imagine calling worlds into being with only the vibration of your voice.

If the diaphragm and the larynx create a sound, then the head gives it life. Lips, teeth, and tongue chew the sounds, lashing tone into articulation. Air travels up into the cavities of the throat and head, resonating in caverns of bone. You can feel the motion: high notes spinning in the head, a ringing pressure; low notes vibrating further down, sending shockwaves backward until it feels as if your chest is a cathedral, filled with sound. By the time a note passes from your mouth to the ears of an audience, everything you are is involved: legs are strong and steady; torso is a bellows, a factory for air; the throat is like a chimney, a column for directing breath; the head is a resonating chamber, a cave full of echoes; and the lips, teeth, and tongue shape the sound. The human body is the only instrument that can learn to play itself.

It is a common enough hyperbole to hear, “I need {insert desired object here} like I need air to breathe.” But if it is song that teaches breath, and breath that merely facilitates, then perhaps we’ve got the equation wrong. Music vibrated the world into being; it moves us still. We need air as badly as we need song. We need air *because* we need song.

On the Mythical Importance of Light

Sometimes it is just as valid
not to see. Light makes life
too easy. It shines on sharp corners
and rough edges, and around
the rim of the precipice
that waits to devour, but goes
hungry because we sidestep to stay
in the light. In moments of darkness,
we stumble over shoes or boxes
that leave bruises on shins, and we
need the bruises, the mark of things
we only find in the dark.

Nature of the Beast

I moved to a new house for the first time when I was sixteen. It was unplanned; my uncle had had a stroke and come home to live with the rest of my family. We needed more space, and I found myself in a new house before I'd gotten used to the idea of leaving the old one. One night, after a hurried dinner of pizza on paper plates, I took my dog for a walk to explore our new neighborhood. Somehow, when I wasn't looking, Rex had gotten old on me, grown out of his exuberant puppy-hood. His shaggy black hair was faded and streaked with grey. I thought it made him look dignified, a fitting image for the sedate pace he kept beside me. I led him out of our cul-de-sac and down a narrow, quiet side street lined with rows of old growth trees in full summer bloom. The leaves shielded us from the worst of the late August heat. It might have been the scenery, or the silence, or the pleasant inner hum of familiar ritual, but we walked for far longer than I had meant to. Sunlight faded. There were no street lamps to guide us, no moonlight strong enough to shine through the trees. I turned quickly back the way I'd come and set off at a swift walk that soon became a run, heart beating loudly in the darkness. Rex was panting beside me; hot saliva splashed my bare leg as he sat down on the street. I stopped short and started to tug on his leash, to drag him along the way he'd done to me so many years ago, but he was too tired to move. For a frantic moment I considered leaving him, running back to the lighted windows I could see in the distance. He looked up at me then with eyes as brown and lost as my own. We stared. I couldn't go. I sat down with him instead and wrapped him in a hug, hot tears falling on his salt-and-pepper fur.

Some Thoughts on Postal Workers

I have been thinking about the postal service and their unwavering dedication to our friendship, as if they had a personal stake in our correspondence. Last week, I saw a box of rose hip tea I'd never noticed before on my usual grocery store rounds, and thought of you. I bought the tea and meant to send it, but I had a headache that afternoon, or maybe I couldn't find a box of appropriate size—I'm sure something like that must have happened. The tea, two months old and yet untouched, resides in my pantry; I see it when I reach in for canned corn or tortilla chips, and think of you. I think of you a great deal, actually. But I still have this tea.

Yesterday, after the rain stopped, I went outside to get the mail. There was a familiar dark green rectangle jumbled in among the pizza coupons and cable bill, the matching envelope to your favorite stationery, and I knew that you must be thinking of me too. You talked about the weather there and your knitting projects, the latest antics of your mountain-climbing, boat-sailing boyfriend. The date at the top of the page was two weeks gone, and I imagine that you will soon be wearing the scarf you were preparing to make when you penned this letter. I think of the postal worker who must have delivered this note in the pouring rain today, and I am a little ashamed of us. He, or maybe she, has never seen either of us before, but in doing her, or maybe his, job, does more to keep us connected than we do. If packages flew at the speed of thought, mine would pile up outside your door, proof positive of how much and how often I feel your lack. But time, like thoughts, gets away from us all. So I have been thinking of the postal workers, and of maybe sending them a thank you note, or a batch of cookies, when I get around to it.

Juniper

The tree was not pretty
the way its piney brethren were
pretty, all needled limbs and golden
scent of sun-warmed sap.

This one was gangly
an awkward tree, pale
bark scattered with paler leaves,
barely any color at all.
It stood alone on a ledge, as if grown straight
from the cliff face, rooted in stone
instead of soil.
It shifted and waved, bending
easily in the rough March wind,
while I, rooted in nothing
but cheap hiking boots, crouched beside it
on hands and knees.

I could see the whole valley from there.

You never said to me, *be careful*,
never called me back to
where you stood, watching,
from the line of
pine trees, an insect in amber,
frozen on the cusp of motion.

You only waited,
feet planted in the dark soil,
hands reaching.
I wavered, like the tree,
poised at the edge of everything,
bending in the wind.

Your Princess is in Another Castle

The original Super Mario Brothers video game had eight levels, with each level divided into three sections. The highest level I ever reached on my own was six. In the last section of each of these levels was a castle; inside the castle waited a monster, a battle, and, if you were victorious, a princess. If you're keeping count here, that's eight separate damsels in distress. And none of them were the point of the game; it was only the last one that would actually fulfill your ultimate goal of winning. All the other, lesser princesses, though grateful for being rescued, were mere side journeys, heroic tasks you accidentally accomplished on your way to do something larger. "Thank you!" they would say, their pixilated faces smiling, "but your princess is in another castle." And off you'd go.

At age ten, I had to wonder about that. Were there no women in Marioland who could defend themselves? Did Mario ever accomplish anything else in life (I think he was supposed to be a plumber), or was he constantly racing about the countryside, chasing princesses? It was a curious thing to play that game as a girl, to see my gender-appropriate in-game counterpart waiting around in poofy pink skirts while I, controlling the male hero, jumped into pipes, squashed evil turtles, and swam with electric jellyfish. (And after an unfortunately hands-on run in with jellyfish on a childhood vacation, I remain slightly afraid of them—even the video game versions.)

The game, and the Nintendo game system that I played it on, were presents from my uncle. Looking back, I realize that nearly every electronic gift I received in my childhood was from him: the Nintendo, my first cd player, the keyboard I wanted so I could take piano lessons. I don't think he actually purchased my first big-girl bike (the tall kind,

without training wheels), but he did help assemble it, thus encouraging my peripatetic nature and enabling a lot of neighborhood wandering. I think we were equally enamored of each other, he and I. We were both very shy and naturally introverted. He came over every Sunday, dutifully eating lunch at my grandmother's table after church, but he would rarely stay around afterwards, even if I asked him to play checkers with me. I was never offended; I think I understood, even then, the need to be in one's own space. I was always welcome at his apartment. Once, sometime in junior high, I convinced my mother to get me a computer program that taught French. Our computer couldn't handle the software, but my uncle's could; he gave me an open invitation to come borrow it any time I wanted. I had plans to do so one afternoon, but when I got to his apartment, *Star Wars* was just coming on television. I skipped my French lesson and he made popcorn. Later, when the movies were re-released in theatres, he took me to see all three of them. I can't speak a word of French today, but I can quote *Star Wars* with the best nerds out there.

My uncle influenced my reading habits as well, starting me early on a steady diet of Asimov and Heinlein and other science fiction heroes. This is not, traditionally, standard adolescent girl reading, but I devoured Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game* and the like with as much fervor as the hard backed copy of *Little Women* I'd swiped from my mother's old book collection. My choice of reading material was virtually the only way in which I stood out at school and, while my passionate avowal of love for all things *Star Trek* didn't exactly make me popular, I found I didn't mind too much. I feel the stronger for it now, and less likely to judge anyone else for what might seem awkward or out of place.

In spite of all the quiet communion we'd shared and the subtle hand he'd had in shaping so much of my childhood—or perhaps because of all of this—I was crushed when my uncle abandoned me. He had a heart attack my junior year of high school. It was a mild one, they said, when we visited him in the hospital that night, and there was no reason to suspect that wasn't true. He was lying in bed, impatient to be home, smiling that little, tolerant smile we shared when my grandmother was fussing over him—which she was—or when she and my mother were bickering—which, for once, they weren't. I keep a picture of that smile, of how it looked on his tired face, frozen in my mind.

Sometime in the night, the heart attacked caused bleeding and the bleeding caused a clot and the clot caused a series of strokes. The series of strokes was followed by a series of years, in which my uncle, now missing a piece of his skull and we'll never know how many memories, went from a nearly vegetative state to a semi-communicative one. During all of this I learned, from watching my mother, how to be stronger than anyone ought to be capable of, or ought to have to be capable of. From my uncle I learned all over again how to be different, and how not to mind when people stared. When he died, I assisted with all of the funeral arrangements, chose a casket in his favorite color, picked out a suit and tie to match, and tried to tell everyone, via a speech someone else had to read for me, how vastly special he really was. He was so quiet, and later so damaged, that I was afraid they might not have known.

That Nintendo still lives at my mother's house and sometimes I pull out my old video games when I visit. I've still never made it past level six of that first Mario Brothers game, but I'm hopeful. I like to think that, when he bought it for me, my uncle knew already that I would never be that princess in her poofy pink skirt and golden tiara,

waiting around for someone else to make things better. When the second Mario Brothers game came out, he bought me that one too. In that game, the princess was a playable character. She wore her familiar dress and delicate crown, but she could fly and fight, and never tried to save anyone but herself. It's still my favorite video game. I've never successfully beaten that one either, but I keep trying.

Come Autumn

Outside our kitchen window
just beyond the glow of warm electric light
a spider is eating a butterfly—
or trying to.
I watch their frenzied motion for a moment
and think
of going to help her—
the butterfly—
but that would somehow cheapen her struggle
and she *is* struggling—
her black and orange wings beat and beat
against the spider's long long legs.
I plunge my hands back
into soapy sink water,
fingernails scraping at leftover scraps of the dinner
it was my turn to cook,
wondering idly when it would be my turn
for anything else.
I look up—
the spider is winning.

The end is sudden:
the spider lets go.
Too much trouble to keep holding on.
The butterfly, bitten and beaten,
is free—
she tumbles to the ground and is
lost
somewhere
in the blackberry bushes below.

Come autumn
when I leave you—
will it really feel like flying after all?

Miles to Go

This picture was taken in Washington, one Sunday Afternoon 1944, September.

In the background is the Capital building.

The fence which I'm setting on surrounds the Capital.

The strap around my shoulder ruins the picture, don't you think?

I find the question type-written on the back of a surprisingly well-kept photograph and decide that I don't agree. The strap makes a nice focal point for the image, a dark stripe drawing the eye away from the pale Capital Building and down along its length, from slightly smiling face to hands familiar in shape, though less wrinkled than I ever saw them. A wedding band, lacklustre in black and white, rests already on one finger, and I think of my grandmother. Where would she have been in 1944? Still in their tiny furnished apartment? Had she gone back home to her parents' farm, put up with the well water and lack of electricity to avoid being home alone?

I know in five years they both find themselves in Ohio, relocated for the sake of a job. My grandfather went on ahead and rented a house; grandmother put all their things in storage and followed a few months later. Though home was Tennessee, they stayed in Ohio for years; their first child was born there. My grandmother tells me this story when my own husband is transferred to Ohio and asks me not to follow him. It's not a place he wants to stay; I think having me safe at home allows him to believe he will eventually return here too. Still, after more than a year of enforced separation, I want to ask my grandmother about the war, about those months alone before Ohio, about being married to a stubborn man. As yet, I am too afraid to hear those details. I know the end of the

ory, so I cling to that instead: after years on unfamiliar soil, the couple returned home, settled into a house, had another child, helped raise their granddaughter, and lived more or less happily ever after, till death did them part. But I look at the man looking out across Washington, gaze drawn by a horizon not captured on film, and wonder what he saw coming.