

Archives
LB
2322
.A9x
T-761

EITHER WAY YOU'RE DONE

STEPHANIE DUGGER

Either Way You're Done

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts Degree
Austin Peay State University

Stephanie Dugger
2009


TO THE GRADUATE COUNCIL:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Stephanie Dugger entitled *Either Way You're Done*. I have examined the final paper copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English.




Blas Falconer, Ph.D. Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:




Barry Kitterman
Professor



Amy Wright, Ph.D.
Professor

Accepted for the Council



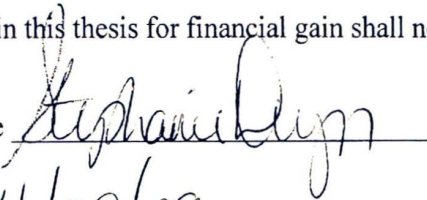
Charles Pinder, Ph.D.
Dean, College of Graduate Studies

STATEMENT OF PERMISSION TO USE

In presenting this thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master's degree at Austin Peay State University, I agree that the Library shall make it available to borrowers under rules of the Library. Brief quotations from this thesis are allowable without special permission, provided that accurate acknowledgement of the source is made.

Permission for extensive quotation from or reproduction of this thesis may be granted by Dr. Blas Falconer, or in his absence, by the Head of Interlibrary Services when in the opinion of either, the proposed use of the material is for scholarly purposes. Any copying or use of the material in this thesis for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission.

Signature



Date

4/29/09

Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without the help and support of many people.

First, I would like to thank the instructors at Austin Peay State University who have nurtured me through this process, both in writing workshops and literature classes. To Dr. Blas Falconer, I am indebted to you for your patience, support, and guidance. Thank you for showing me that writing doesn't have to be just a dream and for being a constant, inimitable mentor. To Barry Kitterman, who encouraged me when I thought this was impossible, thank you for your invaluable criticism, nurturing, and sound advice. My thanks, also, to Dr. Amy Wright, who introduced me to the possibilities of memoir and who guided me in writing some of the most difficult material here. I also appreciate the contributions of Dr. Steven Ryan, who supported my scholarly work throughout my years at Austin Peay, Dr. Jill Eichhorn, who taught me to consider the processes and perspectives of learning and writing, and Dr. Ken Cervelli, not only because of his admirable love of poetry, but whose passion for teaching is perhaps one of the biggest influences on the instructor I hope to become.

I would like to thank my friends and family, as well, for their support and encouragement. Among them, Denise Marin, who has read every word of this thesis almost as many times as I have and still cheers me on. Finally, to my husband, Brian, thank you for understanding the value of a "corn pone in pocket." You were the first to call me a writer. Thank you for never doubting.

Foreword

This thesis is a compilation of poetry and memoir. Each of the pieces speaks in some degree to loss, healing, and love (in all of its forms).

Contents

Marking the Body.....1

Steinberg’s *Cat Garden*, 1962.....4

The First Baptism, Eleven Years Old.....5

Conversation in Three Parts.....19

Aside from Cornfields.....21

Livestock.....22

Among Tornados.....37

After Chemo.....38

Operations and Advances in Occupation.....39

In Regard to Hunger.....40

Palliative Treatment.....42

Either Way You’re Done.....43

Marking the Body

The lines—faintly blue under swirls of pink and pearl—
run down your stomach.

You say

I did this to you,

these thin stretches of skin,

and if I touch them,

they will tear.

Blue is almost honest.

Blue is the place where I moved through sulfur-

water and the sound of mice

scattering from underneath

my bed

as my feet hit the floor.

*

The apple scent of shampoo

before I fall asleep—

this is when I think

I know you.

Almost as gently,

the run of water pressed from a tea bag

tells me there is something

more definite

in the way flowers you planted
when I was born
open only at night.
In Russia,
mothers swim with their babies
in frigid water.
They bounce them
in and out of the cold
and the babies laugh until their lips turn blue
and their hands curl into fists.

*

Women are known for ____,
but I can never tell you
about the stretch of blue cedars
behind our house and how
they look like you,
over
and over,
until you become small
and shapeless,

or how the clothesline strung between the first two

is just loose enough

to quiver.

Steinberg's *Cat Garden*, 1962

A cat, or the semblance of one,
waters a fleur, and birds, sickly thin
with plumes that curl and fan,
talk to a single rabbit. The rabbit
is white and quiet—

listening,

and when the birds finish,
she says she won't remember
what they said.

Some birds find branches
of yellow bridges reflected in water
and nibble the petals from pristine
steeple. Away from this, two houses
side by side and the elegance
of a snake in black and white.

Some would say she let you down.

Another fleur grows here and here,
the smell of cedar,
and the pages and pages
of an open, unread book
in the top right corner.

The First Baptism, Eleven Years Old

I expected it to be cold, but the tepidness of the water surprised me as I slipped my foot in. The hem of my white gown rested on the top of the water, before I felt it tugged down with the weight of absorption. I heard a man in the audience clear his throat and someone near the front sniffled. I extended my arm with the next step and the pastor's cold fingers clasped my hand as I moved into his chest.

My mother worked every Sunday, partly because it was the busiest day of the week for the diner and partly because her boss didn't want to work on Sundays. I knew she felt bad about it, because almost every time she did get to go to church she went down the aisle at the end of the sermon to pray with the pastor. Sundays were the worst for me, too. I hated going to church while she was at work. I never knew what kind of mood my father was going to be in during the week, but it was always bad on Sundays. I got up early to get myself and my sister, Tonya, dressed while my father got ready, and after a lot of screaming and yelling, we rode to church in silence. Once we got there, I couldn't shake the heaviness. Even though the place was filled with people, it felt lonely—like only Tonya, my father and I were sitting there with God. I wanted my mother to be there, too, so I was happy to hear she was leaving work early to come see me get baptized.

For years I wondered what it was like to walk down the aisle and announce that I wanted to be baptized. When I was five, I saw Carol Anne, an older girl in the congregation, walk down

the aisle, and I decided to ask my mother if I could try. It was late at night when I approached her, and she was washing dishes. She looked from the sink of dirty water down at me, then yelled for my father. He came into the kitchen, and she told him I wanted to walk down the aisle at church. He looked at me then looked back at my mother.

“I don’t know,” she told him. “Call the pastor.”

When the pastor arrived, he sat on the couch with Tonya and me. Because she was two years younger than me, Tonya always wanted to try whatever I did, so she said she wanted to walk down the aisle, too. I sat on one side of him, and my sister sat on the other. I don’t remember a word he said, only that I stared at my mother the whole time. I don’t know how she knew—maybe she knew that this was more than I expected when I asked her the question—but when my mother said, “It’s ok to cry,” I got up, ran to my room, and cried on my bed until Tonya joined me. When my mother came in to check on us, we were playing with our dolls that were made out of panty-hose and fiberfill. The dolls didn’t have legs, so we could lay a blanket across their bodies and stick our hand through the stuffing, up into the head and arms, to make them move. We called them our real babies.

From that night on, I kept my curiosity about being baptized to myself. During the invitation each Sunday, the part where the church members stood and sang songs like “Oh, Why Not Tonight” and “Just As I Am” while waiting for another person to be moved by the weight of the words, I talked myself into, out of, into, and finally out of walking down the aisle. I told myself that the devil would get me, that my mother would tell me I didn’t know what I was doing, that I would go to hell, that everyone would laugh. At night when I went to bed, I imagined the devil trying to push his way into my body through my chest, so he could pull out my soul. I prayed that God would keep it from happening. I lay in the dark and begged Satan to

leave me alone. After awhile I *commanded* him to leave me alone. I asked my sister to pray for me. Eventually she started asking me to pray for her, too. We spent nights wrapped around each other, afraid that the devil would take control of one of us. We only knew that if we were going to hell, we had to go together.

My mother wanted twins, so she dressed my sister and me in matching clothes from the time Tonya was born. Most people thought it was cute, and I guess it was when we were younger, but eventually I asked for dresses that were different than Tonya's. I told my mother it was only fair to Tonya, because usually when she got my hand-me-downs, she wore the same yellow polka-dot dresses and blue and pink plaid shirts she had been wearing for the last year. Still, my mother thought it would hurt Tonya's feelings if she found out I didn't want to match.

My sister and I had slept in the same bed since she was old enough not to sleep with my mother, so I knew she didn't want my old clothes. Many nights when we lay awake and whispered after my parents went to bed, Tonya told me about the dresses she dreamed of wearing at parties thrown for her.

"I want a white lacy dress with long gloves and white, shiny shoes," she said. "I want the dress to drag the floor in the back, like a wedding train, and long dangle earrings that match."

"I can't believe you'd really wear that. It might be better if you don't invite me to this party," I said, but I knew that would never happen. I couldn't go anywhere without my sister, not that I particularly wanted to.

One Sunday morning, my friend Christy pulled me aside before church. She told me how the pastor came to her house the night before and that she was going to be baptized at the evening's service. The thought of everyone watching me walk down the aisle from a pew near the back of the church was one of the things that kept me still at the end of services. I pictured the women nudging the elbows of the men beside them as they sang about me. I heard them talk about old man Lambert and how he was too stubborn to walk down the aisle in front of people. Someone said the church might fall in if he ever did set a foot into the aisle. My mother said she heard the pastor had been to his house to talk to him, too, but nothing had come of it.

"I'll walk down with you if you'd like," Christy said.

During the song at the end of the service, I stood in my place. I tried not to look at Christy. I bowed my head and pretended to pray. Christy grabbed my hand and led me down the aisle, my head still bent down. I felt every eye in the building watching me; I couldn't feel myself breathing. I heard the hum of people's voices, so I knew they were still singing, but I couldn't make out the words. When we got to the front, the pastor asked me what I needed from God.

"To be baptized," I whispered. He sat me down on the pew to his left and murmured a prayer beside me. I repeated it. After the music ended, he announced to the congregation that my father was a good man and a good father, and now one of his children was joining the flock. He asked my father to come stand with us in the front of the church, and then told the congregation to come by and offer congratulations. My father hugged me so hard he lifted my feet off the floor. Once he set me back down, the congregation members filed by and offered a handshake or hug. Tonya stood beside me, but didn't look at me.

I noticed Carol Anne standing in the line waiting to get to me. I tried to hurry the others through the line so she could get to me faster. Even though she was already seventeen, I loved Carol Anne like I loved no one else. I loved the way she opened her mouth wide when she sang. I loved how she pulled at her blond hair—the same wheat-blond as mine—one strand at a time, root to end, when she talked or was nervous. I joined the school band because I loved the way Carol Anne shaped her lips and held her arms when she played the flute. It was no secret to her that I wanted to be around her as much as I could, but she was always nice. She placed her hand on my chest, just at the top of my stomach, when she wanted me to sing louder in the youth choir. When my father, who did farm business with her father, brought me along, she took me to her bedroom to wait. She showed me pictures of her with friends while I sat as still as I possibly could on her purple satin comforter. I was afraid of wrinkling the perfectly smooth surface.

As Carol Anne moved closer in the line, I saw that she was smiling. I knew she was proud of me. Carol Anne took this baptism thing seriously. She directed the youth choir at church. Except for the music they made her play in the band, she only listened to God's music. She played everything by the rules, but she was still different from all the other members of the congregation. When they asked her to stop singing the newer Christian music during the special services, she said no. Some of the older members thought the songs didn't fit in with the ideals of the traditional hymns, but Carol Anne made sure everyone knew she was singing for God, not for them.

When Carol Anne finally made it through the line, she stood in front of me with tears in her eyes.

"I'm so proud of you," she said. "I hope you know I love you."

I didn't say anything, so she hugged me. When she moved down the line, Christy, who was standing beside me accepting congratulations, too, leaned over and whispered, "When she found out I was getting baptized, Carol Anne offered to help me. She said we all need someone to help us with the before and after."

I smiled at Christy and wondered why Carol Anne didn't offer the same thing to me. I knew it was common for the person being baptized to have someone in the changing room to help her in and out of the baptismal gown. None of Christy's family attended church, so I figured out why Carol Anne offered to help her, but I thought since my family would want to watch me go under the water from the audience, maybe Carol Anne would help me, too. After all, Christy and I would be in the same room at the same time.

When the last person moved past me, I left the front of the church and ran to the parking lot. Like I had hoped, Carol Anne was there talking to a friend. I waited beside an overgrown bush until they were finished, then walked closer to her car.

"Carol Anne," I said, trying not to sound out of breath. "I wanted to ask you a question." My heart beat faster, and I thought my throat would close up. I looked around to make sure no one could hear us.

"Go ahead," she said. "You can ask me anything."

"Um, well." All of a sudden, I realized how stupid this might sound. I wanted to think of something else to say, but my mind wouldn't work fast enough. The sound of my pulse in my ears drowned out any ideas I might have come up with.

I spit it out as quickly as I could. "Christy told me that you told her you would help her, and I was just wondering if you would help me, too."

Carol Anne didn't even pause. "Oh I think you'll be just fine."

“I need help, too,” I said. I felt the disappointment in my voice more than I heard it. I wanted to take it back.

“But you have lots of people around you to help,” she said. Her voice was smooth, satin-like. A lump moved from my stomach to my throat. “Christy doesn’t have anyone close to her to help with Bible studies and her Christian walk,” she said.

I slowly caught on to what she meant. “So, you’re not helping with the gowns?” I asked.

“Oh, well, yes of course I will if you two would like.” She looked a little relieved.

Maybe, I thought, she was too busy for two of us.

“Sure,” I said. I turned and walked to my car to wait for my family. I was glad that Carol Anne was not upset, but I was disappointed to find out she didn’t want to help me in *my* walk. I couldn’t even tell her what a walk was, and I knew I couldn’t ask my parents. I didn’t want to risk another scene like the one when I was five by asking them anything. I didn’t know I was supposed to change. I just knew the devil couldn’t get me once I’d gone underwater.

After my family got to the car, we left the church. When my father drove past our house, I asked him where we were going.

“To tell your mother the good news,” he said.

I didn’t want to go to the diner. I hadn’t thought of telling someone outside of the church building, especially my mother. I thought about what I would say and realized I didn’t want to hear the words come out of my mouth; I would rather have kept this to myself. My mother had a way of overreacting. I knew this wouldn’t be any different. I knew better than to say it, but I hated that she walked down the aisle so often, more than anyone else in the church. And she was baptized more than anyone else, too—once when she was a teenager, again not long after they called the pastor to the house for Tonya and me, and again two more times after I was older. She

claimed it was because she never felt right with God, but I wondered if it was more that she liked the feel of the people's eyes on her when she walked forward, their hands in hers at the end of service. They rarely shook her hand any other time.

When we got to the diner, my father parked the car beside the door that led into the kitchen. It was a screen door, so my mother could see us when she looked up from where she stood at the grill. She came out, wiping her hands on a towel. As she walked towards my father, he motioned for her to come around to the other side of the car.

"She has something to tell you," he said over the half-rolled-down window.

My mother walked around the car, and I rolled down the window. She asked me what was going on.

"I'm going to get baptized tonight," I muttered.

My mother squealed, which was something I had never heard her do before. She yanked open the door and pulled me out of the seat. She hugged me, telling me again and again how proud she was.

"I just wish you could be there," I said. All I really wanted was for her to be there—I wanted the lonely Sunday morning feeling to go away, but I also didn't want to have to talk about this anymore.

"Of course I'll be there," she said, pulling back from me a little. "I'll close the place up for the day. I'll tell them there was an emergency." I was surprised. My mother never took off from work for anything.

After we got home from the diner, my mother began calling the family to tell them the news. I was starting to think I might call it all off. I had heard a preacher say that God knows your intentions and if your intentions are in the right place, you shouldn't worry about the

results. I figured since my intentions were to go under the water, maybe I could still keep the devil away if I backed out because of things getting so out of control. And besides, Tonya and I had baptized each other in the bathtub more times than I could remember when we were little. That's how her lip got busted, and she had to have stitches. I was sure that counted for something in the way of intentions.

When she finished calling the family, my mother called everyone else we knew. She even called my second grade teacher. At that point, I told my parents I needed a nap and went to my room. I took the book I was reading off my nightstand and fell across the bed. The book was about a girl who was fifteen and dying from cancer. I had a whole collection of those. I bought one at the school book fair when I was nine, even though the librarian said it wasn't something she would recommend for a girl my age. I asked her if she was saying I couldn't buy it.

"It's your money. Buy what you want," she said. I had saved my lunch money for two weeks so I could buy something at the fair. My friends bought posters and calendars, but I wanted my own book. The only books my parents had ever bought me were encyclopedias. I tried to read my father's old copy of *Tom Sawyer*, but he got mad at me because the pages were coming out, and he said it wasn't something for a girl to read anyway. So I checked out books from the library every week, but I still didn't own my own book.

After I bought and read the first girl-dying-from-cancer book, I was hooked. I asked my parents to get me new ones for my birthday and Christmas, but they said I needed clothes more. My mother thought it was weird that I liked the book so much, but I saved more of my lunch money and bought a few every month when the book fair came around.

The books weren't about the cancer. Sometimes the girl beat it and sometimes she died, but the story was really about how her family and friends were so upset. They forgot everything bad she ever did. And she always had a boy who loved her, even though she was sick and dying. Usually, the girl did something special because she thought she wouldn't be around much longer. One girl wrote her father a note and told him she forgave him for not staying with her mother. Another girl went horseback riding with her boyfriend, even though her parents forbid it because they thought she might hurt herself and die earlier than she had to. I liked the books mostly because they gave me an excuse when I cried. If my mother or sister came in the room, I could say I was crying because the book made me sad. Before that, I hid in my closet to cry because I didn't know what to tell anyone when they asked why.

When my mother knocked at my bedroom door, I had only read a couple of pages, so I knew it wasn't time to get ready. She opened the door as I was putting the book under my pillow.

"I think you should go next door and tell your granddad the good news," she said.

I wondered why it was so important to tell him, too.

"But he doesn't go to church."

"He used to. And he would want to know," she said. I got up from the bed and walked next door. The truth was, even though I was tired of talking about all of this, I was glad to get away from things for awhile. By things, I mean my family. My mother and father were already yelling at each other, and my sister wasn't talking to anyone. I didn't know why she was upset, but I think it might have been because she thought the devil could only get her now, not both of us like we'd planned.

My granddad was outside hollowing out gourds to hang as birdhouses. As I walked up, he stopped his knife and looked at me.

“I thought you’d be taking your Sunday nap,” he said.

“I would be, but I’m supposed to come over here and tell you some news.”

“Good news or bad news?” he asked.

“I’m going to get baptized tonight,” I said. He looked at me for a moment, then started moving his knife again.

“I guess that’s good news then. Congratulations, honey,” he said, looking down at the gourd he was working on.

“Are you coming?” I asked. I had never seen my granddad in church before. Part of me didn’t want him to add to this mess, and part of me wanted to be his reason for going back after all this time.

“I’d like to be there, I really would, but I can’t sit on those hard pews. It hurts my hips.”

I figured he was telling the truth about the pews hurting him, so I told him I understood and that I would miss him. I kissed him on his forehead, where I always kissed him, and went back to my house.

I started to think this was all a big mistake, a lot of drama to keep the devil away, but then I thought about getting to see Carol Anne. I thought I would ask Christy to go first, then it could just be Carol Anne and me. I wanted her to say how she always knew I would do the right thing, how much alike we are, and how that makes us belong to each other.

When it was time to get ready, I couldn’t find Tonya. I searched the house. I checked the bed to make sure she wasn’t asleep, and I looked under it to make sure she wasn’t reading my *Teen* magazines that I got from the girl who sat on the backseat of the bus. I kept them under the

bed to hide them from my parents. I knew they would take them away if they saw the period articles or the quizzes on how to know if your boyfriend wants to have sex. Tonya wasn't there. By this time, my father was yelling that he wanted to get in the bathroom so he could brush his teeth, but my mother was just getting out of the shower.

I finally found my sister curled up in the closet in our bedroom. She was holding her pillow against her and refused to come out. I pulled her out by her arm, but she just stood in the middle of the room. She said she didn't want to go. She said she wanted to stay at home by herself.

"Don't you think I want to stay here, too?" I asked.

My mother walked by the door, yelling for us to hurry up and get ready.

I let go of my sister's arm and sat down on the bed. I hoped she would do the same and that we could just skip the service altogether. I wanted to see Carol Anne—her blue eyes and smooth hair—but the rest was too much. I picked up my book and started to offer her one to read, but she was pulling on her dress. When she grabbed her black Sunday shoes and left the room, I closed the door and pulled on the dress I had worn to services that morning. Outside the room, my mother and father were still yelling. I asked God to make them leave me alone.

After a few minutes, my mother banged on the door and said it was time to leave. I smoothed out my hair then walked out of the room and to the car. My mother was standing on the porch, brushing my sister's hair with hard, fast strokes, and my father was checking his tie in the reflection of the glass on the door. I slipped into the back seat without saying a word to anyone, and without anyone saying a word to me.

As we walked into church, I looked for Carol Anne. I didn't see her or Christy, so I knew they must be in the room already. The singing was about to start, so I told my parents that I

should go on back. I looked over at Tonya, but she was talking to someone else. The pastor's wife, a tall thin woman with almost all gray hair and only half of a smile, met me as I was walking to the room and said she would show me the way. I already knew how to get there because we used to hide in the room before they started locking the door. She walked in front of me, and I followed, hoping she wouldn't try to hang around once we got to the room. When she opened the door and stepped to the side, I saw that Christy was already in her gown.

"Where's Carol Anne?" I asked. "Did she help you change already?" I was worried she might have forgotten about me. The door clicked shut behind us, but we could still hear the music.

"Carol Anne went to a youth rally with a friend," the pastor's wife said. "She called me a few hours ago and said he invited her after church this morning. She asked me to help you and Christy with your gowns."

I looked around the room, just to make sure she wasn't kidding. I saw that Christy was smiling, but she looked nervous. I thought of the people in the audience clapping and singing and watching.

"You'll go first, right?" I asked her.

I told the pastor's wife that Christy could help me with my gown, and she said she'd be waiting for us on the other side of the water. After she left, I pulled off my dress, put on my T-shirt and shorts, and zipped up the gown. Christy watched me, but never said a word. When the song ended, she was still looking at me.

"You're up," I said. She walked out of the room and left the door cracked so I would be sure to hear when she was done. I sat down in a chair and listened for the rush of the water, and the *amens* that always followed. I remembered my mother and all the times she walked down

the aisle. I thought about the times she had gone down in the water, and I knew then I would not be like her; I knew I would never do this again. And if I could have gotten out of it without making a scene, I wouldn't do it this time. I looked at a poster on the wall of Jesus sitting on a stump, with children all around him. The sky behind him was blue, and it felt like the only color in the room.

Conversation in Three Parts

She pulled at strands of her yellow hair—
root to end— taught church songs
to children, wore gypsy instead of jeans,
and admitted she loved me.

The day she left, I bought
green candles that smelled like sage.

The man at the check-out
wondered why—
said he laughed when Grace Paley died.

At night, the unpainted side of the crosses
is quiet and more comfortable,
an easier place to say what comes next.

The touch and rush,
the one we both put off for years,
is on the surface,
and the sound of my father
saying my name
interrupts us.

after Saul Steinberg's Bleeker Street

Puffs of smoke move past bodies

lying on the sidewalk,

bodies of women

looking up at open mouths and flashing

billboards.

They barely hear their names.

Across the street—a crowd of heels and mice—

she sighs and touches the wrist

of someone next to her.

They told us it was wrong.

Only the police are in color,

(not even the horse),

the green street light

that signals an alligator.

and the shades of yellow hair

moving among them.

Aside from Cornfields

We moved through rows,

deep hampers filled with ears
of sweet white corn.

And later, the smell of cold exhaust,
the whisper sound of the steering wheel
moving through your hands.

Will you forget
that I gathered my baby teeth
from between the slats of the floor—
put there for safe keeping—
and that you watched me without saying
a word?

In the field, you don't mention the itch,
the tiny hairs on the leaves
that leave scratches on your skin.
You slide your hand
down the length of green,
the ridges draw blood.

What you should say
is that as you walk,
the brushing against your face
brings the instinct to raise
your hands, and the leaves fly back,
cutting the lips of your open mouth.

But the smell of fresh corn at dusk—

What I understand
is the unmistakable sound of husk
pulled away from the ear,
and why I should have learned to pull
the silk in one motion. What I knew
then was to keep my mouth closed—
my hands pulled into my sleeves—
to wear sleeves.

Livestock

It has been fifteen years since I moved from my father's farm in northern Alabama. The land was flat, with fruit and oak trees near the house and a small pine tree grove near a catfish pond on the back of the property. Standing in the yard, I could see all around me with nothing in my line of vision except barbwire fences, a barn, and cattle.

Despite being removed by both time and distance, I often dream about the farm, usually the same dream. I look out my bedroom window and see a tornado, sometimes several of them. I hurry to find my sister and brother and get them into the basement. After they are safe, I go to my mother's room and wake her. When she is with my brother and sister, I look for my father, who is either riding the tractor through a field or mowing the lawn. I have to yell over the motor for him to hear me. Once we are all inside, we stand looking out the small window that is high on the wall of the cellar, but level with the top of the grass outside. We watch the tornados until they pass above the window, then we lean against the damp wall and feel the rumble as they move over, demolishing the house above us.

My father's claim to fame was cows. We lived on a farm with dogs, cats, fish, the occasional pig or horse, and a herd of cattle, usually around fifty head. Most of the animals served a practical purpose: the cows for meat, the dogs to herd the cows, the cats to keep the mice out of the corn that the cows ate, and so on. My father named many of the cows and hand-

fed ears of corn to his favorites. He cried when one got struck by lightning and died alone at night.

Before, I had seen him cry on only two other occasions. The first time, he was singing in front of our church on Mother's Day. As he finished the first verse of "In the Garden," his voice broke. While the rest of the church sat in silence, he sobbed into the microphone, explaining between gasps that the song had been his mother's favorite. She died when he was fourteen. The other time that I saw my father cry, he had shot our cat, Ginger, after a car ran over her. Afterwards, he came to the room my sister and I shared and sat on the bed with us. He began crying before he could tell us she was gone and when we started crying as well, he covered his face with his hands and muttered "stop fucking crying" over and over.

My family loved animals, and throughout my childhood we had several dogs, most of them mutts with no real herd training. When I was thirteen, my dad brought home a set of Border Collies, specifically trained to herd cattle. We named them Buster and Shep. Buster followed me everywhere and Shep favored my brother, whom no one else seemed to be able to connect with, especially my father. My brother proved at an early age that he was more inclined to sit inside and read or play video games than help outside. My father resented my brother's intelligence and apathy towards farming. He had nicknames for us all, and while he usually called my sister and me "the nerds," he often referred to my brother as "the stupid," especially when it came to understanding farming.

Like my brother, Buster and Shep were smart and learned quickly. My father often moved cattle from one field to another based on where the fescue was growing at a given time, and he taught the dogs to work in tandem with him. He herded the cows from one direction in a truck, and the dogs herded from the other two directions, moving the cattle through a gate into an

adjoining field. Over time everyone got down the rhythm of herding; the cows knew how to respond to the dogs and the dogs knew how to respond to my father. It worked like a symphony really, each member phasing with the others to create a progressive, directed movement—sometimes smooth, sometimes frenzied.

After a few years, Shep disappeared. My father was upset, but he didn't mention it except to say that Shep was probably stolen by one of the Mexicans who had moved into the new trailer park a few miles down the road. Several of the farmers in the area suffered financially, and some sold their land to developers who turned the farms into trailer parks or neighborhoods with oversized churches. My father was more upset about the people moving in than the vanishing farm land. He assumed the families moving into the trailer parks were illegal immigrants from Mexico who would cause trouble. The wealthier people moving into the neighborhoods also made him uncomfortable and, although he never voiced it, I felt his embarrassment about his own financial struggle. He often commented on how the large houses and churches "cluttered up" the area.

One afternoon after Shep was gone, my father came into the house, yelled for me to come outside, then ran and jumped into his truck. I followed and watched as he sped through the gate connecting our driveway to a field of recently planted grass that would later be harvested for hay. The cows were loose in the field and were chewing up what sprouts they could get. Their tongues grazed the barely green ground, and their teeth pulled up the new grass. The cows were scattered all around the field and each one chewed slowly, looking up occasionally, with no idea that the grass wasn't ready yet. They could not have known what they were destroying.

My father drove around the cows in a poor attempt to move them. He obviously grew angrier by the minute because the truck moved in faster and faster circles, until I imagined it

would turn over, crushing and killing him and Buster, who had run out to help. Buster tried to herd the cows out of the field, but since my father had no idea where he wanted them to go, Buster had no direction either. The two ran confused circles around the cows, the dog barking at their legs and my father calling the cows and yelling indistinct commands at Buster from the window of his truck. Finally, he drove back to the gate, got out of his truck, and whistled for the dog.

Buster ran to him and my father put his hands around the dog's throat, picked him up into the air, and slammed his body onto the ground. I stepped closer to them. I could smell my father's anger—a mix of tobacco, sweat and bile. I yelled at him to stop, that the dog was only doing as he had trained him. He grabbed the dog by a tuft of skin and fur on the back of his neck, dragged him down the gravel driveway, around the house, and threw him down the stairs of the basement. He didn't look at me as he walked back to the truck.

Buster's punishment wasn't short-lived. That evening my father stopped me as I headed outside.

"Where are you going?"

"To let the dog out."

"Don't touch that door."

The next morning when my father went to work, I went down to the basement to let Buster out. There was a padlock on the door that had not been there before. That evening when my father came home, he made it clear we were not to discuss the dog. The dog stayed locked up for three more days. No one mentioned him or much else.

The afternoon of the fifth day, I came home and found Buster outside running around. He was jumping from side to side and I knew he was happy to see me. I got out of the truck and

petted him, roughing up the fur around his face with my hands. I felt his head twitching beneath my fingers, almost like a strong pulse or a head nodding “no.”

I pressed my hands more firmly around his face to make it stop. It didn't. I let go of his head and he stepped to the side, still twitching. My father walked around the house from where he had been working at the barn, holding a rusted bolt with a washer attached to it. He was trying to remove the washer from the bolt. He didn't look up.

“Something's wrong with him,” I said.

“I don't see anything wrong with him,” he said, still looking at the washer and bolt. “He's out isn't he?”

My father tilted his head slightly and looked down at the dog. He looked back at the bolt, turned and walked away. I ran around the side of the house to the basement. I lifted the padlock from its hook, opened the latch and pushed on the door.

The air from the basement was cold and smelled musty, and I could not see past the first few steps. I walked down the stairs. At the bottom, I felt along the wall for the switch and turned on the light. There were shelves of jarred tomatoes, green beans and peaches. Water dripped down the concrete walls and stood in puddles on the floor. There were smaller jars of blackberry and grape jams sitting on a table and underneath it was a pile of firewood. I saw above the table, a section of yellow and pink exposed insulation that ran the length of the wall. I moved closer and noticed some of the jars of jam were pushed over and some pushed to the side, leaving an empty space on the table. Above the spot, sections of the insulation had been torn away and were missing.

I ran back up the stairs and outside to the barn. I told my father that Buster had eaten insulation. He kept working.

"I saw where he got into it," I said. "What should we do?"

"We aren't going to do anything. He's not stupid enough to eat insulation, but if he did, he got what he deserved."

I went back to the dog, who was still twitching. I opened the truck door and tried to pick him up to put him inside, but my father stepped out of the barn and yelled, "What are you doing?"

"Taking him to the vet," I called back.

"You're not taking that dog anywhere. I told you he's fine. Bring me the WD-40."

I shut the door and found the can in the garage. I took it to him and went back to the dog. My father watched me the entire time.

I went to the garden beside our house to get the hose that my father had been using to water the new cantaloupe and squash plants. I followed the hose from the spigot around the water-well, and under the fence to where the end of the hose was draped over the handles of a plow. I took the hose to Buster and wet him down, then washed him with dish soap. I rinsed him. The twitching was the same. I washed and rinsed him again. He lay down in the grass when I finished, his head still twitching and his body now shaking. I put the hose in his mouth. The water ran out of the sides and he gagged. I held the hose out and let the water pour onto the ground. He stood up and drank from the end of the hose. He drank until I thought he would vomit. When he finished he walked down to the barn, still shaking.

The next morning, I found Buster in the driveway, blood pooled around his head and dripping from his mouth. I knew I was partly to blame for his death. Although I tried to wash him and give him relief, I realized at that moment that I should have taken him to the veterinarian, no matter what my father said.

Later that day, I pulled the hose off the plow again and cleaned the ground where Buster had died. When the blood was washed from the gravel of the driveway, I went back to the plow and draped the water hose over the handles. The plow was covered in dried dirt and had been sitting in the same spot for so long, I forgot what the garden looked like without it. It was like a sculpture, sitting beside the fence gate.

My father bought the plow from an Amish farmer not long after he got Buster and Shep. This plow was much smaller than the tractor-pulled plows he already owned and was made of wood, except for its screws, the sharp metal share which dug the furrows in the soil, and the mule hitch in the front. The plow looked exactly like the two antique plows he had hanging in the rafters of the barn except the wood, instead of being gray and splintered, was smooth and bright with a yellow cast, and the metal was not yet rusted. Most of the farmers that were left in the area were better off financially than my family; they had been able to sustain their farms over the years. My father usually purchased second hand farm equipment, so he was especially proud of the new plow and showed it off to the neighboring farmers who came over to purchase hay that spring. They all had the same question: since it's a walking plow, what are you going to pull it with?

"I'm working on that," he answered.

My father had talked about buying a mule for years. At first he thought it would make a good pet, and then he began to come up with different jobs for which he could use the animal.

Once he bought the plow, he said he had an excuse to get a mule. He could not afford either. Still owing for the plow, there was no way he could get another loan to pay for a mule.

As it grew closer to time to till the ground, he showed the plow off less and less.

Eventually, he moved it into the barn with the antiques and didn't talk about it anymore. One Saturday morning, he woke my sister and me at sunrise. My mother was spending the week in a psychiatric hospital, which meant we were tired from extra work. We complained about being awakened so early, but he told us to get dressed and to meet him outside. We took our time putting on our clothes, then went out to find him. He called to us from the side of the house where the garden was. We came around and found he had tied the leather harnessing straps to the hitch of the plow. He was grinning from ear to ear.

"What's going on?" my sister asked.

"We can't wait any longer. We have to get the ground tilled so I can plant this garden," he said.

"So what do you need us for?" I asked.

"Stand in front of this and pull these straps over your shoulders."

My sister and I stared at him. We asked him where my brother was.

"He's too small. He doesn't have enough strength to pull this."

Although he was younger, my brother was already bigger and stronger than both of us, but I knew that no matter how well he did the job, he would not be able to please my father. Despite this, I wanted it to be him pulling, not me or my sister. At the least, I wanted him with us. I worried that someone might drive up and see us pulling the plow. Even with the embarrassment, I felt in some way that this was normal—that all children on farms had to pull a plow at some point.

When my sister and I protested, my father's face grew serious. We stepped in front of the plow and pulled the straps over our shoulders and around our waists. The leather was soft to the touch, but stiff and heavy against our bodies. At first the ground felt uneven, and we stumbled as we pulled the plow. As we worked, we got used to the rhythm of each others' steps. Once we stopped stumbling, the pulling did not seem as difficult and was seamless for small stretches. After awhile, though, the plow grew heavier and sweat pooled around the places where the harness buried farther into our skin. My father tried to make us feel less awkward and kept asking "isn't this fun?" Sometimes he would tell us to slow down or pick up the pace and made a popping sound, as though he had a whip in his hand instead of the handles of the plow. We could hear him laughing behind us.

When I looked over at my sister, sweat was dripping from her face. She was quite a bit smaller than I was, so the leather straps of the harness took up more space on her body. She looked down at her feet and kept the rhythm of our steps by nodding her head. I wanted to do something to help her, but if I pulled harder it caused her to stumble. Although I should have, I didn't stop. I didn't refuse to go any farther or tell my father we were done, and I didn't pull the plow alone. Instead, my sister and I finished the work, unstrapped ourselves from the plow, and went back into the house.

My father was proud of us and told everyone how he plowed the garden that year.

When I was sixteen, my mother was admitted to a psychiatric hospital for the third time. She often grew tired of the chores of farming, working as a cashier at a local grocery store, and

handling three children. When she had had enough, she would tell us that she was going to the doctor to ask him for a break.

“He’ll send me to the 400 unit and I’ll get a vacation from all of this,” she said. By the third time, we knew to pack her clothes before we left for the doctor’s office.

My mother had always dealt with the family finances—wrote checks for bills, balanced the checkbook, rationed out our lunch money. My father decided after she was admitted to the hospital this time that she was no longer capable of handling the money aspects of our family responsibly, so he had her removed from the joint checking account. Before she returned home, he told me he wanted to put my name on the account. He said there needed to be a second person in case of emergencies. He thought I would be happy to take on such an adult responsibility. I was not.

I asked my father not to put my name on the account. It seemed he wanted me to take my mother’s place—like she was not fit to be the other parent anymore. Each time she went into the hospital, I took on more of her responsibilities. I cooked, washed the laundry, made sure my brother and sister were ready for school in the mornings and helped with their homework in the evenings. I knew my mother would be hurt and disappointed not only by my father, but because I was the one taking the spot where her name had been. When the checks arrived, I took them out of the box and stared at my name typed in neat letters underneath my father’s. I felt nauseated and my chest tightened. I put the checks back in the box and taped it shut.

My father was intensely private about the finances. He never disclosed to me, my sister, or my brother how much he made. We knew it wasn’t much because my parents often took out loans to pay for bills such as school fees or auto repairs, and even more often we were told we could not afford extra expenses like Girl Scouts or yearbooks. Once, I needed to know his

monthly income for a school form. He called the school himself and made us leave the room while he talked to them.

It is difficult to say how I knew, but I always had the sense that I would have to work as soon as I was old enough. One afternoon, a few months before my sixteenth birthday, I found my father and grandfather working on a tractor tire in the barn.

"I'm going to get a job after my birthday," I said to my grandfather. I looked forward to working, to paying my own way since I was getting older. I thought he would be happy to hear how responsible I was. He looked at me, but my father kept his eyes on the tire.

"I wish you wouldn't," Granddad said. "Get a job, I mean. You should be putting all of that time into doing good in college."

I told him I could not afford college without a job. He looked at my father, then at me. "I'll help you out with school as much as I can if you'll just wait about getting a job," he said.

"What are you talking about?" my father said, without looking up. He kept his hands busy on the tire. "We need somebody to help us here on the farm. She can't do that from school."

My grandfather laughed as though my father was making a joke. My father glanced up and chuckled, too. I wanted to believe he was only teasing, but I knew part of him was serious. His demeanor and remarks on other occasions told me that my father felt if I went to college and left the farm, I was turning my back on who he was—I was insinuating that his life wasn't good enough for me. As soon as I turned 16, I got a job working at a local fast food restaurant. There was no way to explain to my grandfather how the tone of my father's voice meant I had to work.

At first, after the new checks arrived, my father paid the bills himself. Over time, he had me write a check here and there until many of the bills were paid by my signature. He told me who to write the checks to and for how much. He sometimes sent me to the gas station and grocery store with cash to pick up checks that had been returned due to insufficient funds. He called them "bounced checks." Even though most of my paychecks were going towards bills, it didn't seem to be helping much.

One evening I received a notice that a warrant had been issued for my arrest because of bad checks. I found my father working in the barn; he was bent over a saw-horse, cutting two-by-fours for the cattle stall he was building. I demanded an explanation. He looked up at me, straightened his back, and said they were checks that bounced and he forgot to pick them up. I took a step towards him.

"Do you realize you are ruining everything? I'm supposed to be finishing school, applying for college. How am I going to do that from jail?" I yelled. "I told you I didn't want my name on that account. You wouldn't listen. You have to make this right!" I turned and walked away.

We never spoke about the incident again. I have no idea how he fixed the situation, but the next day when I got home from school, the bounced checks were lying on the counter next to a new book of checks that were blank where the names usually are. A few weeks later, a set arrived with only my father's name.

My father expected me to inherit the farm that had been in the family for generations, and he told me I was to keep the farm in the family no matter what. On several occasions he insisted, “If you ever sell this land or break it up, I’ll come back and haunt you.” He never asked me if staying around was what I wanted. When I talked about college he usually left the room, but when he did discuss it, he assumed I would go to be a musician or band director. I began piano lessons when I was six years old and joined the school band as a flutist when I was ten. There was no option in this. My brother, sister, and I were expected to learn to read music because my father said it was the one thing he regretted not doing in his life. He sang in church and led the choir as director for years, but he couldn’t play an instrument. He told me music and farming were two things that could be done together.

I started writing around the time I got my first job. I wrote because I didn’t know what else to do. I needed a way to say what I thought freely and without being dismissed. A new friend from work wrote poems and read them to me over the phone at night. I was surprised at his honesty and candidness and decided to see if I could do the same. I kept my work in a yellow folder and never let anyone read it. Although I wrote every night, I didn’t take my own poems seriously. Writing was something my father would never let me consider for college, so I didn’t let myself consider it.

I married and moved away at nineteen and my father began teaching my sister and brother what he had taught me about farming. He barely spoke to me for awhile. Later, after working in factories and as a maid for ten years, I enrolled in college. I hesitated to tell my father. I knew he would be hurt because I was rejecting the life he had chosen—for himself and for me.

A few years ago, one of my best friends from high school died. I remembered I had written several poems about him. They were in the yellow folder in my bedroom at my father's house. I wanted to see those poems—to recall those moments I had written about. I called my father to see if I could get the folder. He told me he and my mother cleaned out the room I shared with my sister after she married and moved out. They threw away everything.

I believe my education was in some way a rebellion against my father. I moved farther away from the farm and from the expectations he had for me by enrolling in college. To this day, he still does not remember what degree I earned, although I have told him several times. He recently called to tell me he saw an old friend of mine. He told her I majored in music and that I am a band director. He tells everyone that. He doesn't tell them I'm a writer, or that I'm happily married with two dogs and a deep desire to move to a different town every few years.

After my sister, brother, and I moved out, my parents divorced. My father stayed on the farm while my mother moved into a government-funded apartment in the nearest town. My father tried his best to tend the farm, but could do very little on his own. He sold his cattle a few at a time until he had none left. He met my stepmother and moved in with her, abandoning the farm altogether. After a few years, he sold it to a neighbor for one-fourth its total value. Before he signed the papers, he called me to make sure I wasn't upset with him for selling it.

A few weeks ago, I had a different dream than usual about the farm. My mother was dead and my father had arranged for me to take over as his wife. I begged him not to—I didn't want to take her place. He laughed at me. I left the room and came back to find him hitting my brother. I

ushed my father away and told my brother and sister to get in the truck; we were going to the police. I ran outside and started the truck, but my sister couldn't get the door shut. As my father ran out of the house, I started driving forward. I could hear him screaming for us to stop. I looked in the mirror and saw he was crying. He said my brother was just like our mother, and he deserved it. As he cried and begged us to stay, I drove away, the door still swinging open and my father growing smaller in the rear-view mirror.

Among Tornados

One, no two, no three tornados
touched down at once
in what was Pontotoc County.

--

The tornado confronted her
as she sat in the stands.
It laughed at what she had to say.

--

I am not afraid
of what the tornado is,
but what I will become inside it.

--

The cellar, with its mold and snakes,
was the safest place from tornados.

--

She passed on the duck blood soup.
It reminded her of tornados and James.

--

What arrogance and cowardice
we must possess
in the opinion of the tornado.

--

We should have moved them all,
before the tornado
scattered them among dogs.

--

On Cale Lane, you and I
and the tornado that finished it.

After Chemo

My father made a turtle from clay,
painted it with white spots
and kept it on a shelf by the kitchen window
until I dropped it in hot water,
watched it dissolve into brown sediment
at the bottom of the sink.

He never noticed it missing
or never said
and I could not have told him
how I pulled it out of the water,
held it in my hands,
how it was headless, smooth-shelled,
before I put it back in.

This is what it will be like
to not have you.

Operations and Advances in Occupation

I knew part of him—
 the man who used hay string
 to hang hollowed gourds from apple trees
 so he could watch cardinals and blue birds
 from his porch. He calmed a birthing cow
 with soft words in her ear and smooth strokes of his hand
 down her side.

He walked through fields of rye grass
 and could tell by taste
 whether the crop was ready to cut
 or if he should wait another day.
 He was older and more focused,
 but it was not unusual
 to hear him yell at his son,
 the only one left who would listen.

I could tell you
 that in an album, between pictures
 of his daughter wearing a graduation cap
 and his grandson at two, naked in a tub,
 he kept a photo of a man, chest up
 and sepia colored. The man's eyes were closed
 and he was lying on a downed
 barbwire fence, a bullet hole through his forehead.
 Written underneath the picture,
 the word *Jap*. He never spoke about it,
 except to say the moon on the water
 made him homesick,

despite the fact
 his wife had packed the car with everything they owned
 before his feet touched the sand. If you had asked him,
 perhaps he could have found his way
 to tell you what he missed back there.

In Regard to Hunger

I

When he was nineteen
he cooked crow for doctors and officers
without their knowledge.
Though not quite duck,
the birds were tender and savory.
He was proud.

II

Two needles, long and thick,
pierce the skin of each shoulder,
coming out the back just above the blade.
Nurses in oversized white hats
pull the needles up, stretching
the skin as far as it will go—
much farther than he can stand.

III

If I had lain with you,
it would have changed me,
but your hands were wild
and I was afraid you would
pull out your tubes or wires
and it was only me.
I'll do it this time. Among sugarcane
and politicians if you'll ask.

IV

The embers glowed around bills
and cancelled checks.
Only his bed remained,
untouched. Black ashes floated
through the air, resting on arms
and concrete—the rustle
of white painted trees.

V

As he improved they fed him
tiny bites of blue applesauce.
He aspirated
and never said "I'm hungry"
after they removed the tubes.

Palliative Treatment

In the wild, they sense the moment
and wander off, perhaps to spare the pack
or to keep those closest
from bearing the last breath.

When my grandfather neared the end,
we gathered around his bed—

begged him to go. But hers was quiet,
the slowing of breath,
and the leaves of the oak outside the window,
that bore the slightest resemblance
to hands, pawing at the air.

Either Way You're Done

A bolt of lightning moving down the sky

is enough. The plastic smell

of conditioned air

and the *tick-tick* of my dog

breathing beside me—

I was not always this ____.

A grizzly in Yellowstone

digs under rocks to find

brown miller moths—spots like still eyes.

The moths fly up when disturbed,

and land in swarms on the bear's arms.

He licks them from his fur, the dust of their wings

covering his tongue.

He watches squirrels stash pine-nuts

so he can steal them just before hibernating.

The diet is elk calf after waking,

then salmon, the moths, and finally

the nuts.

There are few inconsistencies here.

I have imagined what it would be like,

and decided I would want to be ripped,

too—to know you. You worry

this might not be normal. I say

you run the risk of burning

when you breathe that hard.